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A Long Lost Relative in the *Parmenides*? Plato's Family of Hypothetical Methods

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Abstract: The *Parmenides* has been unduly overlooked in discussions of hypothesis in Plato. It contains a unique method for testing first principles, a method I call ‘exploring both sides’. The dialogue recommends exploring the consequences of both a hypothesis and its contradictory and thematizes this structure throughout. I challenge the view of Plato’s so-called ‘method of hypothesis’ as an isolated stage in Plato’s development; instead, the evidence of the *Parmenides* suggests a family of distinct hypothetical methods, each with its own peculiar aim. Exploring both sides is unique both in its structure and in its aim of testing candidate principles.

Keywords: first principles, hypothesis, method, *Parmenides*, Plato

Interpreters interested in Plato’s use of ‘hypothesis’ have focused on the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* and for good reason: each dialogue not only uses the term, but does so in central passages that show a keen methodological and epistemological interest in hypotheses.¹ But there is less of a good reason to focus on these three dialogues to the neglect of the *Parmenides*. This neglect goes at least as far back as Richard Robinson’s classic study *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic*. Robinson includes a chapter on the *Parmenides* only to argue that it should not be combined with any of the other evidence he considered.² He admits that the dialogue ‘comes nearest of all Plato’s works to being wholly methodological’ (267) but adds ‘the methodological aspect of the *Parmenides* ... seems to be, like its other aspects, bewildering, sceptical, and depressing’ (280). This demotion of the *Parmenides*

¹ Despite Plato’s aversion to technical terminology, the term proves to be consistently important from a methodological perspective. I intend to use the English cognates ‘hypothesis’ and ‘hypothesize’ as a stand-in for the ancient Greek ὑπόθεσις and ὑποτίθημι. Plato’s notions are close enough that ‘hypothesis’ and ‘hypothesize’ serve as a helpful, first-pass characterization of what Plato means.

² In fact, even this chapter was absent from the first edition, and only appeared with the second edition published in 1953 (thanks to Hugh Benson for pointing this out to me).

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from the ranks of methodologically interesting dialogues has been as influential as it was premature.³

My aim here is to show how Plato's use of hypothesis in the *Parmenides* is closely related to, but importantly distinct from, what interpreters have taken to be the canonical 'method of hypothesis' in other dialogues.⁴ I will argue that Plato describes a unique hypothetical method in the *Parmenides* that I call 'exploring both sides'. While it shares its hypothetical nature with the canonical method of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, it is distinct in both structure and aim. Each respective method can be characterized as follows:

Exploring both sides

- Structure: (1a) identify a set of mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive hypotheses (the simple case being a hypothesis and its contradictory)
 (1b) explore the consequences of each hypothesis independently
- Internal aim: (1c) do so with an aim of assessing the truth of the hypotheses themselves
- External aims:⁵ testing candidate first principles,⁶ encouraging further inquiry

3 Hugh Benson's *Clitophon's Challenge* is a good example of this continuing trend of focusing primarily on the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. He recognizes the relevance of the *Parmenides* but leaves it out due to considerations of space (269 n.84). A welcome exception is Vassilis Karasmanis' recent article 'Dialectic and the Second Part of Plato's *Parmenides*'. The article makes interesting and important observations, many of which I will agree with here, but aims to give a positive interpretation of the *Parmenides* rather than the more conservative methodological route taken here. Richard Patterson also recognizes potential connections to a larger methodological program in 'Forms, Fallacies, and the Functions of Plato's *Parmenides*' (*Apeiron* 32.4, 1999) but focuses only the controversial second half of the dialogue.

4 Whether there is a single method of hypothesis in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* is controversial. Benson thinks that there is a single method, though it is further developed in the *Republic* in particular (see *Clitophon's Challenge* p. 6–7 for a concise statement of Benson's view). For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the hypothetical method(s) of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* discussed in the secondary literature as the 'canonical method of hypothesis' or 'canonical method' for short, but by doing so I do not intend to take a stand on the relation between those dialogues. Whether or not what is found there is best described as a single method will not affect my central point about the ways in which the method of the *Parmenides* is unique.

5 Thanks to discussions with Rachel Barney and her unpublished paper 'Sextus, Socrates, and Sceptical Inquiry' for the distinction between aims that are internal or essential to a given method and aims that are not a necessary feature and thus external to the method. Thanks also to David Charles for further discussion on this point. The external aims I list here are what I will argue are characteristic uses of this method for Plato, though they need not be a feature of every application.

6 I intend 'first principle' as a translation of the ancient Greek term ἀρχή when used in the relevant sense. Though Plato uses the term with this sense more explicitly in dialogues such as the *Republic*

The canonical ‘method of hypothesis’

Structure:	(2a) identify a hypothesis from which some thesis T can be derived
	(2b) explore the consequences of that hypothesis independently
Internal aim:	(2c) do so with an aim of assessing the truth of T
External aims:	identifying candidate principles, creating a series of interconnected theses

Both methods are hypothetical in structure since they involve deriving consequences from some hypothesis (1b and 2b). Yet exploring both sides in the *Parmenides* is set apart by the ‘lateral’ orientation of looking to the contradictory hypothesis (1a) as opposed to the ‘vertical’ orientation of looking to a higher hypothesis in the canonical method (2a). This difference goes hand in hand with a difference in aim. Essential to exploring both sides is an internal aim of assessing the truth of the hypotheses themselves. The canonical method, by contrast, has an internal aim of assessing the truth of a thesis derived from the hypothesis in question rather than the hypothesis itself. These differences are particularly salient when it comes to inquiring into first principles: since there is nowhere higher ‘up’ to go, the canonical method is not appropriate for testing their truth. I will argue that, for Plato, exploring both sides as described in the *Parmenides* is designed to fill this gap. The application to first principles is not essential to the method, and thus external to it, but this along with its ability to encourage further inquiry when an interlocutor might otherwise be inclined to give up are characteristic external aims of the method.

This does not mean that Plato has become disenchanted with the canonical method by the time of the *Parmenides* as Robinson supposes (280). One strong consideration against Robinson’s developmentalist reading is the fact that exploring both sides can be found throughout the Platonic corpus, including what are standardly assumed to be earlier dialogues such as the *Lysis*.⁷ Instead, the evidence of the *Parmenides* suggests that he developed a family of different hypothetical methods with different purposes. Plato makes clear in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* that the interlocutors are not inquiring into the relevant principles themselves, though the canonical method can still be useful for

and the Cratylus, see Section 2.2 below for further discussion of the relevance of first principles for the *Parmenides* as well. Debra Nails has a helpful discussion of this use of ἀρχή in Plato and its relevance for the *Republic* in particular in ‘Two Dogmas of Platonism’ (92–3).

⁷ I argue that the *Lysis* employs the same method as the *Parmenides* in ‘More than a *Reductio*: Plato’s Method in the *Parmenides* and *Lysis*’. I have also argued that the *Sophist* contains an explicit discussion and extended application of exploring both sides in ‘Pushing Through’ in Plato’s *Sophist*: A New Reading of the Parity Assumption’.

identifying candidate principles and for creating a system of interconnected theses that show ‘what goes with what’.

