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The Silence of Socrates: The One and the Many in Plato’s *Parmenides*

A sincere discussion of the nature of reality in the pre-dawn hours of metaphysics, Plato’s *Parmenides* is more than an early survey of the apparent contradictions between the One and the Many. The first dozen pages crackle from a young Socrates engaging Zeno’s and Parmenides’ challenges concerning the One and the Many with his own doctrine of Forms, but the remaining five dozen pages of the dialogue are given to Parmenides himself, who guides his youngest disciple through eight antinomies concerning the One and the Many. Nonetheless, the *Parmenides* is not *not* an early survey, a kind of “map,” of metaphysical questions that were, at the time, unanswerable because, strictly speaking, Parmenides was not himself a metaphysician.

Considering the precious few metaphysicians left to us, this map is useful even today; and it could direct many professional philosophers to metaphysics itself, which, presently, might be for them a *terra incognita*. While no shortage of scientific specialists exists among us, reality demands more of scientists than specializations in this or that narrow aspect of the real; and because the weary modern intellect sorely needs the rest that only metaphysical first principles afford, we would all benefit from a reminder of metaphysics. Philosophical, scien-

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tific, knowing is a shared *enterprise*. To that end we could do worse than spend an afternoon reading Plato's *Parmenides* on its own terms; but I propose reading the *Parmenides* with the aid of Aristotle's and St. Thomas's answers to the challenges posed by the apparent contradictions between the One and the Many. More excellent is to *resolve* metaphysical *aporiae* than merely to be reminded of them.

This map of premature metaphysical questions in the *Parmenides* is, in its way, primitive. A dialogue, absent from its structure, is the courteous order found in a Scholastic treatise. The contours of its topics sprawl recklessly in several directions and with greater or lesser proportion to the detail we would expect them to require.

At times, historical maps-in-progress do this. For that reason some people find them funny. Even a child of six giggles at the exaggerated shorelines and ridiculous proportions allotted to the known and hypothesized land masses proposed by the early maps of the New World. They only strike us as funny, though, because all of the current maps of the world are fully developed and uniform in their accuracy. We all know what a world-map should look like because we all know what the world is, and we all know what the world is because we are all taught and retaught the locations of things using the same maps from childhood to adulthood. This situation is not same with metaphysics today, and true metaphysicians themselves would be the last to find amusement in the contemporary abandonment of the first science.

For still other reasons the *Parmenides* tends to strike nobody as funny. Instead, it tends to strike even seasoned metaphysicians as long-winded and convoluted. Close to the whole truth in some ways, it is far off in others. And, while no serious metaphysician might want publicly to admit that it is boring, it *is* tedious and technical, yet unequipped with the precise, technical language that we depend upon to make metaphysical distinctions, discussions, and instruction possible. To make matters worse, to those who expected him to put his opponents in their

place, Socrates' strange silence is discouraging. Finally, the dozens of dead ends garnishing each of the eight antinomies inspire flashes of remorse at having taken up the challenge of seeing this dialogue all the way through.

In this article, I will take the eight antinomies of Plato's *Parmenides* as though they were eight difficulties raised at the beginning of a Scholastic treatment of a question, and the question—which is the chief question of this paper—is whether reality must be a One (not a Many). To make the case that the difficulties posed by the One and the Many are not solvable without a sound metaphysics, I will rely upon Aristotle and St. Thomas and their progeny to offer inroads to the solution of each of the difficulties.

An Overture to the Difficulties

The *Parmenides* opens with the conditional assertion that, if reality is a many, then many things must simultaneously be *like* and *unlike*. “Unlike” cannot be like “like” and “like” cannot be like “unlike” because these possess irreconcilable characters. And because many things cannot be at once like and unlike, reality cannot be a many. This is Zeno's original thesis, which echoes Parmenides' thesis that “reality is one.”¹

As his first attempt at a response, Socrates proposes the doctrine of Forms, which includes forms for Likeness and Unlikeness. He explains that, by their participation in Likeness, things partaking in the form of Likeness become alike, and things partaking in the form of Unlikeness become, by their participation in unlikeness, unlike. A unified thing partaking in both forms participates in the form of Plurality, but

¹ Plato, *Parmenides*, trans. John Warrington (London: Everyman's Library, 1969), 127e–128b (cf. *Plato's Parmenides*, The Perseus Project, available online—see the section *References* for details).

he concedes that the form of Oneness cannot be proven to be the same as the form of Manyness.

