

**Ancient Philosophy within a Global Purview:
Parmenides and Zhuangzi on Expressing
What Can (and Cannot) Be Known**

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Abstract

This Thesis argues that widespread misconceptions about the early history of philosophy hamper engagement with ancient philosophy within a global purview. I identify and challenge an influential narrative according to which philosophy emerges through a shift from *mythos* to *logos* (Chapter 1). This framework misrepresents the history of ancient Greek philosophy and simultaneously underpins the perceived illegitimacy of ‘non-Western’ traditions as *philosophical* traditions. I examine how this same narrative creates major interpretive blind spots within specialist work on ancient philosophy (Chapters 2–5). I do so by exploring two consequential cases, two foundational philosophers in early Greek and classical Chinese philosophy, respectively: Parmenides and Zhuangzi.

I show how problematic assumptions inherited from mainstream macro-narratives prime us to see Parmenides as exhibiting thoroughly optimistic attitudes toward human knowledge, and Zhuangzi as either an anti-rational mystic who dismisses language or as a negative dogmatist who rejects objective knowledge (Chapter 2). I demonstrate that adopting a dialogical approach to specific questions in epistemology as they arise in Parmenides and Zhuangzi helps substantiate alternative interpretive routes which have been obscured by received historiographical frameworks. I bring Zhuangzi and Parmenides in dialogue on the issue of the limits of human cognition (Chapter 3); on the potential of analogies and indirect argumentation to push the boundaries of what can be known (Chapter 4); and finally, on whether numerical monism is defensible (Chapter 5).

From these inquiries, Parmenides emerges as someone quite other than the unmitigated epistemological optimist he is usually assumed to be, which raises

fruitful questions about the status of his constructive claims. Conversely, Zhuangzi is not the anti-rationalist or negative dogmatist he is widely taken to be; instead, his own circumspect stance on the question of what can (and cannot) be known leads him to forgo all unqualified claims to knowledge.

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Introduction

Overview

In anything from ‘Areas of Specialization’ in resumes and job descriptions to introductory textbooks and university courses, the field of ‘Ancient Philosophy’ is typically presented as being restricted to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, which is seen as the genesis of ‘Western’ philosophical thought. Several of the top journals whose self-described remit is ‘Ancient Philosophy’ publish papers pertaining exclusively to ancient Greek and Roman thought. Broad judgements about the nature of ancient philosophy are also commonly made in publications which purely address Greek and Roman texts.¹ That narrow construal of the field, though not universal,² perpetuates a presumption that philosophical inquiry throughout antiquity was confined to the Greeks and Romans.³

Drawing on metaphilosophical and historiographical work, this Thesis begins by arguing that widespread misconceptions about the early history of philosophy – which continue to thrive especially concerning the narrative of a Greek-originating ‘Western Philosophy’ – hamper our engagement with ancient philosophy within a global purview. In Chapter 1 I consider the origin story usually presented in histories of ‘Western Philosophy’, according to which the emergence of philosophy is to be explained by a shift from *mythos* to *logos* in ancient Greece. This development is typically framed as a move away from religion and mythology,

¹ Burnyeat (1982) is an instructive example, to which I return in Chapter 3.

² For instance, the Oxford Network for Ancient Philosophy, launched in 2022, challenges the standard equation of Ancient Philosophy with Graeco-Roman philosophy. See also King (2011, 5) for an implicit challenge to the *status quo* in a volume pertaining to ancient Chinese and Greek ethics.

³ Note however that the proverbial use of the label ‘Ancient Philosophy’, in contexts where primarily Graeco-Roman philosophy is treated, does not necessarily imply acceptance of what I am calling the ‘narrow construal’ of ancient philosophy. See e.g. Castagnoli and Fait, eds. (2023, 16), who are unequivocal that their primary focus on ancient Greek logic in their *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Philosophy* “should not be taken as an implicit commitment to the view that there were no important ancient logical traditions outside of Greece”.

and into philosophy. As will become clear, the *mythos-logos* framework has been increasingly challenged in specialist scholarship on ancient Greek philosophy and ancient Greek religion. Altogether peripheral to such critiques, however, is the fact that the *mythos-logos* framework continues to prop up a much broader historiographical narrative; in particular, the framework serves as an origin story for a supposed ‘Western Philosophy’, which is routinely taken to be interchangeable with the history of philosophy *tout court*.

As I argue in Chapter 1, the narrative that Greek thinkers invented philosophy in a shift from *mythos* to *logos* not only misrepresents the actual history of Greek philosophy, but also underpins the perceived illegitimacy – still widespread in academia and beyond – of ‘non-Western’ intellectual traditions as *philosophical* traditions. I then show that the dynamic uncovered in Chapter 1 affects specific areas of specialist scholarship in ancient philosophy (broadly construed), in ways that have gone largely unnoticed. In Chapters 2–5 I focus on two specific and consequential cases, which are foundational texts in ancient Greek and classical Chinese philosophy, respectively: the fragments of the early Greek or ‘Presocratic’ thinker Parmenides, and the classical Chinese text *Zhuangzi* (named after its legendary author). As I argue in Chapter 2, still-prevalent assumptions reliant on the *mythos-logos* framework have created interpretive blind spots in the study of both texts. Here my proposal is that an explicit and sustained critique of these assumptions puts us in a position to identify clearly, and move beyond, such blind spots.

Parmenides is a figure whom specialists to this day regard as marking an inflexion point in the early history of philosophy, as one of the putative originators of ‘Western philosophy’. Zhuangzi, by contrast, has long been marginalized from

the mainstream canon of ancient philosophy, despite exerting an immense influence on East Asian intellectual history, literature, and culture for the better part of two millennia. Chapter 2 outlines the philosophical motivations for this dual case study, offers context for the texts and authors under investigation, and introduces how they have been read or misread historically – in no small measure due to the persistent influence of the *mythos-logos* narrative.

Chapters 3–5 then delve deeper into issues of first-order philosophical interpretation and exegesis of Parmenides and Zhuangzi. I highlight that the roles we see ascribed or denied to these thinkers in widespread macro-narratives about the history of philosophy distort the ways in which we read and interpret their philosophical projects. I argue that once we become open to engaging with them in the light of a sustained critique of the *mythos-logos* framework, an exciting realm of new possibilities opens up for the study of each of these two foundational thinkers. Furthermore, I argue that bringing them into conversation on the issue of knowledge and its limits serves to enrich our appreciation and assessment of these novel interpretive possibilities.

§1. Methodology

§1.1. Philosophical methodology as comparative philosophy: translatability, mutual intelligibility, and commensurability

Chapters 3–5 focus on Parmenides’ and Zhuangzi’s reflections on knowledge and its limits. The approach I adopt throughout these core chapters might invite worries about incommensurability and mutual unintelligibility. These are well-known and often-heard arguments against the study of ‘non-Western’ texts

or authors alongside ‘Western’ texts or authors – the type of exercise for which the label ‘comparative philosophy’ is usually reserved (as discussed in §1.3). It is worth noting that such challenges tend *not* to be levelled at comparative work pertaining to ancient philosophers restricted to the Graeco-Roman world, even though similar challenges of conceptual incommensurability and translatability do commonly arise in a pronounced way in the study of such texts.⁴ What’s more, circumscribing our worries about translatability and commensurability to studies involving ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ texts also overlooks the fact that the sorts of difficulties one faces in consulting texts in a non-Indo-European language such as classical Chinese are not altogether different from those faced by the (Anglophone) scholar of philosophical texts written in dead languages such as ancient Greek. It is no less a given that ancient Greek is ‘fully translatable’ into English than that classical Chinese is ‘fully translatable’ into ancient Greek (or *vice versa*). Conceiving of translatability or linguistic commensurability in terms of *identity* of meaning (sometimes referred to as the ‘isomorphic’ or ‘mapping’ conception of translation) is a non-starter: identity is transitive, translation is not. Tim Crane puts the point succinctly in his 2015 review of the provocatively named *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (itself a translation of the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies : le dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, first published in 2004):

[I]f translation requires identity of meaning, then if A translates B and B translates C, then A and C are identical in meaning. A moment’s reflection shows this cannot be right: “castle” can be translated as Schloss, and “Schloss” as *château*, but the Château de Chenonceau is not a castle in anyone’s book. Translation is not identity of meaning.

⁴ Within the Graeco-Roman sceptical tradition, consider, for instance, the nuance of the Greek term *pithanon* (which brings to mind that which is *trustworthy*) and its (imperfect) translation into the Latin *probabile* (which rather connotes that which is *plausible*), and in turn its imperfect translation into English as ‘the persuasive’ (an alternative translation is ‘the probable’, which misleadingly brings to mind a ‘probabilistic’ measure of relative frequency).

So we do not show that translation is impossible by showing that there is no identity of meaning.⁵

Translatability, it would seem, comes *in degrees*, rather than being an all-or-nothing business.⁶ This means that there is no good reason to assume that *radical* untranslatability plagues either the modern (Anglophone) scholar's engagement with a classical Chinese text, or indeed her dialogical (or 'comparative') engagement with both Greek and Chinese texts.⁷

This brings me to the issue of mutual intelligibility. Are Chinese and Greek philosophy so conceptually foreign to one another as to be *incommensurable*?⁸ Let us note that worries around the incommensurability of concepts also obtain *within the same language*. Consider Thomas Kuhn's conception of incommensurability: the English 'electron' might be understood in very different ways depending on which scientific theory one is using or presupposing. Yet one does not deem two items incommensurable if it was never possible to conceive of a common measure between them.⁹

⁵ Crane (2015). The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin, Rendall, and Apter, trans. and eds. 2014) is a translation of the encyclopaedic *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies : dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Cassin ed. 2004), attesting to the translatability of (*inter alia*) French 'untranslatables' into English. See Wardy (2018, 61) for the questionable philosophical assumptions built into the very title *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

⁶ As Li (2022, 26) observes, however, "arguments for untranslatability are not really about the feasibility of translation on a linguistic level but about fully respecting the Other's singularity and difference". I discuss the pitfalls of this kind of ethical argument below.

⁷ It might be argued that the Anglophone scholar's philosophical language and conceptual scheme, which owes much of its nomenclature to Greek and Latin, is less far removed from Parmenides than from Zhuangzi. The crucial point, however, is that the difference is one of *degrees*, rather than being unbridgeable – *contra* arguments for radical incommensurability that are often levelled at (e.g. Anglophone) studies involving ancient Chinese texts.

⁸ For the influential idea of China as the radical "other" (also known as "The China Syndrome"), see Wardy (2000).

⁹ See Lloyd (2018b, 450); Davidson (1973, 6). For Kuhn's notion of incommensurability and its relevance to comparatism, see e.g. Lloyd (2015, 1–15) and Lloyd (2018b, 449–450).

In short, the question is what *degree* of commensurability, or comparability, or mutual intelligibility obtains in any given case; and this will depend on the specifics of the inquiry as well as the clusters of concepts and subject matter at hand.

§1.2. Getting started

Shared objects of study can be identified in the two ancient works with which Chapters 2–5 of this Thesis are concerned, such as concepts of unity and difference, as well as ‘being’ and ‘not-being’ (though these latter concepts are unpacked and used in relevantly different ways in the Greek and Chinese contexts, as discussed in Chapter 5). Both texts also address second-order questions: what modes of inquiry are to be preferred, on what basis one might claim to have knowledge about the world and with what limitations, how far the nature of things admits of being expressed through human language, etc. Thirdly, both texts appeal to interesting analogies – some of which they share in common (not least, the image of the path or road¹⁰) to convey such concerns, the details of which I discuss in Chapter 4.

In the first instance, however, this Thesis considers each of the texts on their own terms and within their respective cultural contexts, with an eye to the *mythos-logos* critique set out in Chapter 1. Focusing on each of the texts independently is a safeguard against simply assuming substantive common ground (or pronounced differences) between them.

¹⁰ The image of the ‘path’ or ‘way’ (*dao* 道) is central to classical Chinese philosophy as a whole, but takes on a metaphysically loaded meaning specifically in strands of Daoist philosophy with which Zhuangzi engages, as discussed in Chapter 5. For Parmenides’ use of road imagery, see Folit-Weinberg (2022a).

§1.3. *A dialogical approach*

This Thesis is *dialogical* in the sense that it brings two thinkers together in a *two-way* conversation. Neither of the two thinkers with which the proposed case study is concerned functions as a privileged point of reference from which to evaluate the other.¹¹ This is precisely why my approach can lead to substantial rethinking of foundational texts in the history of both Greek and Chinese philosophy.

One might be tempted to see this approach as just another ‘comparative’ exercise. To be sure, the dialogical approach is obviously *comparative* in the broad sense that it draws on questions, ideas, and conceptual resources found in one text and the corresponding secondary literature to help shed light on another text; *and vice versa* (though this is not true of all self-styled ‘comparative’ approaches). In calling my approach dialogical, it is this latter point that I want to stress: the kind of comparative analysis I undertake is distinctive in that it cuts both ways. It is thus not *merely* – that is to say, one-directionally – comparative.

There are a few additional reasons why one might resist using the label ‘comparative philosophy’. The first is that, theoretically speaking, the very idea of ‘comparative philosophy’ is arguably trivial: all history of philosophy is in a sense inherently comparative, though this feature of philosophical methodology is almost never explicitly acknowledged. I take it that doing work in the history of philosophy presupposes engaging, at least to some extent, with current views in philosophy

¹¹ For the avoidance of doubt, in employing the term ‘dialogical’ I do not mean to narrow the terrain of analysis to forms of *discursive* argumentation found in Parmenides and Zhuangzi. Chapter 4 brings out the significance of analogical reasoning not only in Zhuangzi but also in Parmenides, and highlights the significance of what is left *unsaid* by both – in a way that is sensitive to each of the thinkers’ use of non-discursive modes of communication and argumentation. My approach is thus different from what Jenco (2007, 744–745) presents as the problematic “dialogic” approach to cross-cultural philosophy.

(one *comparandum*), as well as with a historical thinker or thinkers (one or more additional *comparanda*). Even just my external position as an exegete and philosopher raises questions about the degree of commensurability between my own conceptual and linguistic frames of reference and the object of my philosophical analysis. Perhaps less trivially, one might wonder about other cases where distinct thinkers are explicitly under investigation – say, a study involving Parmenides and Kant in relation to idealism, or a study bringing Sextus Empiricus in dialogue with Descartes on sceptical themes. These are cases which would probably not be identified as instances of ‘comparative philosophy’, but which quite clearly warrant extra methodological caution. In such cases, one might be inclined to insist that the presence of a genealogical (that is to say, a historical) connection between the different thinkers, however indirect, makes a significant difference. Surely, however, the comparative challenges remain, especially if one cares about what, say, Sextus meant in his own context, rather than what Descartes thought of him (to the extent that Descartes seriously engaged with Sextus at all¹²). In fact, one might expect that in such cases the waters are muddied *even further* by the fact that one needs to factor in how one author might be (consciously or not) misconstruing the other. Furthermore the genealogy-based response only goes so far: as we will see in Chapter 2, significant historical interactions between Chinese and European philosophies are well-attested since at least the seventeenth century, and yet this does not stop scholars calling studies involving post-Enlightenment European philosophy and Ming-Qing (1368–1911) Chinese philosophy ‘comparative’.

¹² For Descartes’ (possibly second-hand) awareness of Pyrrhonian scepticism, see e.g. Burnyeat (1982, 44–45).

Philosophers generally seem to use the label ‘comparative philosophy’ only and specifically when what is at issue is a study involving at least one ‘*Western*’ text and at least one ‘*non-Western*’ text, as if such cases were the only ones which raised significant methodological challenges. This is a strange state of affairs. By way of contrast, the label ‘comparatism’ is widely used in the fields of history, religion, anthropology, and literature broadly to describe frameworks of “reflexive” or “self-conscious” comparison,¹³ and is thus taken to cover many more aspects of comparative engagement than does ‘comparative philosophy’. It is also worth noting that whereas ‘comparative literature’ is often used to talk about comparisons across bodies of literature in European languages – rather than necessarily involving reference to non-European languages – ‘comparative philosophy’ almost always denotes comparative engagement between ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’/‘Eastern’ philosophy; or, to invoke another familiar axis, comparative studies across traditions in the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’.

By calling my approach ‘dialogical’ rather than ‘comparative’, I do not mean to deny comparatism its methodological importance and relevance. Rather, I mean to emphasize both that (i) the methodological challenges raised by the particular study I propose to undertake are not qualitatively different from those that already arise in the study of two or more thinkers within mainstream ancient philosophy or, for that matter, more broadly within so-called ‘Western Philosophy’; and that (ii) the ‘comparative’ gaze, to the extent that it is distinctive of my approach, *cuts both ways*.

¹³ Gagné (2018, 1); see Li (2022) for comparative literature.

§1.4. *The problem of asymmetry*

With these caveats in place, let us delve deeper into the benefits of the dialogical method I have in mind. One familiar pitfall of ‘comparative philosophy’ as it is commonly understood and practiced is worth highlighting. This is the tendency to use one tradition unilaterally as a model against which to evaluate the other. In practice, that generally means privileging the ‘Western’ *comparandum* as a paradigm through which to assess the ‘non-Western’ one, and not also the other way around.

As Eric S. Nelson has remarked in general terms:

It [Western philosophy] is the primary normative paradigm to which other philosophies are assessed and must conform to be included and taken seriously in the discipline. There is to this extent Islamic, Indian, or Chinese philosophy insofar as they fit into this predetermined framework, without any thought or inquiry whether the opposite could be the case.¹⁴

This situation applies to Greek-Chinese comparative work, where the former is often taken as the unquestioned reference point by which to analyse (unilaterally) the latter.

Let us consider one relevant example of this kind of asymmetry¹⁵ within recent Greek-Chinese comparative philosophy. In a paper that places the burden on

¹⁴ Nelson (2017, 4). Nelson interestingly argues that a more felicitous approach, characterized by the “multi-perspectivity and multi-directionality of thinking” (2017, 4), finds a blueprint in the *Zhuangzi* itself, especially in chapter 17 (2017, 141–149; see also Cantor 2023, 66, n. 20). Compare Beane’s association of “connective perspectivism” (2021) and “the virtues of open mindedness and ajar-mindedness” (forthcoming) with the *Zhuangzi*.

¹⁵ For the ‘asymmetry’ worry in relation to comparative engagement with Chinese philosophy, see Shun (2009, 470; 2016, 59); Kohn (2014, 199–200); Angle (2013, 228); Defoort (2001, 393–394); Wong (2020 [2001]); and Zheng (2005 [2001], 20–21). For a similar worry of asymmetry (likewise predicated on the ‘Western’ vs ‘non-Western’ axis) in the case of comparative engagement with Indian philosophy, see Krishna (2011, 59–61). For the worry of asymmetry in comparative literature, where ‘Western’ literatures and theories are most often taken as a basis for analysing ‘non-Western’ ones (and not the other way around), see Dutton (2012). For the “problem of asymmetric ignorance” in history, wherein “[t]hird-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate”, see Chakrabarty (2000, 28). For the general problem of a “hidden agenda” aimed at establishing the “superiority of one group’s views” underlying certain forms of comparatism, see Lloyd (2015, 29; see also 30–31).

classical Chinese philosophy to prove that it has metaphysics – and more specifically, to prove that it has metaphysics by the lights of a distinctly *post-Parmenidean* and *Aristotelian* conception of metaphysics – the scholar of Greek-Chinese comparative philosophy Jiyuan Yu (2011, 146) writes that:

It would be helpful if we could study whether Chinese cosmology is subjected to the challenge of Parmenides. Chinese cosmology focuses on change; yet has it provided an account of change that can survive Parmenides' criticism? Are Chinese cosmologies doctrines supported by intellectual argument? Has Chinese cosmology reflected upon the conditions of its own enquiry? Can it establish its secure point of departure?

Although this Thesis explores affinities and points of difference between Parmenidean monism and early Daoist cosmologies (discussed in Chapter 5), it also turns the challenge on its head: what happens when *Parmenides'* thought is subjected to Zhuangzi's sceptical challenges? Has Parmenides sufficiently reflected upon the conditions of his own inquiry? Can his epistemology start from solid foundations?¹⁶

The dialogical approach can deliver on what is often taken to be the promise of 'comparative philosophy': that of bringing to the surface deeply entrenched assumptions or sets of priorities within *each* of the scholarly traditions concerned, which do not have an obvious basis in the texts or authors themselves.

¹⁶ Note however that Yu's comparative method of 'saving the phenomena' (inspired by Aristotle) posits that Chinese philosophy (like Greek philosophy) can in principle offer up "genuine insights that are not culturally bound" (2007, 4; see also Yu 2011, 139; Yu and Bunnin 2001).

§2. The myth of ‘radical incommensurability’ and the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy

We have seen that radical incommensurability is a non-starter. Yet the claim is often aired that ‘non-Western’ philosophical discussions are *radically* incommensurable with those arising in e.g. Greek philosophy. In Chapters 1–2 we will see that these kinds of anxieties about radical incommensurability and mutual unintelligibility have commonly preoccupied scholars under the guise of a different set of questions: implicit in the question whether Chinese and Greek philosophy are at all commensurable, is the question whether Chinese thought even counts as philosophy *at all*. What is tacitly assumed here is that what *really* counts as philosophy is ‘Western Philosophy’, so that any philosophical tradition considered ‘non-Western’ is forced to face the challenge as to whether it counts as a philosophical tradition. By contrast, whatever is taken to be ‘Western Philosophy’ – say, Greek philosophy – is not subjected to the same kind of scrutiny as to whether it constitutes a philosophical tradition with which we (as modern historians of philosophy and/or philosophers) can fruitfully engage.

A genuinely dialogical approach to ancient philosophical traditions, of the kind I adopt in this Thesis, moves beyond the ‘double bind’ which often plagues comparative engagement with Greek and Chinese philosophy: namely, that of either entirely assimilating Chinese philosophy into Greek philosophy (so that no room is made for the text under scrutiny being at all distinctive from Greek philosophy), or of making Chinese philosophy out to be radically different from Greek philosophy, to the point of making meaningful philosophical dialogue impossible.¹⁷

¹⁷ For the ‘double bind’, see further Bernasconi (2003 [1996], 572) and related discussions in Chapter 1, §4.2 below.

Critics of the first extreme have rightly denounced the tendency to force ‘non-Western’ ideas and thinkers into the mould of a Eurocentric canon of philosophy, pointing out that this distorts or erases the specificities of the texts and thinkers at issue.¹⁸ In attempting to counteract this dynamic, however, it can be tempting to place *too much* emphasis on radical difference. This easily results in the opposite extreme which we already considered: that of declaring ‘non-Western’ traditions thoroughly incommensurable with European or ‘Western’ philosophy, even to the point of denying their common philosophical character. While this kind of extreme can have different motivations (some more benign than others, as we will see), it ultimately reproduces a Eurocentric discourse according to which only Greek philosophy (and by extension European or ‘Western’ Philosophy) has a claim to being philosophy proper.