The picture that emerges from contrasting Plato’s hypothetical method of the *Parmenides* with that of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* is one of two methods with complementary but distinct philosophical applications. My main focus here will be to correct for the relative neglect of the *Parmenides* by analyzing that dialogue with an eye to its more general methodological lessons. The fact that we find exploring both sides thematized throughout the *Parmenides*, that it is discussed and applied in other Platonic dialogues as well, and that it has a clear philosophical role to play in the Platonic system, suggests that exploring both sides deserves equal footing with other more widely recognized methods in the Platonic corpus such as the elenchus, collection and division, and the canonical ‘method of hypothesis’.⁸

Pace Robinson, and as suggested above, the first step in establishing the *Parmenides* as a dialogue that recommends a philosophically interesting method is to take a closer look at Plato’s use of ‘hypothesis’. In the first section I show how his use recommends a closer look at a central methodological passage in the *Parmenides* where exploring both sides is explicitly introduced. In the second section I examine the differences between exploring both sides and the canonical method in greater detail including their relation to first principles. By way of conclusion I look to one final passage that gives us a further hint about Plato’s aspirations for exploring both sides as part of a synoptic understanding of reality.⁹

1 The Methodological Passage: Exploring Both Sides

When it comes to hypothetical method in Plato, an initial case can be made for paying closer attention to the *Parmenides* based on the prevalence of ‘hypothesis’

⁸ Debra Nails provides another welcome exception to the trend of ignoring or downgrading the methodological relevance of the *Parmenides* in her book *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy*. What I am here calling ‘exploring both sides’ is the neglected half of what she calls ‘double open-endedness’, the idea that we should be ready to reconsider not only the conclusions or ending points of an inquiry but also the starting points or underlying assumptions (219–22). Nails points to the *Parmenides* in particular as exhibiting this aspect of double open-endedness (227).

⁹ Plato frequently discusses the ideal of forming a comprehensive understanding of some domain or of reality as a whole, often using the Greek term *διοράω* as he does in the passage in question (*Parmenides* 136c5; *Phaedrus* 277b8; *Republic* 423e7, 577a3–5, 611c4) or its cognates *καθοραώ* (*Parmenides* 135c7; *Laws* 858a2, 904a6; *Phaedo* 66d7, 109e3–5; *Phaedrus* 247d5–6; *Philebus* 16d8, 17d2; *Sophist* 232a4; *Republic* 476c8) and *συνοράω* (*Laws* 779c7, 904b3, 963c3, 965b10; *Phaedrus* 265d; *Republic* 537c7).

and its cognates throughout the dialogue. Out of 100 total occurrences in Plato, nearly a quarter appear in Plato's *Parmenides* (23 to be exact). This is by far the most out of any Platonic dialogue, with *Republic* coming in at a distant second with 15 occurrences. The difference is even more striking in terms of frequency. Plato uses 'hypothesis' and its cognates an average of over 15 times per 10,000 words in the *Parmenides*, over twice as often as the *Meno* and *Republic* VI–VII at about seven times per 10,000 words each. Such relative frequency gives *prima facie* evidence that the term is an important one within the context of the *Parmenides* itself, and the fact that a quarter of all occurrences appear in this dialogue suggests that it should provide important evidence for Plato's use of the term more generally.

The term is used consistently throughout the dialogue, but is most concentrated around a central methodological passage from 135c5–137c3.¹⁰ This passage turns out to be crucial for understanding the method of exploring both sides. In the present section I will defend the idea that this passage recommends a genuine philosophical method (Section 1.1), one that meets the structural conditions of exploring both sides (1a and 1b above) and is thematized from the beginning of the dialogue (Section 1.2). But first, two distinctions will be helpful for getting clear on the sense in which this passage may or may not be about method. One is between different levels of generality, and the other between structure and aim.

First, it is important to keep in mind that there can be methods at different levels of generality. Any method is going to be a type with general features that apply to different tokens. For instance, an astronomical method for detecting exoplanets will at least in principle be applicable to different detection episodes. But methods also display family relationships, with a family of methods displaying commonalities at one level of generality despite having siblings with more specific differences.¹¹ I will be suggesting that we should understand Plato as employing a family of different hypothetical methods throughout the dialogues, each method containing a different structure at one level of generality despite structural commonalities at another.

Next, methods not only have distinctive structural features, but also have a distinctive aim or goal. In this way they are very much like crafts, sports, or games. For instance, the game of Go is constrained by rules about where pieces can be placed

10 The 23 occurrences break down as follows: 127d7, 128d5, 135e9–137b4(15), 142b1–143a3(4), 160b7, 161b8.

11 For example, there are many methods that fall under the general family of methods for detecting exoplanets. Some involve photometric methods, such as transit photometry or reflection photometry, while others involve timing methods, such as pulsar timing or eclipsing binary minima timing. All four are generally describable as methods using electromagnetic radiation to detect exoplanets, but the first two operate by directly measuring changes in electromagnetic intensity caused by an exoplanet, while the second two operate by measuring changes in the timing between electromagnetic spikes.

and in what order, but not just any placement in accordance with these constraints will qualify as a match of Go. The players must also try to score points by maximizing their territory and capturing the opponent's pieces. It would be a very different game if players tried to *lose* territory and *avoid* capturing the opponent. Furthermore, one can distinguish goals that are internal to the practice and those that are external to it. The goal of scoring more points than the opponent is an internal aim of Go, but that does not prevent Go from being played for mental acuity, for international recognition, or to test the limits of artificial intelligence. The latter three goals are consistent with, though external to, the game of Go.

So while external goals might lend insight into the use of a given method, they need not play a role in identifying or individuating it. As we turn to the methodological passage of the *Parmenides*, then, we should be looking for general structural features that can be applied to multiple argument tokens and are related to a single internal aim.

1.1 The 'Methodological' Passage?

What justifies calling this passage 'methodological'? Why think it describes a *philosophical* method that Plato himself endorses? From the very beginning Plato has Parmenides indicate that he is recommending a general structure that is aimed at truth. Parmenides has just made devastating criticisms of Socrates' proposal about the separate existence of forms, but then suggested that someone denying their existence would destroy the ability for dialectic (135c1–2).¹² As Antiphon reports in the frame of the dialogue, Parmenides then asks:

“[*Parmenides*:] What then will you do about philosophy? Where will you turn while these things are unknown?”

“[*Socrates*:] I don't entirely seem to have a clear view at the present moment.”

“[*Parmenides*:] You are trying to mark off something beautiful and just and good and each one of the forms too early, Socrates,” he said, “before being trained. For I also noticed [the same thing] earlier when I heard you at that point in dialogue with this here Aristotle. The impulse with which you strive for arguments, as you know well, is noble and divine; lift yourself up then and train more by what seems to be useless and is called prattle by the Many. [Do this] while you are still young: if you don't, the truth will escape you.”

“[*Socrates*:] What then, Parmenides, is the manner of the exercise?” he said.

(135c5–d7)

¹² See Section 2.2 below where I argue that this passage contains a hidden use of exploring both sides.

A number of considerations show that Parmenides' concern is a general one. He begins his cautionary note by pointing out that certain truths remain unknown and ends by saying that Socrates must train first in order to catch them. The fact that he does not narrow his final point down to, say, truth about forms suggests that he had a more general target in mind.¹³ Furthermore, Parmenides suggests that Socrates has suffered from lack of training (135c8, d4), a problem he recognized in both this argument and a previous one with young Aristotle. This shows that the exercise¹⁴ is meant to correct a general problem.¹⁵ If Parmenides only intended to make a single point about an individual argument, it is not clear what that point would be. Furthermore, he urges at the end of this passage that Socrates must do this in order to avoid missing out on the truth. This gives *prima facie* evidence that the ensuing recommendation meets the minimal criteria of containing a general structure with a clear internal aim.

