***Rearranging Parmenides:***

***B1: 31-32 and a Case for an Entirely Negative* Doxa (*Opinion*)**

Abstract:

This essay explicates the primary interpretative import of B1: 31-32 in Parmenides poem (*On Nature*)—lines which have radical implications for the overall argument, and which the traditional arrangement forces into an irreconcilable dilemma. I argue that the “negative” reading of lines 31-32 is preferable, even on the traditional arrangement. This negative reading denies that a *third* thing is to be taught to the reader by the goddess—a positive account of how the apparent world is to be “acceptably” understood. I then suggest that a rearrangement of the fragments would make more sense overall, while further supporting the “negative” reading as more natural and coherent. In particular, the rearrangement dispels the objection that, “if mortal opinions were not true, why would Parmenides include such a lengthy false account of the apparent world--an account which explicitly denies the conclusions of the earlier section, *Truth*?”

In what follows, I explicate the primary interpretative dilemma that has arisen with respect to Frag. B1, Lines 31-32, of Parmenides’ poem. I argue that: 1) the negative reading of these lines—denying a third thing to be learnt by the youth (how the world of appearances could be described acceptably)—is preferable even on the traditional arrangement of the poem, and that 2) a rearrangement of the fragments is warranted on its own merits, and further supports the negative reading.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The standard arrangement of Parmenides sole work, *On Nature*, relies on a tripartite structure. First, uncontroversially, there is the *Proem*—an account of a youth’s mythical journey to the realm of a goddess.[[2]](#endnote-2) The goddess welcomes him, and then appears to provide a programmatic outline of what is to be discussed in the poem. First, she says:

“…And it is necessary for you to learn all things, (28b)

Both the still heart of persuasive truth,

And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no trustworthy persuasion.[[3]](#endnote-3) (30)

That the youth is supposed to learn the truth about reality is also uncontroversial, and B1:29, along with Frags. B2-4, B6, and B7-B8, are the primary basis for the second major section of the poem, commonly referred to as ‘*Truth*’. For this essay, the important upshots from this section are that what can be conceived of is the primary guidepost for what exists, and that the goddess uses this epistemic-ontological relationship to lay out arguments against motion, change, generation, perishing, etc. In the end, what is true about the reality of all *Being* is that *Being* is necessarily eternal, unchanging, indivisible and unified.[[4]](#endnote-4)

At the end of Fragment B8 (lines 50-61), the goddess ends her “trustworthy account and thought about truth/reality,”[[5]](#endnote-5) and from here on commands the youth, hearing the “deceptive arrangement” of her words, to learn mortal opinions.[[6]](#endnote-6) Thus, it seems as if the goddess’ promise to teach about mortal opinions is about to be fulfilled, in the same linear order as lines 28-30, and this is the basis for the third traditional section, *Opinion*. The remainder of the material found in Fragment B8 surely belongs to *Opinion*, and here mortals are said to err by distinguishing between opposites—Fire (in subsequent passages, “Light”) and Night—by granting each different names and properties, when in fact there is truly only one thing,or name, that exists—*Being* itself.”[[7]](#endnote-7) This line of thought was first introduced earlier at B8: 34-41, where the Goddess explicitly states that *Being* is all there is, and everything else that mortals take to be real—that there is generation and perishing, or change in any way—is a mistake, nothing more than a name. The error is further clarified in Frag. B9: “all is full of light and invisible night together, both being alike, since amongst neither is nothing (or, “not being”).”[[8]](#endnote-8) The only other fragment that clearly carries on this discussion (B19) is generally taken to be the conclusion for the entire poem, where it is stressed that things having been named came-to-be in the past, currently exist, and will ultimately perish—all *according to (mistaken) belief*.[[9]](#endnote-9) It is important to note how the conclusions reached in *Truth* can be held without any conflict in these passages, as all descriptions are represented as belonging to false mortal beliefs.

