Spheres, Semantics, and Parricide: The Stranger's Attack on Parmenides, Sophist 244b-245d

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Prior to writing the *Sophist*, Plato seemingly found his former metaphysical theories to be untenable in the *Parmenides* in which he introduced issues with the theory of the Forms.[1] To address these specific issues, Plato wrestled with the monism of the Parmenidean doctrine and its metaphysical ontology. In this essay, I will examine the debate of whether Plato takes the Parmenidean doctrine seriously in the *Sophist*. The views of Lesley Brown and Mary Louise Gill conclude that Plato was not truly attempting a dissection and complete understanding of Parmenides' poem, which thereby made it effortless for him to reject the view. Brown holds that Plato did not understand the metaphor's implications in its entirety, while Gill maintains that the metaphor was taken much too literally. I oppose both views and claim that Plato did attempt a serious understanding of monist ontology, and that whether the Parmenidean passages were taken out-of-context is not the case.

I will explain Plato's argument against Parmenides in the *Sophist* directly for an understanding of the context that Brown and Gill argue. Afterwards, I shall examine the objections of Brown and Gill, and then I will offer my own counterarguments against their claims. I aim to show flaws within their reasoning that I find to be based on both a misuse of language and unapplied context. Finally, I will offer a strict defense of Plato's interpretation of Parmenides' numerical monism and the Stranger's rigorous analysis.

THE SPHERE ARGUMENT: SOPHIST 244B-245D

Before expanding upon Gill and Brown's arguments, it will perhaps be useful to understand the argument rejected on the basis of its superficiality. I shall only be focusing on the second half of Plato's rejection which contains the argument Brown singles out, i.e., the sphere argument.[2] Plato's rebuttal through the Eleatic Stranger[3] begins on the premise that Parmenidean monism[4] will claim that *the whole* is the same as *the one*.[5] For if they did not, they would already be lost into plurality. To understand Parmenides' idea of wholeness, the Stranger quotes the famous poem giving an analogy of what a *whole* is:

> All around like the bulk of a well-formed sphere,
> Equal-balanced all ways from the middle, since neither anything more
> Must it be, this way or that way, nor anything less.[6]

Since Parmenides himself uses a sphere to explain the quality of wholeness in Being, the Stranger tells us that it must have a middle and extremities i.e. a multiplicity of parts as a sphere does. The Stranger then grants that what is "truly one, properly speaking, has to be completely without parts."[7] The Stranger goes on to conclude that a being with no parts does not fit the account that was given to what a whole is in Parmenides' poem. Furthermore, the one-being which cannot possess wholeness *will be deprived of itself*—this allows for the conclusion that being and wholeness have two separate natures. Consequently, *the whole* is not being and *being* is not whole.[8] On the Stranger's account, whatever *becomes* must at some point become a whole being so we cannot label either *being* or *becoming* as something that exists without taking wholeness as existent as well.[9] Moreover, what is not whole cannot have quantity at all since anything of any quantity has to be a whole of that quantity.[10] For example, one inch must be a whole inch or it cannot claim to be one inch. Since the monists claim Being has the quantity of one, it must be a whole *one* and claim wholeness as well. In showing that A) anything with the quality of wholeness must have parts, B) anything that exists must become whole, and C) that anything with quantity, i.e., the monists' one-being, must also be a whole of that quantity; the Stranger has finally set himself free of Parmenides' clutches. All three refutations introduce pluralism to Parmenides' theory about Being as one thing, and in doing so, Plato seems to have set himself free from the shackles of Parmenides' argument of Being. At last, the monists have been defeated.[11]

