

Parmenides B6.1–2 without a Modal Fallacy

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On all accounts, Parmenides makes a marvelous argument in the *Way of Truth*. However, there is no clear consensus among interpreters about how to read it. The only noncontroversial point in interpreting the work seems to be that in it, Parmenides did something profound to philosophy. Despite this collective obligation to acknowledge Parmenides' unique innovation (whatever it may be), it has become popular to read Parmenides as relying on a modal fallacy to make his argument. This would be an embarrassing mistake for such an influential work, especially given the argument's deductive appearance. In this paper, I will outline the modal fallacy that Parmenides is accused of and argue for an interpretation that is free of the fallacy.

I. The Alleged Modal Fallacy

The critical fragment we must examine to decide the question is B6.1–2, in which the fallacy is supposed to occur:

χρηὶ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἐὸν ἔμμεναι ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι,
μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν . . . (Graham 214)

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As usual, Parmenides' language admits of many permissible translations for interpreters to quibble over, but this fragment is exceptionally difficult to render. T. M. Robinson rightly points out that "the fragment is notoriously replete with ambiguities" (627). Let us examine a few translations, then, keeping in mind that classicists and linguists can marshal complex arguments for and against each of them.

In *Early Greek Philosophy*, John Burnet translates the fragment in this way:

It needs must be that what can be spoken and thought is; for it is possible for it to be, and it is not possible for what is nothing to be. (174)

In their commentary, *Presocratic Philosophers*, G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven follow Burnet and offer a similar translation:

That which can be spoken and thought needs must be; for it is possible for it, but not for nothing, to be.¹ (270)

When these commentaries were published (in 1892 and 1957, respectively), they were considered authoritative and widely influenced Presocratic scholarship. Although these translators did not explicitly accuse Parmenides of a modal fallacy, one can detect it after formalizing their translations.

To show the fallacy, I will convert the key phrases from the fragment into logical premises (note that the first premise comes from a previous fragment (B5)):

"the same thing exists for thinking and for being"
(Kirk and Raven 269).

(1) x can be spoken/thought² \leftrightarrow x can exist.³

"it is possible for it [what can be thought and spoken of] to be"

(2) What can be spoken/thought can *possibly* exist.

¹ It is significant that when Schofield edited a second edition of Kirk and Raven's collection, he gave a new translation that avoids the fallacy altogether by leaving out the modal qualifiers: "What is there to be said and thought must needs be: for it is there for being, but nothing is not" (247).

² It is somewhat controversial what Parmenides has in mind here. Some consider it an unassuming reference to thinking and speaking, while others consider it more like simple ascertainment. We will see below how Robinson uses ascertainment to help avoid the fallacy.

³ It is very controversial how to construe "is there." Whether Parmenides intended it to be a verb of existence, predication, identity, veridicality, fusion, or speculation is hotly contested. In this paper, I have construed it existentially, but it may be productive to examine how each sense bears on the fallacy. Mourelatos, in *The Route of Parmenides*, has argued that a speculative sense will avoid the fallacy (60–63).

“it is not possible for what is nothing to be”

(3) What-is-not can't *possibly* exist.

“what can be spoken and thought is”

∴ (C1) What can be spoken/thought exists. (2, 1 modus ponens)

∴ (C2) Thus, what-is-not can't be spoken/thought.
(3, 1 modus tollens)

The alleged fallacy is to take premise (3) as a *de re* statement (i.e., $P \rightarrow \Box P$), when it can be read only as a *de dicto* statement (i.e., $\Box(P \rightarrow P)$). That what-is-not is not is a simple *de dicto* truth—true in the same way that “all bachelors are unmarried men” is true. But the argument requires something stronger to effect its conclusion. The scope of this modal operator (whether it is a *de re* or a *de dicto* statement) means the difference between logical tautology and metaphysical necessity.

