

Understanding Parmenides as a Numerical Monist: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

Among other scholars, G.E.L. Owen and Leonardo Tarán established the traditional view of Parmenides, the 5th century BC Greek philosopher, as a numerical monist. A numerical monist is a philosopher that advocates one true reality without distinction. More recently, there have been alternative interpretations. Standing alone, Jonathan Barnes suggests that Parmenides was not a monist. On the other hand, Patricia Curd and Alexander P.D. Mourelatos claim that Parmenides expressed limited monism. With the emergence of these arguments, I was compelled to present my own perspective. I argue in support of the conventional position, however, unlike Owens and Tarán, I offer evidence based on a literary comparison between Parmenides and Shankara, the 8th century AD Indian philosopher.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One – Introduction	1
Chapter Two – The Philosophy of Parmenides	4
Chapter Three – Parmenides and the Presocratics	15
Chapter Four – The Philosophy of Shankara	19
Chapter Five – Shankara and the Vedas	25
Chapter Six – Religion and Philosophy	29
Chapter Seven – Shankara and Parmenides	33
Chapter Eight – Conclusion	37
Bibliography	38

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is an investigation into the scholarly debate over the classification of the philosophy of Parmenides, the 5th century BC Greek philosopher. Scholars do not agree on what type of monist Parmenides was, if indeed he was a monist. This paper will demonstrate how a comparison between Greek and Indian philosophy can weigh in on the argument.

Traditionally, Parmenides is considered a numerical monist. A numerical monist is a philosopher who believes that there is one true reality without distinction.¹ This was the position notably argued by G.E.L. Owen² and Leonardo Tarán³ in the 1960s. Not all scholars, however, agree with this interpretation. For example, Jonathan Barnes⁴ and Justin Skirry⁵ deny that there is enough evidence to support the theory of numerical monism. Furthermore, Patricia Curd⁶ and Alexander P.D. Mourelatos⁷ claim that Parmenides expressed limited monism and went so far as to suggest that there is plurality in his poetry.

I argue in support of the traditional view that Parmenides was in fact a numerical monist. In addition to the evidence provided by other scholars, I back up this argument with a comparison

¹ G.E.L. Owen, "Eleatic Questions" *The Classical Quarterly* New Series Vol. 10 No. 1 (May 1960): 86.

² G.E.L. Owen 84-102.

³ Leonardo Tarán, *Parmenides: A Text with Translation, Commentary, and Critical Essays by Leonardo Tarán* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965) 175.

⁴ Jonathan Barnes, *The Arguments of the Philosophers: The Presocratic Philosophers: Volume 1 Thales to Zeno* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 155-230; "Parmenides and the Eleatic One" *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 61 (1979): 1-21.

⁵ Justin Skirry, "The Numerical Monist Interpretation of Parmenides" *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* Vol 39 (2001): 403-417.

⁶ Patricia Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides: Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 65-97.

⁷ Alexander P.D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides: A Study of Word, Image, and the Argument in the Fragments* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 132-133.

between Parmenides and Shankara, the 8th century AD Indian philosopher and established numerical monist.⁸

For a long time, many have recognized the similarities between the philosophies of Parmenides and Shankara. R.D. Ranade captured this connection when he referred to Shankara as the “Indian Parmenides”.⁹ An analysis of Shankara’s philosophy will demonstrate the validity of this epithet. To begin with, it is well known that Shankara was a proponent of the Advaita Vedānta school of thought. The central idea is non-dualism. Non-dualism is unequivocally a monistic concept of one existence. For this reason, Shankara is universally considered a numerical monist by scholars.

As an Advaita Vedānta philosopher, Shankara taught a doctrine that had been established centuries earlier. In addition to the works on Advaita by his predecessors, there are over three hundred texts accredited to Shankara himself. There is a wealth of information known about Advaita Vedānta and Hindu culture through the work of Shankara and other philosophers. Although the details of his philosophy can be interpreted differently, there is no motivation for scholars to debate about what type of philosopher Shankara was.

According to J. Fritz Staal, “Shankara gives an interpretation to the whole of Hindu tradition, which is not only a religion, but a complete system of life, including e.g., an elaborate social order, a moral code, a canon of duties and rights, etc.”¹⁰ On the other hand, there is a narrower scope of subjects in the only surviving text of Parmenides, *On Nature*.¹¹ Naturally, it is

⁸ Due to the limited scope of this paper, few arguments regarding dates will be made. Please refer to the footnotes for resources regarding this matter. Additionally, as is typical when dealing with subject matter of this kind, the ancient sources are widely recognized as unreliable. This is in part because much of the information about the primary sources and authors were retrieved from the quotes of other, later writers. Due to the complexity of this matter, this research will not focus on such issues.

⁹ R.D. Ranade, “Pre-Socratics,” in *History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western Vol. II*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), 37.

¹⁰ J. Fritz Staal “Parmenides and Indian Thought” *The Philosophical Quarterly: An Organ of the Indian Institute of Philosophy and the Philosophical Congress* Vol. 28 (1955): 96.

¹¹ J. Fritz Staal 96.

impossible to know what additional topics Parmenides may have discussed in his other works.¹². Nevertheless, it is clear that Parmenides was interested in the same metaphysical subjects as Shankara, such as existence and knowledge.

Unlike Shankara, Parmenides broke from his predecessors. The monistic theme present in his poem is what set Parmenides apart from other western thinkers at that time. Not all scholars agree, however, that Parmenides was radically different from the other Presocratic philosophers. In an effort to assimilate the philosophy of Parmenides to other Presocratics, these scholars do not label Parmenides a numerical monist but rather a monist of another sort or not a monist at all. This reluctance to recognize the uniqueness of Parmenides leads to misinterpretations that neglect the core meaning of his work.

The ontological and epistemological topics will be the focus of this comparison. This research begins with a presentation of the philosophies of Parmenides and Shankara, followed by an overview of their historical origins. The rest of the paper is dedicated to a comparative analysis of their differences (including regional religious influences) and similarities (such as positions on being and illusion). Ultimately, I aim to show that Parmenides' view on being is so similar to that of Shankara that Parmenides must also be considered a numerical monist.

¹² G.S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 257: e.g. Plutarch mentions in *adv. Colotem* III4B (DK 28 B 10) καὶ οὐδὲν ἄρρητον ὡς ἀνὴρ ἀρχαῖος ἐν φυσιολογίᾳ καὶ συνθεῖς γραφὴν ἰδίαν, οὐκ ἄλλοτρίαν διαφορῶν τῶν κυρίων παρήκεν (and as befits an ancient natural philosopher, who put together his own book, not pulling apart someone else's, he has left none of the important topics undiscussed).

CHAPTER TWO

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PARMENIDES

Parmenides was a Presocratic philosopher from the Greek colony of Elea, Italy. He was born ca. 515 BC and became the founder of the Eleatic school of thought.¹³ The only extant work by Parmenides, *On Nature*, is made up of one hundred and sixty-two lines that are fragmentary, ambiguous and transmitted to us by various authors over time. For these reasons, it is a challenge to determine the meaning of this poem. Nevertheless, an attempt is necessary.

For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the definitions of being, non-being and thinking according to Parmenides. Significant passages relevant to these topics will be presented along with a variety of interpretations and arguments.

The work is split into three parts: the proem, the Way of Truth and the Way of Opinion. The poem follows an unnamed narrator on a journey through the universe to visit an unidentified goddess. Ultimately, the goddess presents the argument to the visitor that there is only one truth (ἀληθεῖα) in the world. Every other presumed reality is an illusion. The narrator's duty is to take this explanation back with him to the mortal world.

It is generally assumed that the narrator is Parmenides himself.¹⁴ The identity of the goddess, however, is debatable. Many, who make the attempt, identify the goddess as Dike (Justice)¹⁵, Nyx (Night)¹⁶ or Persephone¹⁷. Consider these lines:

Parmenides fr. 1.11-14, Sextus *adv. math.* VII, 3

¹³ G.S. Kirk 239-240.