As Jonardon Ganeri (2016a, 136) argues, in the worst case the driver is the residual colonial-era discourse whereby “[t]he colonial power had philosophy, the rest of the world has only what was described as “culture”, or more condescendingly still, “wisdom tradition””. Unfortunately, this kind of bias inherited from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European historiography (upon which I expand in Chapters 1–2) continues to inform still-current prejudices. It is not entirely uncommon today to read that Chinese philosophy is akin to ‘fortune cookie’ sayings.¹⁹ However in some cases the dismissiveness of the label ‘philosophy’ in relation to Chinese thought is motivated by a genuine concern to respect the tradition’s distinctiveness and specificity – a motivation voiced, for example, by

¹⁸ See n. 15 above.

¹⁹ Van Norden (2017, 12) has drawn attention to the late US Justice Antonin Scalia’s invocation of this prejudice (with reference to Confucius) in 2015. Grayling (2020 [2019], 559) repeats the derogatory cliché in relation to the *Classic of Changes* or *Yijing* 易經.

some postcolonial and poststructuralist thinkers as well as by some Sinologists, as we will shortly see.

§3. Derrida and Chinese philosophy: a cautionary tale

To better appreciate the pitfalls of this dismissive extreme in its more subtle or ‘benign’ garb, let us consider briefly a claim which the French poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida infamously made while on a visit to Shanghai in 2001, to the effect that China lacks philosophy but has thought. Following Sean Meighoo (2016), I take this anecdote as an apt ‘cautionary tale’ for how the discourse on radical incommensurability easily descends into ethnocentrism, even where the author purports (as Derrida does) to be motivated by the exact opposite aspiration.

Accounts of the event survive only in Chinese, with some discrepancies as to the exact wording Derrida used.²⁰ What *is* clear is that the Chinese scholars present at the time were appalled by the substance of Derrida’s declaration, since it seemed to revive the old position – typical of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Eurocentric narratives – according to which China lacked a *philosophical* tradition of its own. Interestingly, however, Derrida reportedly denied endorsing a Eurocentric-supremacist position, insisting the statement was meant “without praise or criticism” (*bing bu han you baobian* 并不含有褒贬), and without any implication of “cultural hegemony” (*wenhua baquan* 文化霸权). This can be explained by the fact that Derrida saw himself as carrying out a project of ‘deconstruction’ predicated on *challenging* (what he took to be) philosophy, and,

²⁰ Based on the reports we have, it appears that Derrida declared either that (i) 中国没有哲学, 但有思想 (“China has no philosophy, *but* [dan 但] thought”) or (ii): 中国没有哲学, 只有思想 (“China has no philosophy, *only* [zhi 只] thought”). The French has thus been reconstructed as “*La Chine n’a pas de philosophie, (i) mais / (ii) seulement la pensée*”. See Zhang (2019 [2016], 23) and Defoort (2006, 628, with n. 25).

more specifically, what he took to be its ‘logocentric’ character. Indeed his writings suggest that he sought to expose what he saw as the inescapably ‘logocentric’ and even ‘ethnocentric’ features of philosophy.²¹

We might nevertheless wonder, with some of Derrida’s critics, whether the conception of philosophy that he took for granted – one which foregrounded the role of the ‘Presocratics’, Plato, Hegel, Heidegger, and Saussure, and which he equated with “the totality of the history of the Occident” – wasn’t itself ethnocentric.²² Rather tellingly, Derrida reportedly justified his claim that China lacks philosophy by suggesting that philosophy just *is* ‘Western philosophy’ – that is, of a purely European form, the supposed “product of a specific time and environment”, with its origins allegedly going back to ancient Greece.²³ His critical project reinscribed a variant of the ethnocentric assumption which he had set out to criticize. Yijing Zhang (2019 [2016], 24) has remarked that “[b]y reducing China to that which the West is not, all we see in it *is* the West. In other words, we remain stuck in logocentrism”.²⁴ As David Wong (2020 [2001]) cautions, the urge to look to the Chinese tradition for what “one may perceive as lacking in one’s own tradition” – in this case, the (putative) absence of logocentrism – results in a kind

²¹ See e.g. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (2016 [1967], 3–4) for what he presents as the intimate relationship between “logocentrism”, “ethnocentrism”, and “the imperialism of logos”.

²² See Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (2016 [1967], 3, 77–78). Critics include Bernasconi (1997, 213); Spivak (2016 [1998], cvi); Meighoo (2008, 166); Jirn (2015); Nelson (2017, 204); Van Norden (2017, 25); and Zhang (2019 [2016], 24).

²³ According to the report of his conversation with the Chinese scholar Wang Yuanhua 王元化 (1920–2008), Derrida justified the claim with the following statement: “Western philosophy is a product of a specific time and environment, and its source is Greece.” (西方的哲学是一个特定时间和环境的产物，它的源头是希腊。) See Du and Zhang (2002, 139) and Defoort (2006, 628).

²⁴ See similarly Nelson (2017, 204) and Bernasconi (1997, 213). Jenco (2007, 741–745) more generally gestures at the ethnocentric tension that arises in relying on poststructuralist thought in contexts of comparative and cross-cultural engagement.

of reverse “Orientalism”, where “the radical other is now superior”, or depicted as superior.²⁵

This anecdote is instructive, for a number of interrelated reasons.

First, it suggests that even in cases where the intent is to *criticize* over-assimilation in the name of cultural difference, over-emphasizing the historical *singularity* of marginalized traditions actually creates the opposite problem: that of rendering them so alien as to be unphilosophical. This is a high price to pay. The issue is not simply that philosophy carries great institutional prestige, which it would be naïve to deny plays a role in the evaluation of the relative merits of intellectual traditions, as well as in determining which ones are deemed worthy of being studied, taught, and so on.²⁶ Beyond these kinds of socio-political and pragmatic considerations, also at stake is the question of epistemic justice. The denial that non-European traditions have philosophy threatens to recreate European colonial discourses according to which people outside of Europe are incapable of rigorous, critical, rational thought, and implicitly to legitimate spurious claims about the intellectual superiority of Europeans.²⁷ As Jonardon Ganeri (2016a, 135) has remarked:

This colonial use of reason represented itself as impartial, objective and universal but was in fact anything but, and that was its first dishonesty. Its second was the way it defended its claims to impartiality and universality over and against competing claims from outside. It did not engage in honest debate, philosopher to philosopher, but instead dismissed the alternative’s claim to universality altogether.

²⁵ For the influential idea of “Orientalism”, see the eponymous book by Said (1978). For Derrida’s attitudes to logocentrism as “reverse ethnocentrism”, see Spivak (2016 [1998], cvi).

²⁶ See Bernasconi (1997, 213; 2003 [1996], 568, 572) and Defoort (2017; 2020, 222).

²⁷ For epistemic injustice, see Fricker (2007); for Eurocentrism in philosophy as a kind of epistemic injustice, see Alcoff (2017, esp. 400) and Posholi (2020); for Eurocentrism as a form of ‘white ignorance’, see Mills (2022 [2015]; see also 2007).

This brings me to a second problem, which is anticipated by Ganeri's observation. Denying the philosophical credentials of 'non-Western' traditions has the effect of stripping them of any claims to universality, instead relegating them to having merely local and/or historical interest – rather than offering (at least some) insights and concepts of universal applicability that transcend their historical and cultural origin.²⁸ Once again, we run up against a version of the asymmetry problem discussed earlier, whereby only so-called 'Western Philosophy' is afforded attention as offering insights of trans-historical relevance and trans-cultural applicability.

A third takeaway is that the slippage between philosophy *as such* and 'Western Philosophy' is rooted in a parochial conception of philosophy as being essentially and inescapably entwined with Greek *logos* and its legacy in later philosophy. Indeed, while it may be intended as a critique of philosophy, the fact remains that Derrida's emphasis on *logocentrism* underpins a distinctly exclusionary metaphilosophical picture which presupposes the 'Westernness' of philosophy all along. Such blind spots around the unquestioned idea of a 'Western Philosophy' with a monopoly on philosophical rationality are by no means specific to Derrida, or to 'continental' authors. Indeed, it is worth noting that even some Sinologists today consider as Eurocentric the very project of broadening the scope of what is (institutionally) recognized as philosophy to include Chinese thinkers, and instead suggest that we should curtail the imposition of a 'Western' framework

²⁸ See also Shun (2009, 473) for this point. Note that one of the great modern historians of Chinese philosophy, Feng Youlan 冯友兰 (1895–1990), was animated by the conviction that "parts of classical Chinese philosophy have a contribution to make to the elevating of man's spiritual sphere and in solving universal problems in human life. In this lies its lasting value" (2000 [1984], 373). At the end of his life he lamented that "Chinese traditional philosophy has always been regarded as a part of sinological studies and is considered as having no relation to philosophy" (1991, 209; cited and translated in Defoort 2006, 625).

(supposedly) originating in ancient Greece onto, *inter alia*, the ancient Chinese tradition of masters (*zhuzi* 諸子).²⁹

However, all of these positions presuppose the problematic reification of a ‘Western Philosophy’ as a unitary, self-evident, and hermetically sealed ‘tradition’ stretching from the ancient Greeks to present-day Europe, with a privileged claim to philosophical rationality. I challenge these assumptions systematically in Chapter 1.

§4. Ancient philosophy within a global purview

§4.1. Dismantling the origin story of ‘Western Philosophy’

One of the scholars who has highlighted the residual ethnocentrism built into Derrida’s project of deconstruction in greatest detail, Sean Meighoo (2016, xii–xiii), has proposed that “the very concept of the West must be dismantled”. This, he suggests, must involve “dismantling the origin of the West”. Chapter 1 undertakes this task, focusing on the origin story of ‘Western Philosophy’, and highlighting what is more broadly at stake for the history of philosophy within a global purview. In particular, I criticize the role which an alleged shift from *mythos* to *logos* in ancient Greece plays in mainstream accounts of philosophy’s history. I argue that this origin story underlies the characterization of ‘Western Philosophy’ as being essentially interchangeable with philosophy as such, to the exclusion of all else. In the context of ancient philosophy, this results in spotlighting Greek and Roman philosophy, at the expense of all other ancient traditions – including those with a genealogical connection to ancient Greece (e.g. Egyptian, Babylonian,

²⁹ For an overview of this position, see e.g. Defoort (2001, 396–397; 2006, 628–629); Dyck (2005, 14); and Slingerland (2019, 271–273).

Persian, and Indian philosophy), as well as those for the most part historically unconnected to it (e.g. Chinese philosophy). This tendency is manifest, to greater and lesser degrees, in the works of ‘continental’ as well as analytic authors. Some, like Hegel and many analytically oriented historians of philosophy, would celebrate the centrality of reason or *logos* in ‘Western’ philosophy and decry its absence elsewhere. Others, like Derrida and several other ‘continental’ philosophers, would bemoan ‘Western’ logocentrism.³⁰ All, however, forgo the possibility of genuine philosophical dialogue with ‘non-Western’ traditions. This Thesis seeks to move beyond such an impasse by taking aim at the very idea of a Greek-originating ‘Western Philosophy’ (Chapter 1), thereby clearing the ground for constructive and more genuine engagement with two major philosophers in the Greek and Chinese traditions on a specific philosophical issue: that of expressing what can (and cannot) be known (Chapters 2–5).

§4.2. Back to the texts

Parmenides, our protagonist on the Greek side of the case study, is celebrated as *the* rationalist par excellence of ‘Western Philosophy’, and indeed of philosophy *tout court* (the two being largely perceived as interchangeable in many areas of scholarship). He is seen as inaugurating an almost miraculous revolution in metaphysics, logic, and all subsequent philosophy. As discussed in Chapter 2, the implicit *mythos-logos* model that underpins such characterizations encourages a reading of Parmenides as embracing distinctly *optimistic* attitudes toward knowledge. The more this narrative gets repeated, the greater the urge to read Parmenides as a thinker bent on *unreservedly* vindicating the powers of human

³⁰ See Meighoo (2016, 44–45).

reasoning. I argue that seeing Parmenides as a *triumphalist* rationalist is textually and philosophically problematic.³¹ This has wide-ranging implications for the *status quaestionis* as to what Parmenides' attitudes to knowledge are meant to be. My proposal is that the ossified view of Parmenides as an unmitigated epistemological optimist misses the true depth and nuance of his second-order sensibilities.

The challenges we face in the Chinese part of our inquiry evince the underside of the flawed macro-narrative of 'Western Philosophy'. Daoist thinkers like Zhuangzi have been branded irrational, illogical, mystical, nihilistic, unreasoned – even *unphilosophical* – for as long as the Greeks have been championed as the initiators and figureheads of philosophical rationality (for reasons elaborated further in Chapters 1–2). Scholars have therefore been slow to take the measure of Zhuangzi's contributions to early epistemology. Indeed, recent scholarship continues vastly to underestimate Zhuangzi's circumspect reflections on the conditions of possibility of knowledge, and how this informs his idiosyncratic and at times subversive use of language, literary masks, and analogies. I submit that still-prevalent characterizations of Zhuangzi as gratuitously playful or sophistical, as an anti-language mystic, or as a negative dogmatist who denies the possibility of objective knowledge are in no small measure the result of interpretive blind spots emerging from macro-narratives that underplay the philosophical sophistication of classical Chinese texts.

In a nutshell, this Thesis argues that general biases about the history of philosophy and about the role of certain players within it – in this case, Parmenides

³¹ Though vague, the label 'rationalist' may still be defensible depending on how one understands 'rationalism'. The implicit move to *triumphalist* rationalism, however, is unwarranted, as I argue in Chapters 2–5.

and Zhuangzi – have prevented us from entertaining certain interpretive options; and that, by clearing away such biases, we can better spell out and assess these new possibilities. The value of the dialogical approach does not lie in its *putting on the table* altogether new interpretive hypotheses of the two thinkers under investigation – for that can (and indeed should) be done on the basis of a close reading of the textual evidence in a way that is sensitive to its historical and cultural context. Nor does its interest lie in *confirming* a given interpretation (which, after all, would be question-begging). Rather, the heuristic value of the dialogical approach lies in its helping us flesh out and better understand the implications and plausibility of various possible interpretations which should already be up for consideration. Thus the ways in which I propose to re-orient our reading of Parmenides and Zhuangzi on the issue of knowledge and its limits (and of what can be said of such limits), do not themselves *depend* on the dialogical perspective, even if they are fruitfully enriched by such a perspective.³² My conclusions are equally based on close readings of the texts, and it is my hope that they will be received as not just interesting, but also plausible, by scholars working on the two traditions entirely separately.

To recapitulate, Chapter 1 exposes a seemingly obsolete, yet persistent, macro-narrative concerning the Greek origins of philosophy, which according to many specialists of ancient philosophy has long fallen into disrepute. In Chapters

³² The idea that Parmenides is not the epistemological optimist that most interpreters take him to be is a feature of both Mackenzie's (1982) and Cherubin's (2017) interpretations. However, both assume that Parmenides is a numerical monist, an interpretive *parti pris* which, as discussed in Chapters 4–5, I do not take to be necessary. Aspects of my interpretation of Parmenides' second-order sensibilities are also anticipated by Long (1996), Tor (2015; 2017; forthcoming a), and Mansfeld (1985a, 61) – all of whom stress that Parmenides was centrally interested in the problem of knowledge. However, I part ways with their interpretations in challenging the supposition that Parmenides displayed unmitigated epistemological optimism. My interpretation of Zhuangzi's scepticism builds especially on Wong's (2005; see also 2006, 2017, 2022) reading of Zhuangzi as a radical interrogative sceptic, although our approaches differ on how to understand some of the more 'constructive' aspects of Zhuangzi's scepticism.

2–5 I examine how this same narrative nevertheless creates major interpretive blind spots within specialist work on ancient philosophy, focusing on the cases of Parmenides and Zhuangzi.

I show how problematic assumptions inherited from mainstream macro-narratives prime us to see Parmenides as exhibiting thoroughly optimistic attitudes toward human knowledge, and Zhuangzi as either an anti-rational mystic who dismisses language or as a negative dogmatist who rejects objective knowledge (Chapter 2). I demonstrate that adopting a dialogical approach to specific questions in epistemology as they arise in Parmenides and Zhuangzi helps substantiate alternative interpretive routes which have been obscured by received historiographical frameworks. I bring Zhuangzi and Parmenides in dialogue on the issue of the limits of human cognition (Chapter 3); on the potential of analogies and indirect argumentation to push the boundaries of what can be known (Chapter 4); and finally, on whether numerical monism is defensible (Chapter 5).

From these inquiries, Parmenides emerges as someone quite other than the unmitigated epistemological optimist he is usually assumed to be, which raises fruitful questions about the status of his constructive claims. Conversely, Zhuangzi is not the anti-rationalist or negative dogmatist he is widely taken to be; instead, his own circumspect stance on the question of what can (and cannot) be known leads him to forgo all unqualified claims to knowledge.

At a metaphilosophical level, this approach allows us to dispel certain biases characterizing historically influential accounts of philosophy and of global thought generally, which tend to understate the philosophical value of non-European texts like the *Zhuangzi*. This dismissiveness often relies on facile and caricatured comparisons to Greek texts, amplifying misconceptions about the nature of Greek

philosophy itself. At the level of first-order philosophical analysis, a proper critique of received historiographical frameworks permits us to revisit the thought of Parmenides and Zhuangzi in a manner that suggests novel interpretive possibilities. The dialogical approach helps us unpack and assess these new ways of considering, and appreciating, how Parmenides and Zhuangzi – each distinctively, and self-reflectively – engaged with the problem of what can be known and said about reality.

Chapter 1 – From *mythos* to *logos*? The spurious origin story of ‘Western Philosophy’¹

Overview

Histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ commonly endorse a stark *mythos-logos* distinction to justify a ‘Greek beginning’ of philosophy. Even self-described “unconventional” or “critical” histories, like Karen Warren’s *Unconventional History of Western Philosophy* (2009, 29) or Yakub Masih’s *Critical History of Western Philosophy* (2002 [1994], 1–5), explicitly present the “shift from *mythos* to *logos*” as the origin of ‘Western Philosophy’. These accounts largely present rationality as having emerged at a particular historical moment: the earliest Greek philosophers, the story goes, moved away from religion and mythology and *discovered* or even *invented* rationality, marking the birth of philosophy.

This kind of narrative may strike the specialist of ancient Greek philosophy as outdated and simplistic – if not obviously mistaken. The issue might even seem unworthy of serious scholarly attention. But that would underestimate vastly how the framework still widely informs contemporary scholarship in the history of philosophy as well as specialist work in ancient philosophy.

In §1 I show that the flawed *mythos-logos* narrative underlies a much larger story still current in general historiographical literature: namely, the supposed birth

¹ This chapter is based on a longer paper co-authored with Josh Platzky Miller (under review); all of the sections pertaining to ancient philosophy, some of the sections on the historiography of ‘Western Philosophy’, as well as part of the introduction and conclusion of that paper were written by me. References to the fragments of ‘Presocratic’ philosophers are to the editions of Diels–Kranz (‘DK’, 1951–1952 [1903]) and Laks–Most (‘LM’, 2016). The letters ‘A’ or ‘B’ followed by a number refer to the relevant passage in Sections ‘A’ or ‘B’ respectively of DK; the letters ‘D’, ‘R’, or ‘P’ followed by a number refer to the relevant passage in Sections ‘D’, ‘R’, or ‘P’ respectively of LM.

of a ‘Western Philosophy’ in ancient Greece. To provide context on the Greek terms concerned, I first discuss the ancient distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, arguing that it does not track any coherent view about the origins or development of philosophy. I then discuss twentieth- and twenty-first-century histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ that nevertheless invoke such a formula.

In §2 I consider three interconnected defences of the idea that philosophy originated among the Greeks which have been exploited by authors of these histories. The first is the claim that the early Greek philosophers (i) ‘invented’ or ‘discovered’ *rationality*; the second is that they supposedly (ii) abandoned their predecessors’ mythologies and religious assumptions in favour of a strictly philosophical or *scientific* mode of reasoning; the third is that they (iii) were *secular* or even *anti-religious*. I consider these claims in turn, and show why they are baseless.

In §3 I consider whether the *mythos-logos* narrative can be salvaged based on a weaker conceptual distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, whereby the emergence of Greek philosophy is conceived as the endpoint of a gradual shift from *mythos* towards *logos*. I argue however that the framework’s teleological implication of progressive *rationalization*, *naturalization* or even *secularization* risks over-determining or running afoul of the evidence, just as the cruder framework does.

In §4 I show that dispensing with the *mythos-logos* framework of Greek philosophy has important ramifications for the study of other traditions as well. Over the last two to three centuries, Eurocentric scholars have presented the Chinese tradition, like other ‘non-Western’ traditions, as not being ‘real’ philosophy – because it is supposedly not truly argumentative, reasoned, scientific,

or secular. I argue that abandoning the fetters of the *mythos-logos* framework frees up space for marginalized philosophical texts and authors to be engaged with on their own terms and within the broader history of philosophy, without being hamstrung by an illusory set of standards. This reveals pathways yet to be explored in the study of ancient philosophy within a global purview.

§1. The *mythos-logos* narrative of ‘Western Philosophy’

§1.1. *The ancient distinction*

The Greek term *mythos* does not correspond precisely to our modern sense of myth as ‘false story’, nor are its connotations necessarily negative.² A common post-Homeric usage is that of ‘unverifiable speech’. As the Thucydidean usage suggests, this can imply speech that lacks credibility.³ However, *mythos* is originally neutral with regard to the question of truth.⁴ A striking use of *mythos* in the neutral sense of ‘story’ appears in Parmenides’ poem, wherein it is closely associated with the path of ‘reality’ (*Alētheia*; DK28=LM29 B8.1=D8.6).⁵ Like *mythos*, in some cases *logos* means nothing more than ‘speech’, without any truth-value necessarily being attached to it.⁶ Thus Herodotus sometimes uses *logos* to mean ‘story’ even when he does not believe it to be true (Herodotus II.16).⁷ The ancient *mythos-logos* distinction therefore appears to be primarily *polemical* and

² Morgan (2000, 15–45).

³ See Sassi (2018 [2009], 19) and Morgan (2000, 17–18) on antecedents for this usage in Homer and Hesiod. For Thucydides’ contrast between myth and historical truth, see Williams (2002, 149–171); for the claim that such a distinction is found (implicitly) in Herodotus as well, see Fowler (2011, 61).

⁴ Laks (2018 [2006], 38).