At this point we might worry, however, that Parmenides' recommendation is a mere training regimen rather than a genuine method that deserves our attention.¹⁶ Parmenides stresses that Socrates is trying to 'mark off' (*ὀρίζεσθαι*, sometimes translated 'define') certain forms too early and that he needs to train more first. This might suggest that there are two radically different practices described here; the defining or demarcating that we are interested in and the exercise that merely prepares for it. But there are at least two reasons why this potential worry should not keep us from taking serious methodological interest in Parmenides' exercise.

13 The same point is emphasized at 136c4–5 and e1–3.

14 I have decided to translate the verb γυμνάζω as 'train' and the cognate noun γυμνασία as 'exercise' to preserve two important aspects of the Greek. First, both Greek words primarily suggest physical activity, but can be used to describe intellectual activity as well. Second, they both can refer to either a mere practice session or to the main event (see *Theaetetus* 169a6–c3 for a good example of 'γυμνασία' used to refer to an intellectual contest that is not a mere practice session). The noun 'exercise' retains both of these aspects, while Gill & Ryan's 'training' fails to maintain the second. My use of 'train' for the verb runs the risk of a similar problem to Gill & Ryan's translation of the noun, but is still better than the obvious alternatives. 'Exercise' as a verb leans too heavily on the physical, and 'practice' as a verb does not capture enough of the physical connotations. Parmenides' use in this passage clearly refers to an intellectual exercise, though the word still maintains its physical overtones. It is also important to keep in mind that the exercise could be intended for use in a final argument as well as in practice sessions leading up to that argument.

15 As we will see, Parmenides' elaboration also unambiguously describes this training in terms of general features that apply to various examples, lending further support to the thought that his interests here are general.

16 According to Proclus, no one before his time adequately appreciated the method (*In Platonis Parmenidem* V 1020, cf. I 648–58). Proclus argues that this is in fact a genuine Platonic method though for slightly different reasons than the ones I give below, and without the same emphasis on its special application for testing candidate first principles.

First, nothing about its being a training regimen prevents the exercise from being of methodological interest. As long as the recommendation meets the minimal conditions argued for above we can understand it as a method in its own right.¹⁷ As we will see in the ensuing sections, the general structure of the recommendation does in fact invite illuminating comparisons with the canonical ‘method of hypothesis’ that suggest a unique philosophical aim.

Second, when understood in its broader context, the recommendation is in fact continuous with the inquiry depicted from the very beginning rather than a mere preparation. The interlocutors use talk of ‘marking off’ forms interchangeably with positing their existence.¹⁸ The contrast is not in the type of positing or demarcating involved, but rather between Socrates starting with and focusing on a narrow group of forms (the beautiful and just and good) as opposed to taking a broader view. The exercise is the same type of process as the ultimate activity recommended here, just with a different scope. Earlier in the conversation Parmenides criticizes Socrates for shying away from fully investigating whether there are forms of things like hair and mud, attributing Socrates’ hesitancy to the fact that *philosophy* has not yet seized him. He also emphasizes that Socrates is still young and that this type of activity might not be esteemed by the Many (130d3–e4). These points are repeated in the passage just quoted; it is framed by a question of what a young Socrates might do about *philosophy* despite the skepticism of the Many. Since the previous invocation of philosophy implicated more than just positing the forms of the just, the beautiful, and the good, we should understand the present invocation of philosophy as doing the same and as including Parmenides’ exercise.

Calling this section of the dialogue ‘methodological’, then, is justified by its emphasis on general features of an argument that can be applied to multiple argument tokens and by the hint of its importance for the goals of philosophy. But, even granting that what we have described here is a method, should we be sympathizing with the Many? Should we, despite Parmenides’ insistence to the

¹⁷ We might worry that the relation of the exercise to the final performance is not like that of an Olympic weightlifter lifting weights as preparation for that very same activity during the actual competition (model 1). Instead, it might be like lifting weights for a basketball player who wants to increase their vertical in order to get more rebounds on game day (model 2). Parmenides may be recommending a model 2 exercise that simply trains a certain ability (say distinguishing between necessary and sufficient conditions) rather than a model 1 exercise that much more closely resembles the final practice we are interested in. On its own, the Greek is ambiguous between these two models. Yet Plato’s repeated application of the method in other contexts, especially in the *Sophist*, suggests a model 1 exercise as is still consistent with the language of γυμνάσια (see n.14 above).

¹⁸ See 128e6–129a1, 129d6–e1, 130b1–3, 130c7–d1, 133a8–9, 133b1–2, 135a1–3, 135b5–8.

contrary, see this method as not truly philosophical, or at least not one that Plato himself takes seriously?

I think that part of why Parmenides' general recommendation here has been overlooked is that it looks uncomfortably similar to sophistic methodology. As we will see, the method involves looking at both a hypothesis and its contradictory, reminiscent of sophistic contradiction (ἀντιλογική, sometimes translated 'arguing both sides'). Yet I will argue that the structural condition of looking to a hypothesis and its contradictory in exploring both sides has a genuine philosophical use (see Section 2.2 below). We get a hint of this possibility from the way in which Parmenides points to how the Many call this training 'prattle' (ἄδολεχία), a word used as a popular rebuke of philosophy in fourth and fifth century Athens.¹⁹ This is further supported by Plato's use of the term in other dialogues, especially in the *Sophist* where Plato recognizes the potential for conflating this type of method with sophistry. The fifth definition of sophistry identifies it as a type of contradiction (ἀντιλογικόν, 225b11); when this is done to make money it is identified as sophistry, but when it instead spends money because of the pleasure it brings it is called 'prattle' (ἄδολεσχία) by the Many. This is the very same word that Parmenides uses to describe his method, one that Socrates also uses to describe himself at *Theaetetus* 195b10 (cf. also *Phaedrus* 269e4–270d8 and *Statesman* 299b6–8).²⁰ Thus, this type of two-sided method need not be 'sophistic' in the pejorative sense.²¹ The details of Parmenides' recommendation and its thematization throughout this and other dialogues will confirm this reading.²²

So what exactly does this philosophical exercise, this Parmenidean method, entail? This is exactly what Socrates asks, and what the entirety of the remaining 30 Stephanus pages are meant to answer. Parmenides first [E1] suggests that the exercise is what they already heard from Zeno (135d8), who had just read from his book (127c5–d5). He then [E2] makes a qualification about remaining among imperceptibles (135d8–e4), [E3] specifies the structure of exploring both sides (135e8–136a2), and [E4] offers a series of schematic examples (136a4–c5). This marks the end of Parmenides' initial answer to Socrates' request for elaboration. After Socrates and Zeno encourage Parmenides to spell it out in even greater detail,

¹⁹ See Natali, 'Ἄδολεσχία, Λεπτολογία and the Philosophers in Athens'.

²⁰ Proclus highlights these references and also points out that the same term was used to describe Socrates in Old Comedy (*In Platonis Parmenidem* I 656–58, cf. Eupolis fr. 386 Kassel–Austin and Plato's *Phaedo* 70b10–c3).

