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THE ELEATIC ELEMENTS IN THE METAPHYSICAL REFLECTION
AND IN THE PHYSICAL MENTIONS OF THE *PARMENIDES*

Abstract. In the *Parmenides*, it is possible to identify affirmations that are clearly of Eleatic origin and which are re-elaborated by Plato who includes them *ad hoc* when developing his arguments. The dialectical contribution on the question of the multiplicity of entities given to the Parmenidean philosophy by Zeno is discussed not only in the first part of the dialogue (see 127d–128d) but also in the second. In the latter, Parmenides adopts an ontological-metaphysical setting through which Plato gives an example of the various uses of Zenonian dialectic. Here all the hypotheses concerning the One are analysed (see 136a–c).

Keywords: Plato's *Parmenides*, Zeno, Gorgias, Melissus, Uni–multiple, Dialectic.

1. Premise

The *Parmenides* is acknowledged as being a rich and complex platonic dialogue. In light of this, the aim of this paper is to analyse the arguments which explicitly and implicitly—from allusions to the Parmenidean ontology and Zeno's *reduction ad absurdum*, all the way to Melissus' rigid monism—refer to the Eleatic dimension in its various aspects. Such elements are present in the dialogue in the form of metaphysical or logical-linguistic reflections and in the physical-empirical statements, which both serve to characterize this dialogue.¹

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¹ Too often, the *Parmenides*' arguments have been considered from a unilaterally metaphysical or logical-linguistic perspective (see F. Ferrari, *Unità e oggetto del Parmenide*, pp. 106–107 & R. Patterson, *Forms, Fallacies ...*, p. 103); on the contrary, in some of them, also physical sparks emerge, proof of the close connection between the intelligible level and the sensible level, which characterizes the Platonic philosophy (see M. Migliori, *Dialettica e Verità*, pp. 481–488).

Therefore, the iteration of these elements, which are essential for understanding and reconstructing the dialectical process, need to be analysed in-depth in relation to the Eleatic sources. Plato himself initiates this process in the *Parmenides* with the reorganisation of both Eleatic themes and methods, in particular the Zenonian method.

Indeed, in the first part of the dialogue, Plato formulates the need to teach the dialectical method to a young Socrates. This method is not to be applied only to physical and empirical realities as done by Zeno, neither should it be applied on a purely linguistic level as offered by Eristical logical-deductive reasoning, in a purely polemical sense with the aim to disprove.¹ In fact, it should be chiefly applied to the intelligible realities (Ideas and Principles), as illustrated in the second part of the dialogue with the example of dialectical *gymnasia*. In Plato dialectics becomes an investigatory instrument used to address the complexity of reality, which unveils itself as having an intrinsic and simultaneous one–multiple nature.² This means that firstly all reality is both a whole and multiple at the same time due to its constitutive parts, and that secondly reality is a whole consisting of two radically different levels: empirical and intelligible, closely interconnected and communicating.

Therefore, when developing an argumentation of *Parmenides*, the various Eleatic moments must be explained in an attempt to identify the most influential source of reference,³ which could be Zeno, Melissus or Gorgias, the latter being considered as a sort of successor of Zeno.⁴ The purpose of this is to illustrate the significance of theoretical discussion in relation to Eleatics,⁵ both in terms of its overcoming and of the partial acceptance of its elaborations.

2. The value of the Zenonian contribution in the first part of the *Parmenides*

2.1. The denial of multiplicity

The process of Plato's re-interpretation of Eleatism emerges from the beginning of the dialogue.⁶ Zeno is described as a polemicist, who in one of his early writings wished to highlight the absurdities that the affirmation of multiplicity can lead to; his intention was to help the master Parmenides who argued that everything is One.

¹ See L. Palpacelli, *L'Eutidemo di Platone*, pp. 125–149.

² See Plato, *Philebus* 15d4–8.

³ Where possible, because in some passages, as we shall see, the influences of several Eleatic sources emerge with the same meaningfulness; in turn, these sources influence each other (think of the Gorgian dialectic which evidently draws inspiration from both Zeno and Melissus).

⁴ See G. Calogero, *Studi sull'Eleatismo*, pp. 189–268.

⁵ This centrality can already be realized from the conception of Ideas, as noted by A. Levi, *Il problema dell'errore ...*, p. 215: *The theory of Ideas [...] had some points of contact with the Parmenidean conceptions, since the specific features of the ideal world (identity, immutability, perfection) fully corresponded to those that the old thinker of Elea had attributed to his Being One; but the divergences were very serious between the implacably monist conception of these and the systematic, but pluralist, Plato's conception.*

⁶ See Plato, *Parmenides* 127d–128e.