On the other hand, this cannot be said for the remaining fragments traditionally placed in *Opinion*. The content is at best tenuously related to the Light/Night naming error that uncontroversially begins and ends the *Opinion* section, and the tone is often one which is confidently asserting facts as if they were true, without any indication of being based on erroneous mortal beliefs. Even the content between these “rogue” fragments is at times disparate—the only thing they have in common is that they describe the world as we know it in various ways. There are physical-cosmological explications promised (the origins of the sun, the moon, the aether, the earth and the stars; how the moon gets its light from the sun).[[10]](#endnote-10) There are passages that address human sexuality and birth.[[11]](#endnote-11) There is a passage hinting at a full theogony in the poem (“love was the first of the gods to be born”), which might be the beginning of the cosmology.[[12]](#endnote-12) One passage even appears to cross into the philosophy of mind, addressing the close relationship between the two.[[13]](#endnote-13)

While relationships can clearly be drawn between some of these fragments—for example, B12 does mention: 1) fire/night, 2) an unnamed goddess who could quite plausibly be the creator of the goddess love, and 3) human procreation—the fire/night mention is not sufficient, given the lack of discussion of naming, to guarantee anything beyond a not unlikely coincidence (fire and night being quite common imagery for understanding the cosmos in the Greek mind) for including these passages in *Opinion.*  The case can be made that such placements are largely arbitrary, for lack of any better place to put them.[[14]](#endnote-14) At most, it would be prudent to grant that where B12 is situated, so should go B13, 17-18, due to B12 drawing the latter three together. Finally, it is important to note that a full fleshing-out of this theogony/physics/cosmology, if a unified section, would have to quite lengthy—many times longer than *Truth*.

Back in Frag. B8, the goddesses’ explicit rationale for providing the youth her deceptive, yet “probable” (e0oiko&ta pa&nta—“likely,” “fitting,” or “probable”) account, is so the youth will never be surpassed in judgment by any mortal.[[15]](#endnote-15) The sense seems to be that she gives him the most intellectually tempting account a human might mistakenly agree with, as a test, so that no other mistaken mortal account will ever tempt him. This negative recommendation clearly agrees with the description of mortal opinions in line 30.

This is not the only place in the poem where mortal beliefs are derided. In Frag. B6, the goddess commands the youth to understand that *Being* exists, and that the path of thinking “nothing exists” is to be entirely avoided.[[16]](#endnote-16) However, the goddess also warns the youth from what appears to be a third path—the one which:

“mortals with no understanding stray two-headed, for perplexity in their own breasts directs their mind astray, and they are borne on deaf and blind alike in bewilderment, people without judgement, by whom this has been accepted as both being and not being the same and not the same, and for all of whom their journey turns backwards again.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Frag. B7 seems to offer a similar criticism of mortals relying upon their senses, rather than reason alone:

“Keep your thought from this way of enquiry. And let not habit do violence to you on the empirical way of exercising an unseeing eye and a noisy ear and tongue, but decide by discourse the controversial test enjoined by me.”

These, in conjunction with the Light/Night passages identified above, provide a consistently and universally negative opinion concerning mortal opinions.

But what about lines 31-32 of our programmatic outline from the goddess? What exactly do they promise to teach us, and where can we find this fulfilled? Most importantly here, if lines 31-32 say something positive about mortal opinions, it would be the only extant line to clearly do so, and would suggest the universal negative interpretation of mortal opinions is wrong.

a)ll' e1mphj kai\ tau~ta maqh&seai (31a)

“But nevertheless, you will learn these things as well…”

…**w(j ta\_ dokou~nta**  (31b)

**xrh~n doki/mwj ei]nai dia\_ panto\_j pa&nta per o)/nta [perw~nta]**. (32)

The strong adverb doki/mwj (“acceptably,” “reliably,” “truly”) makes it quite difficult to avoid a positive sense from these lines. This positive adverb seems to then require xrh~n be read counterfactually—“how it would be right for ta\_ dokou~nta to acceptably exist.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Commentators are then largely split on the meaning of ‘ta\_dokou~nta’, and the referent of tau~ta—both are ambiguous. If tau~ta points back to the “opinions of mortals” in line 30, as the concessive ‘e1mphj’ (“nevertheless”) naturally suggests, then ‘ta\_dokou~nta’ refers to “the actual *beliefs* mortals have.” If tau~ta points forwards, it suggests something closely related to mortal opinion, yet distinct—a *third* thing to be learnt. On this reading, ‘ta\_dokou~nta’ refers to the *objects* upon which mortal opine. Finally, the last clause of line 32, with its variant Greek endings—‘per o)/nta’ or ‘perw~nta**’**—means something like “just being all of them altogether,”[[19]](#endnote-19) or “ranging through all things form end to end,” respectfully.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Putting this all together, we can generate two basic translations representative of the two primary approaches to the interpretative dilemma I outline below—the promise of a positive account of the “world of appearances,” versus a further negative description of the content of mortal beliefs.