If this is a correct translation and interpretation of B6.1-2, Parmenides has certainly made a philosophical mistake. There are many conceptions of possibility (e.g., logical possibility and nomological possibility), and the Greek language remained ambiguous even between modal and moral operators.⁴ But we will need to consider only the broadest meaning of the terms “possible” and “necessary” to discover the fallacy. There are many things that are possible: it is possible that the earth has two moons or that I ate spaghetti for dinner last night. Clearly, that these things are possible does not imply that they are also actual. That something can be does not imply that it obtains, at least not without additional argument. However, if we read Parmenides as making this mistake, his argument follows smoothly except for its reliance on this fallacious premise.⁵

The pieces needed to construct the fallacy have been agreed upon since Burnet and were reiterated by Kirk and Raven, but the fallacy took some time to gain attention. G. E. L. Owen was the first to explicitly accuse Parmenides of this modal fallacy, which he did in his watershed article “Elaeatic Questions.” Here, Owen follows Burnet's translation of B6.1-2 with some small stylistic differences:

What can be spoken and thought of must exist; for
it *can* exist, whereas nothing cannot. (94)

This translation carries the same logical troubles for Parmenides' argument that Burnet's did. Owen describes Parmenides' fallacy in a footnote:

⁴ See Kahn 722 and Robinson 633. $\xi\sigma\tau\iota$ can refer both to what is real and what is true.

⁵ This will become more clear when I treat Lewis's interpretation below.

A, which can exist, is distinguished from B, which (poor thing) cannot: invalid, for to say ‘nothing cannot exist’ is not to ascribe compulsory non-existence to anything but to say that it is necessarily (truistically) true that what doesn’t exist doesn’t exist, and this unexciting reformulation disables the argument. The fallacy is the so-called *de re* interpretation of modal statements. (94)

Owen’s criticism is identical to the criticism of premise (3) given above: B cannot exist, but only in a *de dicto* formulation, not in a *de re* formulation, and for Parmenides to rule it out as an object of thought or speech requires the illegal *de re* statement.

Owen gives two reasons to believe that “this celebrated fallacy is the point of the lines [B6.1–2]” (94). First, Owen believes this is the only translation that saves Parmenides from tautology, and the goddess clearly expects something more substantial than a tautology due to her injunction in B6.5, “that is what I bid you consider,” and due to her allusions to the first, wrong path in B2 (Kirk and Raven 270). Second, this translation fits nicely with the point of B3 (which establishes premise (1) above).

Many scholars have followed Owen in ascribing this modal fallacy to Parmenides.⁶ For example, Frank A. Lewis further presses the fallacy in his article, “Parmenides’ Modal Fallacy.” Lewis points out that in the poem, it appears that Parmenides presents some ways of inquiry and then argues by elimination for one of them: the way of *is* remains, while the ways of *is not* and of *mixed (is and is not)* fail. It is often supposed that *mixed* fails because of the law of excluded middle: if either *is* or *is not*, then the conjunct of the two (*mixed*) will be false. However, Lewis points out that this common reading of Parmenides fails to preserve this argumentative structure of elimination; Parmenides’ modal upgrades to *is* and *is not* (added in B2.3–6) make it impossible to eliminate *mixed* because of the law of excluded middle: “If the two ways are represented by their modalized upgrades, the disjunction of the two no longer makes an instance of the law of excluded middle” (2). The contingent, modal statements “*is but can not be*; and *is not, but can be*” are both still available, further ruining Parmenides’ argument by elimination (Lewis 2–3).

Hence, instead of relying on the law of excluded middle to eliminate *mixed*, Lewis believes Parmenides’ denial of *mixed* relies on a modal fallacy that he calls an “illicit modal shift”: “‘necessarily (*is* → *is*)’ becomes ‘*is* → necessarily *is*’” (5). This complaint is identical to the fallacy outlined

⁶ For example, in *Philosophy Before Socrates*, R. McKirahan quotes Owen on the modal fallacy and adds, “I assume that Parmenides was unaware of the fallacy” (164). However, McKirahan mistakenly cites Owen to substantiate his own claim that the argument “contains a subtle fallacy, treating ‘nothing’ as if it could intelligibly, even if falsely, be said to exist” (164).

in premise (3) above. Furthermore, Parmenides could deny the contingent modal statements of *mixed* using this illicit modal shift. Hence, Lewis is confident that the argument by elimination can be restored by simply supposing that Parmenides was unaware of this fallacious modal shift, and the rest appears cogent enough.

II. Possible Escapes from the Fallacy

Owen and Lewis offer a tidy reading of Parmenides' poem, but assuming a fallacy is a high price to pay, especially for interpreting an exceptionally deductive argument like Parmenides'. If one is reading charitably, one ought to avoid readings that require such ugly fallacies from the outset. Not all scholars attribute the fallacy to Parmenides. Still, it may be challenging to find a translation that is free of the fallacy and that can compete with the otherwise graceful readings of Owen and Lewis. A non-fallacious reading must also be philosophically and linguistically compelling.

