

“Οὐκ ἔστιν” (141e8): The Performative Contradiction of the First Hypothesis

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At the end of the first hypothesis, Parmenides gets Aristotle to agree that being [οὐσία] must be in time; that is, that being must partake in at least one of the temporal modes: either to have been in the past, to be in the present, or it will be in the future (140e-142a). If this is true, then “the one does not partake in being” (141e7-8), meaning *temporal* being—to which Aristotle agrees, saying “Apparently not” (141e9). Parmenides then gets Aristotle to agree that “Therefore, ‘the one’ in no way is” (141e9-10). This, however, contradicts the very first premise that begins Parmenides’ entire gymnastic exercise, “if one is” (137c4). The problem with the previous conclusion—that to be is to be in time—is that in professing his assent to it, Aristotle, in fact, gainsays it. He performatively contradicts the very thing he wants to assert. Aristotle answers Parmenides question, “Therefore could something partake of being in anyway other than in one of those ways?” (141e7-8) with a two-word answer in Greek: “οὐκ ἔστιν [It’s not possible].” We can, therefore, ask of the very claim Aristotle is making—that it is impossible for something to be and not be in time—when in time does it hold true? At what time is it “not possible [οὐκ ἔστιν]” for something to *not* partake of temporal being? Is it not possible only in the present moment, in the past, or in the future? If Aristotle’s assertion is to have any force it must hold always. It has the same tenselessness as mathematical propositions, like ‘1+1=2’. Forms, like mathematical entities, must necessarily have atemporal existence. Accordingly, in atemporally maintaining that anything that *is* must be *in time*, Aristotle undermines his own assertion. He performatively contradicts the very thing that he wants to affirm.

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At the end of the first hypothesis after a series of exchanges that lead to some paradoxical conclusions that contradict earlier agreed-upon statements, Parmenides asks Aristotle, “Is it possible that these things are so for the one?” and Aristotle replies, “I certainly don’t think so [οὐκ οὐκ ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ].”¹ Aristotle’s emphatic negative response provokes Parmenides to return to the beginning, and initiates what is called the second hypothesis. So, what went wrong?

1 *Prm.* 142a6-8. All English translations are from the Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell translation in Cooper 1997, sometimes slightly modified.

Being in Time: is it really the only kind of Being there is?

My main claim is that the content of the mistake lies in the fact that the first hypothesis takes for granted a conception of being [οὐσία] in which the only kind of being is being *in time*. Parmenides gets Aristotle to agree that to exist is to necessarily partake of one of the three temporal modes: either to have existed in the past, to exist in the present, or will exist in the future (141e). But this conception of being does not, and cannot, apply to all objects. For example, we would not say of mathematical objects, like the circle itself or the square itself (apart from all material representations or imperfect instantiations of them), that they have a temporal existence. Neither would we say that numbers themselves (again, apart from our groupings or counting-up of actual, material things, and apart from our representations of them) that they have a temporal existence. Nor can we say that mathematical facts, even simple ones like ‘ $1+1=2$,’ have a temporal existence. ‘ $1+1=2$ ’ does not exist only in one of the temporal modes (past, present, or future), but instead it is always true. This atemporal or tenseless being, best exemplified by mathematical objects, is supposed to be a model for the kind of being which Socrates’ Forms possess.² It is Aristotle’s insistence that to be is to be *in time* which will bring the first hypothesis to a series of paradoxical conclusions inconsistent with assertions agreed-to earlier in the conversation with Parmenides.