Socrates then proposes that many things maybe everything, may be a one and a many. A human being certainly is: a *one* man among the *many* covering the Earth. Each man participates in unity; yet each also participates in plurality. Each man, he points out, “can point to [his] right side as different from [his] left, [his] front from [his] back, [his] upper from [his] lower parts; naturally, because [he] partake[s] of *plurality*.”²

While each man, and each of the many other things covering the Earth, participates in both unity and plurality, Socrates denies the possibility of merging any one of the forms into any of the other forms. Having already denied the possibility of merging the form of Oneness to the form of Manyness, he extends this denial to the possibility of merging Plurality to Unity, Rest to Motion, Likeness to Unlikeness, and so on. Similarly, Socrates is sure that forms for Right, Beautiful, Good, exist; but—when Parmenides presses him on the point—he is less sure whether forms exist for such things as Hair, Mud, Dirt, and so forth.³

Nor is Socrates confident about particulars’ participation in the *whole* of forms; he likens particulars’ participation in the same Form to illuminated items participating in the same sunlight of the same day. By contrast, Parmenides likens such participation to multiple particulars underneath the same enormous sail. He is willing to grant that everything is covered by the same sail, but he will not agree that each thing is covered by the *whole of the sail*—only *part of the sail*—and a *different* part of it at that.

For that reason, Parmenides held that Forms must be divisible, not indivisible. From that, he naturally held the form of the One to also

² Plato, *Parmenides*, 129d.

³ *Ibid.*, 130c.

be divisible. And if each particular's participation in unity is only a *partial* participation in unity, then a Form for One is problematic. How could a Form for One be composed of *variously sized* "portions" of "one"? Other ridiculous consequences would have to follow from *partial participation*: Magnitude, Equality, and Smallness, for example, lead to odd considerations such as a *small* part of "Largeness," *Unequal* shares of "Equal-ness," and relatively Larger and Smaller pieces of "Smallness."

Parmenides concedes to Socrates that patterns of appearance and relationship in and between particular things are readily observable in nature, but he is less willing to accept things' participation in Forms. Certainly, large things exist that would appear to participate in Largeness, but then there are also *Larger* things. In what do *these* things participate? We would say that an aircraft carrier is a large thing, that Jupiter is a large thing, that the Milky Way galaxy is a large thing; but would we also have to say that each of these large things participates, according to its respective largeness, in a correspondingly larger Form? If so, an indefinite plurality of large things by virtue of which each large thing participates, according to its specific size, would have to exist.

Endeavoring to explain to Parmenides the universal character of Forms, Socrates indicates that, while many and sundry large things of different magnitudes actually exist in the world outside of the intellect, Largeness is a universal existing *inside* the intellect; and it exists also in a most perfect way outside of individual intellects and the particulars participating in them. And, while Largeness is recalled to the intellect upon the sensation or memory of some large thing, it is not so much participation in the Form of Largeness as it is a *resemblance* to the form of Largeness. Forms, Socrates explains, are "fixed patterns in nature; other things resemble them, i.e., are copies of them, and the so-called

participation of those things in Forms is nothing else but resemblance to the Forms.”⁴

This response will not do for Parmenides, who retorts with the following: If A is like B, then B is like A, and the likeness between A and B must participate in the form of Likeness. But if C and D are also alike, then they too must participate in the form of Likeness. Yet how could the same, single, Form of Likeness accommodate the alikeness of both A and B *and* that which pertains to C and D, if the two pairs are not at all alike to one another? There *must* be another, different form of Likeness for the similarities between C and D, and there must be another, different form of Likeness for E and F. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

Parmenides is unwilling to admit the existence of a single, distinct form for each of the classes of things; but the greatest of the difficulties, he opines, is in the inability to convince a disbeliever in forms that the forms themselves can actually be known in the first place. That *anywhere* or in *any way* “realities in themselves” exist is unbelievable. For, “if there were, how could they be ‘realities *in themselves*’?” Knowledge, as such, must be knowledge of *reality as such*, wherein each distinct branch of knowledge must be knowledge of some department of being as such. Denying the possibility of knowing forms themselves, Parmenides maintains knowledge in our world must be knowledge of the reality *in our world*; and each branch of knowledge in our world must be knowledge of some department of being in our world. Because we do not have access to the Forms themselves—which cannot possibly belong to our world—and because the several Forms are known by the Form of Knowledge (which we do not possess), we cannot know, in themselves, *any* of the Forms: be they Likeness or Largeness, Goodness or Beauty, or anything else.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 132d.

This rules out for Parmenides the possibility of the gods knowing about, or being involved in, human affairs. For, if anything were capable of possessing the Form of Knowledge (through which access to the other Forms is gained), such a capacity would belong to the divine nature. Possessed of this, then, the gods neither own nor know anything of human affairs. The significance of Forms is relative only to Forms, and the significance of things in our world is relative only to things in our world. "The contents of each world are relative only to one another."⁵

According to Parmenides, that no overlap between gods and men can be is the inevitable consequence of postulating independent forms for everything. To Parmenides' reckoning, this postulate is a claim so beset at every step with confusion that any who dare to approach the question of forms will question their very existence, or will maintain that the Forms are, in themselves, beyond the scope of human knowledge. And if an unchanging Form for everything *is not*, Parmenides concludes, the denial of the existence of Forms of things and the unwillingness to recognize a Form in each particular thing is to have no object of thought whatsoever. This conclusion destroys the procedure of dialectic altogether.