⁵ See similarly Empedocles DK31=LM22 B114.1=D6.1.

⁶ See Fowler (2011, 52) and Lloyd (1990, 44–45).

⁷ Morgan (2000, 19–20). Fowler (2011, 46–48, 51–52, 61) argues that in Herodotus *mythos* is connected to unknowable and unfalsifiable speech, implying unreliability if not untruth. However he also recognizes that the evidence is under-determined, since the term is used only twice in Herodotus (II.23, II.45), and in such instances *mythos* is not contrasted to *logos*.

context-dependent,⁸ rather than being conceptually grounded as the modern historiographical scheme implies. The distinction often tracks an author's efforts to represent what they themselves are doing, or what they themselves believe to be true, as *logos*; while what their predecessors or opponents do or believe is presented as amounting to (mere) *mythos*⁹ – the point being to discredit rival accounts as unreliable or false.

Still, one could try to draw a conceptual distinction as follows. At times, the ancients understood *mythos* as an account relying on revelation or divine authority. This was sometimes contrasted to *logos*, understood as a distinctly *argumentative* account. *Prima facie* Plato seems a good candidate for this conceptual distinction, as the first Greek thinker to invoke, in the *Republic*, an “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (X.607b5–6).¹⁰ However, elsewhere in the *Republic* (II.336e11), rather than opposing *logos* to *mythos*, he distinguishes between two types of *logoi*: the one true and the other false. It is true that he here aligns (certain kinds of) *mythoi* with false *logoi*, but not unqualifiedly: the *mythoi* we tell our children – such as the poets' stories – are *on the whole* false, even if there is *some truth in them* (377a4–6).¹¹ The categories of *mythos* and *logos* are also opposed in the *Protagoras* (324d6–7), implying a distinction between ‘story’ (what poets do) and ‘argument’ (what philosophers do).¹²

⁸ Lloyd (1990, esp. 43–72).

⁹ Lloyd (1990, 45) traces such a trend to fifth century BCE authors (including Herodotus).

¹⁰ The ‘Presocratics’, however, probably did not see themselves as being inherently opposed to the poetic tradition. See Boys-Stones (2001, 33; with n. 14); Tor (2017, 54); and Frede (2000 [1996], 6–7; 2009 [2004], 502, 524). On the term *philosophos* and its cognates in the late sixth and fifth century BCE, see Moore (2020, 1–106); Laks (2018 [2006], 40–48); Frede (2009 [2004], 523–524); and Cantor (2022, 729–730, with n. 9).

¹¹ See Fowler (2011, 49).

¹² Partenie (2022 [2009]). Fowler (2011, 49–50, 58) highlights this passage as evidence for a ‘Sophistic’ *mythos-logos* dichotomy. Notice that the *mythos-logos* distinction here harks back to Hesiod's tale of Prometheus, which is however associated with both *mythos* and *logos* (at *Works and Days* 10 and 106 respectively). See Haubold (2010) and Boys-Stones (2010, 41, n. 19).

A strict dichotomy, however, is unfounded. Plato frequently suggests that doctrines ascribed to Presocratic philosophers have more ancient roots in poets. In the *Theaetetus*, the doctrine of universal flux is associated both with “sages” (οἱ σοφοί, 152e2) identified as familiar early Greek philosophers including Heraclitus and Empedocles, as well as “poets” (152e4), namely Epicharmus and Homer. Later in the dialogue, Socrates even declares that the doctrines of Homer and Heraclitus are identical (160d6–8). In the *Cratylus*, Socrates implies that Heraclitus’ views on flux have precedents in Hesiod, Homer, and Orpheus (402b5–10). In the *Gorgias* (523a2–3), he suggests that a certain *Homeric* tale amounts to a *logos*, although others regard it as (mere) *mythos*.¹³ While Plato does not call Hesiod and Homer philosophers,¹⁴ he certainly saw some of their ideas as philosophically relevant.¹⁵ Furthermore, Plato sometimes describes clearly philosophical theories as *mythoi* (e.g. *Theaetetus* 164d9 and 156c4). Particularly striking is Plato’s dismissal as mere *mythoi* of early Greek philosophers’ theories (this time, Parmenides, Xenophanes, and Heraclitus) in the *Sophist* (242c4–e1). *Mythos* here is not an *unphilosophical* ‘traditional story’; Plato rather takes issue with these philosophers’ lack of clarity and lack of regard for their audience – a charge which he presumably also deemed applicable to some of the poets’ stories.¹⁶

¹³ For another *mythos-logos* distinction in the same dialogue – the force of which is *not* one of mutual exclusiveness – see *Gorgias* 505c7–d3.

¹⁴ Note however that Plato refers to Hesiod as a ‘sage’ (*sophos*) (*Republic* V.466b4–c3; *Laws* IV. 718d7–719a2) – a term he also uses to refer to Thales. In the *Lysis*, Socrates presents the poets positively, functioning as “fathers and conductors in wisdom” (214a1–2). See Cantor (2022, 731, with n. 20).

¹⁵ In the *Lysis* (215c–d) Hesiod is associated with a certain view on the nature of love, which reappears in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* (Boys-Stones 2010, 46–48). Hesiod also informs Plato’s discussions on the nature of language (Koning 2010b, 102–110), and is framed as a forerunner of Socrates’ arguments for justice (Van Noorden 2010, 177). See also *Meno* 81a–b, where the views of “priests and priestesses” and “poets” are invoked as part of the recollection argument.

¹⁶ For echoes between this passage and Aristotle’s dismissiveness of Empedocles as well as poets like Hesiod at *Metaphysics* III.4, 1000a9–29, see Cantor (2022, 724, with n. 40) and Barney (2012, 89–90, with n. 53). Sassi (2018 [2009], 21) argues that where Plato speaks unfavourably about *mythos*, such as in this instance, the sticking point lies not in its putative irrationality but in its methodological inadequacy.

As part of his philosophical argumentation, Plato himself deploys myths in his dialogues – many of them rooted in Homeric, Hesiodic, and non-Greek mythology.¹⁷ Thus the very same theory may be both a *logos* and a *mythos*. This occurs, for instance, in the *Timaeus*, whose cosmogony is identified variously as a plausible (or ‘likely,’ *eikōs*) *mythos* (29d2; 59c6; 68d2), but more often as a plausible (or ‘likely,’ *eikōs*) *logos* (30b7; 48d2; 53d5–6; 55d5; 56a1; 57d6; 90e8).¹⁸ Myles Burnyeat has argued that this cosmogony attempts to unveil the *rationality* of the cosmos (hence, it is a *logos*), but it is also a *mythos*: a kind of *revelation*, anchored in the (Hesiodic) tradition of theogony.¹⁹ Plato’s cosmology thus subverts a binary *mythos-logos* opposition, and thoroughly undermines the assumption that myths are necessarily irrational or unphilosophical.²⁰

The idea that the *mythos-logos* distinction is polemically driven is confirmed by the fact that in Plato the philosopher may deploy *mythoi*, and the ‘mythologist’ (e.g. Homer or Hesiod) may expound philosophical (including metaphysical) theories. If there is a binary at all, it looks less like a dichotomy and more like a *continuum*, with *mythos* and *logos* as its two poles.

A polemical *mythos-logos* distinction is also operative in Aristotle’s writings. Thomas Johansen (1999) has shown that Aristotle tends to use the term *mythos* (as opposed to *logos*) when his opponent’s account diverges from his own

¹⁷ For the centrality of myth to Plato’s philosophical argumentation, see Murray (1999, 260); Rowe (1999); Morgan (2000, 15–17); Partenie (2022 [2009]); and Fowler (2011, 65).

¹⁸ See Burnyeat (2009); Sassi (2018 [2009], 2); and Osborne (1996, 185). Partenie (2022 [2009]) remarks that Plato refers to the myth of Boreas in the *Phaedrus* as both *mythologēma* (229c5) and *logos* (229d2). For other examples, see Fowler (2011, 64).

¹⁹ After all, the created cosmos in the *Timaeus* is also a god (Burnyeat 2009, 168, 179). Betegh (2010, 221) further argues that Timaeus’ conception of *logos* can *encompass* mythical accounts. By contrast, Bryan (2012, 163–191) argues that *eikōs mythos* implies “mortals’ inability to confirm their account” (163); this is distinct from “divine capability to achieve confirmation” (163) in *eikōs logos*, which humans can achieve through astronomy (*Timaeus* 90b1–d7).

²⁰ Betegh (2009) also highlights commonalities between the narrative structure of myth and Plato’s method of teleological explanation in the *Phaedo*. The latter, he argues, gets developed into the cosmology of the *Timaeus* (2010, 222–224).

theoretical presuppositions, rather than being demonstrably unempirical or nonrational. At times Aristotle is even willing to dismiss first-hand empirical reports as *mythoi* simply because they contradict his theories.²¹

In other contexts Aristotle uses *mythos* positively, suggesting continuity between the “myth-teller” (the *mythologos*) and the empirical observer. Specifically, *mythos* sometimes refers to trying to explain a *puzzling* observation,²² including in biological contexts.²³ *Mythoi* also often function as *endoxa* (‘reputable’ or ‘received’ opinions), which are of central importance to Aristotle’s philosophical methodology.²⁴ In one biological work, Aristotle associates what is said “mythically” (*mythikōs*) with a theory in accordance with reason (*kata logon*).²⁵ Such close association between *mythos* and *logos* should come as no surprise. Aristotle’s methodology involves “laying down the phenomena”, which prescribes that stories, beliefs, and observations may all count as *endoxa*.²⁶ Indeed, “[t]he *muthos* is part of the endoxic material out of which Aristotle builds his own theories”.²⁷

The idea that a *mythos-logos* dichotomy supposedly tracks a distinction between what is and is not philosophy is, nevertheless, widely attributed to Aristotle – based on his distinction between theologians (*theologoi*), who tend to be associated with cosmogonical myths, and natural philosophers (*physiologoi*). Yet

²¹ See Johansen’s (1999, 281–283) discussion of *De Generatione Animalium* 756b4–14.

²² See Johansen (1999, 283–284) for a discussion of the evidence (especially *Historia Animalium* 579b2–8 and *Historia Animalium* 580a17).

²³ See *Metaphysics* I.2, 982b12–21.

²⁴ See Johansen (1999, 285); Owen (1961); Burnyeat (1986); and Frede (2009 [2004], 523).

²⁵ *De Motu Animalium* 699a27–32; see Johansen (1999, 285). The association between empirical observation and *mythoi* is also present in Epicurus, though in the latter it more specifically tracks a kind of dogmatism involved in *arbitrarily* endorsing a particular account of the phenomena, when several accounts agree with the sense data (*Letter to Pythocles* §§104, 115, 116; see Laks 2018 [2006], 39).

²⁶ Nussbaum (1986, 479, n. 13).

²⁷ Johansen (1999, 287).

this mistakenly assumes that natural philosophy is, for Aristotle, straightforwardly interchangeable with philosophy *as such*. It also overlooks the fact that he envisioned significant continuities between cosmogonical myths and natural philosophy, not least in the realm of metaphysics.²⁸ While we can make some allowance for a conceptual contrast between what the myth-lover does and what the philosopher *par excellence* does, the difference is one which nevertheless allows for an important measure of continuity.²⁹

Finally, there is the issue of cyclical history. Across his corpus, Aristotle famously asserted that the same philosophical truths have appeared infinitely many times throughout human history.³⁰ In one crucial passage of the *Metaphysics* (XII.8, 1074a38–b14), he plainly asserts that philosophy has *repeatedly* developed *to the utmost* and perished again, suggesting that mature philosophical theories were developed in previous cycles of human civilization (extending beyond the Greek world), *prior* to being transmitted in mythological form (ἐν μύθου σχήματι, 1074b1–2). Thus Aristotle would not even grant the idea of an *absolute, single* beginning of philosophy (gradual or otherwise), given his cyclical theory of philosophical development.³¹ Clearly, for Aristotle, the ‘beginning’ of philosophy cannot be understood by a linear separation of *logos* from *mythos*, nor can it be

²⁸ See further Mansfeld (1985a, 52); Palmer (2000, 181–192); and Cantor (2022, 732–734). Mansfeld (1985a, 52) argues that the distinction between (Hesiodic) ancient theology and (natural) philosophy breaks down at *Metaphysics* XII, wherein Aristotle deploys his own philosophical theology (discussed in §2.3).

²⁹ The myth-lover, in wondering at the complexity of the world, already is *in a way* a philosopher (*Metaphysics* I.2, 982b18–19). On Aristotle’s gradualist conception of the development of philosophy (discussed below), the first people who began philosophizing (*in a given cycle of development*) are not yet philosophers in the fully-fledged sense – hence the qualification signalled by *pōs* (compare *Metaph.* I.4, 985a5 and I.10, 993a15–16: even the *physiologos* Empedocles is associated with a faltering kind of philosophy). The philosopher *par excellence* (that is, the philosopher in the full-fledged sense) is not any ‘Presocratic’, but rather Aristotle himself. See Cantor (2022, 735–736, with n. 45).

³⁰ *Politics* II.5, 1264a3–5; *De Caelo* I.3, 270b16–20; *Meteorologica* I.3, 339b27–30; fr. 13 Rose = Synesius, *Calvit. Encom.* 22; *Politics* VII.10, 1329b25–33; *Metaphysics* XII.8, 1074a38–b14. See Mansfeld (1985a, 53); Palmer (2000, 199–202); and Cantor (2022, 737–739).

³¹ Cantor (2022, 735–739).

localized to the Greek-speaking world. Surprisingly, what comes first for Aristotle is not *mythos* but *logos*; as Jaap Mansfeld (1985a, 53) has observed, for Aristotle “philosophy does not derive from myth, but myth from philosophy”. It must be noted that this Aristotelian way of thinking about the relationship between myth and philosophy is in direct tension with the *mythos-logos* framework of ‘Western Philosophy’; not only because it subverts a *myth-to-philosophy* linear sequence of development, but also because it undermines the very project of explaining the *origins* of philosophy in terms of myth. As Mansfeld (1985a, 53) elaborates:

What we have in Hesiod and others is what survived of the ideas of the Aristotle of the lost civilization that preceded our own. No sufficient explanation of the (origin of) philosophy – a genre which, after all, is *sui generis* – can therefore be provided by myth.

None of this is incompatible with the recognition that, for Aristotle, philosophers were also often concerned to *criticize* some mythical expressions of philosophical insights as distortive and problematic. Hence it became part of the mission of philosophical inquiry, especially from Aristotle’s time onwards, to ‘extract’ such insights from mythical materials.³² This helps explain why later Greek philosophers often explicitly named mythical materials – as opposed to, say, treatises in natural philosophy – as the earliest (available) philosophical sources. Indeed, the later Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic periods saw a pronounced tendency to locate philosophy’s beginnings in both Greek and non-Greek cosmogonical myths.³³ It became the dominant historiographical approach not just among Hellenized Jewish and Christian thinkers, but also among Stoic as well as

³² See Algra (2007). A possible precedent of the ‘speaking mythically’/‘speaking truly’ distinction traces to the ‘Presocratic’ Diogenes of Apollonia (fifth century BCE), in which however the poet Homer is identified as speaking truly (*alēthōs*) rather than mythically (*muthikōs*); see Fowler (2011, 63), referring to DK68 A8. For the relevance of allegorical interpretation within Stoicism and its Aristotelian influences, see Boys-Stones (2003).

³³ See Mansfeld (1985b); Ridings (1995); Boys-Stones (2001); Burkert (2008); Sassi (2018 [2009], 5); Lloyd (1991a, 281); and Cantor (2022).

(Neo-)Platonist philosophers.³⁴ Crucially, these later Greek thinkers agreed that the earliest cosmogonic myths offered the most reliable way into philosophy. What unifies these views is an increasingly marked *blurring of boundaries* between *mythos* and *logos*, mythology and philosophy, divine revelation and philosophical truth. From this perspective, the idea that mature philosophical thought amounts to the ultimate (or even gradual) abandonment of ‘primitive’ mythology clashes dramatically with several strands of late ancient views concerning the credentials of philosophical truth.

§1.2. The modern mythos-logos framework

Despite major problems with appealing to an ancient *mythos-logos* distinction to tell a story about the origins and development of philosophy, the narrative of a Greek shift from *mythos* to *logos* is routinely deployed in twenty-first-century histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ – building on early-twentieth-century scholarship on Greek philosophy.³⁵ Two of the most influential promoters of a shift from *mythos* to *logos* as an origin story for philosophy were the German classicist Wilhelm Nestle (1865–1959), who popularized the distinction in a much-cited work, *Vom Mythos zum Logos* (1940),³⁶ and the British ancient philosophy scholar Francis Macdonald Cornford (1874–1943). The latter’s 1912 work *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* is an early example of specialist scholarship that invoked a *mythos-to-logos* distinction in ancient Greek philosophy to buttress the birth of a specifically *Western* mode of

³⁴ See further Boys-Stones (2001; 2003) and Cantor (2022, 740–742).

³⁵ Earlier iterations of the narrative of a *mythos-to-logos* shift are found in late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German historiography of philosophy, on which see Cantor (2022). However, only in the twentieth century did the framework explicitly begin to support narratives about ‘*Western*’ rationality or philosophy.

³⁶ For Nestle’s influence, see Bremmer (1999, 71); Morgan (2000, 30–31); and Tor (2017, 16).

reasoning. Nestle's narrative of a hard *mythos*-to-*logos* break was infused with racist Nazi tropes – depicting rationality as an Aryan achievement based on exceptionality as the “most highly talented race”, of which the Greeks were claimed to be a part.³⁷ Some of Cornford's early work also drew a stark *mythos*-*logos* distinction, and made use of a racist framework to claim a supposedly “civilized” character of Greek (and ‘Western’) philosophy.³⁸ Unlike Nestle, however, Cornford abandoned the stark *mythos*-*logos* distinction of his earlier work (and its racist undertones) in his later work *Principium sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought*, published posthumously in 1952. Here he emphasized the overlap between myth and rational argumentation in early Greek philosophy, and corresponding *continuities* between mythology (including *non-Greek* mythology) and philosophy.³⁹

Many recent specialists of ancient Greek philosophy are similarly cautious about framing *mythos* and *logos* as mutually exclusive, consecutive categories.⁴⁰ This is due to a growing recognition that the supposed dichotomy between the two entails untenable assumptions about Greek philosophy, including about how Greek thinkers themselves thought about the origins of their own philosophical tradition.⁴¹

³⁷ See Nestle (1940, 6). On aspects of Nazi ideology that motivate Nestle's framework, see Most (1999b, 29–31), Bremmer (1999, 71–72), and Sassi (2018 [2009], 9, n. 14). Note that Nestle's version of the narrative was not strictly speaking linear, since he argued for a return to *mythos* with the rise of Christianity.

³⁸ Cornford (1957 [1912]) opposed “white civilization” (79) – which he associated with philosophy – to “savage tribes” (79, 83). The latter he associated with the “primitive” and “pre-scientific” thought of non-European traditions.

³⁹ Note that Cornford (1952, 127–155) still took the tensions between early philosophers and poets or “seers” to be important for the emergence of the former and their gradual differentiation from the latter. Indeed, he argued for a schema of *progressive* rationalization which he took to track the historical development of Greek philosophy. I raise objections against this kind of revised account in §3.

⁴⁰ This development is highlighted by Mansfeld (1985a, 45–47); Bremmer (1999, 72); Morgan (2000, 30–32); Laks (2018 [2006], 37, with n. 7); Sassi (2018 [2009], 9); Tor (2017, 10–19); and Most and Puett (2023).

⁴¹ There are exceptions in recent specialist scholarship. Brémond (2020, 3, n. 12; see also 7, 12–13; 15–16, with n. 69) assumes that Aristotle accepted a strict dichotomy between *mythos* and *logos*. Di Iulio (2022) claims that a shift between *mythos* (construed as ‘narration’) and *logos* (construed as

However a pressing issue which remains peripheral to such discussions is how the *mythos-logos* framework serves to prop up not merely a flawed story about the ‘birth’ of Greek philosophy, but also a much broader historiographical narrative about the origins of ‘Western Philosophy’.

Even recent histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ – including those of Karen J. Warren (2009), James Garvey and Jeremy Stangroom (2013 [2012]), Anthony Gottlieb (2016 [2000]), and A.C. Grayling (2020 [2019]) – continue to echo the sharp *mythos-logos* distinction, without acknowledging its pitfalls.⁴² These histories recreate the twentieth-century framework emanating from now-dated scholarship on Greek philosophy: that ‘Western Philosophy’ began with the shift from *mythos* to *logos* in ancient Greece.

§2. Standard *mythos* to *logos* accounts

§2.1. Reasoning: the Greeks ‘invented’ or ‘discovered’ rationality

One of the most extreme versions of the *mythos-logos* narrative to emerge over the last century is the claim that the Greeks *discovered* reason⁴³ or ‘the human mind’,⁴⁴ or that they *invented* rationality.⁴⁵ Garvey and Stangroom (2013 [2012]) offer a prime example of this ‘Greek Miracle’ narrative, supposedly an exceptional phenomenon unparalleled elsewhere in human history.⁴⁶ They claim (2013 [2012],

‘argumentation’) occurs in Parmenides. I highlight the pitfalls of interpreting Parmenides through the lens of the traditional *mythos-logos* framework in Chapter 2. Fowler (2011, 57–66) attempts to save the framework by speculating that a *mythos-logos* dichotomy can be traced to the Sophists, but recognizes that this putative dichotomy is contested as early as Plato.

⁴² Popkin (1999, 1) is a notable exception.

⁴³ Garvey and Stangroom (2013 [2012], 34).

⁴⁴ Snell (1953 [1946], v–vi) and Vernant (2006 [1965], 371).

⁴⁵ Garvey and Stangroom (2013 [2012], 20, 33).

⁴⁶ As Laks notes (2018 [2006], 55), the ‘Greek Miracle’ narrative can be traced to the nineteenth-century French historian of religion Ernest Renan (1823–1892). The latter’s racial theories (which underpin his denial that philosophy could possibly emerge outside the ‘European mind’ – see Renan 2018 [1883], 265) have been criticized by anti-colonial intellectuals like Aimé Césaire (2001 [1950]) and postcolonial scholars like Edward Said (1978).

20) that relinquishing myths and talk of the divine was a prerequisite for the Greeks' 'invention' of rationality:

We think in the way we do because of a monumental intellectual shift that happened shortly after Homer's poem took shape. [...] What they [the Milesians] and a few others did has been called "the Greek Miracle." It didn't happen anywhere else, and it changed the course of human history. [...] Within a generation, a handful of people in a few Greek settlements were no longer satisfied by talk of myths and gods. Suddenly, almost inexplicably, they invented rationality.