²¹ I elaborate on the relationship between exploring both sides and the method of the sophist Gorgias in 'Structure and Aim in Socratic and Sophistic Method'.

²² See n.7 above. One might also worry that the baffling contradiction that the dialogue ends with is another hint that we should be skeptical of this method. For my reading of the dialogue's ending, and more on the use of exploring both sides to encourage further inquiry, see n.43 below.

Parmenides reluctantly agrees (136c6–137c3). Parmenides' agreement, in turn, marks the end of what I have been calling 'the methodological passage' and the remainder of the dialogue consists in Parmenides' expository deductions that use the method he recommends.

While the *Parmenides* has been unduly neglected in studies of Platonic methodology, the dialogue has by no means been neglected in general. Yet general studies tend to see the central methodological passage as a mere interlude or, as Miller puts it, a 'disconcerting' transitional section that means we have to somehow reconcile the discussions on either end (Miller, 72). Meinwald and Sayre are exceptions to this general trend. They see the interpretation of the methodological section, especially [E4] of Parmenides' initial answer to Socrates, as crucial to understanding the deductions that come in its wake. Gill also discusses the passage and puts special emphasis on Parmenides' suggestion to repeat the exercise with different subjects (*Philosophos*, 45–9). But a certain bias has still been perpetuated in the relative neglect of [E1–3]. When the methodological passage is read with an eye to understanding the rest of the dialogue the most pressing question is why the deductions that follow take the form they do. Why, in particular, do there appear to be eight (or by some counts nine) separate arguments? Meinwald maintains that understanding the somewhat obscure relations indicated in [E4] by the Greek preposition $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$ is crucial to answering this question.²³ But if, instead of asking what specific method will give us eight or nine (or more) arguments in this dialogue, we come to the passage with an interest in what *general* method is being recommended here, [E1–3] becomes much more central.²⁴ In particular, I want to take a closer look at Parmenides' suggestion about exploring the consequences of both a hypothesis and its contradictory, which is thematized throughout the dialogue in a way that has so far gone unnoticed.

23 From [E1–3] we should only expect two arguments, one for a positive claim and one for its negation. In [E4] we add two *pros*-relations for at least two different subjects, creating at least eight possibilities total (below I will argue that there are actually more than eight). The relative obscurity of [E4] means that interpreters have devoted most of their time to trying to figure out what is going on there rather than taking a closer look at [E1–3]. I will be focused on the latter, but discuss [E4] as well in the conclusion (Section 3 below).

24 Rickless gives the methodological passage more attention than most, but largely bases his interpretation on his understanding of what goes on in the later deductions (see *Forms in Transition* Ch.3, 95–111). Rickless sees the method as aimed directly at answering Parmenides' criticisms and showing that the forms exhibit contrary properties. As we will see, the methodological passage alone does not support such a specific reading. This may be part of what is going on, but Rickless' narrower interpretation overlooks the more general methodological lessons being emphasized. My more conservative approach of seeing what general features can be gleaned based on evidence internal to the methodological passage will reveal a much more general and open-minded method being recommended here.

1.2 The Structure of Exploring Both Sides

In this subsection I will discuss the first three parts of the methodological passage. [E3] shows that exploring both sides meets the two structural conditions mentioned in the introduction: (1a) deriving consequences from a hypothesis, and (1b) deriving consequences from the contradictory hypothesis as well. The first two steps link this recommendation back to Zeno's display and highlight how this structure has been present from the beginning of their conversation. The passage runs as follows:

– [E1] –

“[Socrates:] What then, Parmenides, is the manner of the exercise?” he said.

“[Parmenides:] It's this one,” he said, “which you heard from Zeno.”

– [E2] –

‘Except I was amazed at this [aspect] of what you were saying in reply to him as well, that you would not allow [him] to conduct the examination among visible things, not even about them insofar as they wander, but rather about those things which one might most of all take up in speech and might think to be forms.’²⁵

25 There are a number of issues in how exactly to construe the Greek in this sentence and as a result how to translate. One is whether to take οὐδὲ as adverbial or conjunctive, a second issue is whether to understand ἐπισκοπεῖν with both the ἐν and the περί, or just the περί, a third issue is whether to take τὴν πλάνην as the direct object of ἐπισκοπεῖν or rather to read it adverbially, and a fourth issue is whether to supply τὴν πλάνην in the final clause. Each issue is in principle separable from the others and has the potential to make a significant difference in how one understands the qualification. I will briefly discuss my own conservative translation and what I take to be the most plausible alternatives. I am reading οὐδὲ adverbially, which puts pressure on reading ἐπισκοπεῖν with both ἐν and περί. I am reading ἐπισκοπεῖν intransitively, hence my translation ‘conduct the examination’ (for the intransitive use of ἐπισκοπεῖν in Plato see *Gorgias* 461a6, 526d1; *Hippias Major* 295c2; *Republic* 596a6). This suggests reading τὴν πλάνην adverbially and makes good sense of what it adds as a modifier. On my reading Parmenides first forbids conducting the examination solely with perceptible objects (this would have been familiar for instance from empirical methods of mathematics: see Karasmanis, ‘On the First Greek Mathematical Proof’). He then adds that even focusing on their ‘wandering’ (which one might think would help avoid error) is not enough, but rather one must include imperceptibles. Occurrences of the related verb ἐπισκέπτομαι + περί (*Protagoras* 348d1, 361c6; *Cratylus* 396e2; *Sophist* 254b3, 261d2) and + ἐν (*Republic* 369a2) without an accusative direct object support this reading. In keeping with my conservative approach, I am not understanding τὴν πλάνην as supplied in the final clause. This also affects the interpretation; on my reading, the main contrast is between investigating perceptibles and investigating imperceptibles *simpliciter*, but if one supplies τὴν πλάνην in the final clause then the contrast is between investigating *the wandering* of perceptibles vs. investigating *the wandering* of imperceptibles. Of course it is another step to interpret what exactly ‘investigating the wandering’ means. This more involved understanding of the contrast with τὴν πλάνην supplied might be supported by the reference back to Socrates’ initial challenge to Zeno, where the observation of contrary properties

[Socrates:] “Well it seems to me,” he said, “that in this [realm] at least it is not at all difficult to reveal the things that are suffering similarity and dissimilarity and whatever else.”

– [E3] –

[Parmenides:] “And you’re right,”²⁶ he said, “but it is also necessary to still do this in addition to that, not only to examine the consequences of the hypothesis when hypothesizing if each thing is, but also to hypothesize if this same thing is not, if you would like to train more.”

(135d7–136a2)

For present purposes, I will begin with [E3].