What is even more noteworthy than the *content* of the mistake is also the *form* in which Plato presents Aristotle’s mistake. In order to bring out this tension between a tenseless or atemporal existence and a spatiotemporal existence, Plato has Aristotle performatively contradict the idea that to be is to be only *in time*.³ Parmenides asks Aristotle, “Therefore could something partake of being in anyway other than in one of those ways?” (141e7-8)—that is, in another way other than in one of three temporal modes. At 141e8, Aristotle responds with a two-word answer in Greek: “οὐκ ἔστιν [It’s not possible].” Aristotle’s claim is modal; it says what is not possible, that is, what is impossible or what is necessarily *not* the case. We might say that Aristotle’s assertion, following Kant, has necessary apodictic force (A74-5/B100). As both Hume and Kant taught us, modal claims, especially claims about what are necessary, go beyond sense experience, beyond our given intuitions of space and time. We can never perceive the necessary. A necessary claim is one that is about and refers to all possible times; it does not hold at only one of the temporal modes (past, present and future) but it is true in all of them. Aristotle in attempting to profess his assent to the idea that to be is to be in time, in fact, gainsays

2 Cf. *Ti.* 37e-38b.

3 What I am call ‘performative contradiction’ would be classed as Mackie’s “pragmatic self-refutation” 1964, 193-5. For ‘performative self-contradiction’ in Plato see Duque 2020 and Altman 2020.

it. By atemporally maintaining that it is impossible for something to be and not to be *in time*, Aristotle undermines his own assertion. He performatively contradicts the very thing that he wants to affirm.

Plato stresses the necessity of the assertions Aristotle agrees to, by having the interlocutors repeatedly use the word ἀνάγκη, especially in relation to the conception of being as necessarily being in time. Here are three examples. At 141a5-7, Parmenides asks, “So if it is like that, the one could not even be in time at all, could it? Or isn’t it *necessary* [ἀνάγκη], if something is in time [ἔάν τι ἢ ἐν χρόνῳ], that it always come to be older than itself?” and Aristotle replies, “*Necessarily* [Ἀνάγκη].” At 141c1, in response to a question put forth by Parmenides about how there is no need [οὐδὲν δεῖ] (again, notice the emphasis on what *must* be or *must* not be the case)] for a thing to come-to-be different from something else that already was, is, or will be different, Aristotle answers, “Yes, that’s *necessary* [ἀνάγκη γὰρ δὴ].” And finally, at 141c7, Aristotle answers Parmenides’ question about coming to be in time that: “Therefore these are *necessary* [ἀνάγκη γὰρ οὖν καὶ ταῦτα].”⁴ And in his follow-up, Parmenides mirrors back Aristotle’s own word at the beginning of his sentence, “Therefore it is *necessary* [ἀνάγκη ἄρα ἔστιν]”

As Aristotle the Stagirite says in the *Metaphysics* (1003a33), “being is said in many ways.” If there is more than one kind of existence, more than one way of being, then it seems like there could be various kinds of nonexistence as well. The relevant kind of nonexistence for my purposes is that when Parmenides claims in the first hypothesis that the one *is not*, this is shorthand for the longer expression that the one of the first hypothesis does not partake of any of the modes of temporal being. Another way of putting it is that a spatiotemporal, sensible particular *is not* a Form; it has a very different kind of being. Likewise, a Form *is not* a sensible particular. So, in claiming that “the one is not,” Parmenides should not be seen as denying any and all kind of existence to the one, full stop. I claim that Parmenides is not negating the being of the one in the first hypothesis, but only its spatiotemporal existence. At the end of the first hypothesis Parmenides treats being as if it were some kind of thing, some kind of category or predicate, that an object could or could not have. If the one can “have” or “partake” of a determinate being *in time* in the same way that an object can have or partake in predicates, this makes an object “have being” in the same way that it would “have” a quality, an attribute, or a property. In part, Parmenides derives his paradoxical conclusion that the one is not, from the idea that if the one has being, then it would have being in the same way that it would have a property, and thus it would make the one not-one.

