



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH IN PARMENIDES PHILOSOPHY

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### ABSTRACT

The article's discussion object is to reflect on the problem of knowledge and truth in the philosophy of Parmenides. The reflections about knowledge and truth in this thinker must be linked to his discussions about the problematic of being. In reflecting on this subject, he eventually demonstrated that the rational aspect constitutes the legitimate nature of knowledge and truth. In this sense, reason, besides being an instrument capable of formulating principles to evaluate knowledge and truth, can also be interpreted as the foundation for the construction of any knowledge that claims to question the real knowledge status. The article is structured in three parts: a) An introduction in which we situate the philosopher's thought and present the problem to be discussed; b) Presentation of the materials and methods that guided the discussion about the issue; c) Presentation and analysis of the results originated, especially from the work of Parmenides.

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## INTRODUCTION

Parmenides of Elea was born at an uncertain data of a particular time in Ancient Greece. One of the late sources of the so-called early philosophers, Diogenes Laetrios (IX, 3, 23, 1987), finds its heyday at the 69th Olympics, which means, it would have reached maturity around 504-501 BC. Although the dates of his birth and death are controversial, it is right to say that he lived at a time when the historical dynamics in Greece had profound social transformations, which also contributed to the fruitful investigative of development and thinking way of men, considered as original. In this sense, Parmenides' philosophy disagrees, in part, from that developed by the Ionian philosophers, whose central concern was directed to the physical world's nature. Distancing himself from naturalistic philosophers, Parmenides approached the use of speculative thinking and reason oriented to a more complex and embracing problem. Among other subjects, such as the unity of being, his poem *Of Nature*, written in hexameter

verses, is intended to address the problem of knowledge and truth. Given the above considerations, the paper's discussion object is to reflect on the problem of knowledge and truth in Parmenides' philosophy. Our interpretation is that, although the philosopher was inserted in a context in which philosophical questions were turned to cosmological problems, it is possible, through fragments of his work, to demonstrate his concerns related to these two themes (knowledge and truth). In addition to exploring such topics, we also intend to highlight a close relationship and connection between them. The article is structured in three parts:

- This introduction in which we are contextualizing the philosopher's thought and presenting the problem to be discussed;
- Considerations about the materials and methods that guided the discussion about the issue;
- Presentation and analysis of the results originated, especially from the work of Parmenides. In this particular part,

we will deal with two relevant themes in the author's thinking that are closely related: knowledge and truth.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Firstly, the methodological approach adopted for the investigation around the problematic defined for this article was consisted of doing a bibliographic survey regarding the themes that deal specifically with the subject contemplated in our approach. Secondly, the procedures adopted for our discussion were guided by the text's reading, analysis, reflection, and interpretation that deal with the thought of Parmenides and his scholars. Thus, guided by qualitative approach are the results presented in the article. It can be stated that "The qualitative methodology is concerned with analyzing and interpreting deeper aspects, describing the complexity of human behavior. It provides a more detailed analysis of investigations, habits, attitudes and behavioral trends." (MARCONI and LAKATOS, 2008). Therefore, choosing this type of approach for our discussion is justified regarding the article's nature, that is because its problem lies entirely within the scope of speculative and theoretical research. Regarding the materials or theoretical framework, the theme's discussions were limited to some texts that address the author's thinking. The work attributed to Parmenides entitled *Of Nature* will be highlighted. Grouped into nineteen fragments, these are presented sequentially and divided into sections. After the proem (fragment. 1), the text is divided into two parts: while the first part presents a discussion of truth (fragments. 2-8.49), in the second, concerns opinion (fragments. 8.50-19). The proem, written in poetic form, is an invitation to education and knowledge, a report of his developmental trajectory.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Parmenides, in his formative journey, resorts to what is already established, because he understands that one cannot learn from anything, but from the elaborate tradition, to forward a new thought and knowledge. This statement can be seen in the quotations that the Eleatic made in the prologue. He refers to Anaximander, an Ionian philosopher when he mentions the importance of justice and mentions Hesiod's Theogony insofar as his poetic language alludes to divine revelation. Turning to the past, Parmenides seems to suggest that the formative process would imply in the dialogue with tradition but also argues about the need to overcome it. Thus, the reported trip may suggest a metaphor for someone who comes out of darkness (opinion) and walks into light (knowledge), or even the abandonment of the familiar world in which collective experience prevails for a way of thinking that leads to a transcendent understanding of both unchanging truth and opinion (Kirk; Raven; Schofield, 1994). Therefore, it suggests the itinerary of knowledge and the appeal to instruction and truth, as Parmenides states in the proem *Of Nature*, in the version translated by Fernando Santoro: "But you must instruct all of you: both from the fearless heart of persuasive Truth and mortals' opinions in which there is no true faith. However, you will also learn this: how opinions must patently be, going through everything of anything" (Parmenides, 2006). The end of the proem is suggestive, as its author claims that it is necessary to "let anything instruct you" so you can learn afterwards. In this way, it opens one of the most critical discussions of Greek philosophy, the way of truth. In the first part, after the proem, Parmenides, in the second fragment,