BROWN AND GILL'S OBJECTIONS

In her 1998 essay, "Innovation and Continuity", Brown discusses the Battle of Gods and Giants[12] within Plato's *Sophist*. Before her discussion comes an

explanation of the context that this battle arises. What precedes this battle was the investigation into earlier theorists of being and puzzles that arise when inquiring into their thoughts. These earlier theorists include recognizable pre-socratics such as Heraclitus, Empedocles, and most importantly for this essay, Parmenides and the Eleatic school of thought. Oddly, Brown writes in her essay that she will not discuss Plato's investigation of the dualists and the monists. She firmly states that "It is clear that the arguments do not represent a serious attempt to understand what the theories in question were driving at."[13] However, she gives only one reason for this which focuses solely on the 2nd part of Plato's argument against Parmenides. She does not mention the 1st argument against Parmenides at all, which suggests that her disavowal concerning Plato's misunderstanding in his 2nd argument against the monists is enough to cover both arguments as well as the argument against the dualists. She does this by asking the reader to consider the sphere argument; Brown states that the Stranger takes Parmenides' comparison of being to a sphere much too literally, which allows him to charge Parmenides' one-being with a multiplicity of parts. This is because her stance on the sphere analogy is that it was only a simile designed to "convey the notion of homogeneity and absence of differentiation" without any further argument.[14] This, for her, seems to be enough to skip over any discussion of this section in the *Sophist*.

When one turns to Mary Louise Gill's book, *Philosophos,* and its examination of this part in the *Sophist*, very similar objections can be found. Gill goes a bit farther in attempting to defend her points than Brown did.[15] In calling the 2nd argument "disappointing", Gill does not specifically state, as Brown does, that the interlocutors did not seriously attempt to understand the argument, but rather tells the reader that the Stranger "misrepresents numerical monism by appropriating an image the historical Parmenides uses as an analogy in his poem."[16] She argues that Parmenides, in his poem, only made a comparison of being to a spherical whole but did not say being is *literally* a whole on the grounds that Parmenides explicitly denies the divisibility of being.[17] Gill maintains that the Stranger did actually know what Parmenides believed since after concluding the divisibility of the sphere, he states that what is "truly one" has to be "completely without parts" in reference to Parmenides' One as a quantity with no parts—since with parts it would be more than one.[18]

In my understanding, both Gill and Brown implicitly deny that the Stranger attempted to consider that there is a metaphorical interpretation of Parmenides poem. Both views take the stance that the Eleatic Stranger misconstrued the Parmenidean poem for some cause, whether it be for advancement of his own metaphysical theories, accidental, or some other unknown reason. Both Gill and Brown seem to be in strict agreement that the Stranger took Parmenides much too literally which made it quite simple to overthrow his concept of the one-being. In the following sections, I will bring on my own objections to Gill and Brown's readings of this section in the *Sophist* and argue that the Stranger did no wrong in

how he had interpreted the monist's theory of being.

Status, Origin and Speech: Problems in Language and Context

Firstly, I would like to point out the significance of the home city of Elea in which the Stranger hails from. The fact that Plato veers away from using Socrates as his primary speaker[19] to reject Parmenides, but rather someone from the city that Parmenides hails from is of significant importance. The Stranger's origin and stated status as a philosopher is of such import that Plato reveals it in the first few lines of the *Sophist*.[20] If Socrates was our primary speaker in this dialogue, there would leave more room for misinterpretation of the Parmenidean doctrine.[21] However, since we have a "divine philosopher"[22] from Elea, there is less room to argue that the Stranger is incognizant and oblivious—furthermore, it was Socrates himself who held this to be true. In understanding the importance of divinity within the context of Platonic dialogues, it would be wise to interpret that because it only happens *ad hoc*, a Socratic reference to the divine is to be respected with little room for doubt.[23] Because of this, there is no reason to consider that the Stranger wanted to strawman the father of the Eleatic school of thought. The Stranger even goes so far as to ask Theaetetus not to consider him as committing a "parricide" when he tries to insist by brute force that "*that which is not* somehow is" and "*that which is* somehow is not."[24] This is somewhat thought-provoking since Parmenides actually taught that "what is not" to be forbidden and prohibited any inquiry into.[25] Additionally, one could argue the Stranger is more well-versed on the subject of Parmenidean Monism than anyone else in the Platonic dialogues apart from Parmenides and Zeno in the *Parmenides* considering his status and origin. This is reason enough to believe that the Stranger does actually attempt to take Parmenides' argument seriously contra Brown and Gill. This claim however, does not speak on whether the argument was taken literally or metaphorically, it only states that Plato, through the Stranger, does attempt to take the monist's theory in all seriousness.