4 Translation slightly altered.

The use of “οὐκ ἔστιν” at 141e8 as “it’s *not* possible” is quite revealing for two further reasons. First, ordinarily, οὐκ ἔστιν just means “is not” but from the context and the enclitic accent one must understand it as οὐκ ἔξεστι, meaning it is *not* possible. Second, this phrase is the same one used by the historical Parmenides in his poem. In Fragment 6, Parmenides famously says that “μηδὲν δ’ οὐκ ἔστιν.” And here Parmenides is taking advantage of a poetic ambiguity; one can read both the ordinary sense of the words (“Nothing is not”) and the modal sense (“nothing is not possible”). Interestingly—although I cannot expand on this here—this is the very same position the *Xenos* will criticize Parmenides for in the *Sophist* (241d ff.) and that leads him to his philosophical “patricide” of father Parmenides.

Three Lessons from the Performative Contradiction of the First Hypothesis

My interpretation of the first hypothesis and of the *Parmenides* in general is much indebted to Mitch Miller (1986) and to his observation that what is actually missing from the first hypothesis is an atemporal sense of being—the idea that being does *not* necessarily imply being *in time*. But even Miller misses the importance of this performative contradiction of the οὐκ ἔστιν at 141e8 (1986, 89-91). I draw three lessons from Aristotle’s performative contradiction. First, the performative contradiction at the end of the first hypothesis invites the listener/reader to re-examine the paradoxical final steps of the first hypothesis, and possibly to understand a way to resolve them. Second, the performative contradiction hints at another kind of being besides being in time: a tenseless or atemporal existence, similar to the out-of-place-and-time nature of the ‘the Instant.’ Lastly, recognizing Aristotle’s answer as a performative contradiction is the first step in interpreting the first hypothesis, and is representative of the work the listener/reader must do in figuring out the meaning of Parmenides’ gymnastic exercise.

1) Reconsidering the final paradoxical claims of the first hypothesis

Aristotle’s performative contradiction signals a turn in Parmenides’ questioning in the first hypothesis. It makes us reconsider the radical claims that follow Aristotle’s inconsistent οὐκ ἔστιν at 141e8, all of which aim to refute the initial premise of the first hypothesis, “if one is.” For example, these are the paradoxical claims that:

- (i) deny ‘the one’ being (141e9-10);
- (ii) deny ‘the one’ oneness (141e12);

- (iii) deny ‘the one’ a name, or that there is an account, knowledge, perception, or belief of it (142a3-4); and lastly
- (iv) deny that ‘the one’ be named or spoken of, or be the object of belief or knowledge, or that any existing thing perceives it (142a4-6).

[i] At 141e9, Parmenides denies the one being: “Therefore the one in no way is [οὐδαμῶς ἄρα ἔστι τὸ ἓν]” and Aristotle agrees, answering “Apparently not [οὐ φαίνεται].” This contradicts the very first protasis that begins the first hypothesis, the first line of the dialectical exercise, “if one is [εἰ ἓν ἔστιν]” (137c4). [ii] At 141e10-142a1, Parmenides denies the one oneness and being: “Therefore neither *is* it in such a way as to be one, because it would then, by being and partaking of being, be. But, as it seems, the one neither is one nor is, if we are obliged to trust this argument” and Aristotle tentatively answers “I dare <say> [κινδυνεύει].”⁵ At 142a1-2 Parmenides has Aristotle agree that “If something is not [sc. as ‘the one’ is supposed to *not be* because it is not in time], could anything belong *to* this thing that is not, or be *of* it?” and Aristotle replies, “How could it?” This premise is important for the next denial; [iii] at 142a3-4, Parmenides denies that ‘the one’ could be an object of any cognitive state, saying “Therefore, no name belongs to it, nor is there an account or any knowledge or perception or opinion of it” and Aristotle answers, “Apparently not.” Parmenides has Aristotle agree that ‘the one’ can have no name, while at the very same time referring to it as ‘the one.’ Parmenides has Aristotle agree that ‘the one’ cannot be the object of belief or knowledge, while at the same time making ‘the one’ the grammatical and intentional object of his very question! The final denial [iv] is closely related to the third. Whereas the third was about the consequences for the one as a cognitive object, the fourth relates to the cognitive subjects and their lack of epistemic access to the one: “Therefore it [sc. ‘the one’] is not named or spoken of, nor is it the object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything that is perceives it” and Aristotle answers, “It seems not.”