In the first antinomy of the text, brought for the first time to Athens¹ by the Eleatic school, it is stated that if things are many, it then follows that the same things are *both* like and unlike. This statement is however impossible as it is contradictory in nature;² consequently, the premise of multiplicity itself is questioned. The Zenonian dialectic method is thus presented as a *reductio ad absurdum*:

- one can put forward a hypothesis (does the multiplicity exist?),
- and draw a direct consequence (it should consist of like *and* unlike),
- however, such a consequence is unfeasible (the same thing cannot simultaneously be like and unlike),
- therefore, the premise is wrong (multiplicity does not exist).³

Since there are only two possibilities that either reality is one or it is multiple,⁴ Zeno demonstrated *in the negative way*, i.e. by denying the existence of many, what was positively argued by Parmenides, that is to say that everything is One. In the dialogue Zeno explains to Socrates the reason why he wrote the treatise they are talking about:

*The real truth is that it's a defense of Parmenides' argument, directed against those who try to ridicule it on the ground that, if it is one, many absurd and inconsistent consequences follow. This treatise then is a retort to those who assert the many, and pays them back in kind with interest; its purpose is to make clear that their own hypothesis—that plurality is, when followed out far enough—suffers still more absurd consequences than the hypothesis that (only) the One is. I wrote it when I was young, in this sort of spirit of controversy, and after it was written someone stole it, so I wasn't allowed to decide whether or not it should see the light of day.*⁵

Hence, Plato emphasizes that Zeno does not directly defend the One, as he wants to show that if we assume the paradigm of the multiplicity of entities we

¹ For this dialogue setting, focused on an impossible encounter between a young Socrates and an old Parmenides, which certainly does not faithfully present the thought of Parmenides and Zeno but mixes historical data and plausible news, see M. Migliori, *Dialettica e Verità*, pp. 104–113 and F. Ferrari in: Platone, *Parmenide*, pp. 20–27. In brief, we must say that historical data are scarcely reliable because here Plato carries out an operation that is mainly speculative.

² See Plato, *Parmenides* 127e.

³ This is the Platonic reformulation of Zeno's argument against the many that can be reconstructed through a passage of Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 116, 5, consisting of the following: If many are, they 1) must be unlike because otherwise they are one and not many; 2) in order to be unlike, they must differ either because of being or because of not being; 2.1) the many cannot be unlike because of being, as for being they are the same; 2.2) they cannot neither be unlike because of not being, since it is necessary that they exist, in order to apply not being to them; 3) this shows that the many are contradictory, because they are both like and unlike, so only the one is.

⁴ This elementary alternative is certainly at the center of the Platonic critique which wants, on the contrary, to show that reality is always one–multiple.

⁵ Plato, *Parmenides* 128c6–e1, tr. R. Allen.

will unavoidably be faced with even *more ridiculous* consequences than those which would be encountered by the monists. This last clarification is important to preclude thinking that Zeno is a pure monist. The Platonic clarification of the *purely polemical* aim of the Eleatic grants the author of the dialogue the possibility of obtaining a *destructive* effect on both hypotheses: both the monists' and the pluralists' positions are aporetic and must therefore be rejected on the grounds of unilaterality.

Two pieces of data confirm that this is a Platonic operation: firstly, the key concept of Parmenides' philosophy is that of Being and not the One; his concept is an ontology and not a monism (the latter belonging to Melissus); secondly, despite the emphasis by Platonic Zeno, the historical Zeno

[...] moves with a precise aim: his operation is not purely destructive, he destroys in order to build. His arguments have the value of a founding effort through negation [...] [indeed, he is aware of the fact that] the sensible world is intimately contradictory, and it cannot bear the verification of reason. The emerging contradiction destroys any explanation linked to common sense and it requires the definition of a totally different dimension.¹

Unfortunately, tradition has only retained the destructive part of this dialectic with the constructive part having been lost.²

2.2. The need for a one–many dialectic

One of the reasons for this Platonic invention can be found in the need to establish a strong link between Zenonian dialectic and Parmenidean ontology on a metaphysical level: *Plato's ability consists in transforming this bond into a hierarchical relationship which sees Zeno gradually lose his role while Parmenides becomes the only true metaphysical master.*³ Indeed, Plato is interested in preparing the field to showcase the great contribution that the Zenonian dialectic can offer in understanding reality's uni–multiplicity. However, in order to be actually useful the Zenonian contribution must be developed not on a logical-empirical level, i.e. the level on which historical Zeno moves, but rather on the metaphysical level, which according to Plato can only be affirmed by a great philosopher like Parmenides.⁴ This Platonic aim is confirmed in Socrates' first reflection: *Now, if someone should undertake to show that sticks and stones and things like that are many, and the same things one, we'll grant*

¹ M. Migliori, *Unità, molteplicità e dialettica*, p. 78.

² See G. Reale, *Eleati*, p. 713.

³ M. Migliori, *Dialettica e Verità*, pp. 372–373.