Before a strict defense of the Stranger's refuting analysis against Parmenides' One, I find it critical to point out flaws within Brown and Gill's rejection. I will begin with Brown's claim that the sphere metaphor was designed only to "convey the notion of homogeneity and an absence of differentiation." The language she uses has already implied a multiplicity, something that I suppose she would call a fallacious understanding of Parmenides according to her disavowal. I shall argue that the notion of *homogeneity* implies a relationship. I claim that for a thing to be homogeneous, there must be something else for it to be homogeneous to. In claiming that there is only one thing, Parmenides would not be able to claim the relationship of sameness and homogeneity. For to be the same as a thing, *X*, actually states there "there is a thing, *Y*, that a different thing, *X*, is homogeneous

in nature to." This statement would not be valid under the conditions of Parmenides' Numerical Monism due to Being as only one thing. I admit that one may argue that the notion of homogeneity can still be conveyed in the statement that "A thing, *X*, is the same as itself", yet I believe this does not reach the monist's requisition of only one thing. This statement still embraces pluralism by employing two different concept-subjects within it; the concept of sameness and the subject as a thing, *X*. This once again cannot be embraced by the monist's since there are two separate entities within the statement. One may further argue against my rebuttal that a concept cannot be thought of as an entity, yet I believe that in the "sphere" of Parmenides ontology, the concept of sameness is still an entity since we cannot inquire into what is not,[26] yet we still do inquire into the concept of sameness putting it in the realm of what is. In Brown's dismissal of the Stranger's argument, she makes the mistake she believes the Stranger made: an unserious attempt at understanding what Parmenides was driving at.

The flaws of Gill's argument come from a different route from Brown's. Rather than a problem of language like Brown, I believe Gill makes a contextual error and possibly does not account for what the Stranger's argument was actually attempting to do. She never reveals, as Brown does, what she believes was the purpose of the sphere metaphor, rather she only takes the claim that it was taken fallaciously literally insofar as the Stranger still knew what the true view of Parmenides was. Here, I do not argue that the Stranger may have misconstrued the teachings of Parmenides—I only wish to claim that it was necessary to take the metaphor and subject it to rigorous examination, i.e., not fallacious. I find it to be the case that the Stranger was not attempting a direct rebuttal of Parmenides poem, but that his poem had insufficiently defended the thesis of his monism. I believe that in Stranger's rebuttal, he only meant to show that wholeness cannot be existent with the monist's view. The Stranger in this argument has, at the very least, shown two things; 1) that what is whole must have parts and 2) that what is one is without parts.[27] The combination of these two statements is impossible within the ontology of the Eleatic school, for Being to be completely without parts cannot allow Being to be a whole since what is whole implies parts, something the monists cannot maintain. On the other hand, Being as *truly one*, as the Stranger notes, cannot maintain the concept of wholeness for, as we have seen, wholeness implies parts—this is once again incompatible with the monist ontology. This conclusion does not misappropriate and take an analogy fallaciously, it only shows that A) Parmenides cannot explain his Being with wholeness if he is to claim it as one and B) that he cannot explain his Being to be one if he is to claim it is whole. The Stranger only showed insufficiency in the metaphor of Parmenides poem, and did not take an analogy literally.

A Defense of the Stranger's Analysis

After pointing out flaws in the objections of Brown and Gill, I will now share my own defense of the Stranger's argument. In asking whether the Stranger takes Parmenides' poem too literally or subjects a metaphor to an examination that is overly rigorous, I believe two paths of inquiry should be considered: (1) Whether Parmenides is able to be taken any way but literal and (2) whether the metaphorical interpretation forwards an understanding of Parmenidean Monism.