points to the two ways of questioning and thinking: "one for what is and, as such, is not to be"; [...] another, for what is not and, as such, one must not be" (Parmenides, 2006). Thus, reflections on knowledge and truth in Parmenides' philosophy must be related to his discussions of the problematic of being. This thinker, in the context of pre-Socratic Greek thought, is known to have promoted a substantial renewal by placing 'being' as the object of philosophical inquiry, inaugurating what has come to be called ontology or the study of being. But how did the philosopher conceive this theme in his thinking?

From the fragments of his work, it is possible to find many passages that express elementary aspects about 'being' within the scope of Parmenides' philosophy, which provides theoretical presuppositions for a discussion comprehension of this article. Therefore, we intend to highlight some of these passages to demonstrate how do knowledge and truth constitute two fundamental themes in the philosopher's thought. It is right to state that, as far as the problem of knowledge is concerned, the few passages related to this theme lead us to infer that Parmenides, when reflecting about being, eventually demonstrated what is the nature of true knowledge, although the fundamental objective of his philosophy was not to propose a definition or to answer the question of what knowledge is. Once the principle of the identity of 'being' is instituted and, consequently, many other attributes (we will talk about them in the following lines), what seems to stand out from the fragments of his work is the attempt to demonstrate which type of knowledge (path) is the most appropriate. Also, to investigate not only the constitutive elements of being but also in what sense this investigation can be considered authentic and true. According to Giovanni Reale's (1993) interpretation, 'being' is what must be affirmed while 'non-being' must be denied. Truth, therefore, would imply a movement of both denial and affirmation: one denies the 'non-being' while one affirms the 'being.' In other words, Reale alludes to the fact that 'being' is purely positive and 'non-being' the pure negative. 'Being' is the only thinkable and expressible thing, ergo, an act of thought is thinking of being, and by extension, non-being is unthinkable and inexpressible. In his poem, Parmenides maintains that "Necessary is to say and think that (the) being is; for it is to be, and nothing is not" (Parmenides, 1978). Remarkably, the allusion to what it is a recurrence in the philosopher's work. In this sense, we can affirm that the attempt to explain this aspect and make it intelligible can be considered its most significant concern. But what did the thinker have in mind when referring to what it is? One answer to this question may be as follows: "He says: What is, is. There is no doubt that this is what we call the body. This body, of course, is seen as spatially extensive as it is seriously described as a sphere. [...]"

The statement that 'is' is precisely the same as that the universe is a *plenum* and that there is nothing that resembles space, either inside or outside the world" (Burnet, 2006). Regarding to being or *what is*, Parmenides states: "And of [...] what is naive being is also imperishable, for it is all whole, unshakable and endless; neither was nor ever will be, for it is now altogether, one, continuous [...] Nor is it divisible, for it is all identical [...] On the other hand, immobile in the limits of great union is without beginning and pause" (Parmenides, 1978). As we can see, this passage expresses the constitutive elements of being and, consequently, the way the philosopher conceived this theme. From the last passage, we can list some essential attributes of 'being.' First, 'being' is permanent and eternal.