Owen M. Goldin has given a possible escape for interpreting Parmenides without a modal fallacy. His interpretation is intended to agree with Owen's "Eleatic Questions" with a single departure: Goldin denies "Owen's claim that Parmenides' argument for the existence of any object of reference or thought rests on fallacious modal logic" (19). Goldin points out that in Owen's version, the fallacy springs from the range of the modal qualifiers, while in another version, which he argues is superior, the fallacy results from the poem's equivocal language.⁷ According to this version, the fallacy arises because it is possible to read the verb εἶναι as both potential and existential without distinguishing them. In this case, the alleged fallacy does not concern the scope of the modal qualifier, but involves an equivocal shift from the potential meaning to the existential meaning. Because Goldin cites convincing linguistic arguments to prefer his version, it is necessary to reevaluate modality's role in Parmenides' argument.⁸

Goldin points out that the philosophical ambiguity of Parmenides' language need not imply that his argument was bad. According to Goldin, Parmenides' argument is safe if his proposition amounts to "the principle that what is thinkable is a possible being . . . [Indeed, in this case] we see that Parmenides has explicitly considered the status of a possible existent; its being *is*, as an availability, intention or goal" (27-28). If this was his position, Parmenides is free to argue that all possible objects of thought already

⁷ See Tugwell.

⁸ Specifically, Goldin cites Kahn's work on the ambiguity of the potential and locative (existential) uses of εἶναι (Kahn argues that they were undistinguished in the Greek mind) and Cordero's work on τὸ or τε in the manuscripts (he argues that it cannot be construed as Owen's translation requires).

exist in some sense without committing any modal fallacy or equivocal shift; interpreted this way, Parmenides is saying that thoughts are guaranteed existence by their nature, not by a modal argument from what can exist. What is thought and spoken must exist qua thought or utterance.

Goldin's reading is attractive, but I believe that it fails to preserve large portions of Parmenides' argument and that it relies on problematic anachronisms. First, it is a vital element of the poem that the Way of Truth is certain and in no way contingent. But if Parmenides considers thoughts themselves to be real beings, he will be forced to embrace a completely contingent reality that is at odds with his poem's central theme. Suppose thoughts are things for Parmenides, as Goldin proposes. These thoughts either can be created by the mind or they cannot. If minds can actively create, then the resulting aspect of existence is contingent (contra Parmenides' salient point) on being thought by a mind. On the other hand, if minds cannot create, it makes no sense to follow the goddess's earnest command to reason, nor does it make any sense to censure double-minded men as the poem does. Some conceptions of mind may allow all thoughts to be necessary products of the mind, but it seems impossible to consider Parmenides' argument in this way since his project presupposes possible mind states from the outset. Although treating thoughts as entities is an interesting ontological position that could be successful on its own and perhaps even save Parmenides from a modal fallacy, it cannot exist peaceably within Parmenides' argument.

Furthermore, Goldin's reading of Parmenides as a proto-Meinong is historically implausible. Although Goldin delineates some fine distinctions between Meinong and Parmenides in his article, it appears *prima facie* impossible to argue that the Greeks at the time of Parmenides made such distinctions. One would expect massive reactions to such an interesting position, yet no ancient philosopher shows any signs of appreciating it. On the other interpretations covered, one can at least find reactions, or even misreadings, of Parmenides in the works of Melissus or the Atomists.⁹ If Goldin's interpretation is correct, then Parmenides would have gone utterly unappreciated by his immediate readers. Unfortunately, Goldin's interpretation does not cohere with the history of thought any better than it fits within Parmenides' own premises.

⁹ It may seem odd, or even circular, to use misreadings as evidence for my preferred interpretation here. However, this maneuver has an important place when it is done carefully. Philosophers influence their successors deliberately and accidentally, but in both cases their influence is a function of attention. A misreading can be especially revealing if one can pinpoint its cause. Correct understandings make for straightforward evidence, but misreadings can reveal more about the philosophical milieu and the priorities of contemporary readers. Modern interpreters should pay attention to both in order to construct a thorough story of developing ideas.

Perhaps Parmenides' argument can benefit from an alternative translation of B6.1-2. In his article, "Parmenides on Ascertainment of the Real," T. M. Robinson gives various translations of key fragments and defends them linguistically. Consider his translation of B6.1-2:

Necessarily, what is there to pick out and ascertain
is real for it is *there to be* real, whereas *nothing* is
not. (627)

Notice that in this translation the pronoun "it" no longer refers to "what can be spoken or thought of" as it did on previous translations. Now "it" refers to "what is there to pick out and ascertain." This is a major shift away from Burnet's translation. An external world (what is there) has supplanted an internal one (products of thought and speech), effectively reversing the direction of the argument. On this translation, Parmenides does not argue that our thoughts constitute reality, but rather that reality *supervenes* on our thoughts (at least, on our thoughts about ascertaining the world). This is important because "Parmenides is at once absolved of the elementary modal fallacy to which the translations of Burnet, [Kirk and Raven], and Owen appear to commit him" (Robinson 628).