This approach crystallized in early- to mid-twentieth-century specialist scholarship. In a 1946 book entitled *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, the German Classicist Bruno Snell (1896–1986) asserted that the Greeks "discovered the human mind", in a manner that was "nothing less than a revolution". For Snell, Greek thought is "our only way of thinking; its authority, in the Western world, is undisputed".⁴⁷ In 1965 the French historian of Greek philosophy, Jean-Pierre Vernant (1914–2007), proclaimed that "[r]ational thought has, as it were, its official identity papers: we know its date and place of birth",⁴⁸ referring to the Greek cities of Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE, and plainly endorsing Snell's *mythos-logos* scheme.⁴⁹

A basic question is what 'rationality' is taken to mean in these discussions. One might be inclined to think that *logos*, understood as 'rationality', is a universally shared human capacity. But if so, then clearly rationality cannot be 'invented'. Aristotle, for instance, viewed rationality as a basic capacity for something like deliberative imagination and choice (practical reason) and contemplation (*theōria*), which distinguishes humans from other animals.⁵⁰ Hence

⁴⁷ Snell (1953 [1946], v). Snell was aware of Nestle's work, although he did not cite him here.

⁴⁸ Vernant (2006 [1965], 371).

⁴⁹ Vernant (1995) eventually changed his mind about the *mythos-logos* dichotomy, declaring that "[t]here was no struggle of the rational against the mystical [...] nor was there a reasoning, a Western reasoning, that came out of it" (2000 [1996], 162–163).

⁵⁰ On practical reason, see e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.13, II.3 and *De Anima* III.11; on theoretical contemplation, see *Nicomachean Ethics* X.8.

he could not possibly credit the early Greek philosophers with *inventing* rationality.⁵¹

Snell does not argue that *logos* was ‘invented’, but rather that it was ‘discovered’: specifically, the Greeks came to reflect on their own psychological capacities and realized that there were rational, intellectual ways of thinking that were distinct from mythologies past.⁵² Yet it is patently false that rational self-awareness is a uniquely Greek phenomenon in the ancient world.⁵³ While it may be defensible to hold that different modalities of thought existed in ancient Greek texts, just where or how one draws the line between mythology and rationality, between revelation and reason, between religion and philosophy in our philosophical sources is much more uncertain than it might seem. I return to this issue in §3, where I discuss what has sometimes been characterized as impulses toward ‘natural theology’ or ‘rational theology’ in Greek philosophy, both of which would seem to implicate mythico-religious as well as philosophical sensibilities.

Contemporary specialists are more wary of attributing to the ancient Greeks the achievement – whether discovered, invented, or otherwise – of a singular,

⁵¹ In fact, Aristotle considered certain non-Greeks (identified as ‘Asians’, comprising the Babylonians, Persians, and possibly also the Egyptians) privileged in their capacity for *theoretical* reasoning. Specifically, he deemed the souls of ‘Asians’ to be full of intelligence (*dianoia*) – unlike those of ‘Europeans’ (that is, Northern Europeans), whose souls he instead deemed deficient in *dianoia*. The souls of ‘Greeks’, he declared, lay somewhere in the middle (*Politics* VII.7, 1327b24–32). A caveat should be registered: in the same passage he also declared ‘Asians’ to be deficient in *thumos* (spiritedness), and ‘Europeans’ to be too full of it. And since a deficiency or excess in *thumos* implies a deficiency in practical reasoning, both groups (unlike the Greeks) turn out to be impaired at the level of *practical reasoning*. As Aristotle’s infamous argument for natural slavery (*Politics* I.4–8) suggests, the natural slave’s impairment is rooted in a *deficiency* of *practical reasoning* – even if they retain some type of rational capacity (*logos*) required to execute a master’s orders (*Politics* I.5, 1254b22–23; III.14, 1285a16–31). Note that a *deficiency* in *thumos* (the case of ‘Asians’) is in some sense worse than an excess of it (the case of the ‘Europeans’) in that it makes one specifically prone to enslavement rather than merely inhibiting one’s ability to conquer or rule over others. This is why the ‘Asians’, as a group, are deemed *fitted to be ruled* (see *Politics* I.4, 1253b32–1254a17). See further Heath (2008).

⁵² Snell (1953 [1946], v–x).

⁵³ While this point hardly needs proving, the vast literature on ancient scepticism across ‘non-Western’ (including classical Chinese and Indian) traditions amply confirms that second-order concerns took pride of place in philosophies beyond the Graeco-Roman world.

universal form of rationality. They have instead looked towards disaggregating ‘rationality’ into more specific sub-concepts. However, this approach runs up against several problems. The first is a tendency toward ethnocentrism, which ignores similar dynamics in pre- and non-Greek contexts.⁵⁴ A second is the risk of misrepresenting, retroactively, what was happening in ancient Greece, and applying more contemporary labels and distinctions – such as a Weberian conception of ‘Western’ rationalism⁵⁵ – in the service of a teleological picture of philosophical development. A third is the risk of pitting Greek ‘religion’ against Greek philosophy (or ‘science’); even though (as discussed in §2.3) no unified conception of religion existed in ancient Greece, such that a philosopher could straightforwardly reject any and all religious thinking and practice as unphilosophical.

§2.2. Science: the Greeks were ‘philosophical’ in the sense of ‘scientific’

A second type of argument underpinning the *mythos-logos* distinction attributes to the Greeks a nascent scientific outlook.⁵⁶ Here scholars frequently take the liberty of glossing the term *logos* as ‘science’ in a naïvely modern sense.⁵⁷ Often the claim is stronger: rationality *per se* necessarily requires this scientific outlook. The argument therefore seems to be that the Greeks invented rationality understood as a certain scientific method. This assertion, at least, seems coherent on its face, but tends to assume: (i) that whatever is rational must in some modern sense be

⁵⁴ For similar complaints, see Goody (1996) and Harrison (2006, 130).

⁵⁵ See, for instance, the discussion of rationalities in Laks (2018 [2006], Ch. 4).

⁵⁶ For versions of this view in specialist scholarship, see Mansfeld (1985a, 46–47). Mansfeld himself goes on to endorse a version of the view with regards to the ‘earliest Presocratics’ (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Pythagoras), but interestingly, denies their status as *philosophers* (1985a, 56–57), and instead suggests Parmenides as a better candidate for the beginnings of philosophy, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

⁵⁷ Lloyd raises “the issue of just how far the ancient Greeks’ investigations tally with one or other views of science that *we* might take” (1990, 42), pointing to non-trivial disconnects in several of his studies (see notably Lloyd 1979).

scientifically grounded (e.g. in empirical methods of observation); *and* (ii) that whatever is rational must be devoid of religious ideas, motivations, presuppositions, etc. These two assumptions tend to underpin a single conception of rationality, due to the popular view (wholly alien to the Greeks) that scientific and religious concerns are incompatible at their core.⁵⁸

This view, too, can be traced to nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians of Greek philosophy, including the two Scottish Ancient Philosophy scholars John Burnet (1863–1928) – whose work *Early Greek Philosophy*, first published in 1882, was the most influential anglophone guide to the study of early Greek philosophy for much of the twentieth century⁵⁹ – and W. K. C. Guthrie (1906–1981), as well as Jean-Pierre Vernant (in his early work).⁶⁰

Cornford (1952, 107) was a major critic of what he took to be the modern obsession with a “conflict of religion and science”, which he argued does not square with our evidence of early Greek philosophy. The most ‘rational’ among the Greek philosophers had no qualms about invoking divine agency (including in the context of naturalistic explanations),⁶¹ and explicitly endorsed religious rituals at times (as discussed in §2.3 below).⁶² The ‘Presocratic’ philosopher Xenophanes, for instance, was as interested in observing fossils⁶³ as he was in different forms of worship and ritual practice.⁶⁴

Cornford (1952, 38) also argued forcefully against the view that the early Greek philosophers were primarily empirical or experimental thinkers, noting that

⁵⁸ This was the case in Russell’s hugely influential *History of Western Philosophy* (2005 [1945], 15, 21, 31). More recently, Gottlieb (2016 [2000], viii, 4) similarly traces the origins of philosophy to what he sees as the origins of science (beginning with Thales).

⁵⁹ Vlastos (1952, 98); see also Osborne (2006, 223–224).

⁶⁰ Burnet (1930 [1892], 28); Guthrie (1953, 8ff.); Vernant (2006 [1965], 371).

⁶¹ See also Tor (2017, 20–22).

⁶² See also Dodds (1951) and Lloyd (1979, 34–35).

⁶³ See DK21=LM8 A33=D22.

⁶⁴ See DK21=LM8 A12=P16; A13=P17; A14=P18; A52=D15a, D15b; B14=D12; B16=D13.

the rare cases of (quasi-)experiments recorded in the ancient literature were conducted not by the natural philosophers (*physiologoi*), but by doctors in the Hippocratic tradition.⁶⁵ We should add that even the medical tradition tended to undervalue the import of experience, and showed no systematic interest in what we now call the ‘experimental method’.⁶⁶

Take the case of Thales, which is ubiquitous in histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ because he is usually identified as the first philosopher.⁶⁷ The view that Thales’ choice of water as a principle (*archē*) of all things reflects some sort of burgeoning empiricism is central to the account for why he ought to be taken as the first philosopher.⁶⁸ Unfortunately we know very little about Thales’ methods of inquiry, or his reasons for thinking that everything comes from (or fundamentally is) water. Our main evidence for Thales’ cosmology comes from two passages in Aristotle, and it is doubtful whether Aristotle’s analysis is an accurate account of what Thales really said or meant.⁶⁹ Aristotle implies repeatedly that he knew about Thales’ thought only on a second-hand basis,⁷⁰ and does not hide the fact that his reconstruction of *why* Thales might have held his views is speculative.⁷¹ What seems clear from many reports is that Thales dabbled in geometry and astronomy (though he was by no means the first to do so, as the ancient Greeks themselves tell

⁶⁵ Lloyd (1979, 143–146) lists rare cases where early Greek philosophers conducted observations within the realm of their physical theories, such as Xenophanes’ apparent reference to fossils in support of the view that what is now dry used to be covered by the sea (see also Burnet 1930 [1892], 26).

⁶⁶ Tor (2017, 27–29) has shown that certain Hippocratic discussions of disease accommodated divine intervention.

⁶⁷ See further Cantor (2022) and Mansfeld (1985a, 45).

⁶⁸ See Russell (1972 [1945], 26); Gottlieb (2016 [2000], 7); Garvey and Stangroom (2013 [2012], 42); Grayling (2020 [2019], 12–13); and Warren (2009, 29).

⁶⁹ See *De Caelo* II.13, 294a28–32; *Metaphysics* I.3, 983b6–984a2.

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.3, 983b22, 984a2–3; *De Caelo* II.13, 294a28–32; *De Anima* I.2, 405a19; *De Anima* I.5, 411a8; *Politics* I.11, 1259a8, 10, 18. See Cantor (2022, 733, n. 32); KRS (90); Snell (1944, 170–173); and Barney (2012, 86, with n. 41).

⁷¹ See Aristotle’s use of the adverb *isōs* (‘perhaps’) at *Metaphysics* I.3, 983b22.

us⁷²), and to that extent one might be inclined to recognize him as an early (though not *the first*) scientist. But how this is supposed to earn him the label of the ‘first philosopher’ remains mysterious.

The ‘Presocratics’ may not have been primarily empirical or experimental thinkers, but perhaps they nevertheless pioneered a different, and still original, form of scientific rationality relevant to philosophical inquiry. This was the claim of the Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper (1902–1994) in his 1958 presidential address to the Aristotelian Society.⁷³ What changed, according to Popper (1958, 3), is that the ‘Presocratics’ attempted to provide ambitious *explanations* or *arguments* for why things are a certain way: their “bold theories about the world”, he asserted, marked the start of “Western science”.

These kinds of claims have become widespread in recent histories of ‘Western’ philosophy, including in Garvey and Stangroom (2013 [2012], 334) and Gottlieb (2016 [2000], 6).⁷⁴ In *An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, Antony Flew (1995 [1971], 36) provides a prime example, justifying the title of his work by saying that:

philosophy, as the word is understood here, is concerned first, last and all the time with argument. (It is, incidentally, because most of what is labelled *Eastern Philosophy* is not so concerned – rather than for any reasons of European parochialism – that this book draws no materials from any sources east of Suez. Such works of the classical Chinese Sages as the *Analects* of Confucius are in their own kind great. But that does not make them in the present sense philosophy.)

⁷² Most obviously, Plato (*Phaedrus* 274c5–d2; see *Philebus* 18b6–d2) credited the Egyptians with inventing geometry and astronomy. Aristotle claimed that the Egyptians and Babylonians transmitted their astronomical insights to the Greeks (*DC* II.12, 292a7–9, see *DC* I.3, 270b5–24 and cf. Plato, *Laws* X.887e2–7 and *Cratylus* 397c8–d5).

⁷³ On the debate that Popper’s paper ignited, and Kirk’s response (1960), see Lloyd (1991b, 105–120).

⁷⁴ A version of this story is also found in Barnes’ (1982 [1979], 4–9) history of early Greek philosophy, *The Presocratic Philosophers* – although Barnes considers the criteria for taking Thales to be the founder of “Western science” to be different from those that (according to him) make Thales the first (Western?) philosopher.

Flew asserts that most of ‘Eastern philosophy’, unlike ‘Western philosophy’ (starting with the Greeks), is not concerned with argument, and thereby casts doubt on its philosophical credentials.

In fact, we need not look beyond the classical Chinese text *Mozi* 墨子, attributed to Confucius’ rough contemporary, Mo Di 墨翟 (fl. c. 430 BCE), for explicit efforts to argue out alternatives and to offer systematic criticism of opponents based on argument.⁷⁵ The Mohists undeniably had *reasons*, and offered carefully argued positions, for their doctrines.⁷⁶

§2.3. *Secularism: the Greeks were secular or anti-religious thinkers*

The third type of belief underpinning the *mythos-logos* narrative is that early Greek philosophers were secular, anti-religious, or even atheist thinkers, who therefore shunned mythology and theology. In his *History of Philosophy* (2020 [2019]), which is avowedly concerned with the so-called ‘Western’ tradition (xi–xii), A.C. Grayling (2020 [2019], 9) asserts that:

Thales is the first person we definitely know of who wondered about the nature and origins of the universe, and not only wondered, but put forward ideas about them which are distinctively philosophical rather than religious or mythological in character.

⁷⁵ See e.g. *Mozi* XXXVII for a clear articulation of the need for “standards [yi 儀] before making statements” (trans. Fraser 2020, 128).

⁷⁶ Several specialists of Chinese philosophy have thus suggested that Mo Di was perhaps the first ‘systematic’ philosopher in the Chinese tradition (Ivanhoe 1998; Graham 1989, 36; Fraser 2020 [2002]; see also Hansen 2000 [1992], 96). While it is important to acknowledge the presence of discursive argumentation in many areas of Chinese philosophy (including in the *Zhuangzi*, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 5), we need not accept Flew’s implicit metaphilosophical view that for a historical text to count as genuine philosophy it needs to rely first and foremost on this kind of argumentation (see Kalmanson 2017 and Meyer 2012 for an elaboration of this point in relation to Chinese philosophy). In Chapter 4 I discuss analogical reasoning, showing that its significance in the thought of both Zhuangzi and Parmenides is under-appreciated.

Grayling is here echoing past scholars of ancient philosophy like John Burnet (1930 [1892], 13), who proclaimed that “there is no trace of theological speculation” in early Greek philosophy.

The fact that few words occur more frequently in the ‘Presocratic’ fragments than ‘god’ (*theos*) is the elephant in the room.⁷⁷ It may seem trivially true that the evidence undermines Burnet’s and Grayling’s claims; indeed, the usual rejoinder is that references to the ‘gods’ can somehow be explained away as not *really* being about religion or theology. Burnet himself claimed that statements like “all things are full of gods”, attributed to Thales by Aristotle (*De Anima* A5, 411a7; see Plato, *Laws* X.899b9), imply a “non-religious use of the word “god”” (4).⁷⁸ Yet there is no obvious sign of any polemical or ironic tone in such fragments;⁷⁹ to assume so would at best be to read into evidence that is undeniably under-determined, and at worst to make unfounded assumptions about the supposed opposition between religion and philosophy in early philosophical speculation. I nevertheless consider charitable elaborations on this view in §3 below, where I discuss attempts to interpret the early Greek philosophers’ engagement with the divine in terms of an impulse toward natural or rational theology, in contradistinction to ‘traditional’ theology and religion.

There is a stark rift between what the evidence, taken at face value, suggests about the prevalence of theoretical interest in the divine in early Greek philosophy, versus what the commonplace assumptions of grand historiographical narratives claim about the tradition’s supposed secularism. Burnet’s view that a total absence of theological and religious preoccupations characterized early Greek thought

⁷⁷ Vlastos (1952, 97, n. 1). Most (2013, 158) notes that almost a third of the extant fragments attributed to Heraclitus involve religion.

⁷⁸ For a critique, see Vlastos (1952, 98); Boys-Stones (2009, 2–3); and Tor (2017, 10–25).

⁷⁹ Boys-Stones (2009, 3).

evidently faces the challenge of countervailing, strong *prima facie* evidence, of which he was well aware. That he could dismiss available evidence without much justification speaks to the power of *post-hoc* teleological narratives of secular rationalization, which for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were left effectively unchallenged in scholarship on ancient philosophy. In short, there is a real worry that scholars' continued insistence on the secularism of Greek philosophical thought is *motivated* by a prior commitment to a teleological story having little or nothing to do with the actual evidence.⁸⁰

Illustrating this point, Glenn Most (2013, 153–154) has highlighted how Heraclitus' attitudes to religion have become a major battleground for vindicating a certain story about the “rise, specific origin, and development of [a] philosophical project in ancient Greece”, such that the extant fragments touching on religion have been “pressed into the service of later needs”. *Inter alia*, this has resulted in a misleading (if still influential) caricature of Heraclitus as “Voltaire” – with Heraclitus rejecting “religion as a whole as being absurd and irrational from the point of view of philosophical truth”.⁸¹ While scholars may disagree on the extent to which Heraclitus was (or was not) conservative in his engagement with existing religious views and practices,⁸² it is clear from the evidence that he never made it his philosophical mission to reject religion *as a whole*. According to one compelling interpretation, Heraclitus even drew on existing religious ideas and practices to support his own metaphysics.⁸³

⁸⁰ For this observation, see Harrison (2006, 131).

⁸¹ Most (2013, 154). Adoménas (1999, 87–88, 109, 113) similarly challenges the image of Heraclitus as an anti-religious “*Aufklärer*”.

⁸² For Heraclitus' religious ‘conservatism’, see Most (2013); for Heraclitus' appeal to ‘conventional piety’ (with reference to DK22=LM9 B24=D122a, B79=D75, B83=D77, B92=D42, and B93=D41), see Boys-Stones (2009, 4). Tor (2016; forthcoming b) takes DK22=LM9 B93=D41 to present theological reflections which are much more paradoxical within the context of Delphic religious traditions than is usually supposed – even if they remain embedded in that context.

⁸³ Adoménas (1999); see also Boys-Stones (2009, 4).

The view that early Greek religion and Greek rationality/philosophy were at cross-purposes continues to inform contemporary histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ as well as some recent scholarship in ancient philosophy.⁸⁴ This is a common prejudice, which resonates with a familiar post-eighteenth-century teleological story advocating a distinctively secular and ‘Western’ rationality that supposedly grew out of ancient Greece, starting with Thales in the sixth century BCE.⁸⁵

A related pitfall of such narratives is that they take Greek *religion* to have been a clearly delimited, unified terrain which Greek philosophers could reject or accept straightforwardly.⁸⁶ Complicating this picture most obviously is the fact that the Greeks lacked a term for ‘religion’. Furthermore scholars have for a long time commented on the absence of fixed religious dogmas in ancient Greek society, which is partly explained by the absence of an institutionalized priestly class⁸⁷ – a point which has been recognized at least since Eduard Zeller’s landmark *History of Greek Philosophy* (1881 [1844–1852], 55–60).⁸⁸ But ever since Zeller, this same observation has been put in the service of unrefined claims about the Greek ‘genius’, and the triumph of freedom of thought over religious doctrine.⁸⁹ What is omitted from these historiographical accounts is that it is precisely the absence of a priestly

⁸⁴ For the view that early Greek philosophy represents the rise of a ‘secular’ outlook, see e.g. Leshner (2008); Curd (2013, 222); (and more implicitly) Granger (2013, 165–167), who cites Burnet (see 163, n. 2).

⁸⁵ For a critique, see Harrison (2006, 124, 131); Gagné (2009, 216–217); Tor (2017, 16–19); and (with regard to Parmenides) Bryan (2020a). I further discuss the legacy of this narrative in the scholarship on Parmenides in Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ For the pitfalls of viewing Greek religion as a single, inflexible, unified whole, see Harrison (2006, 132; 2007, 382); Betegh (2006, 626–627); Boys-Stones (2009, 1–2); and Tor (2016, 115–116; forthcoming b).

⁸⁷ See e.g. Boys-Stones (2009, 2–3); Betegh (2006, 628); and Cornford (1957 [1912], 2).

⁸⁸ See also Zeller (1889 [1883], 23).

⁸⁹ See Zeller (1881 [1844–1852], 51–56). A century earlier, Kant (1992, 20) had already used a similar criterion to claim that philosophy could only emerge among the Greeks (as opposed to other ancient non-Greek peoples): namely, the lack of authority of a clergy in ancient Greek society. See Park (2013, 85).

class and of a corresponding set of prescribed beliefs, which helps explain the *blurring of boundaries* between the religious and philosophical spheres in ancient Greek thought.⁹⁰ This fact, as George Boys-Stones (2009, 2–3) has observed, can be “uncomfortable for many historians of philosophy”, since it speaks directly against standard narratives about the emergence of philosophy.

It also won’t do to ground a nascent philosophical outlook in the abandonment of religious *rituals* or *practices*. Many Greek philosophers were preoccupied with, and even prescribed, religious practices, often in a way integral to their philosophical projects.⁹¹ In fact many ‘Presocratics’, including Xenophanes and Heraclitus, advocated divine *worship* – a decidedly non-secular practice which, lest we forget, Plato also inherited.⁹²

What should we make of passages invoking criticisms of religious beliefs and ritual practices? Might *they* provide grounds to vindicate the *mythos-to-logos* picture? One problem with this approach is that it tacitly assumes that a philosopher’s criticism of a particular set of religious assumptions, attitudes or practices is tantamount to a rejection of religion *as a whole*; from there it is a small step to claiming that Greek philosophers dismissed *all* religious rituals and views as absurd or irrational. Here again we run the risk of misleadingly reifying Greek

⁹⁰ This is not to deny that there were articulate sets of religious beliefs (*pace* Boys-Stones 2009, 5) and arguably even dynamic theologies (*pace* Price 1999, 126) for philosophers to engage with and/or reject. For this caveat, see Eidinow, Kindt, Osborne, and Tor (2016, esp. 9–11) and Tor (2017, 8 with n. 7).