All these final steps of the first hypothesis depend on the proposition that being necessarily means being in time. If this crucial premise can be rejected, then one can dismiss these final argumentative moves and save most of the earlier premises of the first hypothesis. This means seeing that there are at least two kinds of being: existence in time and a tenseless existence. The first kind of spatiotemporal existence is appropriate to the sensible things among us, and the second kind of atemporal existence is appropriate to mathematical objects, but more importantly to Socrates’ Forms.

⁵ Translation slightly altered.

2) *The link between the tenseless Forms and the atopus nature of 'the Instant' [τὸ ἐξαιφνης]*

The kind of atemporal being suggested by the performative contradiction connects the first hypothesis to what is referred to as the appendix or digression that follows the first two hypotheses that concerns “the Instant [τὸ ἐξαιφνης]” (155e-157b). “The Instant” is a strange or out-of-place (ἄτοπος) thing that is not in space or time (156c2-3; c6; c9-d1; e1; e6). Its atemporal or tenseless existence is supposed to suggest the way in which Forms do *not* exist in a particular time and place. “The Instant” is the moment in between two periods of time when an object changes from one state into another. For example, when an object changes from being at rest to being at motion, and vice versa. In that instant, the object is neither at rest nor at motion, and so it is *not* in time. During “the Instant” an object is neither of the two opposites, neither like nor unlike, neither one nor many, neither small, great, nor equal, etc. ‘The instant’ is outside time and becoming, thus [it] is not prey to the vicissitudes “among [the] visible things and ... their wandering between opposites ... but [is] instead ... among those things that one might above all grasp by means of reason and might think to be forms” (135e1-4).

‘The Instant’ is a moment outside of time and models the way that Forms are neither in time nor in space. A Form cannot take on an opposite quality. For example, the Like itself cannot come to be Unlike. This is because the coexistence of opposites only occurs in the realm of becoming. In a similar manner, “the Instant” is what allows an object in the realm of becoming to go from one state into another, it allows the object to change because it posits a moment in which the object is neither of the opposites. As Mitch Miller puts it, “As situated in the ‘Instant,’ the form has just that prescindion from temporal determinateness that the closing arguments of I (140e-141e) established for it” (1986, 119).

Part of what I think is happening in the first hypothesis is that whereas Kant sought to deduce the transcendental unity of aperception, the transcendental self or I, that is the basis of all judgments, we could say that in a like manner, the Platonic Parmenides seeks the transcendental basis for any unity whatsoever. What would it mean for something, anything, *to metaphysically be one*? It must participate in the Form of oneness. The Form of oneness is the ground of the unity of any spatiotemporal object. But the transcendental conditions of possibility of unity based in the Form are very different from conditioned and determinate properties of sensible things. To apply spatiotemporal categories, material determinations, to ‘the one,’ the Form of Oneness of the first hypothesis—which is that which metaphysically determines the unity of all things—would be to commit a category mistake. This is similar to some of the tricky moves Parmenides makes earlier in the first part of the dialogue when he takes Socrates’ ethereal example of daylight (which is ambiguous

between the space *and/or* the time in which a day covers) and he turns it into a much more physical, down-to-earth, example of a sail that covers people (131b-c).

Why is being, at least being in time, denied to ‘the one’ in the first hypothesis? Although Plato does not have Parmenides explicate it in this manner, I contend that it is because tracking the persistence of one thing through time involves distinguishing between various, multiple ones: ‘the one’ of the past, ‘the one’ of the present, and ‘the one’ of the future. Consider the case of personal identity through time. For me to establish a singular identity through or in time, I must also distinguish various parts (or selves): my past-self, my present-self, and my future-self. In the process of trying to identify a singular entity in or through time, I have also multiplied, divided, and distinguished several selves in order to group this many under one identity. All spatiotemporal objects suffer this fate. But there are abstract, ideal objects that do not exist in time and are not prey to undergoing opposite qualities at the same time, nor of losing their singular identity through time because of internal division and multiplication. Although one may perform operations on *a* sensible circle or *a* sensible square (think of Socrates’ demonstration in the *Meno*), the idea of the circle itself or the square itself does not change, it does not alter nor divide, and does not multiply into various circles or squares. There’s just the idea of *the* circle itself or *the* square itself.