¹⁴ G.S. Kirk 243.

¹⁵ Karl Deichgräber, *Parmenides' Auffahrt zur Göttin des Rechts: Untersuchungen zum Prooimion seines Lehrgedichts*. Mainz 1958 (Abh. der Akad. d. Wiss. & Lit. Geistes- und Sozialwiss. Kl., Jahrg. 1958, Nr. 11), 6-7, 37.

¹⁶ John Anderson Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 58-59.

¹⁷ Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, California: The Golden Sufi Center, 1999) 92-100.

ἔνθα πύλαι Νυκτός τε καὶ Ἥματός εἰσι κελεύθων,
καὶ σφας ὑπέρθυρον ἀμφὶς ἔχει καὶ λάϊνος οὐδός.
αὐταὶ δ' αἰθέριαι πλῆνται μεγάλοισι θυρέτροις·
τῶν δὲ Δίκη πολύποινος ἔχει κληῖδας ἀμοιβούς.¹⁸

There are the gates of the paths of Night and Day
and a lintel and a stone threshold enclose them.
They themselves, high in the air, are blocked with great doors
and avenging Justice holds the alternate bolts.¹⁹

It is tempting to identify the goddess as Dike since she is briefly mentioned as holding the ‘alternate bolts’ i.e. the keys to the gates of the passages of Night and Day. Night can be understood as darkness, illusion, and ignorance. Day can be interpreted as the light, truth, and knowledge. Since she holds the keys, she has the power to reveal truth. Accordingly, Dike fits nicely because she can serve as a symbol of judgment between truth and illusion.

There are, however, issues with this interpretation as well as compelling arguments in support of other goddesses.²⁰ Kirk, Raven and Schofield refer to her only as “the goddess” and make no argument as to her identity.²¹ Although it is a topic worth discussing, the identity of the goddess is not paramount to understanding the overall purpose of the poem. On account of this, in the footsteps of Kirk, Raven and Schofield, I will leave the goddess unnamed.

Returning to the events described in the poem, it is important to focus on the interactions between Parmenides and the goddess. At the end of the poem, Parmenides reaches the goddess. She explains to him that the purpose of their meeting is for her to reveal to him the truth of the world. The nature of the argument is two fold: there is a right way to think and a wrong way to think.

The following passage introduces the issue and provides the parameters of the argument at hand:

¹⁸ G.S. Kirk 242.

¹⁹ G.S. Kirk 243.

²⁰ One issue is geographic. Being that she is mentioned as holding the alternate bolts to the doors that begin the paths of Day and Night, she seems to be standing at the entrance of these doors. She is stated as having been talked into opening the gates. Parmenides and company go through the doors and continue the quest to find the goddess. Therefore, how could she be located at the destination as well unless they go full circle? Please see the sources cited above to understand the arguments in support of the other goddesses.

²¹ G.S. Kirk 241-262.

Parmenides fr. 1.28-32, Simplicius *de caelo* 557, 25ff.

...Χρεὼ δέ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι
ἤμην Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἀτρεμές ἦτορ
ἠδὲ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθῆς.
Ἄλλ' ἔμπης καὶ ταῦτα μαθήσῃ, ὡς τὰ δοκοῦντα
χρῆν δοκίμως εἶναι διὰ παντὸς πάντα περῶντα.²²

It is proper that you should learn all things,
both the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth,
and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true reliance
But nonetheless you shall learn these things too,
how what is believed would have to be assuredly
pervading all things throughout.²³

This introduction foretells the argument to come in such a way that the reader becomes prepared for a series of proof. At this stage, it is essential to point out that Parmenides is credited with being the ‘inventor of argument.’ Charles Kahn states, “the poem of Parmenides is the earliest philosophic text which is preserved with sufficient completeness and continuity to permit us to follow a sustained line of argument.”²⁴ The purpose, testability and validity of his argument have been the focus for many scholars. According to some, he offers a slew of contradictions and fallacies. I do not claim to have the answers for these issues but I will present them. Although there may be no resolution for some of the problems, I believe that that Parmenides’ argument is coherent enough to prove that he is a numerical monist.

Unlike most, Jonathon Barnes believes that Parmenides was not concerned with the validity of his argument but with the demonstration of argumentation. He claims that *On Nature* is a request for future philosophers to offer an argument against other arguments. In doing so, they would move beyond asserting their own beliefs and into refuting the beliefs of others.²⁵ Barnes states, “Parmenides’ views on the objects of inquiry are not merely antique exhibits in the roomy

²² G.S. Kirk 242.

²³ G.S. Kirk 243.

²⁴ Charles H. Kahn “The Thesis of Parmenides” *The Review of Metaphysics* Vol. 22, No. 4 (June 1969): 700.

²⁵ Jonathon Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers* Revised Edition (New York: Routledge, 1982), 170.

museum of philosophical follies: the arguments he adduces, though unsound, are ingenious and admirable; their conclusion, though false, has a strange plausibility and attractiveness.”²⁶

Barnes suggests that the complexity of the poem is seemingly inconsequential to its purpose. Although Barnes gives up on any valid interpretation of Parmenides, I believe that he does not take into consideration the amount of attention Parmenides gave to being and non-being. Given the depth of description, these topics should not be disregarded as a means to an end for argument’s sake. The definitions of being and non-being make up the core of Parmenides philosophy and are the greatest source of evidence for their classification as numerical.

As many scholars have recognized, the essential factor in the interpretation of Parmenides’ being is the identification of the subject of ἔστι. Consider this passage from the Way of Truth:

Parmenides fr. 2.1-3, Proclus *in Tim.* I, 345, 18
εἰ δ’ ἄγ’ ἐγὼν ἐρέω, κόμισαι δὲ σὺ μῦθον ἀκούσας,
αἴπερ ὁδοὶ μούνη διζήσιός εἰσι νοῆσαι·
ἢ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι...

Come now, and I will tell you
(and you must carry my account away with you when you have heard it)
the only ways of enquiry that are to be thought of.
The one, that [it] is and that it is impossible for [it] not to be ²⁷

The interpretation of the unexpressed subject of ἔστι effects the way in which a scholar approaches and classifies Parmenides. Scholars that believe Parmenides was a numerical monist must say that Parmenides argues for the existence of only one thing. The definition of what this one thing is varies; be it *what is*, existence as a whole or thought.²⁸ It was Hermann Diels that claimed the subject is *what is*.²⁹ On the other hand, Francis Cornford asserted that the subject is

²⁶ Jonathon Barnes *Presocratic Philosophers* 172.

²⁷ G.S. Kirk 245.

²⁸ John Palmer *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 74.

²⁹ G.E.L. Owen 90.

The One Being.³⁰ Owen refuted both these arguments and claimed that it is *what can be thought of*.³¹ I argue that all of their interpretations are congruent with numerical monism. In other words, *what is* is inherently The One Being that is *what can be thought of*.

Before going on to a more in-depth look into the numerical monism of Parmenides, it is necessary to present the opposing view, namely that Parmenides is not a numerical monist. Those who do not classify Parmenides as a numerical monist argue that the subject of ἔστι in the above passage is any number of individual elements that can be tested to exist. The following analysis will demonstrate that this is a misleading interpretation motivated by the desire to assimilate Parmenides to his predecessors.

Patricia Curd does not believe that ἔστι has an existential meaning. Instead, the subject of ἔστι is meant to be any physical substance. Therefore, she claims that Parmenides is a predicational monist. A predicational monist maintains that each object can only be itself, therefore there is no single unity in the universe. Curd argues that Parmenides' poem offers a formula to test the validity of those elements that the material monists identified as the foundations of the universe. Consider the case of Thales and water. Curd states that water is whole (οὔλον), uncreated (ἀγένητον), imperishable (ἀνώλεθρον), etc.³² Therefore, since water passes the test, it can be concluded that it validly exists.