⁴ Parmenides is not a coherent metaphysician; however, he is the Eleatic who is particularly suitable to embody the figure of a teacher, capable of supporting the exercise, which Plato poses as an example of the dialectical method.

he has proved that something is many and one, but not that the one is many or the many one.¹

By means of his dialectical arguments, Zeno demonstrated the importance of negation to establish the positive; however, he was unable—according to Plato—to fully develop this intuition by illustrating the intertwining of one and many which characterize different levels of the same reality. Zeno in fact only showed the obvious *aporia* of empirical reality as he believed that the consequent denial of multiplicity was sufficient to establish the One. Zeno's vision of reality is simplified as reality appears to be *both* one and multiple and as such requires justification. To do this, it is necessary to move away from the *aporias* cited at the empirical level and to transcend this level to reach the metaphysical one. In executing this movement Socrates shows that what is contradictory and therefore constitutes an *aporia*—the coexistence of like and unlike—on the empirical level is no longer contradictory if referred to at the level of the Ideas:² *Even if all things get a share of both, opposite as they are, and by having a share of both they are both like and unlike themselves, what is surprising in that? If someone were to show that things that are just like become unlike, or just unlike, like, no doubt that would be a portent.*³

The Platonic way of overcoming and implementing Zenonian dialectic begins to take shape: dialectic proves itself to be useful if transposed on a metaphysical level to enable comprehension of how the one–many connection functions (unity of the Idea and multiplicity of the entities which compose it). Moreover, the Zenonian dialectic becomes even more valuable given that also on the metaphysical level within interactions between Ideas the same *aporias* concerning sensible reality are repeated.⁴ Such *aporias* lead Plato to continue his research, further refining the dialectical method until achieving the construction of a system, a paradigm of explanation of reality, within which the one and the many can coexist without generating any contradictions.⁵

3. The Eleatic elements in the *gymnasia* of the second part of the *Parmenides*

3.1. The use of the Zenonian method

In the second part of the *Parmenides*, dialectical *gymnasia* is conducted on an ontological-metaphysical level *starting from and with* Parmenides, who initially presents it to young Socrates as a rational exercise aimed at young people and the discovery of the truth. This exercise is exactly the one that had

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 129d2–6, tr. R. Allen.

² Like entities partake in the Idea of Likeness and unlike entities partake in the Idea of Unlikeness.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 129a6–b3, tr. R. Allen.

⁴ See Plato, *Parmenides* 129e–130a.

⁵ See section 4. *Platonic benefit* ... below. We cannot get into a detailed description about the functioning of the one–many dialectic, which is central to the entire Platonic metaphysical movement, for such in-depth study would go beyond the objectives I have set myself in this contribution. See M. Migliori, *Il Disordine ordinato*, vol. 1, pp. 329–441, esp. pp. 413–421.

been devised by Zeno, but here it is applied to Ideas, as Plato explicitly expresses through Parmenides:

“Believe me, your impulse toward argument is noble and indeed divine. But train yourself more thoroughly while you are still young; drag yourself through what is generally regarded as useless, and condemned by the multitude as a pure game of words. Otherwise, the truth will escape you.”

“What is the manner of training, Parmenides?” he asked.

“The one you heard Zeno use” he replied. “Except for this: I admired it when you said, and said to him, that you would not allow inquiry to wander among the things we see nor concern them, but rather concern those things which one would most especially grasp by rational account and believe to be Ideas.”¹

Therefore, the dialectic is not an intricate game, as most people believe, but rather a fundamental step to allow philosophical growth in the search of the truth, as it is further reaffirmed, this time by Zeno himself: *For most people do not realize that without this kind of detailed ranging and wandering through everything, it is impossible to meet with truth and gain intelligence.*²

Plato underlines the importance of the exercise he is going to perform in so far that it has also a remedial value for those who underestimate the complexity of reality and delude themselves into accepting an easy and immediate approach to the truth. On the contrary, the truth requires deeper exploration; dialectical *gymnasia* is in fact designed to be fear-provoking due to its complexity and has the duty to fully investigate any possible internal relationship present in reality whose nature is precisely characterized by infinite relationships. This is shown by the model employed by Parmenides to illustrate this type of investigation to Socrates:³

In short, concerning whatever may be hypothesized as being and as not being and as undergoing any other affection whatever, it is necessary to examine the consequences relative to itself and relative to each one of the others, which ever you may choose, and relative to more than one and relative to all in like manner. And the others, again, must be examined both relative to themselves and relative to any other you may choose, whether you hypothesize what you hypothesize as

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 135d 2–e 4, tr. R. Allen modified.

² Plato, *Parmenides* 136e1–3, tr. R. Allen.

³ See also Plato, *Sophist* 253b8–c3, confirming that the relations here presented concern the metaphysical world also, hence the links among Ideas.

*being or as not being, if you are to be finally trained accurately to discern the truth.*¹

This is a potentially infinite study, which is defined as an *exceptional exercise*;² *a great sea of words*.³ No possibilities are to be discarded *a priori*, in order—as reiterated once more—to discover the truth.

Having clarified this, Parmenides appears to be the only one able to provide an example. Indeed, Zeno's reaction to the request of young Socrates to perform the exercise can be considered as confirmation of Parmenides' role:

*And Pythodorus said Zeno laughed and said: "Let's ask Parmenides himself, Socrates, for I fear it's no light thing he has in mind. Or don't you see how great a task you impose? If there were more of us, it would not even be right to ask it, for it would be unsuitable, especially in a man of his age, to discuss things such as this before a large company [...] So Parmenides, I join in Socrates' request, so that I too may learn from you after all this time."*⁴

Despite Zeno being the inventor of dialectic, Plato points out that he is not up to the task. Indeed, Parmenides affirms the need to revert to the Zenonian dialectic; not on a physical level, like in the *aporias* of his pupil, but on a metaphysical level, that means applying this method to the realities related to reasoning. Thus, the passage from the Zenonian dialectic to the Platonic one is proclaimed with the mention of the need for an *exceptional individual*⁵ to teach the dialectic of Ideas. This person is required to identify with this Platonic Parmenides' approach presented as a metaphysical and dialectic Eleatic.