Positive: “But nevertheless these you shall learn as well, how appearing things should be accepted: all of them altogether as beings (or, all of them pervading all things completely).”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Negative: “”But, nevertheless, these also you shall learn, how it would be right for things deemed acceptable [human opinions] to be acceptably; just being all of them altogether (or, all of them pervading all things completely).[[22]](#endnote-22)

On the traditional arrangement, a pervasive interpretative dilemma has arisen, with two main strategies at hand. On the “positive” view, one can accept lines 31-32 as a passage that in some way positively “saves” the opinions of mortals—which means explaining how the content of *Opinion* is to be taken positively, and does not outright contradict the conclusions in *Truth*. The most common approach here is to posit a “Platonic” two-world view—that truth is about how things really are at the divine level of reason (much like the Forms), but the apparent world needs to be explained as well, and Parmenides is offering in *Opinion* an “acceptable” account of the world from the empirical, human perspective—an account that is somehow consistent with ultimate reality, and not completely false and/or illusory.

The worries on this horn are numerous. First, translating ‘ta\_dokou~nta’ as “appearances” is highly questionable in Parmenides’ context, and hints at anachronistic Platonic usage in itself.[[23]](#endnote-23) Second, the grammar really does make it most likely that tau~ta points backwards, and what follows is an epexegetic for learning about mortal opinions, despite their lack of truthful persuasion. Finally, while it is clear that Plato was heavily influenced by Parmenides in many ways, there are significant worries about Platonic anachronism not just in language, but in the dualistic distinction between the “really real” world and the “world of appearances”, which Cordero has forcefully challenged.[[24]](#endnote-24)

On the “negative” view one denies the positive “saving” of mortal opinion—they are false throughout, and there is nothing “acceptable” about them as they are. This reading has the virtue of taking the arguments in *Truth* seriously. On the other hand, on the traditional monist interpretation, this view has the related downfall of Parmenides’ own argument denying his own existence! More problematic (in my view), however, is that one must then also try to make sense of why Parmenides would have written such an apparently extensive section (*Opinion*)relying on the very phenomena completely dismissed as real in *Truth*, if there wasn’t something worthwhile to this account. Merely dismissing the *Opinion* as “didactic” will not help here—one does not write extensive cosmologies and theogonies based upon mistaken principles, just to make a point.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The negative reading seems clearly preferable. It conforms to the epic Greek semantics better, avoiding the worrisome and likely anachronistic translation of ‘ta\_dokou~nta’ as “appearances.” Syntax is also on its side---while it is technically possible for tau~ta to point forwards, it is far more natural to read it as pointing backwards. Most importantly, this reading does not require explaining (away) the consistently universal and prolific derision of mortal opinions—at least for all passages that cannot be denied to be part of the error of mortal opinions, introduced at B1:30. Yet, what about the apparently positive account of the other “rogue” fragments traditionally located in *Opinion*—how can the negative reading make sense of this?

This is where a rearrangement of the fragments may be helpful. However, such an argument must clearly rely on its own merits, so as not to be question-begging. Taking note of what we can be certain of, Fragment B1 must be the very beginning. We also know that the main arguments of *Truth* are centrally located, because the end of Frag. B8 transitions to *Opinion*. Since the arguments in *Truth* depend upon the epistemic-ontological relationship established by discussion of the possible “ways of inquiry,” these must precede Frags. 7-8 (both of which overlap, and so must necessarily be held together in that order).