This line of argument is based in the assumption that Parmenides maintains the interests of his predecessors. As such, he intends to offer explanations for the world through physical inquiry.³³ Not only is she arguing that Parmenides is like the Presocratics before him but also those after him. Curd identifies Atomism, Pluralism and Plato's Theory of Forms as responses to

³⁰ G.E.L. Owen 92.

³¹ G.E.L. Owen 95.

³² Patricia Curd 72-71.

³³ Patricia Curd 15.

Parmenides. Since these theories argue for the plurality of elements without attacking the monism of Parmenides, Curd suggests that Parmenides must himself have been in support of a type of limited pluralism.³⁴ In other words, even though Curd identifies Parmenides as a monist, the monism is on a small scale limited to an individual element and not a large existential scale.

Patricia Curd's interpretation, however, is contradictory to fr. 1.31-32, ἀλλ' ἔμπης καὶ ταῦτα μαθήσεται, ὡς τὰ δοκοῦντα χρῆν δοκίμως εἶναι διὰ παντὸς πάντα περῶντα.³⁵ Whatever exists, exists on all levels. The classification of Parmenides as a predicational monist who supports plurality is in direct conflict with the statements the goddess makes. It not only warps his definitions of being but also minimizes the individuality of his concepts. For this reason, he should not be considered a predicational monist.

Interestingly, Tarán stated, “at such an early stage of the argument there is no reason to suppose that Parmenides assumes his reader to be in a position to supply a definite subject.”³⁶ Although I agree that the definition of being according to Parmenides is an ongoing explanation that is not fully entertained in the beginning, I argue that it is still essential to understand in order to identify the subject of ἔστι as one being, defined throughout the poem. The complex nature of his philosophy forces one to look at the multitude of subcategories that make up the definition of being, : dualism vs. non-dualism, thinking vs. being, and ultimately the answer lies in the understanding of existence vs. non existence.

Let us first consider his position on dualism:

Parmenides fr. 8.22-25, Simplicius *in Phys.* 144, 29
οὐδὲ διαιρετόν ἐστιν, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστιν ὁμοῖον·
οὐδέ τι τῆ μᾶλλον, τό κεν εἴργοι μιν συνέχεσθαι,
οὐδέ τι χειρότερον, πᾶν δ' ἔμπλεόν ἐστιν ἔοντος.

³⁴ Patricia Curd 3.

³⁵ G.S. Kirk 242: translation provided above.

³⁶ Leonardo Tarán 33.

Τῷ ξυνεχῆς πᾶν ἔστιν· ἔδν γὰρ ἔόντι πελάζει.³⁷

Nor is it divided, since it all exists alike;
nor is it more here and less there,
which would prevent it from holding together,
but it is all full of being.
So it is all continuous: for what is draws near to what is.³⁸

There does not seem to be room for dispute about whether or not Parmenides' philosophy allows for distinction. It simply does not. Martin Heidegger's interpretation of the following passage reveals how complex the Parmenides' concept of duality truly is. Since the topics addressed in the poem are so integrate, combined in this analysis of duality is an investigation into the Parmenides' meaning of thinking vs. being:

Parmenides fr.3, Clement Strom. VI, 23; Plotinus V, I, 8
τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστίν τε καὶ εἶναι.

For thinking and Being are the same.³⁹

Heidegger's investigation into the meaning of this passage is thought provoking though he does not offer a definitive answer to its message. He suggests that Parmenides is disclosing the distinction between thinking and being made by mortals.⁴⁰ The distinction is dualistic and therefore false. Heidegger identifies the phrase τὸ αὐτὸ as the key to understanding the relationship between thinking and being though he does not state what door this key opens.⁴¹ He explained that there could be endless discussion over the relationship between thinking and being according to Parmenides.⁴² Who could disagree?

Some scholars suggest that thinking is being because it is the way in which being is

³⁷ G.S. Kirk 250.

³⁸ G.S. Kirk 250-251.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger "Moira: Parmenides VIII, 34-41" in *Early Greek Thinking* trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1984), 79.

⁴⁰ Martin Heidegger 89.

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger 100.

⁴² Martin Heidegger 100-101.

represented. Others contend that thinking is part of the everything that is being.⁴³ I agree with the latter. Parmenides is not only pointing out this particular distinction but also removing the validity of it, further evidence of unity in Parmenides' poem. This unitary, non-dualist, perspective is most relevant for proving that he was a numerical monist.

This concept of non-dualism that is so essential to Parmenides' definition of the relationship between thinking and being is inherently present in his explanation of non-being as well. Think about the following passage from the Way of Truth:

Parmenides fr. 8.7-11, Simplicius *in Phys.* 78, 5; 145, 5

...οὐδ' ἐκ μὴ ἑόντος ἑάσσω
φάσθαι σ' οὐδὲ νοεῖν· οὐ γὰρ φατὸν οὐδὲ νοητὸν
ἔστιν ὅπως οὐκ ἔστι. τί δ' ἄν μιν καὶ χρέος ὤρσεν
ὑστερον ἢ πρόσθεν, τοῦ μηδενὸς ἀρξάμενον, φῦν;
οὕτως ἢ πάμπαν πελέναι χρεῶν ἔστιν ἢ οὐχί.⁴⁴

I shall not allow you to say nor to think that it came from not being:
for it is not to be said nor thought that it is not;
and what need would have driven it later rather than earlier,
beginning from the nothing, to grow?
Thus it must either be completely or not at all.⁴⁵

Since only what exists is able to be thought about, and thinking is being, then non-existence can have no part in being. This presents an interesting issue. We are able to think and say things such as, “there is no Santa.”⁴⁶ Therefore, since we thought about what is not, we have brought what is not into being. Being is not only the physical and the tangible, but also the conceptual. This is because when we try to think Santa Claus (or think anything), we are drawn to thinking of just one thing, Being. In order to stay true to the concept of no distinction, Santa

⁴³ Martin Heidegger 80-82: Heidegger argues that many of these interpretations are too ‘easily accessible’ and based too much on modern thinking. Given my argument that Parmenides is a numerical monist, my interpretation is naturally that thinking is part of being and not separate. Although this may seem to simplify the passage and qualify as an easy interpretation according to Heidegger, keep in mind that I support the idea that there is much more to say about the relationship between thinking and being. Since that relationship is not the focus of this argument, I will not elaborate.

⁴⁴ G.S. Kirk 249.

⁴⁵ G.S. Kirk 249-250.

⁴⁶ Owen uses the example of mermaids: G.E.L. Owen 91.

Claus must be understood as not merely a part of Being, but as Being. In this way, saying that Santa does not exist is like saying Being does not exist. If existence can be and not be simultaneously, existence and non-existence are different and identical.⁴⁷

The only resolution for this quagmire goes back to the relationship between thinking and being. Owen goes on to explain this by citing Parmenides' pivotal statement from fragment 6, "what can be spoken and thought of must exist; for it *can* exist, whereas nothing cannot".⁴⁸

Parmenides elaborates on this paradox in the following way:

Parmenides fr. 6.4-9, Simplicius *in Phys.* 86, 27-28; 117, 4-13

...ἦν δὴ βροτοὶ εἰδοτες οὐδὲν
πλάττονται, δίκρανοι· ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν
στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλακτὸν νόον· οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται
κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φύλα,
οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται
κοῦ ταῦτόν, πάντων δὲ παλίντροπὸς ἐστὶ κέλευθος.

...mortals wander knowing nothing,
two-headed; for helplessness guides the wandering thought in their breasts
and they are carried along, deaf and blind at once, dazed,
undiscriminating hordes, who believe that to be and not to be are the same
and not the same; and the path taken by them all is backward-turning.⁴⁹

The description above sums up Parmenides' view on the dualistic nature of human thought. This is congruent with his presentation of thinking and ultimately being. Contrasting what exists to what does not exist inherently creates distinction just as contrasting thinking to being. This, of course, violates being and therefore reality. Since the duality created by the distinction between being and non-being and thinking and being has the same source as any other duality, namely human illusion, they are the same issue: the denial of non-dualism. An example of this mortal habit is in the following passage:

Parmenides fr.8.53-56, Simplicius *in Phys.* 38, 28

⁴⁷ G.E.L. Owen 91.