Socrates does not utter another word for the remainder of the dialogue. Whether he was so dumbfounded or scandalized—or both—at the impossibility of gods and men overlapping in the same, single reality that he left the conversation, or whether Plato just wanted to present Parmenides' ideas without interruption or synthesis, the remainder of the dialogue is left to Parmenides and Aristoteles, his youngest and most pliable student. The former presents to the latter eight antinomies regarding the One and the Many.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 134d.

The Difficulties

The First Antinomy: What Is One Must Lack Parts

As his first antinomy, because parts in a whole entail a many, not a one, Parmenides proposes that what is One must lack parts. Yet without parts, the One would be without beginning, middle, or end and would be, as such, limitless. And without parts and limits, the One would also be shapeless. If the One were shapeless, the One could be neither in another nor in itself; for to be enveloped bespeaks of a many—of at least: (1) an envelope and (2) that which is enveloped. But the One could be neither in another nor in itself. It would be in no place. If it is in no place, then it would be outside of space. And if the One were outside of space, then it would be without motion.

Furthermore, because the One cannot be *in* anything, it could never be in the same state, for if the One were in the same state, it would have to be uncontainable: neither self-contained nor contained by another. It could neither be the same as something else nor other than itself. For each of these implies a many—two things, at the very least, to which sameness or similarity could be shared.

Yet unity could not be sameness, for the One could not be the same as itself or as something else. Nor could the One be other than itself or something else. For these would imply a many, not a One. For the same reason, the One could not be like another thing; but it could not be like itself: neither like nor unlike either itself or anything else, nor could it be equal to itself or to anything else. For these relations would imply a many, not a One.

Furthermore, the One would have to be ageless. If it had duration, it would have parts such as beginning, middle, and end—but these are properties of the Many, not the One, which is outside of time. As such, the being of the One could not be expressed in *any* tense: of the One we could not say, for example, that it *was*, or that it *has become*, or

that it *was becoming*; nor could we say that it *will be*, or that it *will become*. We could not even say that the One *is*, or that the One *is becoming*. The One must have no share in being—it simply *is not*: it neither *is* One nor *is at all*. It is not named, spoken of, or thought of. It is not known or perceived by anyone. In short, if the One is totally distinct from the Many, then nothing at all could be asserted about the One.⁶

The Second Antinomy: The One Cannot Itself Be Being

Parmenides contends here that if the One is, it must have a share in being—it cannot itself *be* being.⁷ To justify this conclusion, he considers anew the implications that would follow if the One were taken to be a whole. Anything that is a one would have to be a whole, and if it were a whole, then it would have parts. Each part, he proposes, would always be two: (1) existence and (2) unity—because existence and unity could not be the same thing. Unity always contains existence, and existence unity, and these are the parts of *any* one.

Because the whole's part must always be two (being and unity) and could never be one (which would be the consequence of the One *having* being, and not *being* Being), the existent One would have to be an indefinite plurality. Further, if the One has *being*, it has *existence*. And because the One has existence, it would be a plurality. It *must* be a plurality, Parmenides reasons, because the *being* of the One is distinct from its *self*.

From the existence of the One Parmenides derives number, concluding from this three things: (1) reality must be *indefinitely numerous*, which amounts to saying that reality is composed on an unlimited number of parts; (2) the existent One must be subdivided by existence

⁶ *Ibid.*, 137b–141e.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 142b–157b.

and would be, as such, simultaneously bounded and limitless in number; and (3) the One must be in a state of permanent motion.

Because it implies the One is both in itself *and in its* parts (a special challenge, owing to his reluctance to entertain the possibility that the One should have parts), the permanent motion of the One presents Parmenides with many difficulties. Parmenides begins with identity, noting things are either identical or different. If things are neither identical nor different, one must be part of the other, or one must be a whole of which the other is a part.

If the One is not part of itself, then it could not stand to itself as a whole of which it is itself a part. Yet if the One is *not* different from the One, it could not be other than itself. But since the One is *neither* other than itself *nor* stands in any whole-part relationship to itself, *it must be identical to itself*.

But if the One is, at once, the same as itself—in the same place as itself—and in other things, its parts (which are elsewhere), it must be at once in itself and in something other than itself. For if A is other than B, then B must be other than A. And if whatever is *not one* is other than the One, then the One must be other than whatever is not one. The One, then, is different from the Many because whatever is *not one* has no unity; if it had unity, it would be, in some sense, one. And if the not-ones were *parts* of the whole of the One, they would, in some sense, share in the One.

Parmenides denies such a relationship between the One and the not-ones; but he is willing to concede a shared similarity: *their mutual difference*. The One must be simultaneously like and unlike itself and the Many.

As for whether the One makes contact with the Many, Parmenides reasons that, if the One is in its parts, it would surely be *in contact* with its parts. If things are to be in contact with one another, they must lie immediately adjacent to that with which they are to be in contact; if

the One were *two*, it could do this, but as One, it cannot. So, a third thing—an intermediary—must exist between the two things between which there can be contact.

If the One is, the One must be said to be. For that reason Parmenides is led to consider—as he did in the previous antinomy—the tenses of being possessed by the One. Because it *has been* and *will be*, the One possesses present, past, and future duration. The One always is and, having a progressive duration, is always growing older; but it can never overtake the present. Because the present is always with the One, whenever the One is, it is *now*.