The first thing to note is that Parmenides describes exploring both sides using the language of hypothesis.²⁷ He stresses that it is not enough merely to examine a given hypothesis, but that one must hypothesize the contradictory as well. The last clause makes it clear that when talking about making hypotheses he is still talking about his recommended exercise: he urges Socrates to do this hypothesizing ‘if you would like to train more.’ The overarching structure involves (a) positing a hypothesis, (b) examining its consequences, (c) positing the contradictory hypothesis, and (d) examining the consequences of the contradictory as well. In other words, as put more succinctly above, it involves (1a) identifying a hypothesis and its contradictory and (1b) exploring the consequences of each independently.

in particular is at issue. The interpretation fits best with taking *ἐπισκοπεῖν* transitively with *τὴν πλάνην* as the direct object, and again with *οὐδὲ* understood adverbially and *ἐπισκοπεῖν* governing both *ἐν* and *περί*. On this interpretation the *οὐδὲ* would be understood differently, not emphasizing some subclass as on my conservative interpretation, but rather just re-emphasizing the ban on imperceptibles, a more difficult construal. This may be what Gill & Ryan have in mind and might be rendered more literally as follows: “you would not allow him to examine the wandering among visible things, really not allowing the examination *concerning visible things* at all...” One final option would be to take *οὐδὲ* conjunctively, which works best with understanding *ἐπισκοπεῖν* only with *περί* and supplying some verb (most plausibly *εἶναι*) with *ἐν*: “you would not allow him to be among visible things nor to examine the wandering in their case...” A plausible parallel for either of the latter readings, taking *τὴν πλάνην* as a direct object rather than adverbially as I have, is an instance of *ἐπισκοπεῖν* + accusative + *περί* at *Theaetetus* 185e2. This is all to say that there are a number of options here, but I have given the more conservative translation in order to be able to establish what can definitively be said about the method of exploring both sides based on using the methodological passage as a starting point.

26 Literally ‘and [it appears to you] well’.

27 Notice that, like the English word ‘hypothesis’, the Greek *ὑπόθεσις* may very well be process/product ambiguous. It is unclear based on this passage alone whether the noun refers to the process of hypothesizing or the linguistic item that results from that process.

It is clear that Parmenides has contradictories in mind, not just any opposing hypothesis. Throughout the methodological passage this contradictory relationship is consistently communicated by presenting one side as the same as the other except for inserting a negation before the verb ‘to be’.²⁸ The same goes for the positive and negative statements of Parmenides’ hypothesis in the final deductions.²⁹ As we will see in the next section, the fact that the two sides are contradictories and thus mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive helps show what is unique and valuable about the structure of exploring both sides.³⁰

Thus, the structure as introduced here in [E3] and employed in the final deductions involves deriving consequences from both a hypothesis and its contradictory, thereby meeting (1a) and (1b) as defined above. Interestingly, [E1] and [E2] invite us to look back to the first half of the dialogue as well. In [E1], Parmenides answers Socrates’ first request for clarification by suggesting that the exercise he has in mind is like the one employed earlier by Zeno. He then makes a qualification in [E2] that they are to stay among imperceptibles. This is clearly a reference back to Socrates’ criticism of Zeno at 129d2ff.³¹ And Zeno’s display not only highlights exploring the consequences of a hypothesis ‘if it is many’, but does so in the context of Parmenides’ opposing hypothesis ‘if it is one’. Socrates highlights this relationship when he suggests that Zeno and Parmenides have reached the same

28 See 136a4–7, 136b1–2, 136b7–8, and 136c4.

29 For the positive formulations see 137c4, 142b3, 157b6, 159b3, and 155e4–5. For the negative ones see 160b5, 163c1, 164b5, and 165e2–3.

30 This point will generalize to any set of mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive hypotheses. The *Parmenides* focuses on the simple case of a hypothesis and its contradictory, but other dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Lysis* use the same method on larger sets of hypotheses.

31 In the end, I do not think that much can be gleaned from this qualification alone. Rickless takes Parmenides here to be suggesting that one must prove that forms exhibit contrary properties. On his reading, the method is specially designed for answering the criticisms that Parmenides has made of the forms (95). Yet this text alone does not mandate such a specific reading. This interpretation requires three moves, first understanding ‘wandering’ as meaning ‘exhibiting contrary properties’, second supplying this same ‘wandering’ in the construction of the final clause of the sentence, and third understanding ‘observe’ to mean ‘positively find’ said wandering. None of these moves are required by the passage at hand. As for the first move, ‘wandering’ could have a more general meaning here of ‘exhibiting unexpected or unacceptable results’. The second move is a valid construal of the Greek, but not required (see n.25 above where I discuss my more conservative construal). The third move is also not required. The Greek verb ἐπισκοπεῖν in general means to inspect, investigate, or consider. Thus, even if one grants the first and second moves, the more natural understanding would be that Parmenides is recommending that they investigate *whether or not* such wandering is to be found among imperceptibles. This understanding is also more in keeping with Socrates’ original contention being referred to here, where Socrates issues a challenge to find contrary properties among the forms but expects that no such discovery would be made (128e5–130a2).

conclusion, just couched in different terms ('one' on the one hand and 'not many' on the other, 127e6–128b6).³² In a way, then, Zeno's display can be seen as having the structure of both conditions (1a) and (1b).³³ While Zeno himself may not have derived consequences from both a hypothesis and its contradictory and thus may not have fully employed the structure of exploring both sides on his own, Plato is drawing attention to the larger context in which both sides are explored. On a second reading of the dialogue, then, the theme of exploring both sides is present from beginning to end.³⁴

These considerations show that exploring both sides is not an entirely new recommendation that Parmenides tacks on in the methodological passage, but rather an important theme emphasized at length throughout the dialogue. This includes the methodological passage, the final deductions, and even Zeno's display. Thus, the structure of positing a hypothesis, exploring its consequences,

32 On this understanding of Zeno's display, where it crucially involves a response to Parmenides' detractors, we need to understand Zeno as having a close connection to Parmenides. And, as a matter of fact, the two are portrayed as hand in glove throughout the dialogue. First, we are immediately told upon Zeno's introduction that he is rumored to have been Parmenides' love interest when he was young (127b5–6). Next, we are told that he and Parmenides brought it to Athens together (ἐκείνων, 127c4). Furthermore, Zeno and Parmenides time and again refer back to what the other person has said in the methodological passage. As we have already seen, Parmenides shows a keen awareness of what Zeno has said when he refers back to Zeno's display at 135d8, then again at 136a4–5. Zeno does the same thing with Parmenides: he gives a knowing laugh at 136d4, and the fear clause at d5–6 suggests an intimate familiarity with what Parmenides is doing. Zeno goes on to simply repeat much of what Parmenides has just said, often using the very same language. The one new piece of information that Zeno adds, that they are relatively alone (136d6–7), Parmenides then reiterates at 137a7. Zeno puts the point negatively, that they are not many, whereas Parmenides puts the point positively, saying that they are alone, cleverly recalling the relation between their two hypotheses. This constant back and forth further portrays the two philosophers as working in a joint context.

33 In this case, the hypotheses are not strict contradictories as they are in the later deductions. 'One' and 'many' are not contradictories, as 'many' and 'not many' are. But the two are still treated as contradictories. In Socrates' interpretation of Zeno's display, he suggests that Zeno and Parmenides' hypotheses are 'the same ... in a way' (128a6) and 'just about ... the same' (128b4–5). This is strictly speaking false: it could be that 'the all' is neither one nor many. But on the understanding that 'one' and 'not many' mean the same thing, 'one' and 'many' *are* contradictories. Thus, the Many's hypothesis that it is many can be seen as the contradictory of Parmenides' hypothesis that it is one, and Zeno's conclusion that it is not many the contradictory of the Many's conclusion that it is not one, all based on the conflation between 'one' and 'not many' in this particular case.

34 The idea of a second reading is important: Plato often includes hints and references in his dialogues that only become clear once the reader already knows what is to come in the rest of the work. For an illustration see Myles Burnyeat's 'First Words', where he shows how the opening scene of a dialogue often reflects a central philosophical point that is properly understood only after engaging with the rest of the work.

and exploring the consequences of the contradictory as well is central to the dialogue. Yet a number of important questions remain: is this structure really so different from what we see in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*? If so, what is so valuable about exploring both sides instead? These are the focus of the next section.