⁴⁸ G.E.L. Owen 94.

⁴⁹ G.S. Kirk 247.

μορφὰς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν·
τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἔστιν - ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσίν -
τάντια δ' ἐκρίναντο δέμας καὶ σήματ' ἔθεντο
χωρὶς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων, τῇ μὲν φλογὸς αἰθέριον πῦρ,
ἥπιον ὄν, μέγ' ἑλαφρόν, ἐωυτῶ πάντοσε τωῦτόν,
τῶ δ' ἑτέρῳ μὴ τωῦτόν· ἀτὰρ κάκεῖνο κατ' αὐτὸ
τάντια νύκτ' ἀδαῆ, πυκινὸν δέμας ἐμβριθές τε.⁵⁰

For they made up their minds to name two forms,
of which they needs not name so much as one
– that is where they have gone astray –
and distinguished them as opposite in appearance
and assigned to them signs different one from the other –
to one the aitherial flame of fire, gentle and very light,
in every direction identical with itself, but not with the other;
and that other too is in itself just the opposite, dark night,
dense in appearance and heavy.⁵¹

Mortals exercise dualism by dividing thinking and being and categorizing things either as existing or not existing. In the same way, humans do so just by naming one thing separate from another. Recall fragment 1.32 διὰ παντὸς πάντα περῶντα. By having distinctions, the true reality of the unity of everything is lost. Everything cannot be/pierce through everything if everything is defined separately from one another.

Now that we have established what being is not, let us consider what being is. As a final analysis in this chapter, reflect on the following passages from the Way of Truth:

Parmenides fr. 8.26-31, Simplicius *in Phys.* 145, 27
αὐτὰρ ἀκίνητον μεγάλων ἐν πείρασι δεσμῶν
ἔστιν ἄναρχον ἄπαυστον, ἐπεὶ γένεσις καὶ ὄλεθρος
τῆλε μάλ' ἐπλάχθησαν, ἀπῶσε δὲ πίστις ἀληθείης.
ταῦτόν τ' ἐν ταύτῳ τε μένον καθ' ἑαυτὸ τε κεῖται
χοῦτως ἔμπεδον αὔθι μενεῖ· κρατερὴ γὰρ Ἀνάγκη
πείρατος ἐν δεσμοῖσιν ἔχει, τό μιν ἀμφὶς ἔεργει.

But changeless within the limits of great bonds
it exists without beginning or ceasing,
since coming to be and perishing have wandered very far away,

⁵⁰ G.S. Kirk 255.

⁵¹ G.S. Kirk 255-256.

and true conviction has thrust them off.
Remaining the same and in the same place
it lies on its own and thus fixed it will remain
For strong Necessity holds it within the bonds of a limit,
which keeps it in on every side.⁵²

and

Parmenides fr. 8.1-5, Simplicius *in Phys.* 78, 5; 145, I, 5
μόνος δ' ἔτι μῦθος ὁδοῖο
λείπεται ὡς ἔστιν· ταύτη δ' ἐπὶ σήματ' ἔασι
πολλὰ μάλ', ὡς ἀγένητον ἐὼν καὶ ἀνώλεθρόν ἐστιν,
οὔλον μουνογενές τε καὶ ἀτρεμές ἡδὲ τέλειον·
οὐδέ ποτ' ἦν οὐδ' ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῦ πᾶν,
ἓν, συνεχές·

There still remains just one account of a way, that it is.
On this way there are very many signs, that being uncreated and imperishable it is,
whole and of a single kind and unshaken and perfect.
It never was nor will be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous.⁵³

According to Parmenides, being is not only what exists but also what always exists.

There is no beginning or end. This explanation confirms that Parmenides is not talking about certain items that exist, but rather, existence as a whole. In sum, being is being. The subject of what is can be none other than being. For this reason, there is no difference between the interpretation of Parmenides' being by Diels, Cronford and Owen. Because all things are one, no exception, no distinction, being is what is, it is what can be thought of and it is one.

Only the main passages about being and non-being have been presented in this chapter.

There is a wealth of scholarly texts providing a variety of interpretations that have not been fully addressed.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, from these passages, it can be concluded that Parmenides believed in only one reality, one truth, and that is that being is a universal existence that encompasses all things without distinction.

⁵² G.S. Kirk 251.

⁵³ G.S. Kirk 248-249.

⁵⁴ For more details on the philosophy of Parmenides, see the sources listed.

CHAPTER THREE

PARMENIDES AND THE PRESOCRATICS

J.F. Staal states, “the great danger of all comparisons is artificial isolation, i.e., an unjustified abstraction from the context to which the considered philosophies belong.”⁵⁵ For this reason, it is paramount to contextualize the philosophy of Parmenides before moving into a discussion on the philosophy of Shankara. The following is a review of the evolution of Greek philosophy as it pertains to the argumentation present in the poetry of Parmenides.⁵⁶ It will demonstrate that the philosophy of Parmenides, as described in the previous chapter, was in fact very different than the philosophy of his fellow thinkers.

As has been mentioned, Parmenides was a Presocratic philosopher. Generally, the Presocratics were concerned with explaining the world through rational and empirical concepts that were not solely based in mythology.⁵⁷ As Kirk, Raven and Schofield point out, there were earlier attempts to provide descriptions of nature prior to the emergence of the Presocratics. For example, Hesiod postulates the physical make up of the Underworld:

Hesiod *Theogony* 726

τὸν πέρι χάλκεον ἔρκος ἐλήλαται· ἀμφὶ δέ μιν νύξ
τριστοιχεὶ κέχυται περὶ δειρήν· αὐτὰρ ὕπερθεν
γῆς ρίζαι πεφύασι καὶ ἀτρυγέτοιο θαλάσσης.

Around it (Tartaros) a brazen fence is drawn;
and all about it Night in three rows is poured, around the throat;
and above are the roots of earth and unharvested sea.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ J. Fritz Staal 81.

⁵⁶ Due to the complexity and volume of research on the Presocratics, this paper will only review some of the main persons and ideas that are essential to understanding the evolution of Presocratic philosophy.

⁵⁷ G.S. Kirk 7-8. Note: some Presocratics subscribe to certain schools of thought and become labeled, e.g. Milesian, Pythagorean or Eleatic. Others borrow only certain elements from these schools. Moreover, certain individuals had such unique theories that they are not easily classified at all.

⁵⁸ G.S. Kirk 9.

These attempts to explain the world were “not truly ‘philosophical’; they are mythic rather than rational.”⁵⁹ The earliest known effort to rationally describe the world began with Thales in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC.⁶⁰ He is considered the first Greek physicist and Presocratic philosopher. Thales is best known for predicting an eclipse and stating that water was the universal element of all things. Anaximander soon followed by suggesting an indefinite foundation for the world. It is not, however, until the arrival of Xenophanes and Pythagoras in the 6th century BC, that the philosophical foundations for Parmenides become more relevant.

Scholars continue to debate whether Parmenides was a follower of Xenophanes, Pythagoras or neither. An analysis of Parmenides’ poetry reveals that there is no evidence to support an argument that Parmenides was a student of Xenophanes or Pythagoras. Instead, it will be demonstrated that based on the evidence currently available, Parmenides developed his own metaphysical theories that set him apart from his predecessors.

According to Aristotle, Simplicius, Diogenes Laertius and others, Parmenides was a pupil of Xenophanes. Xenophanes was originally from Ionia. He reportedly spent time in Elea where he met Parmenides. The evidence for this is inconclusive. Although it is conceivable that Xenophanes visited Elea, the resources on the life of Xenophanes, as with all Presocratics, are notoriously unreliable.⁶¹ Besides possibly having been in Elea at some point, his connection with Parmenides remains apocryphal. Those who contend that Parmenides’ poetry reveals his connection to Xenophanes do not have much evidence. A comparison between Xenophanes’ and Parmenides’ works reveals a weak bridge between the two.