Yet it also is becoming older and younger than itself. For *now* follows whatever passed, and *now* is newer (younger) than the past (older). From this point, Parmenides labors to justify his conclusion that the One is prior to the Many in both generation and existence. He ends up asserting that to say that the One, by its very nature, comes into being *simultaneously* with the Many is the more accurate expression.

Parmenides concludes the second antinomy by considering whether a time exists when the One is acquiring being (that is, “coming into being,” and a time when it is losing being: “perishing”). As a one and a many, the plurality of the One would perish when it became one; and its unity would perish when it became many.

If the One becomes a one and a many, it would be subject to disaggregation and aggregation. If the One becomes like and unlike, it would become subject to assimilation and dissimilation. If the One becomes greater, less, or equal, then it becomes subject to increase, decrease, or equalization. And if the One is stopped in motion, or is changed from rest to motion, then it would not exist in time. Any of the foregoing changes would be said to occur instantaneously.

The Third Antinomy: The One Is Not the Many

The One is *not* the Many, Parmenides opines.⁸ For, if the One *were* the Many, nothing other than the One could be. Yet other things besides the One *are*. Lacking absolute unity, *some* unity exists to the Many. The Many have parts—not of a plurality, but of a whole. Each whole is composed of parts, and each part is part of a single pattern of all its components into one complete entity. The Many are a single, complete whole having parts.

Yet to speak of *each part* of the whole of the Many is to speak of unity: each part of the Many *has* unity, but *is not itself* unity. Only the One can *be* unity. The whole itself of the Many *has* unity, as does each of its constituent parts; but only the One *is* unity. Prior to their constitution, the recipients of unity in parts and wholes in the Many (and of the whole of the Many) are indefinitely numerous, and each part—absent a relation to a whole—is a limitless manifold. The Many, then, are affected by the contrary characters of being limited and limitless. Because contraries are extremes of unlikeness, the Many are both like themselves and unlike themselves. The Many are simultaneously identical with and different from each other.

*The Fourth Antinomy:
The One Must Be Separate from the Many*

Next, Parmenides opines that the One must be separate from the Many because, presumably, nothing else exists besides these, nothing else in which the One and the Many might reside.⁹ Because the One and the Many are never identically located, they must be separate. Moreover, the parts of the wholes of the Many, and the whole of the Many itself only *have* unity (and only a *relative* unity), which differs in kind

⁸ *Ibid.*, 157b–159a.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 159b–160b.

from the sense in which the One *is* unity. Because the Many is not a unity, it lacks the contrary forms found in the One: sameness and difference, motion and rest, generation and corruption, magnitude and paucity, equality and inequality, and so on.

*The Fifth Antinomy:
If the One Were Not, It Could Not Exist*

If the One were not, Parmenides hypothesizes, it could not exist.¹⁰ To entertain the notion that the One *is* non-existent would be to admit possession of being, in some sense. The non-existent One must have, at the very least, the character of “being-non-existent.” Just as existing things possess “*not-being-non-existent*,” *not existing* things possess “being-non-existent.” Completely to exist a thing must have: (1) being, or *being-existent*, and (2) not being, or *not-being-non-existent*. To be absolutely non-existent is to have: (a) not-being, or *not-being-existent*, and (b) being, or *being-non-existent*. Supposing, then, that the One did not exist, the non-existent One would still have to have being: *being-non-existent*, in order not to exist.

*The Sixth Antinomy:
If the One Is Not, It Would Have Not Being Absolutely*

If the One is not, Parmenides hypothesizes, it would have *not-being* absolutely—could in no sense have being.¹¹ If the One were completely non-existent, then in no sense could it be said to *have*, *acquire*, or *lose* being. As such, the non-existent One would be changeless. For the non-existent One to change, it would have to gain or lose being. Nor could the non-existent One be stationary. To be stationary it would have to be located someplace; but it must be in no place. Therefore, it could not be in motion *or* at rest.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160b–162e.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163b–163e.

Nor could the non-existent One have an active character of any kind: not greatness, smallness, equality; likeness to, difference from itself or others. Characterless, the Many could in no way relate to the non-existent One. Further, if the One were non-existent, nothing could stand in relation to it. It could not be said to be a “something” or a “this.” It could not be said to be related to “this” or to an “other.” It could not be set in the past, present, or future. It could not be the object of knowledge, judgment, perception or discussion. Nor could it have a name. The consequence of the non-existence of the One is the impossibility of qualifying the One as anything actual.

The Seventh Antinomy:

If the One Is Not, the Many Cannot Be Unity of Aggregates

If the One is not, Parmenides hypothesizes, the Many must be other than a unity of aggregates. The only option is that the One is not. In the absence of the One, the Many, composed of aggregates (which would only *appear* to be one) would exist; but, actually, it would be multitudes of indefinitely many parts—*appearing* to have number, largeness and smallness, equality, beginnings, middles, and ends.