⁹¹ For Heraclitus and Xenophanes, see Vlastos (1952, 98); Sassi (2018 [2009], 43); Osborne (1997); Adoménas (1999); and Tor (2016). In line with his theory of reincarnation (DK31=LM22 B115=D10, B117=D13, B127=D36, B136=D28, B137=D29), Empedocles rejected animal sacrifice and instead advocated certain vegetarian types of worship (B128=D25, B130=D26, B137=D29, B140=D32, B141=D31; see also B139=D34).

⁹² For divine worship among ‘Presocratics’, see Xenophanes (DK21=LM8 B1=D59), Empedocles (DK31=LM22 B3=D44, B131=D7), and Democritus (*ap.* Sextus Empiricus, *M* IX.19, see also IX.42); for divine disclosure, see e.g. Heraclitus (DK22=LM9 B5=D15, B93=D41), Parmenides (DK28=LM19 B1=D4), and Empedocles (e.g. DK31=LM22 B3=D44). Plato called for the worship of the traditional gods (*Republic* IV.427b–c and *Laws* V.738b–d; see Betegh 2022) and was hardly a secular thinker (Nightingale 2021).

religion, and oversimplifying the kinds of critiques made against complex and often contradictory sets of religious views, beliefs, and practices which were found in various forums and guises in Greek society. The attitude we encounter again and again is not one of hostile rejection of traditional religion, but rather one which blends accommodation, appropriation, and internal criticism of the existing religious landscape.⁹³

By the classical period, Socrates was put on trial for impiety (among other charges), which might seem to suggest an anti-religious strain in Greek philosophy. Yet Socrates' case is far from representative,⁹⁴ nor does it qualify as a case of *atheist* or anti-religious dissidence.⁹⁵ We know of only three other intellectuals who were likely tried for their 'impious' views down to the end of the classical period: the early Greek philosopher Anaxagoras, the sophist Protagoras, and the poet Diagoras.⁹⁶ Whether Anaxagoras' thought does away with cosmic intelligence remains doubtful;⁹⁷ and what we know of Protagoras' and Diagoras' positions does

⁹³ See Tor (forthcoming b); Boys-Stones (2009); Betegh (2006); and Harrison (2006, 132).

⁹⁴ Tor (2017, 43–46); Gagné (2009); Wallace (1994); Dover (1976).

⁹⁵ According to Xenophon, Socrates' views were compatible with polytheism, since he apparently distinguished between minor gods and a supreme first god who is causally responsible for the world (*Memorabilia* 4.3.13; see Betegh 2006, 632). While in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates repeatedly invokes "the god" (*ho theos*) and "a divine thing" (*daimonion*, 31c–d), this need not imply that Socrates' religious beliefs clashed with traditional state religion (*pace* Burnyeat 1997, 8) or that they amounted to monotheism. In many Greek authors, generalizing references to 'the gods' alternate with references to '[the] god' – suggesting that the two locutions were largely interchangeable in ordinary Greek (Parker 2011, 66; see also François 1957 for a study of the terms *theos* and *daimōn*).

⁹⁶ See e.g. Betegh (2006, 625) and Whitmarsh (2016). Gagné (2009) and Dover (1976) cast doubt on the evidence for impiety trials other than that of Socrates. Another name associated with atheism in the classical period is Critias (Plato's uncle), though here the evidence is still more tenuous. For a discussion of the Sisyphus Fragment attributed to Critias by Sextus Empiricus, see Sedley (2013, 141–142) and Dover (1976, 45–46).

⁹⁷ The assumption that it does famously traces to Plato's *Phaedo* (97b–98c). However, Plato's efforts to downplay the presence of a concept of divine intelligence or teleological thinking in early Greek philosophy have been challenged by many specialists (see Tor 2017, 21, with n. 36). See e.g. Sedley (2007, 1–7) and Long (1996, 140) for the claim that the idea that the world is governed by divine intelligence was an *unquestioned assumption* throughout this period. While Anaxagoras was apparently charged with "not recognizing divine beings" for saying that the sun is a red-hot stone, he was probably still committed to a notion of cosmic intelligence (*nous*).

not speak directly to atheism.⁹⁸ According to Plato, Socrates was charged with corrupting the youth because he did not recognize the gods of the polis, and instead recognized new divinities (*Apology* 24b–c). He was not charged with denying the existence of gods.

Vanishingly few major ancient Greek philosophers argued against the existence of god(s);⁹⁹ instead, there was a marked effort, particularly from Plato's time onwards, to provide proofs *for* their existence.¹⁰⁰ From this perspective, it has been argued that philosophical atheism in ancient Greek society is something of a straw-man.¹⁰¹

Aristotle took theology to be the theoretical study of the first causes and first principles (*Metaphysics* I.2, 982b28–983a10 and VI.1, 1026a17–32), and argued that there ought to be a single ultimate *divine* substance on which the world order fundamentally depends.¹⁰² Hence Aristotle called theology 'first philosophy' (*Metaphysics* VI.1, 1026a24), placing it at the centre of his metaphysical pursuits. He also had no qualms about appealing to traditional religious ideas, and arguably lent them an important role in both his political philosophy and his theoretical

⁹⁸ In the case of Protagoras, the evidence points to agnosticism rather than atheism (see DK80=LM31 B4=D10). Diagoras was apparently known as the "godforsaken [one]" (where *ho atheos* carried this specific connotation) because he mocked religious mysteries. See Sedley (2013, 140–141) and Betegh (2006, 634).

⁹⁹ Most Hellenistic philosophers associated with atheism are relatively minor figures, such as the Cyrenaic Theodorus. The question whether Epicurus might count as a covert atheist is hotly debated (see e.g. Parker 2011, 37; Sedley 2013, 145–501; Tor forthcoming b); for difficulties with viewing Epicureans as atheists, see n. 110 below. Sextus Empiricus offered arguments both for and against the existence of god (*PH* III.3–12; *M IX*.137–194) – the outcome being the suspension of judgment as to whether or not the gods exist, rather than *atheism*. Sextus is also unusually cautious in qualifying his arguments against the existence of the gods (*PH* III.2; *M IX*.49), on which see Veres (2020). Precedents for Pyrrhonian arguments against the existence of gods appear in Cicero, *ND* III.29–52.

¹⁰⁰ Betegh (2006, 626).

¹⁰¹ Betegh (2006, 626); see also Humphreys (2004 [1986], 59).

¹⁰² See *Metaphysics* XII.7–8; *On Philosophy* fr. 17 Rose; *Physics* VIII.6; *De Generatione et Corruptione* II.10, 337a15–24. Betegh (2006, 631–632) notes that Aristotle ends his most extensive discussion of the divine with a quotation from Homer (*Metaphysics* XII.10, 1076a4; quoting *Iliad* II.204).

philosophy and theology. It remains a matter of debate whether Aristotle's accommodation of these ideas was motivated purely by socio-political considerations,¹⁰³ or by at least some degree of theological acceptance of them.¹⁰⁴

In sum, while Greek philosophers often departed from existing representations of the gods found in Greek poetry and wider society, they emphatically continued to reflect on the divine. In doing so, whether through critical engagement or through more conservative acts of reinterpretation and reappropriation, they were also indebted to existing views and practices. They did not make it their mission to reject systematically all pre-existing mythological and religious frameworks as being utterly false or irrational; it would be more accurate to say that they built creatively on these existing foundations.

§3. The gradualist account

Some narratives of 'Western Philosophy' do not posit a sudden abandonment of *mythos* and the discovery of *logos* in an all-at-once break. Instead they propose a more gradual, progressive shift over centuries: a slow supersession of irrational *mythos* (roughly, early theology and cosmogonies antedating Thales, both Greek and non-Greek) by *logos* (i.e., 'Presocratic' philosophy and later developments in Greek thought), which they associate with *bona fide* philosophy.¹⁰⁵

In §1 we saw that, at the height of the classical period, Plato and Aristotle engaged with myths as receptacles of philosophical insight, and Plato specifically

¹⁰³ So Segev (2017). While Segev stresses that Aristotle deemed traditional religion necessary for maintaining political order (*Politics* VII–VIII; see Segev 2017, 9), and argues that he even took traditional religion to be necessary in laying the ground for knowledge of 'first philosophy' (2017, ch. 3), he argues that Aristotle ultimately believed traditional theology to be utterly false.

¹⁰⁴ So Bodéüs (2000 [1992], e.g. at 10–11) and Broadie (2003).

¹⁰⁵ A case in point is Anthony Kenny's *A New History of Western Philosophy* (2004, esp. 8–9). A precedent can be found in Zeller (1889 [1883], 24–28), who argued that the early stages of Greek speculation saw a progressive development of scientific thought.

put myth to use as an *argumentative* medium. We also saw that later Greek attitudes to myth and philosophy, during the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic periods, often implied an even more noticeable overlap between the categories of *mythos* and *logos*. This trend contradicts a revised *mythos-logos* framework according to which a gradual separation of *logos* from *mythos* tracks the overall development of Greek philosophy.

One might try to salvage the gradualist framework by appealing to a more sophisticated account of a shift from ‘traditional’ theology to *philosophical* theology. To be clear, this version of the framework is *not* the one we find in histories of ‘Western Philosophy’. That said, a charitable reinterpretation of the *mythos-logos* story might go something like this: while it is certainly true that Greek philosophers did not abandon theology, they did inaugurate a new kind of theological speculation – one distinctly philosophical in nature, and essentially different from traditional Greek (and non-Greek) theology. By ‘philosophical theology’ specialists typically mean *natural* theology¹⁰⁶ or, alternatively, *rational* theology.¹⁰⁷ Let us consider these in turn.

Natural theology is generally taken to rely primarily on argument and observation, and to avoid reliance on revelation, dogma or appeals to authority. In the field of ancient philosophy, it is also additionally typically taken to be *independent* from, if not outright *opposed* to, traditional theology. One could thus tell a story whereby the rise of Greek philosophy tracks a shift away from traditional theology, toward natural theology.

¹⁰⁶ See Tor (forthcoming b) – expanding on Tor (2017, 36–39, with n. 69) – for scholars’ tendency to equate philosophical theology with ‘natural theology’, where the latter is assumed to be divorced from or opposed to traditional religion.

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. Broadie (1999).

One issue with this approach is that it ignores developments in certain Eurasian traditions with established historical connections to ancient Greece, in which naturalist tendencies are arguably just as pronounced at a much earlier stage than the sixth century BCE.¹⁰⁸

A second difficulty with casting the rise of philosophical theology purely in terms of the advent of natural theology is that this arbitrarily narrows the scope of what qualifies as a *philosophical* exploration of theological questions. A wide range of Greek philosophers – from ‘Presocratic’ times all the way to late antiquity – expound theological frameworks that do not fit the model of ‘natural theology’. One example is Heraclitus, in whom we find a theodicy (DK22=LM9 B63=D123, B28b=D28, B66=D84, B94=D89c; cf. B64=D82 and B41=D44) that is underpinned by a metaphysical theory of harmony and unity.¹⁰⁹ Heraclitus evidently inherits themes of divine retribution from Homeric and Hesiodic theology. While these themes are obviously difficult to square with observed phenomena, they are nonetheless part and parcel of his theology and ethics.

This issue is not dissolved amongst later Greek figures. Far from privileging physical or natural explanations, Plato’s *Timaeus*, for instance, foregrounds teleological explanations predicated on a cosmic notion of divine harmony, and makes natural explanations at best *subordinate* to teleological ones. The question whether the theologies of later Hellenistic thinkers – including the Stoics and Epicureans – can reasonably be considered to be ‘naturalized’ ones is far from obvious.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ For the strongly naturalist strain found in some (pre-Greek) Eurasian traditions of cosmogony with historical connections to early Greek speculation, see Davies (2021, especially Part 2). See also Burkert (2008, 70–71) and Cornford (1952, 37).

¹⁰⁹ Tor (forthcoming b).

¹¹⁰ Some interpreters argue that the Stoics exhibit monotheistic attitudes, reflecting a naturalizing tendency divorced from traditional theological approaches (Gerson 1990, esp. 155; Algra 2004, 173,

Would a picture favouring a gradual shift to something less specific – say, *rational theology* – be on stronger ground? One question is what exactly this looser benchmark entails. Sarah Broadie (1999, 205) understands rational theology as a kind of *self-reflective* inquiry into the divine – perhaps supported through an argument or explanation concerning the idea of divinity, perhaps guided by a reflection on the question of the existence of gods or on the *grounds* of one’s beliefs. On this account, one might say that rational theology is centrally interested in the conditions of possibility of theological speculation. This criterion is, however, less congenial to the ‘Western Philosophy’ narrative than it might seem. The ‘mythologist’ Hesiod, for one, is now often thought to play a pivotal role in the early history of epistemology, as well as pioneering central concepts of Ionian natural philosophy, cosmology, and metaphysics¹¹¹ – with salient features likely inherited from antecedent Eurasian sources in regions to the East and South of Greece.¹¹² Moreover, as Broadie (1999, 205–207) cautions, we should not underestimate how embedded aspects of rational theology are in irreducibly *religious* intuitions, which in many cases showed no signs of subsiding throughout the history of Greek philosophy. For example, the familiar assumption that some

n. 1; Algra 2007, esp. 29; Frede 2010, esp. 70–75); others instead argue that the Stoics accommodated (traditional) polytheism within their broader theological framework (Meijer 2007). In the case of the Epicureans, we do find a rejection of some central features of traditional and popular religious attitudes; but we do not find thoroughgoing naturalism or a wholesale rejection of religious attitudes and practices. Note that (i) when Epicurus attacks popular theistic beliefs, he calls them *impious* rather than merely baseless (*Men.* 123–125); that (ii) he still calls for many religious practices, such as attending certain religious festivals as occasions for contemplating the gods (*ap.* Philodemus, *On Piety* col. 27 Obbink); and finally that (iii) he preserves an anthropomorphic conception of the gods (see e.g. Cicero, *ND* I.46–49). See again Tor (forthcoming b) for a discussion of both of these Hellenistic schools in relation to the question of ‘natural theology’.

¹¹¹ On Hesiod and Greek philosophy generally, see Iribarren and Koning, eds. (2022). On Hesiod’s pioneering role in epistemology, see e.g. Tor (2017, 52) and (noncommittally) Di Iulio (2022, 93–97). On his influence on Presocratic cosmology and natural philosophy, see Sattler (2022); Koning (2010a, 190–200); Cornford (1952, 187–201); and KRS (34). On his importance for Plato, see Boys-Stones and Haubold, eds. (2010); Folch (2018); and Scully (2016, 111–118). On his reception in Aristotle and Hellenistic philosophers, see Wolfsdorf (2018).

¹¹² See e.g. Davies (2021); Burkert (2008, 70–71); and Cornford (1952, 37).

ultimate explanation must be found for physical phenomena – an intuition shared among many early Greek philosophers, apparently including Thales and Anaximander, along with later thinkers like Aristotle and the Stoics – is motivated by the conviction that at some level of description, divine and natural forces are identical. As Broadie (1999, 207) remarks, “[a]cceptance that there need be no ultimates of explanation is a modern attitude that owes its existence to the emancipation of science from religion”, rather than to any Greek rationalizing or ‘secularizing’ impulse.

§4. The significance of the *mythos-logos* narrative for philosophy within a global purview

§4.1. The problem of ‘The West’

Another set of problems with the *mythos-logos* narrative concerns its portrayal of a specifically ‘Western’ philosophy. One is that it frequently makes claims about the birth of rationality or philosophy *as such* in the name of ‘Western Philosophy’, conflating these terms.¹¹³ Thus it simultaneously makes universalizing claims about the nature and historical development of philosophy on the basis of the ‘West’, *and* ignores modalities of rationality to be found in philosophical traditions outside the ‘West’, even though many of these traditions saw developments which are deeply in tension with the modern *mythos-logos* framework.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ See, for instance, Buxton (1999, 12ff), who remarks: “whose rationality is it anyway? That of Westerners?”.

¹¹⁴ On this point, see e.g. Laks (2018 [2006], 36–7). Lloyd (1999), for instance, argues that nothing like a *mythos-logos* distinction ever arises in the Chinese case. Note however that Most and Puett (2023, 1–8) explicitly raise the question of the validity of a *mythos-logos* distinction in a volume pertaining to what they call ancient Chinese and Greek “Wisdom Literature” (a label they

A related, underlying problem is that the narrative simply assumes that ancient Greece itself is unproblematically ‘Western’ – as it were, the birthplace of the ‘West’. In the search for the origins of ‘Western Philosophy’, this questionable assumption underpins a privileged focus on the Greeks.

In fact, the ancient Greeks saw themselves as being in extended discourse with Asian and African sources, with the Mediterranean as the hub for trade and cultural exchange in the region.¹¹⁵ They were also largely uninterested in (and for a long time ignorant about) the rest of Europe, particularly as regards its northern and westernmost parts.¹¹⁶ It was only much later, from the eighteenth century, that the historical entanglements of the Greeks with the Levant, North Africa, and Central Asia were erased from the history of philosophy, and replaced with a fully Eurocentric narrative.¹¹⁷ The ancient Greeks hardly had a stable conception of themselves as ‘European’, nor is there a direct and neat line of continuity between them and present-day Europe, much less the recent discourse from the last century of the ‘West’.¹¹⁸

acknowledge is problematic, 2–3), and endorse the distinction’s use (with caveats) in comparative work.

¹¹⁵ See e.g. Whitmarsh and Thomson (2013) and Lloyd (1991a).

¹¹⁶ Even the well-travelled Herodotus (IV.45; see IV.42) confessed his ignorance regarding the boundaries of Europe, and wondered whether water really surrounded the continent. He knew nothing of the bodies of water delimiting Northern and Western Europe, whereas he had a good sense of those that lay beyond its Eastern and Southern borders: the Black Sea, the Persian and Arabian Gulfs, the Red Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Araxes River (Herodotus IV.36ff; see Irby 2012, 93). Only in the Hellenistic period (starting in the late fourth to early third centuries BCE) does specific knowledge of Western and Northern Europe begin to be attested in Greek sources (Irby 2012, 98).

¹¹⁷ See Mansfeld (1985a, 55); Bernasconi (1997); Park (2013); Laks (2018 [2006], 53); König-Pralong (2019); Cantor (2022); and Platzky Miller (2023).

¹¹⁸ Bernasconi (2003 [1996], 573). As authors from Kies (1953) to Whitmarsh (2018) have pointed out, there was no continuity of racial identity between supposedly ‘White’ ancient Greeks and contemporary ‘White’ Europeans. The purported racial basis of the ‘West’ is a part of its political-ideological project, and central to its own self-presentation, but like raciology in general, is not grounded in reality. There are, certainly, ideological points of connection in proto-racial and racial theories, with later authors from the eighteenth century drawing on e.g. defences of slavery and environmental theories of human difference in Aristotle and the Hippocratic corpus (see e.g. McCoskey 2012, esp. 46–49; 54; Isaac 2004, esp. 56–109). This sordid history obviously does not justify the claims of racial continuity, whether cast as ‘Aryan’ or ‘White’, to uphold the narrative of ‘Western’ continuity.

Part of the problem here is that the ‘West’ itself is a suspect concept, as authors like Ben Kies (1953) and Stuart Hall (1992) pointed out decades ago.¹¹⁹ The category of the ‘West’ became prominent in the twentieth century on racialized geopolitical terms to include Europe and white settler-colonies, such as the United States and Australia, in contradistinction to the ‘rest’. The ‘rest’ was an amorphous, ever-changing Other against which the ‘West’ was defined, which at various times included a supposedly premodern ‘Orient’, a communist Eastern Europe and China, a civilization-clashing ‘Islam’, or generally the colonized peoples of the ‘third world’ in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. All of this is rather recent in human history, emerging only in the wake of European colonialism since the sixteenth century and culminating in the nineteenth century.¹²⁰ The contemporary use of the phrase ‘The West’ only crystallized in the mid-nineteenth century, the term ‘Western Civilization’ largely dates to the turn of the twentieth century, and ‘Western Philosophy’ has only been used widely since the 1940s.¹²¹

The idea of ‘Western Philosophy’, then, hangs on at least three dubious claims: that there is a ‘West’ to begin with, that Ancient Greece forms part of that ‘West’, and that the intellectual foundation stone of that ‘West’ was the birth of philosophy that arose through a shift from *mythos* to *logos* in Ancient Greece.¹²²

¹¹⁹ See Platzky Miller (2023).

¹²⁰ There are some other genealogical lineages that can be drawn, such as the Western Roman Empire that stretched (if fleetingly) across much of contemporary Europe. The philosophical significance of this, however, is doubtful: most of the works of ancient Greek philosophy that are ascribed to contemporary ‘Western’ philosophy were preserved, studied, and transmitted through the Persian and Arabic-Muslim Empires and the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire between c. 500CE–1400 CE, in regions for the most part outside of Europe. Note that this period is almost entirely glossed over in the standard narrative of ‘Western Philosophy’ (compare **Figures 1** and **2** in the Appendix below).

¹²¹ See Bavaj and Steber (2015) and Platzky Miller (2023).

¹²² For the perceived importance of the origins of Greek philosophy to ‘Western rationality’, and of ancient Greece in the “self-representation of Western culture”, see Laks (2018 [2006], ix, 53, 63). See also Fowler (2011, 48).

What happens if we dispense with the idea of the ‘West’ and with ‘Western Philosophy’ in relation to the study of ancient philosophy? There are significant ramifications for the history of philosophy, intercultural philosophy, and philosophy and philosophical traditions outside of Europe.

§4.2. Legitimacy debates

There is a species of dead-end debates about philosophical legitimacy, namely whether a given tradition is ‘truly’ philosophical. Such legitimacy debates have taken place over the status of philosophy that is (*inter alia*) considered Chinese,¹²³ Indian,¹²⁴ Islamic,¹²⁵ African,¹²⁶ Latin American,¹²⁷ or Indigenous/First Nations.¹²⁸ In each case, philosophy *proper* is unquestionably taken to be ‘Western Philosophy’. The question is never whether Latin American Philosophy, for instance, is ‘proper’ philosophy based on whether it does or does not live up to the model of e.g. African Philosophy. The only question admitted is whether tradition X measures up in relation to Western Philosophy, taken to be the bastion of logic and reason.¹²⁹ A prime example is Flew’s (1995 [1971], 36) dismissal of “what has been labelled as Eastern philosophy”, such as the *Analects* of Confucius, as not being ‘philosophy’ proper because (it is supposed) only ‘Western’ philosophy is concerned with argument, as discussed above. As Stephen

¹²³ Defoort (2001, 2006, 2017, 2020); Guerrero, Kalmanson, and Mattice (2019); Lee (2018 [2008]); Dyck (2005); Zheng (2005 [2001]).