Xenophanes fr. 26 and 25, Simplicius *in Phys.* 23, 11 and 23, 20
αἰεὶ δ’ ἐν ταύτῳ μίμνει κινούμενος οὐδέν
οὐδὲ μετέρχεσθαι μιν ἐπιπρέπει ἄλλοτε ἄλλῃ,

⁵⁹ G.S. Kirk 7.

⁶⁰ G.S. Kirk 76.

⁶¹ G.S. Kirk 166.

ἀλλ' ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει.

Always he remains in the same place, moving not at all;
nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times,
but without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.⁶²

Parmenides fr. 8, 3-6, Simplicius in Phys. 78, 5; 145, 1, 5
ὡς ἀγένητον ἐὸν καὶ ἀνώλεθρόν ἐστιν,
οὔλον μουνογενές τε καὶ ἀτρεμές ἡδὲ τέλειον· /
οὔδέ ποτ' ἦν οὔδ' ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὁμοῦ πᾶν,
ἓν, συνεχές·

...that being uncreated and imperishable it is,
whole and of a single kind and unshaken and perfect
It never was nor will be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous.⁶³

Although there are elements of Xenophanes' and Parmenides' philosophies that appear similar, this is not evidence enough to suggest that Parmenides is following the lead of Xenophanes. Xenophanes argues that there is one non-anthropomorphic god that is motionless and in control of everything. Parmenides is discussing the essence of Being. It cannot be concluded that Parmenides' Being is a deity of sorts. The only apparent connection between Parmenides and Xenophanes is that they both write in hexameter.⁶⁴ According to Kirk, Raven and Schofield, "the connection between Xenophanes and Parmenides obviously depends on the superficial similarity between the motionless one deity of the former and the motionless sphere of Being in the latter."⁶⁵ There is not enough evidence to support a greater connection.

On the other hand, some have suggested that Parmenides was a Pythagorean. Diogenes Laertius (who claimed that Parmenides was once a student of Xenophanes) asserts that Parmenides had rejected the teachings of Xenophanes and became a Pythagorean.⁶⁶ Strabo also

⁶² G.S. Kirk 169-170.

⁶³ G.S. Kirk 248-249.

⁶⁴ G.S. Kirk 171.

⁶⁵ G.S. Kirk 165.

⁶⁶ G.S. Kirk 240.

claims that Parmenides was originally a Pythagorean. There is, however, little indication in *On Nature* that Parmenides considered himself a Pythagorean.⁶⁷

There are no records of anything written by Pythagoras of Samos.⁶⁸ According to later sources, he believed in reincarnation and refrained from eating meat except during religious ceremonies.⁶⁹ Kirk, Raven and Schofield point out that Parmenides' use of the phrase *στυγεροῖο τῶκου*⁷⁰ could possibly be a reference to Pythagoreanism.⁷¹ Nevertheless, there is just not enough to prove that he was a Pythagorean.

Parmenides stands out as a unique Presocratic philosopher. His poem brings up previously unaddressed topics and for that reason, he cannot be strongly linked to his predecessors . The amount of debate over his place among the Presocratics is a testament to his individuality. Understanding this is essential to classifying his philosophy because it allows him to be categorized in a manner unlike his fellow Presocratic western thinkers. Also, now that his philosophy has been examined and contextualized, it is possible to do a comparison with Shankara and the tradition of Indian philosophy.

⁶⁷ G.S. Kirk 240.

⁶⁸ G.S. Kirk 216.

⁶⁹ R.D. Ranade 33.

⁷⁰ G.S. Kirk 258.

⁷¹ G.S. Kirk 240.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SHANKARA

Staal describes Indian philosophers as links in a chain of philosophical development. Individuality is neither significant nor sought after.⁷² An Indian philosopher is tightly bound to whatever religious scripture with which they identify. This is undoubtedly true for Shankara (also known as Ādi Śaṅkara, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, Śaṅkara Bhagavatpādācārya, Saṅkara, etc.).

Shankara was born into the Nambudri Brahmin caste in Kāladi, Kerala, India. The exact dates of his lifespan are unknown (possibly 788-820 AD or 700-732 AD). He wrote commentaries (*bhāṣyas*), treatises and manuals (*prakaraṇa granthas*) as well as various styles of poetry (*stotras*). Shankara is the credited author of over three hundred works.⁷³

Most of Shankara's texts were written in prose as opposed to poetry. Thus, scholars do not have to battle with as much ambiguity as is present in Parmenides' work. This is not to say there are not contradictions and other issues. Overall, however, there is no debate that Shankara was a Hindu and a numerical monist who promoted the Advaita (non-dualism) Vedānta (on the authority of the Vedas) school of thought. Shankara's argument relies on scriptural quotes that are supplemented by his interpretation of their meaning.

Advaita Vedānta has been widely documented and studied. One of the fundamental sources for this philosophy is Shankara's *Brahmasūtra-Bhāṣya* (*Commentary on the Brahmasūtra*) also known as the *Vedānta Sūtras*.⁷⁴ In this text, Shankara offers his views on a variety of

⁷² J. Fritz Staal 95.

⁷³ George Cronk, *On Shankara* (Stamford, CT: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003), 14.

⁷⁴ George Cronk 14; the original date and author of the *Brahmasūtra* is unclear. It is typically accredited to Badarayana, about whom not much is known. The dates for Hindu scriptures are notoriously unknown.

philosophical topics ranging from consciousness to space. In doing so, he reveals the make-up of the Advaita Vedānta philosophy.

Although Shankara discusses many other concepts, his take on ontology and epistemology will be focused on for the purposes of this paper. To begin with, the ultimate goal for a follower of Advaita Vedānta is to reach total understanding of *Brahman*. Brahman is a complex concept at the core of the Vedānta Sutras (hence the metonym Brahmasūtra). The knowledge of Brahman is to be gained through intense scriptural study and contemplation.⁷⁵ This complete understanding of Brahman is called Ultimate Reality, Pure Consciousness or Consciousness of the Pure Self.⁷⁶ The reality is as follows: Brahman exists; Brahman is the origin of everything; everything that exists is Brahman; being is Brahman.

Brahmasūtra I.i.24

ज्योतिश्

चरणाभिधानात्

Light is Brahman
because of the mention of feet⁷⁷

The ambiguity of the above passage demonstrates the difficulty associated with interpreting the scripture. Because of its enigmatic nature, many ancient and modern scholars' interpretations differ greatly based on their own philosophical background. Shankara acknowledges the puzzling nature of the passages, presents the interpretations by thinkers with opposing views, and argues in support of his own interpretations.

⁷⁵ George Cronk 25.

⁷⁶ Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987), 252.

⁷⁷ Swami Gambhirananda, trans., *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 88-91; Shankara explains that light is Brahman: Brahman had been previously personified as having four feet (not referring to metrical measure). Everything is included as part of Brahman's feet. Therefore, light is Brahman. This meaning and effectiveness of this metaphor is debatable.

By examining Shankara's interpretation of Brahman, we can understand his thoughts on being and knowledge. Brahman is from the Sanskrit root *brh*⁷⁸ and means 'greatest.'⁷⁹ Some philosophers over the centuries have taken the term Brahman to represent the individual soul or a god. Although there is a level of personification in his description of Brahman, Shankara does not agree with the view that Brahman is a separate entity.

Brahmasūtra I.i.3

शास्त्रयोनित्वात्⁸⁰

(The omniscience of Brahman follows)
from its being the source of the Scriptures⁸¹

or

(Brahman is not known from any other source)
since the scriptures are the valid means of Its knowledge

Not only can this passage mean that Brahman is the origin of all scripture but it can also be translated to mean that the sacred texts are the only source of knowledge about Brahman. Shankara offers both of these interpretations since they cause no contradiction. It stands as an excellent introduction into the study of Advaita Vedānta because one who wants to reach the goal of understanding Brahman must embark on a journey into the meaning and nature of Brahman with the guidance of the scriptures. Shankara describes this Brahman as "all-knowing and endowed with all powers, whose essential nature is eternal purity, intelligence, and freedom."⁸²

The first step along the journey is acknowledging that Brahman exists. According to Shankara, the proof of Brahman is the acknowledgement of oneself. While this is essential to

⁷⁸ Charles Rockwell Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader: Text and Vocabulary* (Boston: Ginn, Heath, & Company, 1884), 201.