On the first path, I believe that there is an argument to be made that it would be impossible to take Parmenides any way but literally. Some scholars, apart from Brown and Gill, do maintain the belief that the sphere analogy is metaphorical and compare it to other parts of the poem that should also be taken as a metaphor.[28] This does not account for the fact of only one thing within the Parmenidean ontology for taking a passage literally and taking it metaphorically already implies two things, metaphors and literals, i.e. *more than one* which could not be rendered as permissible within the monist's ontology. As Gill tells us, "The numerical monist cannot even state his position without introducing plurality, and that is reason enough to reject it."[29] Whether or not the Stranger took the passage metaphorically or literally is a different question since I believe that he only used the possible metaphor as a route to show that wholeness and oneness are incompatible, a pluralistic approach.

On the second path of inquiry, which may or may not be contradictory to the first, one should consider how any sense of monism can be made without a serious and rigorous examination of the Parmenidean doctrine.[30] If Plato does not put Parmenides through a meticulous and painstaking assessment, then why would the Stranger make the earlier remarks about parricide and brute force? It's clear that the nature of wholes and their parts in monism cannot be understood through the poem but possibly can be if one were to ask Parmenides himself these questions. Unfortunately, the historical Parmenides was not alive for Plato to ask these sorts of questions so the only way to further an understanding is through this meticulousness. It was possibly because of these factors that Plato had the Stranger subject what seems to be considered metaphorical to such an examination. In no way should it be considered an exaggeration of the true meaning of the passage since Parmenides too used pluralism to explain his monistic ontology when referencing it to be whole, unique, steadfast, and complete.[31] If Plato cannot use a pluralistic understanding to interpret the monism of Parmenides, then it does not seem possible to take the doctrine of the One seriously at all.

Committing a Parricide

After consideration of the objections proposed by Brown and Gill, further analysis can prove that the Stranger did have a valid argument against Parmenides. In

addition to the flaws within the objections of the two philosophers, they failed to consider for what reason and in what context the *Sophist*'s rebuttal to monism entailed. As a result, they do not maintain why they believe the Stranger's rebuttal was taken fallaciously literally, only that it was. In my considerations of the status and origin of the Stranger as well as the context Plato was writing in, I believe that it should be held that the Stranger had a serious and reasonable argument. When a greater consideration of pluralism in Parmenides' poem is revealed, as well as the incompatibility of oneness and wholeness, the Stranger does not reveal himself as a fallacious philosopher, but stays true to his description as a "divine philosopher."

NOTES

1. This is under the assumption that the *Parmenides* comes before the *Sophist*. Since the *Parmenides* was a severe critique of Plato's Theory of the Forms, a rework of Plato's metaphysics was crucial which is possibly why the *Sophist* takes up the task of constructing an entirely new theory than that of the Forms. Furthermore, the beginning passages in the *Sophist* reference Socrates' conversation with Parmenides when he was a young boy and Parmenides was an old man (*Soph*. 217c), most likely a reference to the dialogue of the *Parmenides*. I believe this to be sufficient evidence that the *Sophist* was written at a later date. Nicholas P. White's translation of the *Sophist* footnotes this section and holds the same belief. This is the standard view concerning the composition dates of Plato's dialogues in scholarship, cf. Rist's "The Order of the Later Dialogues of Plato" and Gill's "Method and Metaphysics in Plato's Sophist and Statesman." However, this debate is beyond my scope.
2. The first argument, also known as the name argument, against the monists is an attack on the different names Parmenides uses for the same thing. For further writing on the first half of the argument against Parmenides, see Notomi 215-216. Cf. Alieva 82. Cf. Crivelli 76-9. Cf. McCabe 66-73. To summarize the first argument, it is concluded that "One" and "Being", whether the names refer to the same thing or not, as two separate words embraces pluralism—for a true monist would only need one name. Since the monists are using two separate words to refer to being, they introduce plurality which in itself concludes that this theory of monism can be rejected. Furthermore, monism cannot say that names and what they reference are two different things, contra *Cratylus* 430a6-7 (Names are different than which they name—names only imitate the things they name), since that as well embraces pluralism.
3. I believe Plato has decided to use the Stranger from Elea as his speaker in the dialogue that rejects Parmenides due to the Stranger being from the same city as Parmenides. I elaborate on this in later sections.
4. Parmenidean Monism will also be referred to as monism within this essay. However, I do admit that there are other types of monism such as predicational monism and material monism like that of Thales and Anaximander.
5. *Sophist,* 244d15-e1—All translations used in this essay are from Nicholas P. White unless stated otherwise.
6. *Soph.* 244e3-6
7. *Soph*. 245a8-9. I believe that here we see the Stranger's home city come to be of

use. Since the Stranger is from Elea and partakes in the Eleatic school of thought, he can say what something that is *truly one* can be since he is more familiar with Parmenides' one-being.