3.2. The characterization of the One—one of the first thesis

Plato presents the dialectical method *in opere operato*, which investigates all the hypotheses concerning the One, starting with the hypothesis about the One itself presented as Parmenides' own:⁶ *Where then shall we begin? What shall we hypothesize first? Since it seems I must play this laborious game, shall I begin with myself and take my own hypothesis? Shall I hypothesize about the one itself, what must follow if one is one or one is not one?*⁷

The first metaphysical object to be dialectically analyzed is therefore the One in itself, known as the One—one or the One as One. Indeed, Plato immediately clarifies that this version of One excludes any form of multiplicity and cannot be made up of parts. Consequently, it is not a whole that is inevitably

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 136b6–c5, tr. R. Allen [my emphasis].

² Plato, *Parmenides* 136c6.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 137a5.

⁴ Plato, *Parmenides* 136d4–e4, tr. R. Allen.

⁵ Forewarned in Plato, *Parmenides* 135b1: θαυμαστοτέρου.

⁶ See Plato, *Parmenides* 137c–142a.

⁷ Plato, *Parmenides* 137a7–b4, tr. R. Allen modified.

composed of parts.¹ Plato then goes on to identify, according to the dialectical method, all the consequences that derive from the thesis *if the One is One*.

3.2.1. The refusal of multiplicity and the Melissan source

This first thesis is of particular interest as it is the most explicitly *Eleatic* one with the emergence of many references to this pattern of thought. The first consequence is that the One—one cannot possess neither a beginning, nor a middle nor an end. This is because being absolutely one it cannot be made up of parts, which would qualify it as *multiple*. If this is so, then it follows that the One is limitless given that *the end and the beginning are the limits of every object*;² as a result “[...] *the One is infinite, if it has neither a beginning nor an end.*” “*Infinite.*”³ Having no parts and being infinite, such One does not even have a geometric shape; neither a circular form in which the extremes are equidistant from the center, nor a rectilinear one where the center is interposed between two extremes. This is precisely because it would imply *the center* and *the extremes* as its parts.⁴

The status of this One—one which excludes multiplicity and thus division into parts cannot be attributed to the historical Parmenides who, in his poem attributes *perhaps* just once the characteristic of unity to Being.⁵ This position seems to refer instead to Melissus’ One:⁶ Melissus explicitly affirms that the One cannot have any parts, otherwise it would no longer be one, and so it has no beginning or end; that is, it has no limit and it is the reason for which it is infinite.⁷

*Now since it did not come to be, but is, it always was and always will be, and it has no beginning nor end, but is unlimited. For if it came to be, it would have a beginning (for it would have begun to come to be at some time) and an end (for it would have ceased coming to be at some time). But since it did not begin nor end, it always was and always will be, <and> it has no beginning nor end [...].*⁸

¹ See Plato, *Parmenides* 137c–d.

² Plato, *Parmenides* 137d6.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 137d7–8.

⁴ See Plato, *Parmenides* 137d–138a. As we will see shortly, this is confirmed in the Second thesis, in which the parties’ argument is taken up again (in: 145a–b).

⁵ See M. Untersteiner, *Parmenide*, pp. XXVII–L & E. Zeller & R. Mondolfo, *La filosofia dei Greci nel suo sviluppo storico*, pp. 198–201.

⁶ According to J. Palmer, *Plato’s Reception of Parmenides*, pp. 111–112, the predicates attributed to the One in the first hypothesis are characteristic for Melissus more than for Parmenides. In this wake also M. Brémond, *Mélistos, Gorgias et Platon ...* : in the first hypothesis Plato presents some Melissan-Gorgian predicates and not Parmenidean or Zenonian ones.

⁷ On the contrary, Parmenides considers Being as limited and as having the shape of a sphere.

⁸ Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 109, 20 [= DK30B2], tr. D. Graham. See also DK30B4.

The connection between the absence of limits (therefore of parts) and space–time infinity is further confirmed by *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*:

[Melissus] says that if something is, it is everlasting, since it is not possible for something to come to be from nothing. [...] since it is everlasting, it would be without limit, because it does not have a beginning from which it came to be, nor an end to which it ever ceases coming into being. And since it is all without limit, it is <one>. For if there were two or more, these would be limits for each other. But since it is one, it would be alike everywhere. For if it were unlike, it would be more and no longer one, but many.

Since it is everlasting, incommensurable and alike everywhere, the one is without motion. For it would not move, unless it withdrew into something. For it is necessary for something that withdraws to go either into the full or the empty. But the former cannot receive it, while the latter is nothing.¹

These texts clearly show that the One of the *Parmenides*' first hypothesis echoes Melissan reflections. However, while Melissus deduces the eternity of the One from the absence of limits and therefore its infinity, Plato from the same premise deduces the non-divisibility of the One into parts.