Consequently, Robinson believes it is impossible to read Parmenides as holding that thinking and the real are identical. Instead, "[Parmenides] argued for the epistemologically unimpeachable view that there is a necessary/appropriate nexus between knowledge or ascertainment and the real, and in doing so laid firm foundations for the entire future science of epistemology" (Robinson 632). Moreover, the meaning of Parmenides' conclusion is also that, necessarily, real things can be referred to. Although modal and moral claims remain grammatically joined in the poem, Parmenides has approached the topic with sure first steps under this interpretation. Further, his translation of B6.1-2 indicates that Parmenides "is discussing availability, not possibility," which further discredits accusations of modal fallacies (Robinson 633). None of these advancements are traditionally credited to Parmenides, but Robinson has shown that they are available in the text.

In considering interpretations without modal fallacies, I have shown how Goldin's interpretation failed both within Parmenides' argument and within its historical context. Robinson's translation of B6.1-2, on the other hand, offers interesting insights on both fronts. First, within Parmenides' own philosophy, it becomes clear that he is not equating thinking with reality. Rather, Parmenides argues that what is real can necessarily be referred to. This position becomes especially intriguing for the remainder of Parmenides' philosophy, especially his Way of Opinion. For example, consider the status of Parmenides' cosmology, often treated as the exemplification of the Way of Opinion. With Robinson's translation, the contingent objects of the cosmology have some virtues. Although they remain contingent (unlike

the necessary propositions in the Way of Truth), they can at least be reliably ascertained (thanks to the propositions deduced in the Way of Truth, which under this interpretation show that what we ascertain is real). Hence, while there is a difference between knowing what must be and knowing what is and may not be, on Robinson's reading the second type of knowledge is not worthless, as it is on other readings. Moreover, this position helps us make sense of the goddess's demand to learn the Way of Opinion and account for the remarkably useful astronomy that Parmenides discovered. Interpretations that completely deny the usefulness of the Way of Opinion fail to appreciate one of the greatest scientific observers of an era.

Second, this reading also illuminates Parmenides' historical influence. Robinson shows that under this interpretation, Parmenides' argument gives a structural precedent for Plato's *Timaeus* 28c–29a (Robinson 628). Here, Plato employs an argument that is analogous in structure to that of Parmenides B6.1–2. Plato examines a disjunction between created and uncreated paradigms of cosmogony. This is similar to the disjunction examined by Parmenides: what can exist is comparable to the uncreated paradigm, and what cannot exist is comparable to the created paradigm. In both instances the second item is ruled out: what is not could not be, and the cosmos could not be created, given the nature of the forms. Neither is possible, yet they are used as counterbalances to affirm their complements. Again, we see Parmenides influencing Plato in *Republic* 476e–480 (Robinson 632). Here, Parmenides' emphasis on the real and what can be ascertained appears as Plato discusses what constitutes knowledge, and he does so in strikingly Parmenidean terms. Again, the upshot is analogous: for Parmenides, this premise supports the One, while for Plato it supports his Forms. This interpretation, then, fits the historical picture well.

In conclusion, it appears that Parmenides' argument doesn't need a modal fallacy to remain (otherwise) cogent and compelling. The above interpretations are strikingly divergent (which is perhaps characteristic of interpretations of Parmenides in general). Lewis can be thought of as an extension of Owen with a more complete account of Parmenides' argument by elimination, but both interpretations rely on the modal fallacy to interpret Parmenides. Goldin's Parmenides builds his reality from objects of thought, whereas Robinson's Parmenides builds his objects of thought from reality, and both avoid the modal fallacy in reading Parmenides. Yet Goldin fails to preserve Parmenides' larger argument and can't establish reasonable historical reactions to his interpretation. If we agree with Robinson's translation of B6.1–2, I have shown how one can maintain Parmenides' wider philosophy, particularly his cosmology, as well as his position in the history of thought, as seen in works of Plato. This reading of Parmenides is as graceful as Owen's or Lewis's, and it comes with the significant bonus of avoiding the fallacy.

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