However, the scope of *Opinion* is not clear, nor is it clear that either the *Proem* or *Truth* is complete, or that some fragments might better fit as transitions between them. Also, on the negative reading of lines 31-32, we are supposed to learn how the things that seem acceptable to mortals would counterfactually have been actually acceptable—as “just being all of them altogether.”[[26]](#endnote-26) But we don’t have any reason to think this will be demonstrated *after* *Opinion* (or in that section), other than the fact that *Truth* and the *Opinion* we are certain of (Light/Night named-dualism) follow the order introduced in lines 28-30. In fact, if the reading of lines 31-32 is correct, and we are to learn about things as *Being*, then we would expect that to be satisfied by the arguments in *Truth*. Furthermore, there is actually an extant fragment that suggests playing with the order or presentation:

B5: “It is indifferent to me whence I begin, for to that place I shall come back again.”[[27]](#endnote-27)

Taking this literally, since we have a discussion on *Opinion* after *Truth*, in order to return there again, we may need some discussion related to *Opinion* at the beginning. In fact, it would be somewhat strange to begin with *Truth,* and present the arguments Parmenides does, without some elenchus—some object or viewpoint to refute. This is especially true when one realizes the *Proem* elicits mythological imagery at the beginning, which will be confounded by *Truth*—why not also consider accounts of the physical world to be refuted as well? I therefore propose setting B5 as the second fragment.[[28]](#endnote-28)

In conjunction with these considerations, the poem clearly demonstrates a progression through different personal voices in the sections (as we can be certain of them). In the *Proem*, the youth is providing a first-person perspective account of his journey to the goddess. Once the goddess begins talking to the youth, throughout *Truth*, the second-person is referenced, with mortals always referred to in the third person, as “mortals.” In the sections of *Opinion* we can be certain of, the second-person “you” has been entirely dropped, and third-personal “they” accounts of mortal beliefs take over. However, there are fragments traditionally located in *Opinion* that rely on second-person addresses. This is undeniable In B10: “You will understand the aether’s origin…and you will learn of…the moon…; you will understand also the heaven…,” and it is quite plausible in B11, where the content is almost identical, “…how earth and sun and moon…come into being,” but the beginning of the first hexameter line is missing. What else besides a mental verb could fill in that gap (there is no other verb in the passage)?[[29]](#endnote-29)

Given all this, I suggest that, at the very least, B10-11, in addition to B14-15, should be moved forward in the poem, to follow B5. These fragments: 1) contain no internal evidence of being related to the Light/Night discussion we can be certain constitutes the erroneous opinions of mortals, 2) the method of address far better fits the opening of the poem than the end, and 3) they provide a physical/cosmological foil for *Truth* to refute—satisfying the promise of Lines 31-32 to demonstrate “how it would be right for things deemed acceptable to be acceptably; just being all of them altogether.”[[30]](#endnote-30) Since this final element would work equally well for the translation “appearances,” meaning “objects of mortal belief,” without resorting to the anachronistic charges, both sides should be willing to accept this change.

While the reasoning for this rearrangement stands on its own—and thus avoids a charge of circularity—there is an additional upshot for the negative reading of B1: 31-32. Regardless of whether B12-B13 and B17-18 accompany this move, no longer must an extended and positive cosmology be located at the end of the poem, relying upon the phenomena explicitly discharged in *Truth*, which would be difficult to explain if Parmenides is not offering his own, alternative physical account. Here, as Cordero has argued, we can dismiss the modern fiction of “Parmenides’ (positive) *‘Doxa’,* and admit that all of *Opinion* can be (and should be) strictly understood as developing the Light/Night naming dichotomy, explicating the error of thinking opposites both exist as separate things (which implies “what is not”) and are in fact wholly false (if not illusory) names for what alone truly exists—*Being* itself.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The only serious obstacle that remains for the negative reading is that it encourages the extreme monist reading of Parmenides—that nothing in the apparent world exists, including himself! As ridiculous—even mad!—as this self-denying conclusion may seem, we may have to accept that Parmenides was a “philosopher whose nobility of intellect drives him to accept conclusions, even if they oblige him to regard the obvious or trivial as nonsense, and even if they force him to throw away the ladder he has used to reach those conclusions.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

**References**

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Mourelatos, Alexander P. D. (2008). *The Route of Parmenides: Revised and Expanded Edition*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing.