2 A Distinct Structure and Aim

In this section I will detail the precise sense in which the structure of exploring both sides differs from that of the canonical ‘method of hypothesis’ (Section 2.1). Next I show how that structure goes hand in hand with both an internal aim of testing the hypotheses and, in the case of the *Parmenides*, an external aim of testing those hypotheses as candidate first principles in particular (Section 2.2).

2.1 A Distinct Structure in the Canonical Method

I will not take a stand here on whether the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* are best understood as employing the same hypothetical method when properly specified. But I will argue that at least at one level of generality their hypothetical methods contain the same structure, and that this canonical ‘method of hypothesis’ is importantly different from the structure we find in the *Parmenides*.

The canonical method involves the ‘vertical’ step of looking to a higher hypothesis from which the thesis in question can be derived (2a). This sets it apart from exploring both sides, which instead employs the ‘lateral’ step of looking to the contradictory (1a). The ‘vertical’ step of the canonical method is clearly found in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*,³⁵ though it is conspicuously absent from the *Parmenides*. Hence the difference in the structural conditions for each method, despite the fact that both involve deriving consequences from a hypothesis (1b and 2b).

In the *Meno*, the structure of the canonical method is clearly introduced with the second geometrical example. At 86e1–4 Socrates recommends that they examine the question of whether virtue is teachable via hypothesis. He elaborates with a geometrical example, which involves reducing the question of whether a

³⁵ On Benson’s view this occurs both at what he calls proof stage [Pa] (deriving a hypothesis from which the initial question can be answered) and confirmation stage [Cb] (identifying an even higher hypothesis from which the former hypothesis can be derived). For a brief overview of Benson’s position see *Clitophon’s Challenge* p. 5–7. Benson helpfully points out the main passages that I discuss below where this ‘vertical’ step can be found.

certain area has one geometrical property to whether it has another property. Similarly, the interlocutors go on to reduce the question of whether virtue is teachable to the question of whether it is knowledge (87b2–c10). They then take this ‘upward’ structure even one step further by reducing the question of whether virtue is knowledge to the question of whether it is good (87c11–e1). Thus, the discussion of the *Meno* meets both structural conditions, (2a) and (2b), for the canonical method.

The same holds for the *Phaedo*. Famously, Socrates describes positing the existence of forms as a hypothesis at 99c6ff. He is trying to prove the immortality of the soul, and the hypothesis about forms is a higher hypothesis from which this thesis is ultimately derived by means of principles about the causes of generation and destruction. Thus, this hypothetical argument in the *Phaedo* meets conditions (2a) and (2b) as well. This is further confirmed by Socrates’ general remarks about what to do if one needs to give an account of the hypothesis itself (101d6). As in the *Meno*, he recommends to “in turn posit another hypothesis, whichever of the higher ones appears best” (101d7–8). Unlike the *Parmenides*, which recommends the ‘lateral’ step of looking to the contradictory, the *Phaedo* explicitly recommends the ‘vertical’ step of finding a higher hypothesis.

Benson convincingly argues that the *Republic* also contains an abstract description as well as concrete applications of this ‘vertical’ step.³⁶ The description comes at the end of *Republic* VI in the discussion of the line. Socrates criticizes geometers for unthinkingly accepting their hypotheses without giving an account of them (510c6–7). He goes on to pun on the word ‘hypothesis’, contrasting the geometers’ method with one that treats their hypotheses as true hypotheses, that is as the basis for a ‘vertical’ step towards the principle of everything (511b2–6). This same step is described using vertical imagery at 533c8–d4, and of course analogized in the famous image of the cave. As Benson argues, we also see this ‘vertical’ hypothetical strategy employed in the ‘third wave’ discussion of the possibility of Kallipolis (473b4ff). Socrates suggests that Kallipolis is possible if philosophers rule and establishes this by appeal to an even higher hypothesis about the nature of philosophy.

It is striking that Plato both employs and describes this same ‘vertical’ step in his discussion of hypothetical method in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, and that it is nowhere to be found in the *Parmenides*. These systematic structural differences suggest that, at least at one level of generality, these are two distinct methods. Thus, labeling the canonical method ‘the method of hypothesis’ is misleading. There is a broader genus of hypothetical methods in Plato that involve deriving consequences from a hypothesis, but the canonical method is just one species.

³⁶ See *Clitophon’s Challenge* Ch. 8–9.

Exploring both sides is another distinct species that involves the ‘lateral’ step of looking to the contradictory (1a) rather than the ‘vertical’ step of looking to a higher hypothesis (2a).³⁷

2.2 The Aim of Exploring Both Sides

Above I distinguished a method’s structure from its internal and external aims. Structural differences between the *Parmenides* and the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* are enough to establish my central claim that we should understand Plato as having a family of different hypothetical methods. This claim is strengthened by the observation that exploring both sides as employed in the *Parmenides* also has unique internal and external aims. The internal aim of exploring both sides is assessing the truth of the hypotheses themselves, whereas the internal aim of the canonical method is assessing the truth of one of the theses derived from the hypothesis. This is (1c) and (2c) respectively as laid out in the introduction. Furthermore, exploring both sides is used in the *Parmenides* as a method for testing candidate first principles, whereas the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* are explicit about not having established the principles themselves.

Our survey of the canonical method’s structure shows how its internal aim is assessing the truth of some consequence of the hypothesis rather than the hypothesis itself. In the *Meno* the consequence is the teachability of virtue, in the *Phaedo* the immortality of the soul, and in the *Republic* the possibility of Kallipolis. These theses are not the hypotheses themselves, but rather are tested by the ‘vertical’ step of deriving them from a higher hypothesis. The *Phaedo* was particularly explicit that when giving an account of the hypothesis itself, a higher hypothesis must be posited from which it can be derived. Before we saw that Parmenides introduced the method as aimed at truth, but truth of what? There is no indication that, as in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, the interlocutors are primarily interested in some consequence of the hypotheses. Instead, Zeno and Parmenides are first and foremost interested in their own hypotheses concerning the existence of one or many, and Socrates in his own hypothesis concerning the existence of forms. A hidden application of the method just before its explicit introduction gives yet another hint that the aim is testing the hypothesis itself.

The hint comes just before the methodological passage, right when Socrates is about ready to give up. Parmenides has presented a series of objections to Socrates’ claim about the separable existence of forms, and Socrates has no rebuttal at hand.

³⁷ Benson recognizes that including the contradictory is a new development in the *Parmenides*, but does not draw attention to the related lack of a ‘vertical’ step (*Clitophon’s Challenge* 269 n.84).

But Parmenides ends his criticisms with a curious move. After rehearsing many difficulties for the existence of forms, he adds one last difficulty for someone who *denies* their existence:

“But on the other hand,” Parmenides said, “if, at any rate, Socrates, someone in turn will not allow there to be forms of the things that exist, looking at everything we just went through and other such worries, and will not mark off some one form for each thing, then he will also not have anywhere to turn his thought, if he doesn’t allow for a form to always be the same for each of the things that exist, and thus he will in every way destroy the ability for dialectic.”