The aggregates would only appear to have these. They could not actually have them because no unit would exist against which to measure them, no whole to limit them. These impossible aggregates would only *appear* to be like and unlike, identical with and different from one another. In short: If the Many *are* and the One *is not*, whatever would be *would not be*. Any such array of *apparent, aggregated manys* could not be.¹²

¹² *Ibid.*, 164a–164e.

*The Eighth Antinomy:
If the One Is Not, the Many Could Not Be One*

If the One is not, the Many could not be one. The Many could not be composed of a plurality of ones because no One *is*. If none of the plurality of aggregates were a one—but only *appeared* aggregated—together they could be nothing. No connection could exist to the non-existent One. No semblance or appearance of unity in the Many could be. No unity could even be thought of because it could not exist. If the One is not, nothing at all is.¹³

General Response to the Difficulties

Perennial solutions to the ancient problems posed by the One and the Many, and especially, Parmenides' antinomies, are gained only by a sound metaphysics. While the historical Parmenides was the first to move the problem of genus and species from physics toward metaphysics, he was unable to distinguish metaphysical problems from problems in physics.¹⁴ Parmenides was a materialist. Considered as such, neither he nor Plato's rendering of him in the eponymous dialogue could have arrived at a sound metaphysics.

A portrait of the futility of the materialist's approach to metaphysics is found in Parmenides' exchange with Socrates concerning the doctrine of Forms, wherein Parmenides offers a counter-illustration of individual participation in Forms using the image of a *physical* sail covering a *physical* figure. By this maneuver, he did not show an unwillingness to compromise so much as he displayed an inability to *comprehend* Socrates, who had just proposed a (less imperfect) likeness

¹³ *Ibid.*, 165a–166c.

¹⁴ Peter A. Redpath, *A Not-So-Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis, Mo.: En Route Books & Media, 2015), 86.

between individuals' participation in Forms and things' illumination by sunlight.

By his own admission in the dialogue, Plato's *Parmenides*' greatest difficulty lay in his inability to convince the disbeliever in Forms that the Forms exist in the first place: *If* the Forms are, *where* are they? Just as the failure to distinguish material and formal causation would prevent progress in metaphysics, that same crucial distinction would go a long way to resolve many of the metaphysical difficulties present in Plato's *Parmenides*.

So, too, would sound teaching about the problem of universals. The truth about universals was narrowly missed—by Socrates, no less—in the overture. Our responses to the antimonies are forthcoming, but, first, we should clarify Plato's mistake about universals.

Patterns or *characters* plainly exist in things. If they were not in things, no way would exist to recognize or classify things. Distinct things of such and such a pattern or character do not exist, as Socrates suggested they do, as "copies" of the form in which they participate. Tigers are *not* copies of Tiger-ness, the Form in which each particular tiger participates. Instead, real relations exist between and among particular tigers. The world we inhabit with tigers is the world accessible to us; and the form, the real pattern or character, of tigers is *in the tigers themselves*, not in the Form of Tiger, Tiger-ness itself.

Tiger-ness itself, *the universal*, exists—as Socrates rightly suggested it does—in the intellect. Yet the universal relations are *real*. Employees and managers exist in *every* business. Management *considered as such* is correlative to non-management employment *considered as such*, and vice versa. The one cannot be understood without the other. Yet the relationship between an employee and his supervisor is a real, universal, relation of one person to another person.

A man or woman who is an employee at a firm is not beholden to managers anywhere and everywhere by virtue of his non-management

employee status. Instead, he has a particular boss (or bosses). To speak of management *in itself*, the Form of *Management-ness*, is to abstract from time and place in which real, physical beings exist; and to speak in like manner of its correlative *Employee-ness* is almost beside the point of getting at the real relation, which can only exist between particular men in a particular, concretely-existing, organization or genus.

To know reality, we human beings depend upon both real relations and proper sensibles. While the proper object of the intellect is the proper intelligible, an abstractly-considered being, the proper *function* of the intellect is to draw the universal out of its proper object.¹⁵ To err about universals is to err about all the speculative sciences, and the division and methods of all sciences, all divisions of philosophy. The proper intelligibles of the specific intellectual habits are in the speculative characters of physics, mathematics, and metaphysics; and they depend, in different ways upon matter for their being and/or for their being understood.

The formal objects of physics depend upon matter for their being and their being understood. Those of mathematics depend upon matter for their being, but not for their being understood; and those of metaphysics depend on matter neither for their being nor for their being understood. Plato's error regarding universals is less apparent than the errors of the materialist Parmenides. Because we are dealing here with *Plato's* Parmenides, not the historical Parmenides, we need briefly to consider a fundamental error in Plato's metaphysics and Aristotle's contributions to its correction.

¹⁵ As Gilson puts it: "Though the proper *object* of the intellect is the sensible, its proper *function* is to disengage the intelligible from the sensible; out of the particular object, illuminated by its light, it draws the universal, thanks to that Divine resemblance which is naturally impressed on it as the mark of its origin; in the proper and emphatic sense of the term, it is born and made for the universal." Étienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Edward Bullough (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing's Rare Reprints, 2003), 356–357.