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Miller, Fred D. Jr. (1977). “Parmenides on Mortal Belief,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 15.3: 253-265. 253.

1. My argument is largely indebted to the recently proposed rearrangement of the poem by Cordero (2010), but I differ from his proposal in significant ways, and take the argument further. All references to the fragments of Parmenides’ poem will follow the arrangement of Diels-Kranz (e.g. ‘B1: 31-32’ refers to “Fragment 1, lines 31-32”). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We can be certain of this section in its (near) entirety, as Sextus quoted lines 1-30 altogether, and explicitly states it is the beginning of the overall work. Clearly, if we are to accept lines 31-32 as genuine (which Simplicius quoted, along with lines 28-30) Sextus did not provide the complete *Proem*, so there may still be parts that came after this that properly belong to this section. Of course, the entire division into sections is also a modern fiction… [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. xrew\_ de/ se pa&nta puqe/sqai h)me\n  0Alhqei/hj eu)kukle/oj a)treme\j h}tor h)de\ brotw~n do&caj, tai=j ou)k e1ni pi/stij a)lhqh&j. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I leave aside here whether all of reality is truly *one* such being, or whether Parmenides was open to the existence of a plurality of such beings. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. e0n tw~i soi pau&w pisto\_n lo&gon h)de\ no&hma a)mfi\j a)lhqei/hj: [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. do&caj d' a)po\_ tou~de brotei/aj ma&nqane ko&smon e0mw~n e0pe/wn a)pathlo\_n a)kou&wn. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. B8: 34-41. Here the Goddess explicitly states that *Being* is all there is, and everything else that mortals take to be real—that there is generation and perishing, or change in any way—in *Being* is a mistake, nothing more than a name. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. pa~n ple/on e0sti\n o(mou~ fa&eoj kai\ nukto\_j a)fa&ntou  i1swn a)mfote/rwn, e0pei\ ou)dete/rwi me/ta mhde/n. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. ou3tw toi kata\_ do&can e1fu ta&de kai/ nun e1asi kai\ mete/peit' a)po\_ tou~de teleuth&sousi trafe/nta:

   toi=j d' o1nom' a1nqrwpoi kate/qent' e0pi/shmon e9ka&stwi. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Frags. B10-12, B14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Frags. B12, B17?, B18. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Frag. B13 (and likely B12 here as well). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Frag. B16. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For extensive arguments about the unity (or lack thereof) between the fragments of *Opinion*, see Cordero (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. to&n soi e0gw\_ dia&kosmon e0oiko&ta pa&nta fati/zw, w(j ou) mh& pote/ ti/j se brotw~n gnw&mh parela&sshi. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This picks up on themes that are introduced and developed in B2-B3—the “paths of investigation” upon which any inquiry could logically begin. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Coxon’s Translation (2009). Similarly, Frag. B7 can be taken as a criticism of mortal beliefs and methods. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Mourelatos (2008), 205-210 for extensive arguments on the need for a counterfactual xrh~n here. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Mourelatos’ (2008) translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Coxon’s (2009) translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This is Thanassas’ (2007) translation, other than the alternative parenthetical reading for ‘perw~nta**’**. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This is Mourelatos’ (2008) translation, other than the brackets and the alternative parenthetical reading for ‘perw~nta**’** [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mourelatos (2008). Cordero (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Cordero 2004, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. This is Cordero’s explanation for Parmenides’ *Opinion* in his earlier book, before he proposed rearranging the text—I imagine the obvious lacking in his explanation largely motivated the rearrangement. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Adopting the “per o)/nta” reading as the best attested, and the one that makes most sense in the context of the poem. See Mourelatos (2008) on the meaning of the participle perw~nta, and how it has the sense of “pass through,” rather than “permeate”—a sense that clearly doesn’t fit here. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Coxon’s (2009) translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Coxon (2009) has already done this, so this move is not new. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Cordero (2010) has also commented on the change in personal address, and the inconsistency I point to here. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Again, this is Mourelatos’ translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. This is essentially Cordero’s (2010) stricter view on the scope of *Opinion*, though we differ on exactly which fragments should be moved and where. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Miller (1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)