⁷⁹ George Cronk 28.

⁸⁰ Swami Ganbhirananda 18.

⁸¹ George Thibaut, trans., *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyana with the Commentary by Śaṅkara* from *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed., F. Max Müller (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1890), 19.

⁸² George Thibaut 14.

Shankara's philosophy, Parmenides does not discuss the recognition of oneself. In fact, for Parmenides the individual self impedes mortals from understanding the unitary nature of things. Although they differ in this respect, it is still important to elaborate on the role of self in Shankara's philosophy in order to provide a dynamic view of his beliefs.

For example, Shankara argues that since everyone acknowledges their own existence and "never thinks 'I am not'"⁸³, it can be concluded that everyone acknowledges the existence of Brahman. He goes on to explain that the reason why others may disagree with this view is that they do not have an accurate understanding of what is Self. Some maintain that Self is the physical body or 'momentary idea' or even nothing.⁸⁴

The concept of Self can be a challenge to grasp. I found it most easily comprehensible in grammatical terms. For example, in the sentence 'I read the book', 'I' is the subject and therefore the Self. 'The book' is the object and therefore the Not-Self. When the copula verb 'be' is used, however, the concept of Self becomes more complex. For example, in the sentence 'I am a student', 'I' and 'a student' are made equal by the verb.⁸⁵ The issue is that 'I' is Self but 'a student' is Not-Self. This 'superimposition', as Shankara calls it, is a violation of reality.⁸⁶

Superimposition occurs when the Self and Not-Self are equally joined. Shankara states that "if a man thinks of himself (his Self) as stout, lean, fair as standing, walking, or jumping" this is "endless superimposition which appears in the form of wrong conception."⁸⁷ Ultimately, the only thing that Self can be is Brahman.

Since non-dualism is the core of Shankara's philosophy, it is important to analyze the occurrences of dualism that violate his view. Shankara argues that the Maya (illusion) and

⁸³ George Thibaut 14.

⁸⁴ George Thibaut 14.

⁸⁵ George Cronk 26.

⁸⁶ George Thibaut 4.

⁸⁷ George Thibaut 9.

Avidya (ignorance) of humans are responsible for the misunderstanding that Self is separate from Brahman. An example of Maya and Avidya given is the mistaken identification of a shell as silver. The silver is superimposed upon the shell. In this same way, it can be understood that the world (c.f. silver) is Brahman (c.f. shell).⁸⁸

Another example of misguided dualism, according to Shankara, occurs when people falsely believe there is Jiva (individual Self) and Ātman (universal Self) separate from Brahman. Shankara describes Ātman as “the very essence of perception itself – thus is its nature established which is different from the body; and Atman is eternal, since perception goes on eternally and the essence here is one and the same.” Ātman is the same as Jiva. Jiva is merely the living form of perception that Ātman becomes when it enters any animate being. This false separation of the two is again the creation of Maya and Avidya.

After one is able to let go of the divisions created by Maya and Avidya, fully accepting that Jiva is one with Ātman, which is Brahman, they have reached the goal.⁸⁹ This achievement is best captured by the simple statement, “I am Brahman.”⁹⁰ The Self is Brahman, ergo there is no Self, only Brahman. This concept of Brahman is also illustrated in the *Chandogya Upanishad*: “Now that which is the subtle essence, the root of all things, the Ground of Being – in it all that exists has its True Self. It is Pure Being. It is the True Self, and That thou art.”⁹¹ Shankara identifies this passage as an important part of the definition of Brahman, the unity of all, the lack of dualism and thus the Ultimate Reality.

⁸⁸ Chandradhar Sharma 253.

⁸⁹ Elliot Deutsch and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *A Source Book of Advaita Vedānta* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1971), 125-126: in *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Shankara states, “duality is perceived to be illusory and Ātman alone is known as the sole reality. Ātman, indeed, is this all. Brahman, indeed, is this all. Ātman, verily, was this universe, one alone, in the beginning. Verily, this all is Brahman. Brahman is knowledge, bliss. This Brahman is breathless, mindless. This Brahman is without and within, unborn.”

⁹⁰ G. Sundara Ramaiah *A Philosophical Study of the Mysticism of Sankara* (Calcutta: K P Bagchi & Company, 1982), 5. The use of the copula verb here demonstrates that self (I) is identical to Brahman.

⁹¹ George Cronk 25.

The idea that Self and Brahman are one is non-dualistic (hence the term advaita). Ramaiah summed up Shankara's belief by stating, "Brahman in itself is impersonal, a homogeneous mass of objectless thought, transcending all attributes."⁹² Shankara's Brahman is synonymous with one unitary existence, the definition of numerical monism.

⁹² G. Sundara Ramaiah 7.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHANKARA AND THE VEDAS

The accounts of Shankara's life (*vijayas*) were written long after his death (*Mādhavīya Śaṅkara Vijayaṃ* ca. 14th century, the *Cidvilāsīya Śaṅkara Vijayaṃ* ca. 15th century and the *Keraḷīya Śaṅkara Vijayaṃ* ca. 17th century). Although these biographies include a great deal of folklore, they provide valuable insight to his connection with his predecessors.⁹³ This includes the fact that at some time in his youth, Shankara became the disciple of Govinda Bhagavatpāda (commonly referred to as Govinda). According to legend, Govinda taught Shankara the Advaita Vedānta philosophy that had been around for centuries in one form or another.⁹⁴

The Advaita Vedānta was developed on the basis of the Vedas. These are the earliest Sanskrit texts as well as the oldest Hindu texts. Although the chronology of these texts is debatable, there is no doubt that the Vedic tradition had been in place long before the time of Shankara.

The Vedas were not originally philosophically oriented texts. Systematic philosophy permeated the Vedas after centuries of differing interpretation by thinkers of various backgrounds and religious affiliations. This is not to say that seeds of philosophy were not already planted at the earliest stages of the Vedas. There were topics of creation, what happens after death, what happens during sleep, etc.⁹⁵ All of these themes eventually blossomed into the fruit of varying schools of thought. The way in which the philosophy of Shankara arose from the Vedas deserves some special attention.

⁹³ George Cronk 4-5.

⁹⁴ George Cronk, 6: The original promoter of this dogma was Gaudapada (the guru of Shankara's guru, Govinda).

⁹⁵ Erich Frauwallner *History of Indian Philosophy Volume I: The Philosophy of the Veda and the Epic-The Buddha and the Jina-The Sāṃkhya and the Classical Yoga-System* (New York: Humanities Press, 1974), 5.

The concept of Brahman stems from the Upanisads (about 200 texts that lay out the primary doctrines of the Vedas). In this early stage of the development of Indian philosophy, the pattern of the formation of the doctrine is as follows: stating of a particular theory of knowledge, explanation of the elements in the world that make up the World-picture, then World-edifice, World-duration, and then the inferences on conduct and ethics that come from the view.⁹⁶

Samkhya is the first system of this type. This is the first time in Indian doctrine that a count of elements of existence was made (tattvani). As Frauwallner points out, Samkhya “served as the prototype for all other systems.”⁹⁷ Shortly after, the system of Vaisesika was developed which combined the elements of existence with the theory of categories. Frauwallner contends that these two systems influenced older doctrines such as Buddhism to develop into a new system. Buddhism began with one doctrine (deliverance), and then encompassed many topics of philosophy, and became systemized.⁹⁸ It is widely known that Buddhism had an impact on the philosophy of Shankara, who was a devout Hindu that interestingly argued against Buddhism.