Which means that it is not born; has no origin and, does not perish. The 'being' is also immobile: it does not change, which means, it is unchanging. Now if it changes, it will become what it is not. And lastly, if 'being' were divisible, then what would be the resulting parts of the division? Therefore, he is indivisible because it is only one. Still, regarding the problem of being, the philosopher also states: "The same is thinking and given what it is thinking. For not without what it is, in which it is revealed in the word, will you find thinking?" (Parmenides, 1978). The significant thought in the passage above is that for Parmenides, there is an equivalence between 'being' and thinking. Which means that the existence of 'being' only justifies the activity of thought or reason. Therefore, it is possible to build a discourse or reflection about it; that is, it is possible to say or talk about something inherent to it. Now if reflection, thought, and speech is possible only insofar as being is, then these activities are impossible about what is not, that is, to not 'being.' Therefore, For Parmenides, 'being' is nothingness, that which does not exist. Consequently, one cannot think, reflect, investigate, or say anything about it. But how can the question of knowledge be related to this discussion?

When saying that the same is thinking and, therefore, 'being,' Parmenides indicates an indispensable condition for knowledge or experience: rationality. In this sense, reason constitutes not only the way of access and knowledge of 'being' but also the fundamental requirement to relate it to the theme of truth. And the truth about being is that it is one, indivisible, unchanging, and eternal. Thus, the way to demonstrate these attributes is one of reflection or thought, which means, of reason. Therefore, there's a very explicit implication in Parmenides' view: being, knowledge, reason, and truth constitute a unity, which means that they are inseparable themes. Approaching one presupposes discourse about the others. The philosopher's position on the equivalence between being and thinking allows the inference that the essence of knowledge and truth is markedly rational. Given this, already in the context of pre-Socratic philosophy, Parmenides anticipated a distinction that will later permeate the Platonic dialogues, especially those dealing with knowledge and science: the difference between reason and sensation. Thus in both Parmenides and Plato, knowledge and truth are legitimately founded on reason rather than on the senses. Therefore, for Parmenides reason is an instrument capable of formulating not only a principle (of non-contradiction) for evaluating and judging knowledge and truth, but it is also interpreted as the foundation for any knowledge building or belief that intends to claim the status of true and authentic knowledge. Thus, the reflections of Elea's thinker outline the conviction that inquiry into truth and knowledge must be subject to the rules of rational thought. Now if Parmenides sees thought (reason) as the path to inquiry and understanding of 'being,' producing true knowledge, then what was its position on the senses or sensations? A fragment of his work explicitly expresses his interpretation on this subject: "Well, I will tell you, and you have received the word you have heard, the only ways of inquiry that are thinking: the first, which is and therefore is not. Do not be; of persuasion is a path (for it goes with the truth); the other, which is not and therefore must not be, this then, I tell you, is a shortcut of all incredible, for you would not even know what is not (for it is not feasible) (Parmenides, 1978). The above fragment alludes to the two ways conceived by Parmenides. The first constitutes the scope in which truth reveals itself, for it does not allow

contradiction in being. This path is the one relating to thinking and rationality which we have discussed earlier. The second part of the fragment refers to the second way which many scholars of Greek thought interpret as the way of opinion or appearance, based on the senses and sensations. Parmenides seems to indicate that the apprehension of the essence of being (knowledge) is impossible by this mean. Because it is related to the senses, it can even provide knowledge of the physical and empirical world. And the problem lies precisely in this because in trying to unveil it, it seizes it as multiple, transitory, unstable, in motion. That is, the path of opinion does not capture the world in its true being. Therefore, it is of a markedly misleading and erroneous nature. Thus "the senses could attest to non-being as they seem to testify to the existence of being born and dying, movement and becoming. Therefore, the goddess exhorts Parmenides not to be deceived by the senses and habit they create, by contrasting the senses with reason and its great principle (Reale, 1990). Although the text offers many interpretative difficulties, both ways seem to indicate that the path of research must necessarily take on a task, that of distinction: everything that is known can only be so through thought.