3.2.2. The refusal of motion: the Melissan and Gorgian-Zenonian references

The topic of geometric shape is connected to that of motion which is excluded in all its forms (as anticipated by the text of Aristotle). If moving is considered in the sense of modification or alteration, then the One modified into itself could no longer be One. Subsequently, alteration is impossible: *Because if it were moved, it would either change place or alter character; for these are the only motions [...] But unity cannot alter its own character, I take it, and still be one [...] So it does not move by altering character.²* Similarly, Melissus debates motion on similar terms rejecting any alteration or modification related to the One, also considering its form:

And it would not diminish, become greater, change shape [...] For if it is altered, what is would of necessity not be the same, but what had been before would perish, what previously was not would come to be. Now if it became different by a single hair in ten thousand years, the whole would perish in the whole of time. Nor is it possible for it to be subjected to change of shape. For the shape which existed before does not

¹ Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 974a2–18 [= DK30A5], trl. D. Graham modified.

² Plato, *Parmenides* 138b8–c3, tr. R. Allen.

*perish, nor does a shape which did not exist come to be. But since nothing new comes to be, nor does anything perish, nor is it altered, how could there be a change of shape of existing things? For if something became different, it would by that fact also be subjected to change of shape.*¹

The Platonic argument however also seems to recall the Gorgian argument² used to explain the impossibility of generation from being which is considered a form of change: *For if what-is changed, it would no longer be what-is, just as if what-is-not came to be it would no longer be what-is-not.*³ No entity can be moved, because if it were moved, it would lose its essence and it would also transform what is into what is not; as a consequence, not-being would no longer be not-being, instead it would be simply Being. In this sense, the Melissan fragment is even more explicative as it brings out the absence of motion from the indivisibility—therefore also the lack of parts—of the One: *[Melissus] proves what-is is indivisible and he says: “For if what-is has been divided, it moves. But if it moved, it would not be.”*⁴

Once more, by reason of the absence of parts the One—one from the first thesis excludes also the translation of motion, which can be 1) circular or 2) vectorial:⁵

1) as circular motion requires a center with parts that rotate around it, this automatically implies that the One should have parts, whereas this possibility has already been excluded for the One—one: *Now, if it [the One] revolves in a circle it must rest on a center, and have what revolves around the center as other parts of itself. But how can that to which neither middle nor parts pertain ever be moved in a circle around its center?*⁶

2) Regarding vectorial motion, Plato emphasizes that the moveable mass is *partly inside* and *partly outside* with respect to the place from which and towards which the motion occurs. This is excluded here because the One—one has no parts. Furthermore, since it is not even a whole, it can neither be all inside nor all outside:

It is impossible for what has no parts, I take it, to be at the same time as a whole either within or outside of something [...] But it is even more impossible for what neither has parts nor is a whole to come to be somewhere in something, since it can come to be in it neither part by part nor as a whole [...] So the One does

¹ Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 111, 18 [= DK30B7], tr. D. Graham modified.

² On the parallels between the *Parmenides* and the *Treatise on not being*, see J. Mansfeld, *Historical and philosophical aspects ...* & M. Dixsaut, *Platon et la leçon de Gorgias ...*.

³ Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 979b28–29.

⁴ Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 109, 32 [= DK30B10].

⁵ See Plato, *Parmenides* 138c.

⁶ Plato, *Parmenides* 138c4–6, tr. R. Allen.

*not change by going somewhere [χώρῳ] or coming to be in something, nor does it revolve in the same place, nor alter character [...] So the One is unchanging with respect to every sort of change.*¹

Although Melissus explains the impossibility of translation through void,² here the Platonic source seems to be more Gorgias³ who emphasizes the need for the entity to be divisible into parts if it has to move:

*Nor—he says—can anything move. For if it were moved, it would no longer be as it is but rather what was would not be and what was not would have come to be. Moreover, either it would move as one by translation; since it is not continuous, it is therefore divided and the being ceases to be at this point. So if it is moved everywhere, it is divided everywhere. Yet if this is the case it exists nowhere.*⁴

The entity being moved by translation would be divided (i.e. with one part in one place and another part in another) and being divided it would no longer be at the point of being divided; if motion concerns every part, every part will be divided and therefore it will not be.

3.2.3. The importance of the *place*: the Zenonian-Gorgian source

A further consequence of the fact that the One is devoid of parts is that it has no geometric shape and neither does it change nor move. Plato deals with the theme of *place*⁵ by clarifying that the One—one is neither in itself nor in any other, *therefore it is not in any place*. The One—one cannot be *in another*, since [i]f it were in another, it would be contained in a circle by what it was in, and touch it in many places with many parts; but since it is one and without parts and does not partake in the circular figure, it cannot touch in many places in a circle.⁶ Take note of the emphasis on the circular figure which highlights what we have previously underlined about the geometric dimension, therefore the physical one too, of this One.

Furthermore, Plato denies that the One—one can be *in itself*, otherwise it would be split. So, every time we talk about *being in*, we affirm the coexistence of a containing reality together with a contained one:

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 138e4–139a3, tr. R. Allen.

² See DK30B9 & DK30A5 of Aristotle above-mentioned.