Over time, there was a shift in focus from the formation of the world into the reality of the external world.⁹⁹ It is at this stage of the development of Indian philosophy that “thinkers had begun to occupy themselves thoroughly with the inquiry into the epistemological foundations of different theories and along with it, with the inquiry into the possibility of right knowledge in general. Such as the case in the system of Madhyamaka, where reality and not development of the world is the primary topic, “only an appearance of truth can be ascribed to it in contrast to the highest truth which alone is real but which lies outside all forms of thought of human knowledge

⁹⁶ Erich Frauwallner 6-7.

⁹⁷ Erich Frauwallner 7.

⁹⁸ Erich Frauwallner 8.

⁹⁹ Erich Frauwallner 9.

and which, therefore, remains incomprehensible to our thought.”¹⁰⁰ This contrasts with the school of the Mahayana which believes that the external world is a creation of human consciousness.

These older systems began to fade as India progressed through the Common Era. After 500 AD, Samkhya was no longer a prominent doctrine. Vaisesika had the same fate by the 6th century AD. So follows Madhyamaka.¹⁰¹ It is at this point that the prominence of the religious sects comes to the forefront. At this time, there were two major Hindu sects: Vaisnavite (largely founded on the Upanisads) and Saivite (based on the belief that Shiva is the supreme god). Philosophers either developed regular systems out of the old systems or create new systems by bringing their own thoughts into the old. “Only by way of interpreting and explaining the old texts, it was possible to bring in new thoughts.” Shankara, a Vaisnavite, was among the former.

Following in line with the gradual systemization of concepts, the teachings of the Upanisads were systemized into one text titled the *Brahma Sutra* (also called *Vedanta Sutras*). In the early 8th century AD, Shankara wrote a commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* (called *Brahmasutra-Bhashya*). This is his most famous work, by which he provides his interpretation of the *Brahma Sutra* and thus inherently comments on the Upanisads and ultimately the Vedas. Shankara did write commentaries on the Upanisads directly (including the primary Chandogya and Mandukya Upanisads) as well as many other texts. Nevertheless, these commentaries never reached the fame of his *Brahmasutra-Bhashya*. So it is that the *Brahmasutra-Bhashya* both connects Shankara to the Vedic texts and also gives the greatest insight into his thought and as a result will be the focus of this analysis of Shankara’s philosophy.

¹⁰⁰Erich Frauwallner 9; It is here that one can also find a common ground between Parmenides and Indian thought. I am not interested, however, in comparing Parmenides to the whole of Indian philosophy, so I will not elaborate on this. For further information, see Frauwallner’s *History of Indian Philosophy* and other texts listed in the bibliography.

¹⁰¹ Erich Frauwallner 11.

The philosophies that followed the development of and had their foundation in the *Brahma Sūtra (Vedānta Sutras)* became known as part of the Vedānta system. This system is also called Uttara-Mimamsa meaning ‘later investigation’.¹⁰² The meaning of this term is two-fold. The Vedanta focuses on the last two parts of the Vedas: Aranyakas and Upanisads. In addition, there was a Purva-Mimamsa school of thought that preceded the Vedanta. Shankara was the first philosopher of this system. He took the thoughts of the old philosophical systems present in the *Brahma Sutra* and through his interpretation of the Vedas he established the Maya (illusion) doctrine. He created the view that Brahman (world-soul) is the only reality and as such all else is illusion. In this way, a new view of the world emerged and the Vedānta system appeared.

There are two other major areas in the Vedānta system: Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism) and Dvaita (dualism). All three believe that there is one Brahman, but they disagree over the nature of this Brahman.¹⁰³ Advaita is the only sect that believes Brahman is not a personal creator-savior God. And so it is, the Advaita Vedānta system arose from a longstanding tradition first introduced in early Hindu texts and many centuries later amalgamated by Shankara. As such, Shankara unequivocally stands for unity of all things and therefore against dualism. He is a numerical monist.

¹⁰² George Cronk 23.

¹⁰³ George Cronk 24; also see the previous chapter of this paper.

CHAPTER SIX

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Before moving into a literary comparison of Parmenides and Shankara, it is important to acknowledge the influences of their respective religions. Although they are both polytheists with monistic philosophies, their particular brand of polytheism differs. It is understood that Parmenides believed in the Greek gods and Shankara in the Hindu gods.

As has already been established, philosophy and religion have a close relationship in India.¹⁰⁴ This is obvious in the case of Shankara who bases his philosophy on the authority of the Vedas.¹⁰⁵ The ambiguous nature of the passages in the Vedas, however, allows for flexible reasoning. This is why one philosopher can see Brahman as dualistic and another as non-dualistic. A Hindu philosopher does not seem to be precluded from either interpretation.

Interestingly, there is not great focus or symbolism of any individual gods throughout Shankara's commentary. Although he wrote devotional poems to the Shiva, Vishnu and other gods, this aspect of Shankara does not ring clear in his commentaries.¹⁰⁶ Like different colors of paint on a canvas, there is both a blend and a separation between his religious and mystic nature in the commentaries. They are religious because they are reflections on the Vedas but they are mystical because of the focus on the knowledge of reality.

A mystic is "one who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths."¹⁰⁷ Even though the philosopher as an individual in Indian philosophy is not significant and individuality in Advaita

¹⁰⁴ George Cronk 20.

¹⁰⁵ It is important to note that Shankara was also influenced by other systems, most especially Buddhism: Chandradhar Sharma 253.

¹⁰⁶ George Cronk 20.

¹⁰⁷ G. Sundara Ramaiah 13.

does not exist, the individual experience of the follower of Advaita is important. This is because each person studying Advaita is striving for the apprehension of truth and therefore enlightenment.

Brahmasūtra I.i.1

अथातो ब्रह्मजिज्ञासा

Hence (is to be undertaken) thereafter a deliberation on Brahman¹⁰⁸

Shankara's explanation of this scriptural quote is, "the knowledge of Brahman has emancipation as its result."¹⁰⁹ Therefore, because there is a marriage between scripture and the revelation of truth, his work can be understood as a religious and mystical experience.

Both Shankara and Parmenides are mystics as is evidenced by the nature and themes of their philosophies. Unlike in Shankara's commentaries, Parmenides' poem has more obvious religious symbolism. From the beginning, he speaks of gods and goddesses (e.g. Helios' daughters, the goddess, etc.). The references to such characters have not only great implications of his religious nature but also serve as thought-provoking symbols of his philosophy.

Like Shankara, *On Nature* can be interpreted as the poetic rendition of Parmenides' emancipation. Some scholars claim that the poetry of Parmenides is a record of Parmenides conversion from Pythagoreanism to Eleatic monism. Since it has already been discussed that literary evidence does not support the assertion that Parmenides was a Pythagorean, this argument will not be entertained here. Nevertheless, there is merit that the poem can be understood as a journey from human ignorance to divine revelation. Moreover, this divine revelation is littered with religious symbolism.

Parmenides fr. 1, Sextus *adv. math* VII, 3

Ἴπποιοι τὰί με φέρουσιν, ὅσον τ' ἐπὶ θυμὸς ἰκάνοι,

¹⁰⁸ Swami Gambhirananda 6.

¹⁰⁹ Swami Gambhirananda 9.

πέμπον, ἐπεὶ μ' ἐς ὁδὸν βῆσαν πολύφημον ἄγουσαι
δαίμονος, ἣ κατὰ πάντ' ἄστη φέρει εἰδότα φῶτα·
τῇ φερόμην.¹¹⁰

The mares that carry me as far as my heart ever aspires sped me on,
when they had brought and set me on the far-famed road of the god,
which bears the man who knows over all cities.
On that road I was borne;¹¹¹

In the beginning, the subject of the poem (perhaps Parmenides himself) being driven by a chariot led by the daughters of Helios. This chariot goes along a road and through a gate. Staal points out that these are universal religious symbols.¹¹² At the end of this ride, a goddess greets the subject. The obvious religious significance of a deity need not be explained here. This journey has often been identified as a metaphor for the path to a revelation. Additionally, a number of scholars have noted that the poem has elements of an initiation.¹¹³

Parmenides fr. 6, Simplicius in Phys. 86, 27-8; 117, 4-13

δὴ βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδέν
πλάττονται, δίκρανοι· ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν
στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλακτὸν νόον· οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται
κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοί...