Therefore, there is a coincident truth that cannot be contradictory, according to the third fragment of Parmenides (2006), which states: the same is thinking and being. In addition to the consequences and results that the "way of truth" can reach, expressed above all in fragment 8, we are interested in formulations that may indicate a change in the conception of education of the Greeks. However, if there is a coincidence between thinking, being and, therefore, between knowledge's path and truth, it is acceptable considering that Parmenides distrusted the intellectual activity employed by those who relied too much on senses, appearances, and change. The second part highlighted by Parmenides, after the description of his trip, is known as the path of error (fragments. 8.50-19). For Giovanni Reale (1993), contrary to the way followed by reason, the senses seem to attest the becoming, movement, being born and dying and, therefore, being together with not being. What the Goddess denounces is precisely the danger that arises from faith in the senses against the dictates of *logos*, suggesting that what we do not know through thought is the only opinion, as Parmenides suggests "about Truth; From here he learns opinions of mortals, hearing the deceptive world of my words. For they have established two perspectives of naming forms, one of which is not needed, in which they are stragglers" (Parmenides, 2006).

Thus, if the senses can lead us astray and the *logos* to the truth, then Parmenides' poem may indicate a pedagogical knowledge: Perception needs a guide and guidance because without reason it is a brutal force. Only educated thought, capable of discerning 'being' from 'non-being,' knows that the path of science cannot accept contradictions and it is not confusing. If a man is not born wise, he must go above all strive (Spinelli, 1998). It is essential to consider that the poem Of Nature, which came partially to us through the Sixth Empirical and Simplicity, mainly constitutes as a "[...] description of the phenomenon of philosophical initiation [...]" (Bocayuva, 2007). It contributes to understanding the discovery of rational thought that gradually moves away from the myths and culture of archaic Greece. The structure and language of the poem suggest that Parmenides sought a new pedagogical path to answer his questions, which occurred within the scope of philosophy. Although he tried to dialogue

with the established tradition, in a reference that the present is the result of previous elaborations, his thinking advances because it has made speculative reason a defining category of knowledge and truth. In so doing, Parmenides beckoned to the new: The Education, which has been detached from myth, has not been limited to immediate experiences but instead requires them to be thought and reformulated. Thus, even though the Pre-Socrates did not elaborate a philosophy designed to think directly about such subjects as knowledge, truth, and education, as Plato did, they pointed in one crucial direction: at a time when the warlike and heroic virtues of the warriors, made explicit by the poetry, prevailed, they pointed in another direction, that of rational thought, presenting, at last, a new time and a new man.

### Conclusion

The primary objective of the present article was to reflect on the problem of knowledge and truth within Parmenides' philosophy. As a conclusion of our approach we can say that, in the context of Greek thought, the philosopher's most significant legacy and contribution is not only linked to the fact that he has anticipated the principle of identity and non-contradiction, that will later serve as a basis to Aristotelian logic. His contributions are also related to the fact that Parmenides when having reference to the philosophical tradition that preceded him, indicated the activity of thought or rational speculation (reason) as the foundation and criterion for various themes that will compose the framework theoretician of philosophy after his time: the knowledge, the truth, the language, the specificity of the human being, and so on. Thus, the central aspect of the discussion was to highlight the problem of truth and knowledge. These problems have reached a new dimension in Pre-Socratic philosophy, particularly that of Parmenides because they have broken with the aspect of Homeric myth and tradition to lay their foundations in speculative rationality. This aspect is particularly revealing because it suggests that the Greeks underwent a social transformation that required a rethinking of the cosmos and the means of understanding it.

Moreover, in the wake of the development of philosophy, the Greeks reinvented knowledge by distinguishing opinion and knowledge gained through rationality and not exclusively from the senses. Finally, the prologue of his poem can be understood as the formative trajectory needed by the thinker and anyone who elevates knowledge to other instances: truth is an expression of the human condition, which, therefore, steadily pursues the thought that always learns.

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