3) *How to Interpret the First Hypothesis and the Parmenides in general*

Finally, the performative contradiction gives us an indication as to the best method for interpreting not only the first hypothesis but the other hypotheses in the second half of the dialogue as well. In noticing the performative contradiction, the listener/reader learns that one does *not* have to defend the truth and consistency of *all* the premises of the first hypothesis, as many interpreters want to do.⁶ Instead, Plato inserts Aristotle’s performative contradiction as a provocation to the careful listener/reader of the dialogue, to try to unravel its inconsistency. Plato is merely presenting the problem and gesturing toward a possible solution; that is, that there is another kind of being, an atemporal or tenseless being. Furthermore, this shows us that sometimes mistakes, failures, and, in this case, a contradiction, can be instructive and more pedagogically effective than just giving the reader a step-by-step proof, all the moves of which must be faithfully followed without questioning.

⁶ Cornford 1939, 129-30; Allen 1997, 245-7; Rickless 2007, 132-5; Sayre 1996, 61-2; cf. Tabak 2015, 69.

My method of closely examining not only Parmenides' questions, but also Aristotle's responses goes against a common interpretative method that seeks to abstract an argument from the narrative or literary qualities of the dialogue. Consider the way Cornford (1939) represents the dialectical exercise of the second half of the *Parmenides* in his book; Cornford omits all of Aristotle's answers and only prints Parmenides' questions. We should, on the contrary, ask why Parmenides compares the dialectical exercise to a gymnastic exercise, a chariot race, and to sailing across an ocean of words (135c-136c; 136e-137a). I take it that Parmenides' logical exercise is very much like a demonstration in wrestling, where the trainer is teaching the student what moves to make and how to react depending on how the opponent acts. Similarly, Parmenides, drawing from the poet Ibycus, compares himself to a horse in a chariot race. The horse works in tandem with the rider. It is the two together who will win or lose the race. Lastly, a captain who sails over a vast ocean is not completely alone and independent, he must consider all the vagaries of weather, currents, and underwater terrain. He must work with the elements and chance. We must pay close attention to what Aristotle says and how he reacts to Parmenides' question. Yes, Aristotle is, perhaps, the most pliable interlocutor present, but how he answers is an indication that sometimes the argument has taken a sudden, perhaps, unexpected, and maybe even a wrong turn.

I cannot go into too much detail, but I want to briefly mention some of the points in the dialogue where Plato signals to the listener/reader that Aristotle does not seem so sure about where the argument is going, especially in the stretch I am interested in where they are considering being as being in time. At 141d3, Aristotle answers "I dare <say> [κινδυνεύει]"⁷; At 141e9, Aristotle says "It seems not [οὐκ ἔοικεν]" in response to the claim that "Therefore the one in no way partakes of being"; and right after at 141e10, he answers "Apparently not [οὐ φαίνεται]" in response to Parmenides' "Therefore the one in no way is." The last series of exchanges between Aristotle and Parmenides are supposed to provoke the listener/reader into realizing that something has gone wrong. Aristotle says: at 142a1, "I dare <say>"; at 142a4, "Apparently not"; and at 142a6, "It seems not." All of these responses lead to the final question of the first hypothesis, with which I began, "Is it possible that these things are so for the one?" to which Aristotle replies "I certainly don't think so" (142a6-8).

7 Translation slightly altered. See Pavani 2019 "The risk of the ἐξαιτίας (On *Prm.* 156e3)."