Mortals wander knowing nothing, two headed;
for helplessness guides the wandering thought in their breasts,
they are carried along, deaf and blind at once...¹¹⁴

A person who has been initiated into the mysteries is the εἰδότα φῶτα (fr. 1.3). If

Parmenides is understood to be the subject of the poem, he is the one who has been initiated to the mysteries of knowledge. Those who have not been initiated are the βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδέν (fr.

¹¹⁰ G.S. Kirk 242.

¹¹¹ G.S. Kirk 243.

¹¹² J. Fritz Staal 83.

¹¹³ J. Fritz Staal 83.

¹¹⁴ G.S. Kirk 247.

6.4). Peter Kingsley compares Parmenides' experience to the descent of Heracles into the underworld. Ancient readers of *On Nature* would have been familiar with this imagery.¹¹⁵

So it is that both Parmenides and Shankara were not only greatly influenced by religion but were also mystics. The influence of religion on their philosophies is witnessed in their direct (the goddess) and indirect references (Vedas). Their mysticism is evident by their focus on the achievement of true knowledge.

¹¹⁵ Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, California: The Golden Sufi Center, 1999), 61-62.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHANKARA AND PARMENIDES

Now that the philosophies of Parmenides and Shankara have been examined and contextualized, they can be adequately compared. In order to be considered a numerical monist, a philosopher must believe that all things exist as one. The explanations of being by Parmenides and Shankara are the strongest source of evidence that they are both numerical monists. Both acknowledge a unified existence without distinction.

When I first analyzed the philosophy of Parmenides, I offered the following line as an insight into his thoughts on being:

Parmenides fr.3, Clement *Strom.* VI, 23; Plotinus V, I, 8
τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι.¹¹⁶

For Thinking and Being are the same.¹¹⁷

This can be compared with the famous quote by Rene´ Descartes “I think therefore I am.”¹¹⁸ More importantly, it is similar to “I am Brahman.”¹¹⁹ What is said and thought is no different than what is. This is the first among many commonalities between Parmenides and Shankara. Therefore, in addition to the separate analyses of their philosophies, let me offer a joint synopsis of their similarities. The following passage is a refresher of what Parmenides’ being is:

Parmenides fr.8.22-25, Simplicius *in Phys.* 144, 29
Οὐδὲ διαιρετὸν ἔστιν, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἔστιν ὁμοῖον·
οὐδέ τι τῆ μᾶλλον, τό κεν εἴργοι μιν συνέχεσθαι,
οὐδέ τι χειρότερον, πᾶν δ’ ἐμπλεόν ἔστιν ἑόντος.
Τῶ ξυνεχῆς πᾶν ἔστιν· ἑὸν γὰρ ἑόντι πελάζει.

Nor is it divided, since it all exists alike;

¹¹⁶ G.S. Kirk 246.

¹¹⁷ Martin Heidegger 79.

¹¹⁸ George Cronk 29.

¹¹⁹ G. Sundara Ramaiah 5.

nor is it more here and less there,
which would prevent it from holding together,
but it is all full of being.
So it is all continuous:
for what is draws near to what is.¹²⁰

Now consider Shankara's commentary on the following passage:

Brahmasūtra II.i.13

तदनन्यत्वम्

आरम्भणशब्दादिभ्यः

There is non-difference of those cause and effect
on account of the texts about origin, etc.¹²¹

Shankara identifies the cause as Brahman and the effect as the universe. In order to explain this passage, Shankara uses the example of pottery. Terracotta jars are made from clay. Therefore, there is an element that exists in clay that is essential to the make up of a terracotta jar. Because the potential for a pot already resides in the existence of clay, there cannot be non-existence of the pot even at the earliest stages before formation and firing. The effect is no different than the outcome, "therefore the potency must be the very essence of the cause and the effect must be involved in the very core of the potency."¹²² Ergo, the universe is Brahman. There is no division. Shankara calls Brahman 'that great Being' which is in everything.¹²³

Interestingly, Parmenides does not seem to be concerned with cause and effect. He does not support his argument with this type of relationship. If it had been presented, however, it could have been implemented in the same way and efficiently reinforced his argument.

¹²⁰ G.S. Kirk 250-251.

¹²¹ Swami Gambhirananda 326.

¹²² Swami Gambhirananda 340.

¹²³ George Thibaut 20.

Nevertheless, a significant aspect of being which Parmenides did address is that being has no beginning. At first glance, Shankara's definition of Brahman differs in this respect. It is important to consider his interpretation of the following passage:

Brahmasūtra I.i.2

जन्माद्यस्य यतः

That (is Brahman) from which are derived the birth etc. of this (universe)¹²⁴

If there is origin, then how can Shankara's being be congruent with the continuous being of Parmenides? Shankara, however, states that "the Brahman to be inquired into here is a pre-existing entity; and It is not dependent on human effort, since it is eternally present."¹²⁵ Although everything originates from Brahman, there is no origin for Brahman. Since Brahman is in and is everything, there is no true origin at all.

For both Shankara and Parmenides, all misperceptions are founded on human illusion (maya/δόξα). Shankara states, "mother of pearl appears like silver, the moon although one only appears as if she is double."¹²⁶ Furthermore, he says, "any product is no more than a verbal handle, a name given to it, but that only the cause is real." The cause of course being Brahman.

Parmenides blames mortal illusion as well:

Parmenides fr.8.53-56, Simplicius in *Phys.* 38, 28
Μορφὰς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν·
τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἐστὶν - ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσὶν -
τὰντία δ' ἐκρίναντο δέμας καὶ σήματ' ἔθεντο
χωρὶς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων

For they made up their minds to name two forms,
of which they needs not name so much as one
– that is where they have gone astray –
and distinguished them as opposite in appearance

¹²⁴ Swami Gambhirananda 13.

¹²⁵ Swami Gambhirananda 9.

¹²⁶ Elliot Deutsch 152.

and assigned to them signs different one from the other¹²⁷

Therefore, It has been demonstrated that both Parmenides and Shankara believe that being (or Brahman) is eternal, in everything, without distinction. They also both argue that any opposing view on this matter is the result of illusion. While their time periods, locales and religions differ, their philosophies have much in common. It is widely accepted that Shankara is a numerical monist. On account of their core similarities, I see no reason why Parmenides should not also be classified as numerical monist.

¹²⁷ G.S. Kirk 255-256.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

J.F. Staal argues that the goals are different for Shankara and Parmenides by differentiating between Shankara's 'knowledge of everything' and Parmenides' 'right answer for everything'.¹²⁸ This interpretation ignores the fact that they both claim the knowledge of one true reality. The true reality is that "object and subject are unseparated" which Staal himself recognized.¹²⁹ This non-dualism, which is present in Shankara's *Brahmasutra-Bhashya* and Parmenides' *On Nature*, is the basis of my argument in support of Parmenides as a numerical monist.

Parmenides' particular subject matter and style were unique enough to become the foundations of a new realm of philosophy, the Eleatic School. G.E.L. Owen acknowledged his individuality when he stated, "to me it seems sufficient to establish him as the most radical and conscious pioneer known to us among the Presocratics."¹³⁰ Arguments against the classification of Parmenides as a numerical monist are rooted in the desire to assimilate him to his predecessors and take away from his individuality.

Parmenides' views on being and non-being fulfill the requirements of a numerical monist, which are evidenced by their similarity to the philosophy of Shankara, a well known numerical monist. For both Parmenides and Shankara, everything is one and as such there are no distinctions. Their passages on being and illusion illustrate this belief. The evidence from this literary comparison and the research conducted by past scholars such as Owen and Tarán, establishes that Parmenides ought to continue being classified as a numerical monist.

¹²⁸ J. Fritz Staal 96.

¹²⁹ J. Fritz Staal 96.

¹³⁰ G.E.L. Owen 95.

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