The Thomist Curtis L. Hancock makes the point that Aristotle's solution to the problem of the One and the Many is itself a response to Plato's proposed solution, which erroneously placed the intelligible essences or forms that define things to be what they are *outside* of the things themselves, effectively eliminating the possibility of physics. Responding to this as a means to advance physics, Aristotle grounded the sciences in the identity of being and unity, making science about substance—about substances themselves, which we only know indirectly through accidents (chiefly quantity and quality)—as well as the principles necessarily and universally related to substance.¹⁶

Reply to the First Difficulty

Plato's Parmenides cautioned Aristoteles, first, to be aware of the hazards of conceiving of the One as an organizational whole. Having neither the habit nor the language of metaphysics, he is attempting to articulate why a logical genus of being cannot exist in reality. I make this claim by transposing his "the One cannot be a whole composed of parts" to our "a logical genus of being cannot exist in reality." In so doing, I affirm what Plato does in this first antimony, but only as an imperfect foreshadow for what Aristotle would later observe about the logician's genus.

Aristotle supplies us with a reliable refutation of the possibility of a logical genus of being (to which St. Thomas regularly referred when he was called upon to do the same) being actually conflated with a real genus of being. Any genus, Aristotle observed, has differences *within* itself ("species"). Because the differences *within* any logical genus must each have being and be one, existence of a real "genus of being" or a "genus of unity" as a logician abstractly conceives of a ge-

¹⁶ See Curtis L. Hancock, "The One and the Many: The Ontology of Science in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 69, no. 2 (2015): 233–259.

nus (as an essential unity *equally possessed* by every subject of which it is predicated), is, strictly speaking, impossible.¹⁷ Since all the species of which it is said equally possess it, by what could species within such genera differ, how could they be unequal?

For example, abstractly considered, the concept of being has no differentia. Being is being and non-being is non-being; a being either is a being or it is not a being; a thing either *is* or it is *not*; a thing either exists or does not exist. All being and unity is equally being and one.

Reply to the Second Difficulty

The second antinomy contains much to clarify and much to affirm. To start with, the notion of *sharing in being* and the combination of existence and unity are observations not very far off the mark. The Thomist Peter A. Redpath, for example, indicates that an “existing unity” implies possession of the act of being; but, for St. Thomas, an existing being is more than the mere act of existence. Unity also forms the basis for its intelligibility. Only existing units are presented to the human intellect as intelligibles. In both the real and mental orders, each existing unit is, to varying degrees, united to or divided from its *esse* (act of existence). Existing units *have* the act of existing. That is, each individual being (*ens*) is a *habens esse*—“a that” which *has* the act of existing—which is said to “possess” unity or disunity *with its act of existing*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, III, 3, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 17–18, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1933, 1989), available online—see the section *References* for details. Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 2, and Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, I, 25, 6, in *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English*, available online—see the section *References* for details.

¹⁸ Peter A. Redpath, “Aquinas’s Fourth Way of Demonstrating God’s Existence: From Virtual Quantum Gradations of Perfection (Inequality of Beauty) of Forms Existing within a Real Genus,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 8, no. 3 (July–September 2019): 687.

Moreover, every really existing unit is located within a real genus, a real, causal-order/organization directed toward a real generic aim or goal. Real genera are not abstract concepts. They are acting natures, *organizational wholes, causes, causal units*, possessing an organizational act of existing; and each organization's/genus's act of possessing being (existence) is *unequally shared* by its constituent species-operators. Each species operates in concert with its other species-operators with unequal degrees of strength or perfection unequally to effect organizational aims of the genus: cause organizational action.

Redpath maintains that, *through a harmonious organizational unity*, existing unit-species-operators *unequally* effect the organizational aim because: (1) each existing unit possesses the act of existing at a greater or lesser virtual quantum (or qualitative) intensity of perfection in having (is existentially *unequal*, is *not* a being-one-in-qualitative strength/perfection) *to* the other existing unit-species-operators, and (2), as a result of this inequality of being and causing, each existing unit operates *differently than* (is *not* a being-equally-one-in-quality) to the other species-operators in the genus, with respect to effecting the organizational aim.¹⁹

Furthermore, and calling again upon Redpath, the way to refute Parmenides' errors is to understand and articulate how partial, imperfect, generic, specific, and individual unities (organizational wholes) can exist and "how generic, specific, and individual beings can *have some unity without being total unity*."²⁰ Aristotle did this by discovering that the main key to solving the Parmenidean riddles about the One and the Many lay in properly understanding the complicated natures of unity and *quantity*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 687, 689–690.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 692–693. "The key to refuting Parmenides," writes Redpath, "lay in understanding that all *having, possession, participation*, essentially involves generic, specific, and individual, partial receptivity/resistance to total, absolutely perfect, unity."