¹²⁴ Pajin (1987); Guerrero, Kalmanson, and Mattice (2019). See also (implicitly) Ganeri (2016a, 2016b) and Krishna (2011).

¹²⁵ Diagne (2018 [2008]).

¹²⁶ Outlaw Jr. (2017); Gordon (2021).

¹²⁷ Vargas (2007).

¹²⁸ See e.g. Muecke (2011).

¹²⁹ Bernasconi (2003 [1996], 568).

Angle (2013, 225–226) has noted, superficial judgments of this kind are widespread, even among scholars of Chinese philosophy.

By releasing our embrace of an unduly reified ‘Western Philosophy’, we would not *resolve* the perennial questions of what makes something philosophical. Metaphilosophical issues (about what makes something ‘truly’ philosophical) would remain. But we need not artificially *limit* our inquiries by holding on to an unquestioned idea of ‘Western Philosophy’ that inhibits deeper reflection.

A central problem here is that of *philosophizing in the remainder*, based on *mutual exclusivity*. What I mean here is that ‘Western Philosophy’ is taken to encompass a definite set of problems and questions, methodological approaches, and theories. It is often assumed that in order to do work in a ‘non-Western’ tradition, one cannot ask the same (or similar) questions, use the same approaches, or employ the same theories. The shortcomings of this approach have been ably highlighted by Lucy Allais (2016, 544), who points out that topics and approaches asserted to be ‘Western’ cover a broad range of human experience and understanding of the world. The result is that something like African or Latin American philosophy would “be recognized as existing only if it does something distinctively different to the West” – such that attempting to define a ‘non-Western’ tradition as philosophical requires that it be cast in strict opposition to ‘Western Philosophy’. As Allais argues, this would mean “unnecessarily painting yourself into a corner with almost no room for methodological maneuver and few concepts left”. ‘Western Philosophy’, she points out, can arrogate *to itself* any range of topics or methodologies, which become defined as part of its ambit. Such free-wheeling assimilation goes largely unchallenged, since “Western philosophy is allowed to

take itself to exist no matter what”. This, she argues, “cedes too much conceptual ground as property of the West”.

By way of example, Sinologists have often claimed that mind-body dualism (however ‘thinly’ or ‘thickly’ understood) was entirely absent from classical Chinese philosophy,¹³⁰ insisting that the view was a quintessential feature of ‘Western Philosophy’. In recent years, this assessment has come under attack among specialists, with several scholars arguing that textual as well as archaeological evidence speaks (at least in some notable cases) to dualistic conceptions of the mind and body. Several scholars have pointed the finger at the pernicious effects of cultural essentialism, or what has been characterized, in a nod to Edward Said’s seminal book, as “neo-Orientalism”.¹³¹ Edward Slingerland, for instance, explicitly criticizes the recourse to facile oppositions between “Western” mind-body dualism and “Eastern” holism, which he argues reflects a typically Orientalist “tendency to view cultures as if they were timeless, unchanging, and uniform monoliths”¹³². Instructively, Slingerland condemns the urge to “strawman” the “Western mind”, a phenomenon which he describes as “holding up a particular, technical philosophical or scientific theory as though it represented how every person who has ever lived to the west of the Euphrates and east of San Francisco has ever thought”.¹³³ In her study focusing on Greek and Chinese conceptions of the mind and body, Lisa Raphals (2015, 172) soberly concludes that dualism “is no one’s cultural property” – any more than holism is.

¹³⁰ See e.g. Ames (1993); Jullien (2007 [2005]); and Brindley (2010, xxix).

¹³¹ Slingerland (2019, 305). See also Goldin (2003); Slingerland (2013); Raphals (2015); and (noncommittally) Wong (2020 [2001]).

¹³² Slingerland (2019, 273).

¹³³ Slingerland (2019, 270–273, 305).

Taking stock

The claim that the Greeks ‘invented’ or ‘discovered’ *rationality* trades on inconsistent and problematic assumptions about what rationality is. Even if ‘rationality’ is understood in the narrow sense of adopting some sort of *scientific* method, the Greek philosophers did not shun mythology and religion in the realm of their ‘scientific’ inquiries, and their empirical or experimental spirit (in any recognizably modern sense) remains controversial. Nor did they abandon talk of god(s) in favour of *secular* or non-religious thinking. Thus even accepting a conceptual distinction between *mythos* (construed broadly as an account rooted in religious or theological concepts) and *logos* (understood as some kind of quasi-scientific, argumentative account), the two remained fundamentally intertwined throughout the history of Greek philosophy.

The weaker view that philosophy amounts to the *gradual* separation of the two – the minimal claim required for the origin story of ‘Western Philosophy’ to get off the ground – also fails to withstand scrutiny. The idea that the Greek philosophers became *increasingly* unconcerned with religious and theological questions runs afoul of one of the clearest defining features of the Greek philosophical tradition as a whole: namely its sustained, and pronounced, interest in the nature of the divine. The Greek philosophers’ interest in theological questions, including those broached in mythological narratives, did not progressively subside in the classical, Hellenistic, and post-Hellenistic periods; in many respects, the opposite is true.

Even if one considers only pagan Greek authors during the post-Hellenistic period (to the exclusion of Hellenized Jews and Christians), the trend is one whereby theological concerns became especially pronounced. The thought of

Neoplatonist authors like Plotinus (205–270 CE), Iamblichus (c. 245–c. 325), Syrianus (late fourth–early fifth century CE), and Proclus (c. 412–485 CE) amply confirm this. It is no coincidence that histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ typically downplay the importance of Neoplatonism. This strand of late antique Greek philosophy hardly supports a case for the gradual triumph of philosophy over religion or theology.

Forgoing late Neoplatonism, however, raises problems for the received narrative of ‘Western Philosophy’, not least of which is the central role which its representatives played in mediating ancient Greek philosophy to medieval philosophers – whether in Byzantium, the Islamic world, or Latin Christendom. Were it not for the Neoplatonist Simplicius (c. 480–560 CE), much of what now survives of Parmenides’ poem would have been lost to posterity.¹³⁴ Gottlieb (2016 [2000], 358–359) tellingly claims that with Proclus, “the traditional marks of Greek philosophy were beginning to fade”, adding that “[t]he rationalist spirit” of earlier thinkers was now “quietly dying, or at least mutating”.¹³⁵ Garvey and Stangroom (2013 [2012]) make no mention at all of Proclus, and, with an avowed sense of “sheepishness” (158), instead “fast-forward about 600 years” (158) from the time of Augustine (354–430) up to that of Anselm (1033–1109).¹³⁶ Facile time-lapsing of this sort is typical of narratives of ‘Western Philosophy’ reliant on the *mythos-logos* origin story (as represented in **Figure 1** in the Appendix), but clouds

¹³⁴ As further discussed in Chapter 2, §2.1.

¹³⁵ See similarly Grayling (2020 [2019], 129–130).

¹³⁶ They do make a passing nod to a few intermediate Islamic and Jewish philosophers of the “Islamic golden age” (158), who they acknowledge were – like their Christian successors in the Latin Scholastic tradition – indebted to Neoplatonism (158–166). For the numerous figures which the 600-year ‘gap’ excludes in the Islamic world, Byzantium, and Latin Christendom – the vast majority of whom were responding to Greek philosophy – see **Figure 2** in the Appendix below. See also Cantor and Platzky Miller (2023).

the picture of a ‘tradition’ that also claims to have a continuous lineage tracing to the Greeks.¹³⁷

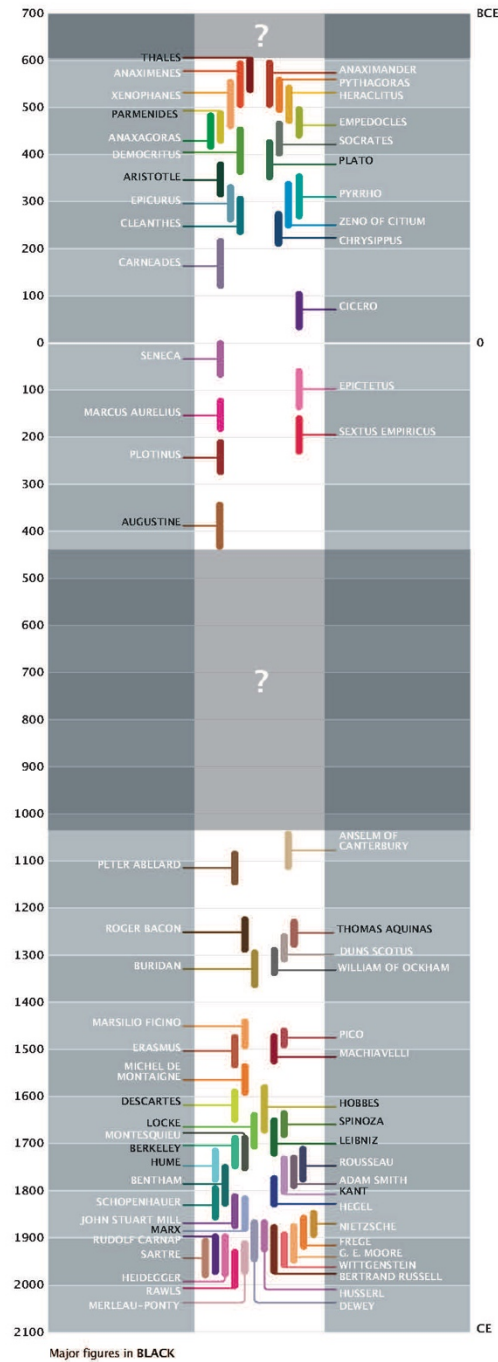
Generally accepted ideas of ‘Western Philosophy’ and ‘Western rationality’ skew our understanding of the history of philosophy, muddy the waters of intercultural and ‘comparative philosophy’, and undermine projects for philosophizing in ‘non-Western’ traditions.

In Chapter 2 I show that the foregoing critique puts us in a position to diagnose clearly the pressures, and blind spots, that characterize scholarship on both ancient Greek and classical Chinese philosophy, in particular Parmenides and Zhuangzi.

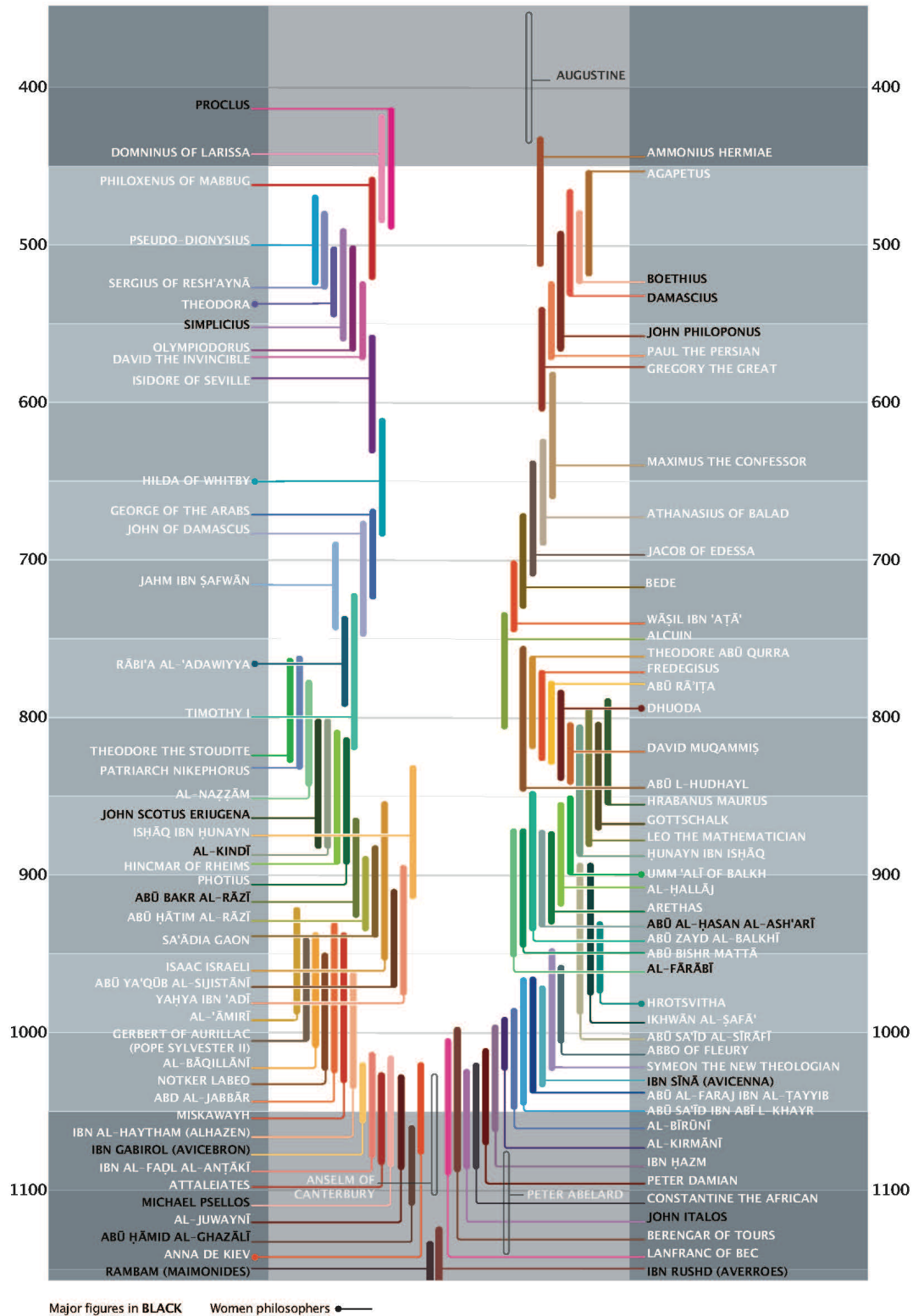
¹³⁷ For the explicit claim that “Western Philosophy” is a “continuous story” stretching back to the Greeks, see e.g. Magee (1987, 14, though see, tellingly, 59).

Appendix

Figure 1 – The standard narrative of ‘Western Philosophy’ & the 600-year ‘gap’



**Figure 2 – Philosophy in Byzantium, the Islamic world, and Latin Christendom
in the 600-year ‘gap’**



Chapter 2 – A case study: Parmenides and Zhuangzi on expressing what can (and cannot) be known

Overview

The sets of expectations that historians of philosophy and specialists of ancient philosophy bring to interpreting ‘canonical’ ancient thinkers are beset with distortions and oversimplifications. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the case of thinkers who are singled out in broad historiographical narratives as playing a major role in the origins and early development of philosophy, like Thales or (as we will shortly see) Parmenides. At the opposite extreme, thinkers typically excluded altogether from grand historiographical narratives about philosophy’s origins and development, like Zhuangzi, systematically get short shrift as *bona fide* philosophical thinkers. On the back of a sustained critique of the *mythos-logos* framework, this Chapter highlights the interpretive and philosophical interest of pursuing a dialogical inquiry involving two specific ancient thinkers with utterly different standings in the global historiography of philosophy: Parmenides and Zhuangzi.

§1. From historiography to first-order philosophical interpretation

§1.1. Parmenides as founder of (‘Western’) triumphalist rationalism

It is well known that Hegel traced philosophy’s origins to the early Greek philosopher Thales, based on an implicit *mythos-logos* framework.¹ But he qualified this claim by affirming that it was Parmenides who started philosophy

¹ I discuss Hegel’s importance in crystallizing the *mythos-logos* narrative in Cantor (2022, 745). For Hegel’s influence on specialists of ancient Greek philosophy, see Laks (1999, 468–477). For Hegel’s influence in the historiography of philosophy in relation to Thales, see Beall (1993).

proper (eigentliche Philosophieren),² as (allegedly) the first philosopher to have put thought itself at the centre of his thinking.

In a similar vein, in his 1953 essay “What is Metaphysics?”, Martin Heidegger claimed that Parmenides (along with Heraclitus) was “the first thinker to thematize Being-as-such and so [to] open the field of ontology”.³ Elsewhere, he categorically claimed that Parmenides and Heraclitus were privileged thinkers “at the outset of Western thought”.⁴

For all their differences, in his 1945 *History of Western Philosophy* Bertrand Russell concurred with Hegel’s and Heidegger’s investment in Parmenides as a foundation stone of philosophical and specifically metaphysical inquiry, emphasizing Parmenides’ role as a pioneer logician:

What makes Parmenides historically important is that he invented a form of metaphysical argument that, in one form or another, is to be found in most subsequent metaphysicians down to and including Hegel. He is often said to have invented logic, but what he really invented was metaphysics based on logic.⁵

In the 1960s Karl Popper, whose views about the Milesians as the first true scientists and philosophers we considered in Chapter 1, also credited Parmenides with pioneering ‘Western scientific thought’ and rationalism.⁶

² Hegel (1995 [1892], 254); see Hegel (1833, 296–297): “*Mit Parmenides hat das eigentliche Philosophieren angefangen*” (see Folit-Weinberg 2022a, 1, with n. 4). Hegel was here unequivocal that it was in the so-called ‘West’ that philosophy proper thereby began (1995 [1892], 99).

³ Heidegger (2000 [1953], 100–103, 145–154); see Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 1, with n. 5). Heidegger’s hostility to the very idea of Asian philosophies is well-known. Still, he took a lifelong interest in Daoist texts, reading the *Zhuangzi* as early as the 1920s (Cantor 2023, 66, n. 20; Nelson 2022; Nelson 2017, 134; Pohl 2003 [1998], 475).

⁴ Heidegger (1998 [1982], 1). For a similar emphasis in specialist work on Parmenides’ and Heraclitus’ joint importance in early philosophy and especially epistemology, see e.g. Mansfeld (1985a, 59–64).

⁵ Russell (1972 [1945], 48).

⁶ Popper (1998, 146, 159–160); see Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 1, with n. 7).

G. E. M. Anscombe went so far as to claim, against Alfred North Whitehead, that subsequent philosophy is footnotes not to Plato, but to *Parmenides*.⁷ Echoing Anscombe's corrective, David Gallop would write, in his introduction to his translation of Parmenides' *Fragments* (1984, 3) that:

The development of western philosophy was once said by A.N. Whitehead to have consisted in a series of footnotes to Plato. In a similar vein, and with hardly more exaggeration, Plato's own writings might be said to have consisted in footnotes to Parmenides of Elea. In his philosophical poem Parmenides bequeathed an enormous legacy, not only to his immediate successors, Zeno and Melissus, but to all subsequent Greek philosophers, and beyond them to later western intellectual tradition. [...] He should be viewed as [...] the first extant author deserving to be called a philosopher in the present-day sense of the word.

Parmenides is widely perceived as the true father of so-called 'Western Philosophy'⁸ – competing with Thales for the title even among specialists. Thus in 1969, Charles Kahn could write that:

Parmenides brought into being western philosophy in the technical sense, as *the sustained argument for a general thesis* involving *lucid analysis* of the concepts underlying *rational thought* on topics such as truth, cognition, contradiction, totality, homogeneity, continuity, and symmetry.⁹

Such views aired by prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers and specialists of Greek philosophy are mirrored in scholarship on Parmenides to this day.¹⁰ Parmenides continues to be celebrated as the founder of

⁷ Anscombe (1981, xi); see Mansfeld (1985a, 57) – who broadly endorses Anscombe's view – and Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 1, with n. 8).

⁸ Bryan (2020a, 218) notices this trend.

⁹ Kahn (1969, 720), my emphases. See Bryan (2020a, 219).

¹⁰ For discussions of modern attitudes to Parmenides and of his perceived role in the recent historiography of philosophy, see e.g. Palmer (2009a, 1–50); Tor (2017, 10–60); Bryan (2020a, 218–219); and Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 1–3).

anything from logic¹¹ to metaphysics and ontology,¹² philosophical argument to clarity of reasoning,¹³ through to proof¹⁴ and demonstration.¹⁵ He is also routinely identified as the most important Presocratic philosopher,¹⁶ even as the first philosopher to be *deserving of the name* before the time of Socrates.¹⁷ More than any other early Greek philosopher, Parmenides continues to be systematically heralded as the figurehead *par excellence* of a decisive shift from irrationalism or anti-rationalism to *rationalism*, from traditional religiosity to *reasoned argumentation*, from obscure ruminations to *clarity of thought*.¹⁸ This is despite the fact that Parmenides is also known (especially among Classicists) for his use of syntactical ambiguity and often obscure metaphors and vocabulary, as well as for his characteristic appeal to motifs anchored within the traditions of Homeric epic,

¹¹ Sattler (2020, 108, n. 104) associates Parmenides with “the very beginnings of logical investigations in Western thought”. Austin (1986, 1) deems Parmenides to be “not only the architect of Western ontology, but also the father of our logic”.

¹² Barnes (1982 [1979], 139) calls him “the first full-blooded metaphysician”. See also Austin (1986, 1). For Parmenides as the pioneer of ‘Western metaphysics’, see noncommittally Lloyd (2015, 18).

¹³ Kahn (1969, 720); McKirahan (2008, 189); McKirahan (2010 [1994], 150–151).

¹⁴ Osborne (2004, 39); McKirahan (2010 [1994], 150–151).

¹⁵ Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 1) affirms that demonstration, and more specifically the deductive argumentation that forms its backbone, traces to Parmenides. He adds that Parmenides “marks a fundamental inflection point in the history of Western thought” (2022, 2).

¹⁶ As noted by Curd (2004 [1998], 3); Warren (2014 [2007], 77); and Palmer (2009a, 1).

¹⁷ Before Gallop, Furley (1967, 47) had identified Parmenides as “the most original and important philosopher before Socrates”. See similarly Guthrie (1969, 1).

¹⁸ There are notable dissenting voices in the literature. Some scholars rightly stress the compatibility of motifs firmly belonging within the remit of myth and religion with the philosophical elements of the poem (often as part of a critique of the stringent *mythos-logos* framework), on which see Tor (2017, 11, with n. 4). Others, notably Kingsley (1995; 1999; 2003) and Gemelli Marciano (2002; 2008; 2013), go so far as to deny that the poem is at all philosophical or argumentative; on this view, see e.g. Sassi (2018 [2009], 158–158), Tor (2017, 11, with n. 3), Bryan (2020a, 220, with n. 8), and Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 6, n. 29). Still others object that Parmenides’ style of writing is far from clear, drawing parallels to the presence of syntactical ambiguity in his fragments comparable to that of his Ionian contemporary, Heraclitus (Mansfeld 1995; Graham 2002, 37; Nehamas 2002, 47–48; and Bryan 2020a) – a point I elaborate in Chapters 3–5.

lyric poetry, Hesiodic theology,¹⁹ and certain kinds of initiation rites (possibly linked to Pythagoreanism and/or Orphism²⁰).