³ M. Brémond, *Mélistos, Gorgias et Platon ...*, pp. 79–84, strongly affirms that, in the *Parmenides*, Gorgias depends from Melissus, and she affirms unilaterally that 1) the reference of the first thesis on the One—one is *Melissus through Gorgias* and 2) all the second part of the dialogue is a *pastiche* of the *Treatise on not being*. Even if we agree on the presence in the *Parmenides* of different references to the Gorgian pamphlet, the conclusion reached by the scholar is not shared by me, as, in addition to Gorgias, other references emerge (such as Zeno), which exclude a *totalizing* reference to Gorgias.

⁴ Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 979b40–980a6.

⁵ See Plato, *Parmenides* 137e–138b.

⁶ Plato, *Parmenides* 138a7–9, tr. R. Allen.

*Furthermore, if it were in itself, it would contain nothing other than itself by itself, if indeed it is in itself: for a thing cannot be in something that does not contain it [...] Now, what contains would be one thing and what is contained another; for the same thing will not at once do and suffer both as a whole. And thus, the One would no longer then be one, but two.*¹

This argument is the reworked version of a similar argument developed by Gorgias,² who uses it in a different context to affirm the impossibility of being non-generated. Indeed, if it is non-generated, the entity is infinite as demonstrated by Melissus; and if it is infinite, it is nowhere because it is not in itself and it is not contained in anything, otherwise there would be two infinities. That which is not in any place does not exist. Plato comes to the same Gorgian conclusion: *So the One is nowhere* [οὐκ ἄρα ἐστὶν που τὸ ἓν], *since it is neither in itself nor in another.*³ Moreover, since it has been excluded that the One is in itself or in another, it cannot even be *at rest*, because this would imply that the One was in the same place, therefore contained in it.⁴

The theme of the place is decisive for denying the specific existence of the One—one as stated in the first thesis: *But since there is nothing else apart from the One and the others, and they must be in something, must they not forthwith be in each other—the others in the One, the One in the others—or be nowhere at all* [μηδαμοῦ]?⁵ By way of confirmation, the second thesis explicitly states the link between place and existence: *Then if it were nowhere* [μηδαμοῦ], *it would be no thing; but if it is a whole as it is not in itself, it must be in another.*⁶ This argument strongly marks the passage from the One—one of the first thesis, which is not in any place, to the One-which-is of the second thesis, which must necessarily be somewhere, as it exists.

These affirmations about the link between place and existence bring to mind the Zenonian argument. The theme of place is a central assumption in one of the discussions against motion, namely that of the arrow. In this dialogue, Zeno affirms that if everything must either be at rest or in movement. Furthermore, he states that if everything that occupies a space equal to itself (so it is in a place), it does not move and is therefore at rest because whatever moves (in this case the arrow) *always occupies a space equal to itself*, and it follows that what moves is at rest.⁷ The assumption becomes even more explicit in another discussion against motion: *What moves, does not move neither where*

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 138a7–b5, tr. R. Allen.

² See Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 979b20–26. See also M. Migliori, *La filosofia di Gorgia ...*, p. 36.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 138b5–6.

⁴ See Plato, *Parmenides* 139a–b.

⁵ Plato, *Parmenides* 151a8–b1, tr. R. Allen.

⁶ Plato, *Parmenides* 145e1–2.

⁷ See Aristotle, *Physics* 239b30.

[τόπος] *it is nor where it is not.*¹ The specific theme here is movement, nonetheless the assumption is clear: everything that exists occupies its space, meaning that it is situated in a place.

As a confirmation of this, it is necessary to refer to the first thesis of Gorgias' *Treatise on not-being* which is aimed at demonstrating that nothing exists, confirms the centrality that Zeno attributes to space and identifies Zenonian authorship relative to this discussion. The latter concludes that Being: *since it is not found anywhere* [μηδαμοῦ] *it is nothing, according to Zeno's argument about space* [χώρας].² However, while the reference to the place has a physical-empirical value in Zeno, the background is completely abstract in Gorgias. Given the presence of a dual reference, the Platonic dialogue must presuppose both values.

3.2.4. The negation of the One–one: a brief parallel with the Gorgian treatise

In the first thesis, Plato sets forth the Eleatic One–one and, by denying all the attributes (generation, change, place, etc.) which characterize everything as existing, he concludes that such One does not exist. It cannot even be one as it is neither possible to know it nor to name it:

*Then in no way the One has share of being [...]. So, the One in no way is [...] So it is not even such as to be one; for then it would already be a thing which is, and have a share of being. But it seems the One neither is one nor is, if such an account as this is to be trusted [...] So neither name nor account belongs to it, nor is there any knowledge or perception or opinion of it [...] So it is neither named nor spoken of, nor will it be an object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything among things which are perceive it.*³

This conclusion directly refers to the Gorgian *Treatise on not being*, in which the sophist overturns the Eleatic triad of being-thinking-saying and illustrates that if we accept Eleatic premises and logic, we arrive at diametrically opposite consequences that are: 1) being is not; 2) even if it were, it would not be knowable; 3) even if it were knowable, it would not be communicable.

Therefore, Gorgias materializes as an *internal revolutionary* of the Eleatic school as he also demonstrates these conclusions using the same Zenonian dialectical method.⁴

For his part, Plato analyzed the One–one by declaring it to be an example of the dialectic inaugurated by Zeno which has been applied to a thesis on the

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers* IX, 72 [= DK29B4].

² Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* 979b25–26.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 141e9–142a6, tr. R. Allen [my emphasis].

⁴ See E. Berti, *Contraddizione e dialettica ...*, pp. 28–29: [Gorgias'] *demonstrations are dialectical in the same sense in which Zeno's were, as they demonstrate their respective theses through the contradiction of the theses opposed to them, formulated like so many hypotheses including all possible alternatives.*

One that goes back to Parmenides. On this basis, he eventually arrives at similar conclusions to the Gorgian ones concerning being that deny One—one's existence and the possibility of knowing it. However, differently to Gorgias the Platonic aim is not to abandon the onto-gnoseological reflection. Instead it highlights the inadequacy of the Eleatically understood One (the polemical reference here is Melissus). Since this One—considered in an absolute sense and free from any type of bond—is rejected at the beginning of the second thesis, Plato affirms the need to rethink the One from a different perspective.

4. Platonic benefit: different senses of the One and opening to the vision of the uni-multiple reality

In a move away from the Eleatic dimension, Plato elicits the need to transcend the One instead of denying it and to successfully utilize its positive contributions. Despite having placed significant attention on the subject of the One, Eleatics fails to explain reality using this concept as they characterize it in an absolute sense. In view of this *Parmenides*' first hypothesis inherits a *cathartic* meaning which allows us to advance and define the One in a different sense. The importance of the One is able to be affirmed even though Parmenides asks young Aristotle at the end of the first hypothesis whether the One is really reflected in the negative condition attributed to the One—one: *Now, can these things be true of the One?—I don't think so.*¹

This conclusion does not however lead to the radical denial of the One and its knowledge, even if the deductions made during the hypothesis are correct. It indicates—following the Zenonian method—that the (Eleatic) premise of an absolute One—one must be rejected.² Therefore, from a philosophical point of view the first thesis achieves a positive result for two reasons: 1) it challenges the reflection on a series of decisive themes; 2) it denies an absolutely transcendent One—one as on one hand it condemns the *Eleatic One* and on the other it opens a different research path. The second hypothesis³ analyzes the One-which-is and therefore participates in Being.⁴ This hypothesis serves as validation of the fact that the Platonic movement cannot be assimilated to the Gorgian demolition.⁵ This is a true change of hypothesis as it starts with the

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 142a7–8.

² As already partly clarified, it should not be forgotten that this is a transcendent reinterpretation of the Eleatic One, which instead has got a *physical* meaning, as it coincides with the totality of nature and therefore it is immanent: the One proposed by Plato in the first thesis has got the characteristics of the Eleatic One, but with a shift on the metaphysical level (i.e. level of Ideas and Principles), which is not typical of the Eleatic ontology. Furthermore, the refusal of this One—one does not allow us to conclude that here Plato is affirming the total transcendence of the One (contrary to what Neoplatonists, like Proclus and Damascius, conclude).

³ See Plato, *Parmenides* 142b1–c7.

⁴ As rightly affirmed by M. Migliori, *Dialettica e Verità*, pp. 224–227.

⁵ I disagree with M. Brémond, *Mélistos, Gorgias et Platon ...*, p. 86, statement that Plato refers more to the Gorgian method than to the Zenonian one (from which the former originates), sharing with the sophist the demolishing aim, which leads him to turn this method against Eleatism itself. If this were the case, the entire first part of the dialogue, in which there are explicit references to Zeno and to his dialectic affirming its value, would not make sense. Moreover, the Platonic aim is not primarily to subvert the Eleatic conclusions and deny the

definition of a totally different subject from that of the first hypothesis and it is no coincidence that the One–one is no longer referred to during the entire dialogue.

The nature of this *new* One is intrinsically complex, because it is binary in its very constitution: the One-which-is is both *one* and *being*:

*“Then the being of the One will be, even if it will not be the same as One; otherwise, it would not be the being of it, nor would the One participate in Being; rather, to say that ‘the One is’ would be like saying that ‘the One is one’. But as it is, the hypothesis is not ‘what must follow if the One is one’, but ‘what must follow if the One is’.”*¹

So, Plato himself clearly distinguishes the One–one from the One-which-is:

*“For the following reason: if the ‘being’ is said of the ‘One’, since it is, and if the ‘one’ is said of the being, since it is one, and if Being and One are not the same, but belong to that same thing we have hypothesized, namely, the One-which-is, must it not, since it is one, be a whole of which the one and its being become parts?” “Necessarily.” “Then shall we call each of those parts only a part, or must part be called part of whole?” “Part of whole.”*²

The One-which-is, that is radically different from the One–one which rejects all predications, inevitably participates in both the One and Being and as such is a *whole* made up of *parts*, which in this status has to be communicable. Insofar as these parts are something, they in turn constitute a whole formed by both One and Being. Consequently, since it is both possible and fundamental to proceed to infinity, the One-which-is splits to constitute an *infinite multiplicity*.³ However, since the One has parts and these parts form part of a whole, it must also be *limited*, possessing a beginning, a middle and an end. It follows therefore that according to the relationship between the centre and the extremes, it will be formed as a round or straight geometric shape.⁴ Yet, being a whole constituted of parts which are in turn a whole themselves, this One concurs with every entity⁵ and as such also concerns the empirical reality which is charac-

existence of Being and the One, but rather that of using these conclusions positively to demonstrate the need to consider the One differently and dialectically.