While Plato appears to have reduced unity and quantity to a *dimensive* principle of number, thereby reducing unity to being the principle of dimensive quantity, Aristotle had distinguished this understanding of unity as a principle of dimensive number from (1) unity as convertible with being and (2) harmonic unity as an internal, qualitative principle of organization, partial resistance to formal division within an organizational whole (what St. Thomas calls “virtual quantity”). From there, Aristotle was able to understand and articulate that, in the real order (in contrast to the conceptual order) all possession of the activity of being (existence)—in real genera, species, and individuals—involves partial (qualitatively unequal) receptivity and partial resistance to perfect unity.

According to Redpath, these intrinsic, opposing, principles of privation and possession that exist within organizational wholes account for the origin of all real species, and for the cause of qualitatively higher and lower (more or less perfect) genera, and more and less perfect individual members of species. And, according to him, from these principles, too, follow: (1) the principles of division by contrary opposition and diversity within real genera; (2) the real perfections in really-existing genera, species, and individuals (as opposed to the impossible Parmenidean “One”); (3) the ability to comprehend the divisions and methods of all philosophy/science; and (4) drawing the conclusion that an absolutely perfect being must exist.²¹

Replies to the Third and Fourth Difficulties

The third and fourth antinomies touch upon the order beheld in all things. St. Thomas notes a twofold order found in things: (1) of parts to a whole, with the parts ordered to one another (for example, skeletal, muscular, digestive, cardiovascular, respiratory, immune and reproduc-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 707–708.

tive systems are mutually ordered to each other in a human body); and (2) of part/wholes (like organizational departments) to an end (for example, military unites cooperating to effect victory over an enemy).²²

Likewise, St. Thomas notes two different philosophical/scientific ways of regarding genus: (1) from an existential point of view—the point of view of the real order; and (2) from the logical, essentialist, point of view (totally abstracting from real existence). By the habits of natural philosophy and metaphysics, genus and difference are considered from the existential point of view, and are found to be based on real natures, wherein the differences must be contrary opposites.²³

The existing, ordered unity of real genera as a proximate cause of organizational action is properly intelligible only from the existential point of view, and only in light of its limited, qualitative perfection of *having unity*. Parmenides' and Zeno's abstractive act of mentally subdividing parts from other parts and from the wholes to which they are really and finitely related wherein sub-atomic particles seem to stretch endlessly toward yet smaller parts toward infinity can never apprehend the nature of real, finite, beings and their causes.

The constitution of real, finite, things existing in real part-whole relationships is really caused by unequal reception of existence and unity. Parts are limited insofar as they unite to wholes. Things would be limitless in the absence of part-whole relationships.

St. Thomas indicates that participation in an organizational whole—a genus—occurs in one of two ways: (1) as species *contained under a genus*, and (2) as being *reducible to genus*. Regarding the first way—the absolute and proper way, St. Thomas notes—things are contained in a genus as species belonging to it (as, for example, skeletal, muscular,

²² Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Ethics*, Bk 1, Lecture 1, par. 1, in *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English*, available online—see the section *References* for details.

²³ Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, a. 7, ad. 17 and 18. Available online—see the section *References* for details.

respiratory, cardiovascular, digestive, and reproductive systems are species belonging to many genera of the animal bodies). Regarding the second way, things are reduced to their generic principles (as, for example, a point is reducible to the genus of quantity as its principle, and as blindness [the privation of sight] is reducible to the genus of natural *habitus* as its principle).²⁴

St. Thomas teaches that two principle-components of any created being (*ens*) exist: (1) the act of being (*esse*), and (2) essence (*essentia*). *Esse*, the first principle-component of any being, is the first *act* of an *ens*: the act of *existing*. *Esse* gives to a being its character of being insofar as, through its substantial form, *esse* causes a form to become actual and a substance actually to exist. Essence is derived from substance, and is the medium through which and in which a thing has its being.

Often used interchangeably with *quidditas* (whatness), and sometimes *nature*, “essence” is derived from what is signified by the definition of the thing that has being; and, in reality, is directed to its specific operations. In other words, a really-existing being is more than its essence. A being (*ens*, *habens esse*) is “what it is” and “what it does.” *Esse*, the first principle component of any being, is the name of an *act*, namely the act of *existing*. *Esse* gives to a being its character of being insofar as it actually exists, and is a proximate principle of an acting nature.²⁵

Reply to the Fifth Difficulty

Speaking of actually existing, the lack of clarity in the fifth antinomy is tied to the lack of a distinction between essence and existence in things. Because existence is not itself a thing, it would be incorrect to

²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 3, a. 5, in *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English*, available online—see the section *References* for details.

²⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, trans. Armand A. Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 29–32.

posit the existence of a thing whose chief characteristic is *being-non-existent*.