Curiously, whereas contemporary specialists tend to keep the view that Thales was the first philosopher, or the first ‘*Western*’ Philosopher, at arm’s length²¹ (even as many continue mistakenly to attribute it to the Greeks²²), many are by contrast willing to endorse, *in propria persona*, the primacy of Parmenides.²³ Even among recent specialists, the view that Parmenides marked *the* decisive shift to rationalism implicates, as it were, a kind of personal investment. Strikingly, the three defences of the *mythos-logos* framework encountered in Chapter 1 often reappear here, in more subtle and nuanced garb:²⁴

¹⁹ For Homeric parallels, see e.g. Coxon (2009 [1986], 7–11); Havelock (1958, 137–140); and Folit-Weinberg (2022a; see also 2022b). For poetic parallels in general, see e.g. Bowra (1937); Mansfeld (1964, chapter 1); Most (1999a); Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 1–46); Sassi (2018 [2009], 151–160); and Tor (2017, 250–277, 312).

²⁰ For possible (if controversial) Pythagorean and ‘Orphic’ echoes in Parmenides, see e.g. Cornford (1939); Coxon (2009 [1986], 15–17); Guthrie (1969, 2–13); Burkert (1969); and Tor (2017, 274–277). For initiation rites more generally (including mystery initiations), see e.g. Tor (2017, 265–277); Burkert (1987); and Bremmer (2014).

²¹ One exception is Barnes (1982 [1979], 8), who endorses Thales’ “traditional place of honour at the head of Western science and philosophy”.

²² For this point, see Cantor (2022). Mansfeld (1985a, 47–49) also takes issue with the ‘textbook’ claim that Aristotle believed that Thales was the first philosopher *as such*. The view that Thales was the first philosopher has been attributed to Aristotle by Frede (2000 [1996], 6; 2009 [2004], 503, 516–517, 520, 528); (cautiously) Sassi (2018 [2009], 4–5); Betegh (2017 [2002], 351); Laks (2018 [2006], 51, 73–74; though see 74, n. 26); and Warren (2014 [2007], 23–25). Frede (2009 [2004], 416) and Warren (2014 [2007], 23) also attribute the view to ancient Greek writers quite broadly.

²³ Particularly striking is Mansfeld’s (1985a, 57, 61) willingness to vouch for Parmenides as a viable candidate for the title of ‘first philosopher’ (or as he puts it, the “first true-blue philosopher”), given that much of his work is focused on dispelling the idea that Thales was the first philosopher (and that he was perceived to be the first philosopher by the Greeks). See also Owen (1960, 101), who famously denied Parmenides’ indebtedness to Milesian cosmology and declared him to be “a philosophical pioneer of the first water” – a view whose influence is apparent in Schofield’s (2003, 44) observation, forty years on, that “it is nowadays commonly supposed that Parmenides was a creative genius not much in debt to anybody”.

²⁴ As Tor (2017, 13) notes, “[t]he common ground in the dispute surrounding Parmenides’ goddess reflects prevalent and quite general attitudes towards ‘rationality’, ‘irrationality’, ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion’ in approaches to early Greek thought and culture”.

- (i) Parmenides is the first ('Western') philosopher to foreground rationality;²⁵
- (ii) Parmenides is the first ('Western') philosopher to provide reasons and arguments for his positions;²⁶
- (iii) Parmenides is the first ('Western') philosopher decisively to turn his back on the old religious and 'god-centred' thought of his predecessors – making way for reasoned and logical thinking.²⁷

Partly because of the reservations already flagged in Chapter 1, as to the very project of tracing a 'Western' mode of thought (let alone rationality or argumentative reasoning *as such*) to the Greeks, the remainder of this Thesis will not be concerned to undermine (i) and (ii). That said, if claims (i) and (ii) were properly qualified so as to make claims about Parmenides' standing within Greek

²⁵ In an admittedly subversive nod to the *mythos-logos* narrative, Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 6) identifies Parmenides as having essentially inaugurated 'Western' thought, deploying "the narrative mechanics and dramatic scenario of myth to stage reason's great debut in Western thought". In a footnote, Folit-Weinberg (2022a, 6, n. 29) adds that those who emphasize the mythical aspects of Parmenides' poem "deny its status as a founding document in the Western tradition of philosophical reasoning and argument – or that it contains arguments at all" – citing (*inter alia*) Gemelli Marciano (2008; 2013). Yet surely taking the poem's philosophical features seriously need not commit one to any claims about Parmenides' status as a founder of 'Western Philosophy'.

²⁶ Kahn (1969, 720). Mansfeld (1985a, 57, 62) associates the critical reflection on scientific views and discovery of "the importance of language, argument, and epistemology" with Parmenides, further claiming he "discovered the *Erkenntnis-problem* and the uses of argument". McKirahan (2008, 189; see also 2010 [1994], 150–151) squarely declares that Parmenides is universally recognized for his "introduction of argument into philosophy". Osborne (2004, 39; though contrast 2006, 228) credits Parmenides with inaugurating "the idea of proving his point". Sattler (2020, 32) identifies Parmenides as "the first thinker in the West to introduce clear criteria for philosophical inquiry".

²⁷ The list of exponents of this view is too long to be reproduced here, given the sheer dominance of Burnet's view according to which we ought not be misled by the presence of the word *theos* ('god') in early Greek speculation (see Chapter 1, §2.3). An especially clear exemplar of Burnet's influential view in recent scholarship on Parmenides is Leshner (2008), discussed below. For scholars' tendency to view Parmenides as the "limiting case for early Greek rationality" in such a way as to pit him against the "god-centred thought" of his predecessors, see Tor's helpful discussion (2017, 10–19, esp. 15). Tor himself does not deny that Parmenides might constitute a "limiting case for early Greek rationality" (in the sense of exhibiting a preoccupation with, and a capacity for coherence, inference and the use of evidence; explanation, questioning, systematization, and so on), but he does crucially challenge that this is in tension with "god-centred" thought.

philosophy specifically (rather than within the history of philosophy *tout court* or ‘Western Philosophy’), then they might be defensible – with the caveat that *triumphalist* rationalism is not packed in. It is however beyond the scope of this Thesis to engage directly with these claims (so qualified). Nor will I enter directly into debates about (iii) Parmenides’ attitudes to traditional religious ideas and practice; though my scepticism toward framing early Greek philosophers like Parmenides as either unconcerned with, or actively opposed to, religion will be evident to the reader, again based on what we saw in Chapter 1. My intention is rather to show how assumptions (i) to (iii), irrespective of what they do or do not get right, serve to sustain a set of deep-seated assumptions as to what Parmenides could or could not be saying, with the effect of foreclosing certain interpretive possibilities which are strongly supported by the evidence.

There is a strong tendency in the literature to frame Parmenides as marking a decisive shift away from religious to *secular* and *naturalistic* thinking, which often explicitly underpins the characterization of him as a philosopher whose attitudes to knowledge morphed dramatically away from pessimism to unmitigated optimism. The pull of the *mythos-logos* narrative (discussed in Chapter 1, §§2.3–3) in such an approach to Parmenides is clear. Consider, for instance, James Leshner’s (2008, 458) characterization of ‘Presocratic’ epistemology as one in which:

[...] divine revelation is replaced as a warrant for knowledge with naturalistic accounts of how and what we humans can know; thus replacing earlier Greek pessimism about knowledge with a more optimistic outlook that allows for human discovery of the truth. A review of the relevant fragments and testimonia shows that Xenophanes, Alcmaeon, Heraclitus, and Parmenides—even Pythagoras and Empedocles—all moved some distance away from the older “god-oriented” view of knowledge toward a more secular and optimistic outlook.

Lesher's discussion culminates with Parmenides, whom he presents as offering the ultimate Presocratic "rationalist" or "humanistic" outlook (2008, 473), and as self-consciously offering a remedy to "the underlying view of the conditions of knowledge on which the traditional indictment of human intelligence had been based" (2008, 475). This then leads him to explain away Parmenides' appeals to the traditional language of poetic inspiration and divine revelation by presenting such features as calculated acts of subversion and covert critique²⁸ – a familiar move in various versions of the *mythos-logos* narrative explored in Chapter 1.²⁹

It is important to recognize that the *mythos-logos* narrative also informs scholarship on Parmenides' philosophy in more subtle ways. Many scholars do not go as far as Lesher in casting Parmenides as a "humanist". But we do find a strong tendency to present the religious overtones of the poem as either superficial or philosophically irrelevant,³⁰ and/or the suggestion that what makes Parmenides truly novel relative to his (Greek) predecessors is his emphasis on the capacities of human reasoning as standing *independently* from divine inspiration or disclosure.³¹ Whatever we make of these more qualified approaches, it is worth noticing that from here it is a small step to claiming that Parmenides adopts *triumphalist* attitudes to (human) knowledge.³²

Other scholars are more cautious about discounting religious elements in the poem (in some cases even making them integral to their philosophical

²⁸ Lesher (2008, 475).

²⁹ In a similar vein, Granger (2008, 5, 14, 17) takes the goddess of Parmenides' poem to be a "secular or non-religious allegory" of "*a priori* reason", and supposedly indicative of a process of "demythologization" by Parmenides. For the goddess as a mere "literary device" in the context of a secular interpretation of Parmenides, see also Tarán (1965, 30). Havelock (1958, 136) also offers a secular interpretation of the proem.

³⁰ See Mansfeld (1985a, 59–60); see also n. 27 and n. 29 above.

³¹ See e.g. Curd (2002, 124–125, 134–136) and Lesher (1984). The passage typically invoked here is B7.5=D8.5, discussed in Chapter 3, §1.2.

³² Curd (2002, 124) is an illustrative example.

interpretations³³); but still suggest, in line with a broader trend in the scholarship on early Greek philosophy, that Parmenides departed radically from his predecessors' epistemological pessimism, inaugurating a new kind of confident optimism.³⁴

§1.2. Zhuangzi as illogical, irrational, anti-rational, mystical

We have observed that the burden is incessantly placed on 'non-Western' authors and texts to prove themselves as philosophical, implicitly by the standards of whatever is taken to be (however arbitrarily or unstably) 'Western Philosophy'. Here it is important to reflect on how this state of affairs has affected engagement with ancient Chinese philosophy, and more specifically, how debates around 'comparative philosophy' have obscured the problematic erasure of classical Chinese philosophers from the purview of ancient philosophy and the history of philosophy more broadly. Why are they not counted amongst 'ancient philosophers' in mainstream Anglo-European philosophical discourse and practice?

When Europeans first encountered Confucianism (*rujia* 儒家), they immediately recognized its figurehead, Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius, 551–479 BCE), *as a philosopher*.³⁵ Through to the late eighteenth century, Chinese philosophy was routinely included in accounts of the early history of philosophy;³⁶ and the fact that

³³ This is especially true of Tor's (2017, 265–277) interpretation, which takes the *kouros*' 'initiation' in the proem as genuinely transformative and relevant to the *kouros*' putative ascent to 'godlike' cognition.

³⁴ So e.g. Bryan (2012, 58, 102–104; 2020b, 92–93) and Tor (2015; 2017). Tor (2017, 314; see 95–103) interestingly argues that the epistemological pessimism of two of Parmenides' core predecessors, Hesiod and Xenophanes, is not unmitigated. Indeed, one of his core claims is that Hesiod accommodates a certain kind of ambivalence between pessimistic and optimistic attitudes. However, according to Tor (2017, 316–317), Parmenides signals a radical break with this tradition by allowing that the *kouros* might transcend the human limitations (through a process of divinization) which the poets, and to some extent Xenophanes, had deemed intractable. I challenge Tor's optimism about the *kouros*' cognitive capacities in Chapters 3 and 4, on both textual and philosophical grounds.

³⁵ See Dyck (2005, 15); Van Norden (2017, 19); and Wong (2020 [2001]).

³⁶ See Bernasconi (1997); Perkins (2016b); and Park (2013).

ancient philosophy was taken to include not just Greek philosophy but also many other traditions, including the Chinese tradition, is apparent from comments made by major philosophers of the European Enlightenment.³⁷ One of the founding figures of the Jesuit missions in China, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), referred to Confucian literati simply as “the Philosophers”.³⁸ In 1687, Jesuit missionaries published a work titled *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (‘Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese’) which they dedicated to the French King Louis XIV.³⁹ The Latinization of Kongzi in the title – derived from the surname *Kong* 孔 followed by an honorific suffix, *fuzi* 夫子 (‘Master’) – is testament to the importance which the Jesuits saw in Confucian teachings.⁴⁰ This text purported to provide the first authoritative manual on Chinese schools of thought, but reflected a marked bias in favour of the Confucian classics. Within a few decades, several leading figures of the French and German Enlightenment declared Chinese philosophy (by which they largely meant Confucian ethics) to have surpassed European philosophy in the realm of a moral philosophy. These included Leibniz (1614–1716),⁴¹ Christian

³⁷ For e.g. Spinoza’s acceptance of ancient philosophies beyond Greece, see Perkins (2016b, 61).

³⁸ See e.g. Ricci (1953 [1583–1610], 58); for this point, see Perkins (2016b, 60).

³⁹ See Couplet et al. (1687). On this work and its role in cementing European acceptance of Chinese culture and especially Confucianism down to the eighteenth century, see Mungello (2013 [1999], esp. 90–116); (in connection with Leibniz) Perkins (2008 [2004], 19, with n. 44; 2016b, 60–61); and Ambrogio (2021, 69ff.).

⁴⁰ The only other Chinese philosopher whose name was widely Latinized in Jesuit circles was another major Confucian philosopher, Mengzi 孟子 (c. fourth century BCE), also known as Mencius.

⁴¹ See Leibniz’ *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (written in French in 1716 under the title *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois* and published posthumously in 1735) and the Preface to his *Novissima Sinica* (1697). In the latter, he declared that “[...] certainly they [the Chinese] surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals” (trans. Lach 1957, 69–70). For Leibniz’ attitudes to China, see Perkins (2008 [2004]; 2016b) and Cook (2020). We know that Leibniz read *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* and that he additionally relied on Catholic missionaries’ reports for his knowledge of Chinese philosophy (see Mungello 1989, 288 and Bernasconi 1997, 214).

Wolff (1679–1754),⁴² and Voltaire (1694–1778).⁴³ From the outset, Confucianism was framed by Jesuits as a highly rational tradition, showing very few signs of anything akin to religious rituals or practices, but presenting a natural theology or theism amenable to Christianity.⁴⁴ Over time, Confucianism began increasingly to be associated with secularism and even atheism (by both its admirers and detractors), which helps explain its widespread appeal among philosophers of the European Enlightenment⁴⁵ – the era in which grand narratives of rationalization and secularization began to take hold in European philosophical discourse.⁴⁶

This, however, was never true of Daoism (*daoia* 道家), the philosophical school with which the *Zhuangzi* is traditionally associated within classical Chinese philosophy. This school of thought has had a fraught reception history ever since it first became known to European philosophers via Jesuit missionaries.⁴⁷ Daoist (like Buddhist) texts received almost no attention in the aforementioned *Confucius*

⁴² See his 1721 lecture entitled *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (“On the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese”).

⁴³ See his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1765 [1764], 283–284), in which, under the entry titled “Philosopher” (“*Philosophe*”), he implies that Confucius was the first true philosopher, and comments that this is “perhaps a disgrace for occidental peoples” (“*fatalité honteuse peut-être pour les Peuples occidentaux*”).

⁴⁴ See e.g. Perkins (2016b, 60) and Cook (2020, 253–254) for the Rites Controversy, in which the Jesuits were compelled to justify their position of ‘accommodation’ in relation to Confucianism. The Jesuits argued that Chinese rituals of ancestor worship were compatible with monotheism, against missionaries who argued that the ancient Chinese were really materialists and atheists. Note that Leibniz sided with the Jesuit accommodationist view in this debate.

⁴⁵ It is telling that in the same entry on the “Philosopher” (mentioned in n. 43 above), Voltaire (1765 [1764], 283–284) declares that the philosopher is not someone “who claims to be inspired by the gods” (“*Le philosophe [...] ne se dit point inspiré des Dieux*”), and thereby (and this is his inference) dismisses even the Greeks as having a claim to true philosophy in its earliest history. Note also that Christian Wolff was infamously forced into exile in 1723 on pain of death owing to his controversial view of the Chinese as virtuous non-theists (Perkins 2016b, 61; see also Bernasconi 1997, 215).

⁴⁶ Kant’s infamous assessment of Confucianism as being at best a quasi-ethical doctrine reserved for the elite – devoid of any true concept of virtue or morality – was strikingly negative even by the standards of his day. See Kant in von Glasenapp (1954, 104); quoted in English in Ching (1978, 169, with n. 25).

⁴⁷ For the European reception of Daoism, see e.g. Pohl (2003 [1998]); Hardy (1998); Clarke (2000); Elberfeld (2001); Walf (2005); Brandt and Purdy, eds. (2016); Nelson (2017); Harper (2019); Tadd (2022); and Cantor (2023). The label *daoia* 道家 goes back to the court historian Sima Tan 司馬談 (c. 165–110 BCE) – the father of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (138–86 BCE), to whom we owe our biographical information about Zhuangzi, as discussed below.

Sinarum Philosophus.⁴⁸ The *Laozi* 老子 – a core Daoist text which is now probably the best-known work of classical Chinese philosophy, and one of the most translated works of world literature⁴⁹ – was mentioned only in passing and in a dismissive tone. The *Zhuangzi* received no mention at all. The Jesuit bias in favour of Confucianism had a long-lasting legacy in European attitudes to Chinese philosophy, entrenching a view of Daoist texts as being either philosophically inconsequential or outright unphilosophical.

It is largely the *Laozi* which formed the basis of European engagement with Daoist thought down to the early twentieth century. This has shaped the modern scholarship on the *Zhuangzi* in important ways. Daoism is first mentioned in European sources in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, in the writings of the French Jesuit Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628).⁵⁰ By the end of the seventeenth century, two other French Jesuits – Philippe Couplet (1622–1693) and Louis-Daniel Le Compte (1655–1728) – bizarrely claimed to recognize knowledge of the Trinity in the *Laozi*.⁵¹ But only a few years earlier (just a few years before the publication of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*), in 1667, the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1601–1680), who was considered an authority on both Egypt and China,⁵² had spoken disparagingly of Daoism, characterizing it as full of “abominable falsehoods”, and portraying it as a form of idolatry originating in Egypt.⁵³ This

⁴⁸ Latin translations of the Confucian texts *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), and the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) were included as philosophical texts. See Mungello (1989, 247–299) and Harper (2019, 32) for the brief treatment of Daoism and Buddhism.

⁴⁹ For the *Laozi*’s global influence, see Tadd (2022).

⁵⁰ Walf (2005, 276–267). The first passages of the *Laozi* to appear in translation in a European language also date to this period, owing to the translation efforts of the Spanish Jesuit Juan Cobo (1546–1592). See Tadd (2022, 92).

⁵¹ Couplet’s comments about the *Laozi* (focusing on *Laozi* 42) were made in the context of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, which he co-edited.

⁵² See Perkins (2008 [2004], 8).

⁵³ Clarke (2000, 39); Walf (2005, 284).

reflected a broader trend in Jesuit circles to brand Daoism and Buddhism as superstitious and irrational, in contradistinction to a notably positive appraisal of Confucianism as abiding by natural reason.

It is important to remember that at this point and down to the late eighteenth century, the generally negative European assessment of Daoism was not based on any direct acquaintance with ancient Daoist philosophical texts, largely because the Jesuits had sought to suppress what they saw as China's more religiously inclined – and therefore more threatening – philosophical traditions.⁵⁴ Thus, when in a 1794 lecture Immanuel Kant identified the thought of the *Laozi* as a “monster system”, he was relying on secondary sources themselves based on fragmentary excerpts from the *Laozi*.⁵⁵ Kant alleged that:

Out of this misbehavior the monster system of Laotse arises, teaching that the highest good consists in nothingness, i.e., in the feeling of being swallowed up by the abyss of the godhead ... only in order to enable man to enjoy eternal calm and thus reach the alleged blessed end of all things. This nothingness, truly conceived, is a concept which annihilates all understanding and in which thought itself arrives at its end.⁵⁶

Despite being shrouded in ignorance, Kant's assessment of Daoism is instructive. His three-pronged verdict on Daoism – as (i) essentially mystical; as (ii) wedded to a conception of an all-engrossing divinity precluding any kind of distinctions, to the point of annihilating the thinking subject; and as (iii) antithetical

⁵⁴ The Jesuits' judgments about ancient Daoist texts like the *Laozi* were deeply skewed by their perception of Daoist religion as they encountered it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – a religious movement whose incipience (usually traced to the second century CE) largely post-dates the *Laozi*'s and *Zhuangzi*'s composition. While Daoist religion lent a central importance to the *Laozi* from an early stage, it only began to foreground the *Zhuangzi* as a sacred text during the time of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–755 CE) (Kohn 2014, 112–134; 2022).

⁵⁵ See Ching (1978, 168); Clarke (2000, 41); and Elberfeld (2001, 143–144).

⁵⁶ Kant (1794, 8:335f.); Kroner and Smith, ed. and trans. (1956, 15–16).

to rationality – was repeated in European scholarship on the *Laozi* for the better part of two hundred years thereafter.

The *Zhuangzi* made a comparably late entrance to the European intellectual scene, with the first full translations of the text into European languages (including in English) appearing as late as the nineteenth century; and European scholarship has tended to assume doctrinal continuity with the better-known *Laozi* – reading features of the *Laozi* back into the *Zhuangzi* even in the face of countervailing evidence, and transferring inherited prejudices relating to the *Laozi* to the study of the *Zhuangzi*. In modern scholarship, this has coalesced with a tendency of Chinese scholarship to accept the traditional Han-era (202 BCE–9 CE, 25–220 CE) narrative, traceable to the court historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (138–86 BCE): whereby both the composition of the *Laozi* and the lifetime of its mythical author are supposed to precede the dating of the *Zhuangzi* (and the lifetime of its putative author, Zhuang Zhou), and whereby, crucially, the *Laozi* is supposedly *the* key source of doctrinal influence on the *Zhuangzi*.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ For an influential dissenting view, according to which the *Zhuangzi* is (barring some later interpolations) the prior text, see Graham (1989). For a recent sympathetic assessment of the traditional narrative, see Fried (2022b). Fried finds that numerous intertextual links to the *Laozi* can be found in the *Zhuangzi*, but that these are much more frequent and conclusive in the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” Chapters (parts or all of which many scholars take to be of a later dating, as discussed below). Still, he argues that the “Inner Chapters” bear the mark of a more oblique Laozian influence, even if he acknowledges that the evidence remains speculative. The latest material evidence suggests that, like the *Zhuangzi*, the *Laozi* was written by several hands over a long period of time. The text is not attested in full (or in Laozi’s name) before 200–150 BCE. We know that a complete *Laozi* similar to the transmitted text circulated in the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 CE), thanks to the discovery in 1973 of two *Laozi* manuscripts (entombed in 168 BCE) at Mawangdui 馬王堆. Newly excavated manuscripts found at Guodian 郭店 in 1993, which are dated to the fourth century BCE, appear to be early versions of the *Laozi*, although they depart significantly from the “complete” transmitted *Laozi* and the Mawangdui *Laozi*. This new find may suggest that the text (or some version thereof) was in circulation during the Warring States (c. 453–221 BCE) period, which some scholars (e.g. Fried 2022b) take to strengthen the traditional hypothesis of a Laozian influence on the *Zhuangzi*. While I do not take a firm view on this issue, the possibility of a Laozian background in (parts of) the *Zhuangzi* will become relevant in Chapter 5. I do not however assume that this putative background implies doctrinal *continuity* between the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.