¹ Plato, *Parmenides* 142b3–c4.

² Plato, *Parmenides* 142d1–8.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 142c–143a, tr. R. Allen.

⁴ See Plato, *Parmenides* 144e–145b.

⁵ Such One describes reality, both on an intelligible level and on an empirical level, as one–multiple, that is, as a Whole, the parts of which are the One and Being. In turn these parts are existing units, that is, they participate in the One and the Being, composed in turn of the One and Being and so on, in a tendentially infinite process. This situation is overcome because, according to Plato, the Whole (which has its foundation in an Idea) is at a higher level than the parts. The Whole has got an ontological primacy: it is not configured as the sum of the parts, but as an entity which organizes the parts according to a precise logic. Therefore, the relationship between Whole and

terized by multiplicity, change and all attributes which were denied to the One—one of the first thesis due to its nature.

At the same time, Plato further emphasizes the detachment from Eleatism by multiplying all the different connotations of the concept of *One*. In the course of this second thesis for example, Plato goes on to consider with a certain degree of abstraction the One in itself regardless of the Being in which it participates; therefore, instead of appearing multiple it is only one.¹ Plato deals with yet a further sense of One (different from the One—one in the first thesis which does not participate in either the One or Being, and different from the One-which-is that participates in both the One and Being). Plato wishes to emphasize the *difference* of One and Being: *Now, if the Being is one thing and the One is another, the One is not different from the Being by virtue of being one, nor is the Being other than the One by virtue of being; but they are different from each other by virtue of the Difference and Other [...] So, Difference is not the same as One or Being.*² Plato affirms that the One and the Being are separated by virtue of Difference which is established as a further term (unexplained) on the same level as the One and the Being as a sort of principle to guarantee their non-identity.

Thus, Plato initially introduces the concept of difference which will have an adequate development in the *Sophist* and is central to affirm the variety of reality. Secondly, he makes clear—and it is emphasized in various way—that just as the One participates in Being but does not coincide with it, so too every reality has to be distinguished from what it participates in. As Plato later underlines, something which is one because it participates in the One is no longer One, instead it is multiple: *“Now, things that have a share of One will have a share of difference from it?” “Of course.” “But things different from One are, I take it, many; for if the others than one were neither one nor more than one, they would be nothing.”*³

A confirmation, *e contrario*, can be drawn from the sixth thesis which examines the One-which-is-not⁴ considered singularly regardless of its relationship with the Others. This One cannot be confused with the One—one, as it is related with Being even if negatively. However, precisely because the relationship with Being is denied, this One is unknowable.⁵

5. Conclusion

This essay has tried to illustrate how Plato uses some important contribu-

parts is vertical. This happens in perceivable realities as well as in the more general relationship among all—intelligible and sensitive—entities: Ideas are principles of unity of sensitive entities, just as Metaideas are principles of unity of Ideas, and so on up to the original Polarity of the Platonic principle One–Dyad. See M. Migliori, *Dialettica e teoria ...*, pp. 57–61.

¹ See Plato, *Parmenides* 143a–b.

² Plato, *Parmenides* 143b4–7.

³ Plato, *Parmenides* 158b1–4, tr. R. Allen modified.

⁴ This version of one denies the relationship with being.

⁵ See Plato, *Parmenides* 164b 1–2.

tions made by the Eleatic philosophers, reinterpreting them and inserting them *ad hoc* within the ontological-metaphysical reflection of the *Parmenides*, in order to prepare the field for a further metaphysical-protological investigation. As Plato affirms at the beginning of the dialogue, such investigation begins with the *serious* dialectical exercise exemplified in his text by Parmenides.

The first major contribution preserved and innovated by Plato is the Zenonian dialectic which is configured as a kind of vector for the Platonic dialectic. The contradictions highlighted by the Zenonian dialectic on the empirical level impel Plato to revert from the physical level to the metaphysical level, that is from physical realities to Ideas and Metaideas such as Identical and Different, Quiet and Motion, etc., to the First Principles (One–Dyad) used to explain the complex twin of One–Many operating at all levels of reality.

The discussion of the first hypothesis on the One, based on Eleatic understanding, draws equal influence from Melissus, Zeno and Gorgias. Using these argumentations Plato is able to demonstrate the ineffectiveness and contradictory nature of the radical monistic hypothesis that presents an absolute One—one and is a starting point that opens research about the other senses of One. Therefore, the specific demonstrations of *Eleatic nature* contribute to affirming the necessity for a dynamic and multifocal vision of reality, which is far from Eleatism itself.

Finally, the presence of these elements in the *Parmenides* provides the opportunity to develop both physical-empirical and *metaphysical* value lines of reasoning of which some are applicable on an intelligible level and others on a sensitive level.¹ The *Parmenides* allows us to realize that reality is one according to Plato even if it is composed of two different levels which present the same dynamics.

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