(135b5–c2)

Someone who denies the existence of forms is simply someone who endorses the contradictory, that forms do not exist.³⁸ So when Parmenides follows out the consequences of this position, he is doing precisely what he is about to recommend to Socrates: exploring both sides.³⁹ But why does he do so? Why sneak in an application of exploring both sides rather than basking in a *reductio* or even testing Socrates’ thesis with the canonical method?

Of course, on a second reading of the dialogue, this episode might simply serve to further draw attention to this method that I have suggested is thematized throughout. But Parmenides appears to have another goal in the immediate dramatic context. Consistent with his portrayal throughout the rest of the dialogue, Parmenides is not simply interested in defeating Socrates in argument; if he was, then hammering home his objections would be enough on its own. Instead, exploring both sides here serves to encourage Socrates and keep him from giving up. It may be that his position is riddled with problems, but the opponent’s position has problems too. It is not yet settled which hypothesis is right.⁴⁰ This suggests that Parmenides is treating the discussion as an ongoing inquiry into the truth of the hypotheses themselves, thus one that meets the internal aim of

38 The claim is made explicitly in these terms in the previous paragraph: “that these things do not exist” (ὡς οὐτε ἔστι ταῦτα, 135a4).

39 Karasmanis also hints at this connection in passing (‘Dialectic and the Second Part of Plato’s *Parmenides*’, 189). Note that in the passage quoted above we have the negation of the positive formulation of the hypothesis at 135a1–3 with the same formulaic consistency as the positive deductions (that is, with the negation added just before the verb).

40 Miller recognizes that this type of method could be used for ‘calculated pedagogical provocation’ (*Conversion of the Soul* 75–6) and Schofield also suggests that it can encourage further inquiry or help identify mistaken assumptions (‘The Antinomies of Plato’s *Parmenides*’ 141–2). Though he does not tie the point to this specific passage, Proclus also suggests that this method can help encourage young interlocutors in particular to continue their inquiry (*In Platonis Parmenidem* I 654).

exploring both sides as laid out above (1c) and indicates the related external aim of encouraging further inquiry.⁴¹

What Parmenides says next is consistent with this understanding of what he is up to. Instead of saying ‘gotcha’ he asks Socrates where he will turn next: ‘What then will you do about philosophy? Where will you turn with these things being unknown?’ (135c5–6). Notice that, instead of portraying it as a dire situation for Socrates, he uses the neutral passive construction ‘with these things being unknown’. The point is to figure out what comes next when there are difficulties on *either side* of an issue and one is interested in determining *which side is correct*. And even though they have not yet proved anything, this is part of what is useful about exploring both sides. If Socrates and Parmenides had just focused on the difficulties with the hypothesis that there are forms, then they might have gone away thinking they had found a successful *reductio* against the hypothesis, locating the problem in the hypothesis itself. But when one explores both sides and the contradictory claim runs into problems as well, then the evidence suggests that there may be some underlying assumption causing problems instead.⁴² There is no longer a better reason for rejecting one side over the other without showing that one of the arguments on either side was flawed. Alternatively, maybe the two sides are not really contradictory after all (as Socrates hints for ‘one’ and ‘many’).⁴³

41 Rickless interprets the valence of this passage differently. On his view this passage shows that certain assumptions in the theory of forms *must* be retained, so in what follows they must do whatever it takes to save this aspect of forms (98). Yet such a specific interpretation is not supported by the text. For all they have said so far, it is not clear where exactly the problem lies, so the situation calls instead for an open-minded reappraisal.

42 You face a similar problem if you explore both sides and find *positive* arguments for each one. On the other hand, if you find issues on one side and not on the other, exploring both sides is still helpful: now you have even further support for your initial diagnosis.

43 See n.33 above. Elsewhere I argue that Plato has the Eleatic Visitor in the *Sophist* use the same method of exploring both sides for encouraging further inquiry and for stressing this very point about the exhaustivity of the hypotheses at hand (see “Pushing Through” in Plato’s *Sophist*: A New Reading of the Parity Assumption). This external aim of the method as Plato employs it gives us a hint about how to read the very end of the dialogue. The dialogue ends on a baffling note. Parmenides reports their findings so far by saying that both his hypothesis that there is one and the contradictory that there is not one result in the very same apparent contradictions. The young Aristotle unhesitatingly agrees, ending the dialogue with the simple words: ‘most true’ (Ἀληθέστατα, 166c5). One can imagine this as a sophistic argument by cases: since the same contradictions follow from both a hypothesis and its contradictory, then we need to simply accept those contradictions. But our observations about exploring both sides as it is thematized throughout the dialogue suggest a different response. In an argument by cases the internal aim is establishing the truth of some consequence, while we have seen that exploring both sides is aimed at the truth of the hypotheses themselves. Thus, as Parmenides encouraged Socrates, the method here might encourage the reader to treat this puzzle as just the beginning of a further inquiry. My view is

Thus, exploring both sides has an internal aim of testing the hypotheses themselves, an aim that goes hand in hand with its structure and further distinguishes it from the canonical method. But again we might ask what the point of such an aim might be. Why would anyone insist on testing the truth of a hypothesis *as a hypothesis*? Why not always use the ‘vertical’ step and derive it from some higher hypothesis? Vassilis Karasmanis has persuasively argued that the method of the *Parmenides* is concerned specifically with first principles.⁴⁴ This is best understood as another external aim of exploring both sides; though it need not always do so, in this case it is employed as a way of testing candidate principles. As Karasmanis points out, when something is a first principle there is nowhere higher ‘up’ to go to test for its truth. Since the interlocutors are treating forms as first principles, it would not make sense to use the canonical method here point to search for a higher hypothesis.

The external aim of testing candidate principles is not as explicit in the *Parmenides* as the structure of exploring both sides, but it does fit nicely with the theme of the dialogue as well as the structural differences with the canonical method. Karasmanis points out how the examples that Plato has Parmenides mention in the methodological passage, as those mentioned throughout the dialogue, are plausibly understood as candidate first principles (194). This creates another stark contrast with the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. In the *Republic* Socrates goes to great lengths to stress his own ignorance of the form of the Good (506b2–e7). Likewise, in the *Meno* he laments not giving an account of what virtue is before inquiring into its teachability via hypothesis (86c4–e4; cf. also 71a5–b8 & 79b7–c10). In both dialogues, then, he stresses how they are *not* engaged in an inquiry into first principles. The *Phaedo* is even more explicit that they have not inquired into first principles; Socrates affirms Simmias’ lack of complete confidence towards the end of the dialogue as follows: ‘Simmias, you’re not the only one, said Socrates, but you’re right and the very first hypotheses, even if you find them persuasive, still need to be examined more clearly’ (107b).

consistent with Meinwald’s, where the conclusion is meant to be entirely unproblematic once we fully understand the distinction between the two *pros*-relations. She herself characterizes the passage as: ‘at first glance ... full of paradox’, suggesting that even on her view further inquiry is indeed necessary at least for a first-time reader (151). A view on which all is meant to be obvious even to a first-time reader I do not think can do justice to the difficulty of the material (as evidenced by numerous controversies in the secondary literature). Gill takes a different line, suggesting that the end of the *Parmenides* is not a real ending, but points to a specific error to be corrected in the deductions (*Philosophos*, 45–6). This too is consistent with my reading, though here I do not take a stand on what the precise error (or errors) of the preceding deductions are meant to be.