8. *Soph.* 245c1-d2
9. *Soph*. 245d4-6
10. *Soph.* 245d8-10
11. These refutations are contingent on the view of Parmenides as a numerical monist, which is somewhat commonplace within scholarship. However, there are arguments that do argue for Parmenides as a predicational monist, see Patricia Curd's *Parmenidean Monism*. Considering that Gill does keep her rejection of this argument within the realm of belief that Parmenides is a numerical monist, I will take that as my view as well if I am to properly reject her objections. Furthermore, on the basis that the foundation of Zeno's Paradoxes is mathematics as well as the idea that Zeno was arguably the most familiar person in history with Parmenides and his theories, then it does not seem problematic to consider Eleatic monism to be numerical. For after considering Zeno and Parmenides' intimate relationship, both physical and intellectual, I find the idea of Parmenides as a numerical monist more convincing than predicational monism.
12. The Battle of the Gods and Giants can be found in *Soph.* 245e-259d.
13. Brown 185.
14. Brown 185.
15. It is worth noting that Gill does only render the 2nd argument against Parmenides "disappointing" and refers to the first argument (The Name Argument) as "better" than the latter. She compares it to the first deduction in the *Parmenides* except that the Eleatic Stranger focuses on names rather than attributes which was the focus of the deduction in the *Parmenides*, see *Philosophos;* Gill 95.
16. *Philosophos;* Gill 95
17. DK 28B8.22-24—All fragments mentioned are from *Philosophy Before Socrates 2e*, McKirahan145-150
18. *Soph.* 245a8-9
19. In all dialogues commonly held as the middle period and early period dialogues, Socrates is our primary speaker. The shift from Socrates as our primary speaker is most notable in the later dialogues such as the *Sophist*, *Statesmen*, and *Laws*. Interestingly, this is also when Plato's methodology of obtaining knowledge switches from the elenchos and hypothesis to the method of collection and division; whether this is related is beyond the scope of this essay.
20. *Soph.* 216a2-4: Plato writes that the Stranger is "from Elea and he's a member of the group who gather around Parmenides and Zeno. And he's very much a philosopher."
21. This is not to say that Socrates does not have the intelligence to understand the Parmenidean treatise but only to point out the difference between teaching yourself vs. having a mentor teach you. Since Socrates was not a member of the Eleatic School, he is in a sense removed from a direct understanding of their thought processes and teachings. In this sense, he would not necessarily understand Parmenides' poem as well as the Stranger who was a member of the Eleatic School and learned their teachings directly. It's similar to the difference of reading Plato in its original Greek vs. reading a translation since it adds a possible layer of misinterpretation.
22. *Soph*. 216c1

23. Even though it is Theodorus who calls the Stranger a divine philosopher, it is immediately replied by Socrates that his opinion is the right one to hold. Socrates goes so far as to say that it is quite hard to distinguish a God from true philosophers. See Larkin 136-147, 169-176; Larkin argues that we cannot take Socratic references to the divine as ironic and that Socrates himself believes that instances of divination can be recognized as viable sources of truth. He concludes by saying that we must "take seriously the role of the divine in the case of Socrates." For more socratic references to the divine, see *Philebus* 25b*, Symposium* 201d-e*, Meno* 81a-b.
24. *Soph*. 241d3-8
25. *Soph*. 237a4-b3, 258c6-e4
26. DK 28B2.5-8, See also DK28B6.1-2
27. See Harte 100-116.
28. See McKirehan 163.
29. *Philosophos;* Gill 95.
30. McCabe 67 n.28.
31. DK 28B8.4

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