Among the many examples of clear teachings someone could employ to refute the errors in the fifth antinomy of Plato's Parmenides, St. Thomas makes the point that existence is not itself a genus; for it also signifies an essence. A substance signifies that which exists of itself *and* an essence that has the property of existing of itself.²⁶ Existence, then, is not a stand-alone property. St. Thomas also makes the point that God is the only substance whose essence and existence are identical: God's essence is *to exist*; His existence *is* his essence, and He is *pure esse* (pure, totally perfect, actuality) and the act by which every potency is brought into the act of existence. In every other substance, the essence and *esse* (act of existing) are distinct, with contingent creatures receiving the act of existence from Existence Itself.²⁷

Upon consideration of the verbal aspect of being—*be-ing*, “to be” is the *activity* of existing—the notion that *the non-existent One would still have to have being* (that is, being-non-existent) *in order not to exist* is rendered especially absurd. We can think of “existence” as an abstract noun, but it is both prior to and more proper to think of existence as an activity more or less possessed by beings that are actively existing. That some beings “exist more than” other beings, in a qualitatively more perfect way, can be seen in the association of “activity” with *operation*;²⁸ but to say that a being which is *absolutely non-existent*, nonetheless, has being (*being-non-existent*) is incorrect.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 3., a. 5, ad 1, in *St. Thomas Aquinas's Works in English*, available online—see the section *References* for details.

²⁷ *Ibid.* I, q. 3, a. 4.

²⁸ St. Thomas presents this connection at *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, a. 9: “gradum formarum in perfectione essendi est etiam gradus earum in virtute operandi, cum operatio sit existentis in actu. Et ideo quanto aliqua forma est maioris perfectionis in dando esse, tanto etiam est maioris virtutis in operando. Unde formae perfectionis habent plures operationes et magis diversas quam formae minus perfectae.”

Reply to the Sixth Difficulty

This antimony cannot be resolved without the distinction between potency and act. By using this distinction, Ed Feser refutes the Parmenidean claim that change is impossible. His three-step approach proves useful to our purpose here. First, change is the motion from potency to act. Second, potency cannot raise itself to act, but must be raised to act by something already in act. Lastly, “an asymmetry between [potency and act]” exists whereby act is both prior to potency and can exist without any potency whatsoever (*pure act*: God), though potency can exist in no way exist without act. Considered as such, for the non-existent One to exist as anything actual would be impossible because potency cannot exist without act.²⁹

Reply to the Seventh and Eighth Difficulties

The seventh and eighth difficulties combine to emphasize the fundamental character of unity that Plato’s Parmenides is right to note. Without a unit to measure against, without a whole whereby to limit them, finite reality as such would be disordered and have only the *appearance* of unified aggregates.

Right, then, in relation to philosophy/science as a habit of the human soul (a psychological activity) is to place emphasis on—even to assign a kind of primacy to—the metaphysical concept of unity. Redpath does this by stressing the unitary character of the generic formal object of philosophy. Every division of philosophy/science essentially involves the act of demonstration. No science, however, is able to

²⁹ Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 9–12.

prove, demonstrate, the existence *or unity* of its subject matter. It takes these for granted, assumes, the existence of its subject.³⁰

Philosophy's/science's two chief acts of demonstration essentially involve analysis and synthesis: dividing and uniting wholes and parts. Considered from this perspective as a proximate cause of scientific/philosophical understanding that the subject of philosophy/science is always an organizational whole (a harmonic unity), being intellectually divided or united, unity is more fundamental to philosophical/scientific understanding than is being.

Real scientific/philosophical genera (*operational-organizational-wholes*) are the proper intelligibles of the specific intellectual habits in the speculative characters of physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. Every science, all philosophy, Redpath reminds us, begins with sense wonder "about what essentially causes some existing composite whole unity . . . to have the generic kind of unity it has (harmonic unity of specific parts) that enables it to generate the specific ways of acting that it does."³¹



³⁰ Peter A. Redpath, *A Beginner's Guide to Understanding St. Thomas Aquinas's Teaching about the Actual Composition of Essence and Esse in Created Beings: A Chapter in Born-again Thomism* (submitted for publication), 2. Taking both existence and unity for granted, every science begins with sense wonder about what causes one or another existing, composite whole-unity to have the kind of unity that enables it to generate its specific ways of acting.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

**The Silence of Socrates:
The One and the Many in Plato's *Parmenides***

SUMMARY

Parmenides was not a metaphysician (he was a materialist), so there is no such thing as Parmenidean metaphysics. Plato's *Parmenides*, however, offers metaphysical insights otherwise overlooked by readers unfamiliar to what St. Thomas Aquinas offers concerning the One and the Many. This article highlights some of these insights and will interest students of St. Thomas. It might also acquaint students of Plato to a more perfect metaphysics, and it could even corrode the beliefs of others who maintain that there is no such thing as metaphysics. The fact that none of the sciences may dispense with the first science is brought heavily to bear upon the reader of the *Parmenides*, who finds it otherwise impossible to resolve any of the difficulties attendant upon reconciling the One and the Many. The many apparent contradictions between the One and the Many displayed in Plato's *Parmenides* really cannot be solved without sound metaphysics, and sound metaphysics cannot proceed unaided by St. Thomas and his inheritors. Go to Thomas to understand Plato's *Parmenides*.

KEYWORDS

Parmenides, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Redpath, the One and the Many, unity, being, potency, act, universal, particular, genus, species, virtual quantity.

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