⁴⁴ See ‘Dialectic and the Second Part of Plato’s *Parmenides*’ p.194ff.

This all goes to show that the difference in structure between exploring both sides and the canonical method goes hand in hand with a difference in aim. The canonical method aims to establish some thesis by positing a ‘higher’ hypothesis but does not establish the truth of the hypothesis itself. Exploring both sides is able to assess the truth of a hypothesis as such by avoiding this ‘vertical’ maneuver. This is its internal aim, while in the *Parmenides* it has the further external aim of encouraging further inquiry and testing candidate first principles.

3 Conclusion

By now it should be clear how paying closer attention to the methodological passage of the *Parmenides* reveals an interesting and unique hypothetical method worth taking seriously. Yet, while I have drawn attention to the relatively neglected [E1–3], one might worry that I have done so to the neglect of [E4]. More specifically, I have not said much about the relations described there using the Greek preposition *pros*, often translated ‘in relation to’, which appear to explain why we see roughly eight deductions in the second half of the dialogue rather than just two. A few comments on this passage are in order.

There are a number of complications involved in matching [E4] with the deductions that follow. Interpreters such as Meinwald, Peterson, Sayre, and Scolnicov see a precise correlation between an eightfold procedure recommended in [E4] and eight deductions to be found in the second half.⁴⁵ But this is controversial; the *pros*-relations are not consistently repeated in the deductions with the same language as [E4], and recent interpreters such as Gill and Rickless have suggested that other principles must be imported to explain the presence of eight deductions. Furthermore, the end of [E4] appears to describe an even more involved procedure that cannot be carried out in the space of a single dialogue. First, Parmenides insists on employing the method with other hypotheses, for example similarity, dissimilarity, change, rest, generation, destruction, being, and not-being (136b1–6). He then suggests examining each one not only in relation to itself but ‘in relation to each of the others, whatever you should choose, and in relation to more and in relation to quite all in this way’ (136c1–2). Here the structure is multiplied into more than just eight steps, more steps than could possibly be included in the

⁴⁵ On this view, [E4] recommends examining the subject of the hypothesis (1) in relation to itself and (2) in relation to others, then examining the others (3) in relation to themselves and (4) in relation to the subject. When repeated for both a hypothesis and its contradictory this makes for an eightfold procedure. While he interpreters mentioned all agree that the *pros*-relations generate an eightfold structure, there is much less agreement on what precisely the *pros*-relations mean.

final deductions despite their length and intricacy.⁴⁶ Because the details of [E4] are not straightforwardly replicated in the final deductions, nor are they clearly foreshadowed earlier on in the same way that exploring both sides is, we can justifiably focus on those structural features that are thematized throughout the dialogue and have a clear, general import outside of the context of the *Parmenides* for understanding the methodological passage.

How then are we to make sense of [E4]? We can make good sense of the passage given the external aim of testing candidate first principles. If one wants to genuinely use this method to test which first principles to adopt, then it will not be enough to apply it to one candidate principle and its contradictory. After all, there may be some other principle with more explanatory power given its consequences and thus with a better claim to be taken as a fundamental starting point. The results of exploring both sides with one candidate principle will have to be compared with the results of exploring both sides with another, hence the recommendation to repeat the procedure with other principles as well.⁴⁷ Furthermore, if the aim really is testing the hypotheses as hypotheses then the more deductions one performs with each hypothesis the more potential information one has concerning its truth or falsity. Thus, heuristics for generating more deductions will be useful, and the varied *pros*-relations can be understood as precisely this type of heuristic.

46 Such ambitious recommendations for a seemingly endless procedure are familiar from elsewhere in the Platonic corpus as well: cf. *Philebus* 19b5–8; *Phaedrus* 271c10–272b6, 273d8–274a5 & 277b5–c6; the extended discussion of dialectic and related studies in books VI–VII of the *Republic*; and *Sophist* 253d5–e2. An anonymous reviewer helpfully points out that one might read this all as what is meant to happen within a single section or deduction focused on the others, that is to examine ‘in relation to each of the others [...] and in relation to more [of the others] and in relation to quite all [of the others]’. If so we might still understand there as only being eight sections or deductions. Yet even on this understanding the coordinating conjunctions here put each of four examinations on par with one another: examining the consequences (a) in relation to itself, (b) in relation to each of the others, (c) in relation to more [of the others], and (d) in relation to quite all [of the others]. On this basis it would be natural to expect at least 16 coordinate sections or deductions. But no matter how exactly we individuate steps or sections or deductions, without a clear correspondence between the suggestion here in E4 and the remainder of the dialogue, we should look for an alternative interpretation of E4’s significance that does not rely on such a correspondence.

47 Peterson draws attention to these ‘new rounds’ in her article ‘New Rounds of the Exercise of Plato’s *Parmenides*’. Gill also points to this recommendation (*Philosophos* 14, 48). Both suggest that this is an important hint for us readers to look for and use other applications of the same method. Yet, on my view, the more important point here is that multiple applications of the method are needed for employing it well. Exploring both sides alone cannot *prove* whether or not a given hypothesis is a first principle; instead, it can recommend one candidate first principle over another based on the balance of explanatory power vs. problematic consequences for the hypothesis as compared with its contradictory and ultimately compared with other candidate first principles that have been tested in the same way.

Time and again the dialogue emphasizes the intricacy of the task at hand. Right after Parmenides elaborates the method Socrates exclaims that it is an enormous task (136c6). Zeno confirms the assessment, stressing that truth and sound judgment cannot be achieved without this wandering and exhaustive path (136e1–3). Likewise, Parmenides refers to what lies ahead as a ‘sea of arguments’ (137a6). This is all foreshadowed at the very beginning when Antiphon shrinks from relating the conversation citing the difficulty of the task (127a6) later echoed by Parmenides and Zeno themselves using the very same language (136d1, d6). This all goes to show that it is no small task that Parmenides has in mind. And understanding him as recommending this ambitious project explains a number of otherwise enigmatic passages. We can now see why it is particularly important for Socrates to begin employing the method while he is still young (135d5–6), why Parmenides criticized Socrates’ hesitancy to explore whether there are forms of hair and mud as unphilosophical (130e1–3), and why his type of philosophy may not be appropriate for large crowds (130e3–4, 135d5, 136d6–e3, 137a7).⁴⁸

This all goes to support understanding the method’s external aim here in the *Parmenides* as one of testing candidate first principles. There is certainly more to be said about the application of exploring both sides in this dialogue and about its relation to Plato’s method in other dialogues as well. But even on its own the evidence considered here is sufficient for seeing why Plato would have been interested in looking at a hypothesis and its contradictory to the exclusion of the ‘vertical’ step of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. Plato’s employment of this distinct hypothetical method in the *Parmenides* shows that he developed multiple hypothetical methods with distinct roles for philosophical inquiry. My hope is that taking the method of exploring both sides seriously will not only help us understand Plato’s motivations for using this and related methods, but will also shed new light on his role in developing new modes of philosophical inquiry.⁴⁹

48 Doing so would take a long time, would require systematically addressing candidates that one might not initially think of as worth the effort, and could easily confuse onlookers and lead to accusations of mere ‘prattle’ as Parmenides points out. This point about testing an exhaustive list of candidate principles, however, can only go so far. One complementary use of the canonical ‘method of hypothesis’ would be to identify plausible candidates for exploring both sides in the first place.

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