One might ask why any of this matters to first-order philosophical analysis. The reason is that a putative continuity between the Laozi's allegedly mystical and monistic worldview continues to underpin received views about the *Zhuangzi*, even among specialists of classical Chinese texts.⁵⁸ This is despite the fact that, as I discuss in Chapter 5, Zhuangzi pointedly *challenges* monism – in a striking argument turning on the idea that one cannot even coherently speak about the one.⁵⁹

And yet consider, by way of example, Benjamin Schwartz' influential book *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (1985):

We shall again begin our account of the historic Chuang-tzu [Zhuangzi] with the mystical vision which he shares with Lao-tzu [Laozi]. Chuang-tzu's [Zhuangzi's] constant efforts to describe the indescribable in many ways simply amplify and enrich what we have already found in the Lao-tzu [Laozi].⁶⁰

A.C. Graham, too, endorses the view of Zhuangzi as a mystical monist in his partial translation of the *Zhuangzi*:

But it is also clear that if he is taking this position Hui Shi has come dangerously close to discrediting his own tool, analytic reason. He wishes to discredit only spatial and temporal divisions, but it will take only one more step to observe that all reasoning depends on making distinctions, and *to reach the conclusion that we should abandon reason for the immediate experience of an undifferentiated world*, transforming “All are one” from a moral into a mystical affirmation. It is in “The sorting that evens things out” [= chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*] that Chuang-tzu takes this step.⁶¹

⁵⁸ See e.g. Maspero (1978 [1927], 306–308); Feng (1948); Creel (1970, esp. 40); Schwartz (1985, 192–194, 216–217); Graham (2001 [1981], 9; 1989, 176; see also 1969, 144); Robinet (1997 [1992], 31–34); Lundberg (1998, 213–214); Coyle (1998, 200–201); Lee (1998, 461); (noncommittally) Kohn (2014, esp. 178–179); and Porat (2015, esp. 128–129).

⁵⁹ Hansen (2000 [1992], 270) rightly denounces this oversight in the literature.

⁶⁰ Schwartz (1985, 216–217; see also 192–194); quoted in Hansen (Hansen (2000 [1992], 265).

⁶¹ Graham (2001 [1981], 9), my emphasis; quoted in Hansen (2000 [1992], 270).

Graham also claimed that Zhuangzi meant to launch an attack on reason,⁶² and reject logic.⁶³ The assumption that Zhuangzi was essentially a mystic wedded to a view akin to numerical monism (identified in the literature on Daoism as “mystical monism”, “absolute monism” or “primitive Daoism”⁶⁴) will be disputed systematically in Chapters 3–5. I will also challenge the still-common views of Zhuangzi as (i) a sophisticated or borderline irrational thinker,⁶⁵ and as (ii) a sceptic-turned-relativist who (inadvertently) forgoes his scepticism, in favour of negative dogmatism.⁶⁶

§2. The protagonists

§2.1. *Parmenides: the man, the fragments, the gap*

Very few biographical facts about Parmenides are known with any certainty. Reliable clues to be gleaned from ancient testimonies and doxography suggest that: (i) he was probably born in the late sixth century BCE; (ii) he was active in the early fifth century BCE;⁶⁷ and (iii) he was from the Greek colony of Elea in Southern Italy (present-day Velia, in the region of Campania).

⁶² Graham (1989, 186, 193–195); see also Graham (1969, 144; 1989, 176) and (cautiously) Littlejohn (2022 [2015], 79–80). For Zhuangzi as a proponent of “anti-rationalism” and mysticism, see also Kohn (1992, esp. 53; see also 56). By contrast, Chan (1963, 177) affirms that Zhuangzi “follows reason as the leading light”, even though he also calls him “mystical”. Carr and Ivanhoe (2010 [2000], 45) ascribe “antirationalism” to Zhuangzi, but with the crucial caveat that “[a]ntirationalism is not a view opposed to or inconsistent with being rational; rather it is a principled objection to rationalism”.

⁶³ Graham (2001 [1981], 9). For dissenting views that emphasize Zhuangzi’s sophisticated use of logic, see e.g. Alt (1991) and Kwok (2022, 423).

⁶⁴ For these labels, see Hansen (2000 [1992], 287) and Fraser (2009, 444, with n. 23) – though both Hansen and Fraser resist ascribing the view to Zhuangzi. Kohn (2014, 181) claims that “[m]ysticism is the one label that has been attached to the *Zhuangzi* more often than others”, noting its frequent association with the doctrine of undifferentiated oneness.

⁶⁵ In recent literature the view is implied by Wenzel (2017), supported tentatively by a dubious theory of linguistic determinism.

⁶⁶ This second view was popularized by Hansen (1983; 2000 [1992]), as discussed in Chapter 3.

⁶⁷ Based primarily on biographical information found in Plato’s *Parmenides* (127a; see also *Sophist* 217c; *Theaetetus* 183e), most commentators take it that Parmenides was born around 520–515 BCE, with his lifespan usually estimated at 520–440 BCE. (For a recent discussion, see Thibodeau 2019, esp. 57, 152–158.)

The surviving text attributed to Parmenides is a poem written in hexametric verse, the epic meter used by Homer and Hesiod. Among the familiar early Greek philosophers, Parmenides is probably the first of whose thought we have a relatively continuous account in his own words.⁶⁸ For this we mainly have to thank the Neoplatonist thinker Simplicius (c. 480–560 CE), who, in the context of his commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics* written in the sixth century CE, set out to cite large chunks of the text “on account of the rarity of Parmenides’ writings (διὰ τὴν σπάνιν τοῦ Παρμενιδείου συγγράμματος).”⁶⁹ Two thirds of the surviving 150 lines of the poem are cited by Simplicius, who is also the latest author we know to have almost certainly had access to the whole work.⁷⁰ Fortunately Simplicius’ method of documenting and citing verbatim quotations is especially reliable.⁷¹ Of the other ancient authors who cite Parmenides’ text, our most significant sources are Sextus Empiricus,⁷² Clement of Alexandria, Plutarch, and (though he is often quoting from memory) Proclus.⁷³ About a quarter of the extant verses are attested in more than one author.

The text details an encounter between an unnamed goddess and a ‘youth’ (*kouros*). The poem begins with a description of the *kouros*’ journey to meet the goddess (the proem); and upon the *kouros*’ arrival before her at the end of the proem,

⁶⁸ Hussey (1972, 78).

⁶⁹ Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 144.25–28=A21=R73.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Coxon (2009 [1986], 1), who also notes that for half of all that survives of the poem, Simplicius is our sole authority.

⁷¹ See Wildberg (1993) and Coxon (2009 [1986], 1).

⁷² Sextus quotes most of the opening lines of the poem, known as the proem (B1.1–30=D4.1–30), as well as five and a half lines of B7=D8.1–6 and B8=D8.6–60 – four fifths of which are known from him alone (Coxon 2009 [1986], 5).

⁷³ For a discussion of these sources, see Coxon (2009 [1986], 1–7). For a full list of quotations from Parmenides that survive in our sources (from Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Eudemos, Plutarch, Soranus [in Latin translation], Galen, Sextus Empiricus, Clement of Alexandria, Plotinus, Diogenes Laertius, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius, Ammonius, Simplicius, and the scholiast Basil), see Diels (1901) and Coxon (2009 [1986], 1–3). Note that Sedley (in progress) has recently proposed that we add a prose ‘dictum’ attested in Simplicius (see *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 31.3–7) to our list of quotations, *contra* Diels’ (2003 [1897], 97) and Coxon’s (2009 [1986], 6) claim that it is really a scholium which mistakenly entered the manuscript tradition.

the goddess becomes the sole narrative voice of the poem. What follows is an exposition of the “unshaken heart of well-rounded truth/reality” – laid out in the part of the poem known as the *Alētheia* (‘Truth’ or ‘Reality’) – and a distinct account in the form of an elaborate cosmology, articulated in the third part of the poem, which is widely referred to as the *Doxa* (‘Opinion’ or ‘Belief’).

While the proem and most of the *Alētheia* survive (largely thanks to Sextus Empiricus and Simplicius), we lack a clear picture of how exactly the latter was organized internally (that is, the order in which the various fragments should be placed); and, more importantly, how this part of the poem relates to the *Doxa*, which we know occupied many more lines, but of which comparatively little text survives.⁷⁴ Filling the gaps here can be extremely challenging, and in some respects arbitrary.⁷⁵ The tendency has been to look exclusively to later Greek thinkers, who were not necessarily concerned with conveying a historically accurate picture of their predecessors’ views, for a more complete picture. This kind of interpretive choice, though fertile, is not without problems. I offer a different approach whereby a text outside, and historically unconnected to, the Greek tradition (and therefore completely immune to the dialectical ‘weaponization’ of Parmenides, as found in e.g. Plato and Aristotle⁷⁶), is brought in dialogue with Parmenides’ philosophy.⁷⁷ In

⁷⁴ We know from Plutarch, for instance, that Parmenides’ cosmological inquiries were extensive (*adv. Col.* 1114B–C). Coxon (2009 [1986], 9) estimates that “perhaps less than a quarter” of the entire poem survives.

⁷⁵ See e.g. Mourelatos (2008 [1970], xxvi): “For, given the paucity of text [...] it would be interpreter’s hubris to claim that any single reading of Parmenides’ poem forecloses the possibility of others”.

⁷⁶ For Plato’s appropriation of ‘Presocratic’ ideas, see e.g. Palmer (1999; 2009b); McCabe (2000); Bryan (2012); and (with specific reference to Parmenides) Nehamas (1999, 124–137). For Aristotle’s attitudes to (and distortion of) early Greek philosophers’ views, see e.g. Mansfeld (1985b); Long (1996, 126–130); Palmer (2000); Laks (2007 [2004]); Frede (2009 [2004]); Sassi (2018 [2009], 21); Barney (2012); and (with specific reference to Parmenides) Palmer (2009a, 2–10), Clarke (2018; 2019), Castelli (2018), and Ferro (unpublished). Still valuable on Aristotle’s attitudes to the ‘Presocratics’ are also Cornford (1957 [1912], 127–128); Cherniss (1935, 347–404; 1951, 320–321); Guthrie (1957); Edelstein (2019 [1967], 95–129); and Stokes (1971).

⁷⁷ For a similar approach to early Greek philosophers drawing on the resources of early excavated (proto-)Daoist texts, see Gajdošová (2017, 51).

particular, consideration of some of the philosophical resources and manoeuvres that Zhuangzi draws on explicitly and in a developed way (for instance, his self-conscious use of analogies) will help us see that similar tools and moves can plausibly and usefully be registered to be operative in Parmenides – albeit in a less explicit or elaborate way.

Unless otherwise stated, references to the fragments of Parmenides are to the editions of Diels–Kranz (‘DK’, 1951–1952 [1903]) and Laks–Most (‘LM’, 2016).

§2.2. Zhuangzi, the Zhuangzi, and the vexed question of authorship

Very little is known about the author(s) of the *Zhuangzi*, named after its legendary author, Zhuangzi 莊子 (‘Master Zhuang’) or Zhuang Zhou 莊周. Scholars who think someone by the name of Zhuang Zhou really authored at least part of the text hold that he lived around the fourth century BCE,⁷⁸ in the Warring States period (c. 453–221 BCE) of ancient Chinese history. This is based on the biographical note provided by the court historian Sima Qian (whom we encountered above) in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Record of the Grand Historian*), according to which Zhuang Zhou was a minor official in the state of Song 宋. While some conjecture that the received *Zhuangzi* was compiled in the Western Han 西漢 period (202 BCE–9 CE), the earliest extant version of the text that has come down to us is by Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312 CE), a thinker associated with the ‘neo-Daoist’ or *xuanxue* 玄學 school in the Wei-Jin 魏晉 period (c. 220–420 CE).⁷⁹

⁷⁸ See e.g. Graham (1989, 170).

⁷⁹ See e.g. Jiang (2016, 41); Meyer (2015, 298, n. 5); and Fried (2022b).

As is true of most ancient (pre-Buddhist) Chinese transmitted texts, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 as we have it today (that is, the received text) was written by several hands over a long period of time.⁸⁰ This much is *not* controversial. What *is* controversial, however, is whether the so-called “Inner Chapters” (*nei pian* 內篇, 1–7) can legitimately be attributed to a single earlier author (usually thought to be the historical Zhuangzi), and the “Outer Chapters” (*wai pian* 外篇, 8–22) and “Miscellaneous Chapters” (*za pian* 雜篇, 23–33) to later (sympathetic) followers, as was for a long time the consensus view.⁸¹ Proponents of this view, which I will call the ‘purist approach’, typically argue that the “Inner Chapters” are historically and doctrinally closer to the thought of the (putative) historical thinker Zhuang Zhou, and ought therefore form the starting point and focus – if not the *exclusive* object – of philosophical analysis of the *Zhuangzi*. However, the assumption that the “Inner Chapters” correspond to an earlier stratum of the text’s composition, and that they were written by the same person, has been convincingly challenged on both philological and historiographical grounds.⁸² From a different direction, critics of the purist approach have also pointed out that exclusively focusing on the “Inner Chapters” has the unfortunate consequence of downgrading or altogether ignoring

⁸⁰ For the composite nature of early Chinese texts in general, see e.g. Boltz (2005) and Li (2004, esp. 197–198).

⁸¹ See especially Graham (1979) and Liu (1994; 2015). See also Kjellberg (1994, 117, n. 22); Van Norden (1996, 247, with n. 7); McCraw (2010); (tentatively) Wong (2005, 91, n. 1; though see 2022, 640); (tentatively) Ivanhoe (1996, 206); and Roth (1991). On some versions of this approach, other parts of the *Zhuangzi* are in fact misplaced fragments from the “Inner Chapters”, conveying an authentically Zhuangzian authorial voice.

⁸² See most notably Klein (2011; cf. 2022), who disputes the supposition that the Inner Chapters were written by a single author, pointing out, among other things, that Sima Qian’s “core *Zhuangzi*” did not seem to be comprised of the seven “Inner Chapters”, and instead presented titles identical to, or reminiscent of, chapters now identified with the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” ones. In the early twentieth century, Fu (1936) had already disputed that chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* is authentically ‘Zhuangzian’, instead tracing it to Shen Dao 慎到 (c. 350 BCE–c. 275 BCE), a thinker associated with the ‘Legalist’ or *fa* tradition (*fa jia* 法家). For discussions of the controversy over the authorship and chronological stratification of the *Zhuangzi*, see Defoort (2016, 9–23), Jiang (2016; 2021, 11–15), and most recently, Klein (2022) and Lo (2022).

a wealth of material in the rest of the *Zhuangzi* of considerable philosophical and literary interest.⁸³ At the same time, defenders of the purist approach worry precisely that giving up on the single authorship hypothesis risks undermining the very project of philosophical exegesis, since it displaces authorial intent as a basis for philosophical coherence.

A central question which this dispute raises is whether, and if so why, it matters that a philosophical text should be securely attributable to *a single historical author*.⁸⁴ It might seem like historians of philosophy generally consider it a *sine qua non* that, in order to assess the contribution of a given philosopher, one should have access to, and focus on, texts securely attributable to them. In a sense, one need not look beyond the controversies surrounding the authenticity of certain fragments attributed to ‘Presocratic’ thinkers like Heraclitus to appreciate this point.⁸⁵ On the other hand, the fact that (at most) a *single fragment* can be attributed with any confidence to Anaximander does not stop the historian of philosophy from engaging with this thinker’s philosophy, and building on what can be learned about his (putative) doctrines from second-hand and indeed (as is mostly the case with the Milesians) *third-hand* reports. The absence of verbatim quotations and of reliable biographical information in such cases does not foreclose engagement with the

⁸³ See e.g. Klein (2022).

⁸⁴ See Jiang (2016, 36–39) for this issue’s relevance to the debate over the ‘legitimacy’ of Chinese philosophy. As Bernasconi (1997, 218) has pointed out, the claim that the absence of readily identifiable, individual authors precludes texts from being genuinely philosophical was explicitly used as a justification for excluding much of non-European thought from histories of philosophy in the late eighteenth century. One of the first to make this move was Dietrich Tiedemann (1748–1803) – the second European historian of philosophy to claim that Thales was the first philosopher (see Cantor 2022).

⁸⁵ Parker (2023) interestingly argues that the complex textual histories of Heraclitus’ fragments and the Daoist text *Laozi* (a text whose authorship is far from straightforward, see n. 57 above) raise similar methodological challenges precisely on the question of authorship, which, however, tend to be downplayed in the case of Heraclitus.

thought of the thinkers concerned.⁸⁶ Given the fragmentary nature of our evidence for early Greek philosophers, including Parmenides, specialists routinely consult and take seriously indirect doxographical reports to gain a more complete understanding of their thought.⁸⁷ In short, even within the mainstream study of ancient philosophy, it is not in practice a requirement that one take seriously only those philosophers whose writings have survived, or whose doctrines have been passed down through texts that are safely attributable to their hand alone.⁸⁸

That said, one might still worry that the almost universally composite nature of Warring States transmitted texts, and the virtual absence of notions of authorship therein (at least down to the fourth century BCE or thereabouts), presents quite a different set of challenges, which has to do with the issue of authorial intent.⁸⁹ In particular, if there is no single author, or even evidence of concerted, coordinated effort to compose a given text, what basis do we have for searching for philosophical coherence?

The clearest and most sustained defence of reading a text like the *Zhuangzi* as a philosophically coherent unit, without the need to impute authorship of the text to a single person, has recently been articulated by Tao Jiang (2016; 2021, 11–15).⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Socrates, of course, did not leave *any* writings behind, and yet one would be hard pressed to find a historian of Greek philosophy prepared to discount him as an entirely irrelevant thinker (even if some, e.g. Sedley 2008, take the rather strict view that we can only ever speak of Plato's, Xenophon's, or Aristophanes' Socrates).

⁸⁷ As we will see in Chapter 3, much of our evidence for Parmenides' theory of human cognition is derived from doxographical reports.

⁸⁸ We also do not entirely disregard those fragments which clearly bear traces of later editorial interventions, visible through e.g. the use of a different Greek dialect. For the methodological challenges all of this raises, see e.g. Palmer (2009a, 3).

⁸⁹ For the relative absence of authorial voice in early (pre-Buddhist) Chinese texts, see Harbsmeier (1999) and Yu (1985). For the challenge this presents for the study of Chinese *philosophy* in particular (as opposed to Sinology and philology more broadly), see Jiang (2016; 2021, 2–26), who specifically uses the *Zhuangzi* as a case study.

⁹⁰ See also Mair (1983, 85–86) for the view that the *Zhuangzi* forms a philosophically coherent unit, regardless of what views we might have on its authorship. He (2021, 2) proposes that chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* ('Zh. 2') in particular is a coherent unit reflecting, if not a single author's hand, at least a compiler's hand in unifying it.

In a nutshell, Jiang makes the case that we might reasonably distinguish between (i) what he calls the ‘original text’ versus the ‘inherited text’; (ii) the ‘historical author’ versus the ‘textual author’; and finally between (iii) ‘authorial intent’ versus ‘textual intent’. The latter term of each of these pairs, Jiang argues, is what primarily matters for the task of philosophical (as opposed to Sinological, or historico-linguistic) analysis. Jiang characterizes the ‘historical author’ as “a person who has left behind traces in historical records, in addition to the text traditionally attributed to him, which support the claim of authorship (the ambiguity and complexity of the concept notwithstanding⁹¹)”. This he opposes to the “*personality* who has been credited as the author of a classic in a tradition”, which is to say the textual author.⁹² In the case of the *Zhuangzi*, our (putative) historical author would be Zhuang Zhou, on the strength of evidence to be gleaned from Sima Qian’s report mentioned earlier; our textual author, by contrast, is the persona which “emerges *from the text* as someone who is hermetic, witty, and iconoclastic, internal tensions notwithstanding”.⁹³ (Our text, in fact, gestures explicitly at such a persona in its final chapter, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.) Correspondingly, we might then distinguish between authorial intent and textual intent, where the latter is predicated on “the authorial personality created by the text” (Jiang 2016, 60). This allows us to preserve the philosophical integrity of the received or “inherited” text, and of the conceptual resources contained within it, as the primary object of study.

As early as the fourth century BCE, we find evidence for the idea of authorship as being *textually constructed* by the compilers of (often) heterogeneous

⁹¹ Jiang (2016, 40–41) discusses the complexity around the idea of authorship as an “interpretive invention” which, following Lewis (1999, 83), he argues developed around the fourth century BCE – reflecting (as we might expect) its perceived import to *textual exegesis*.

⁹² Jiang (2016, 50), my emphasis.

⁹³ Jiang (2016, 50).

texts that had emerged around a more or less legendary figure.⁹⁴ Crucially, this notion of a *textually constructed* author did not necessarily go hand in hand with actual (i.e. historical) authorship.⁹⁵ Scholars have often speculated that the compiler of the earliest extant version of the *Zhuangzi*, the much later thinker Guo Xiang (who we know died in the early fourth century CE), may himself have been guided by a certain *image* of Zhuang Zhou, which in turn plausibly informed the way in which he set about selecting what he took to be the most ‘authentically’ Zhuangzian texts from among a much wider and heterogeneous corpus.⁹⁶ The crucial point here is that the *image* of Zhuang Zhou likely took a life of its own very early on – and may well only have been very loosely (if at all) historically grounded. As Jiang puts it:

The figure of ZHUANG Zhou is integral to the interpretation and transmission of the *Zhuangzi* and the tradition it has inspired. In other words, the ZHUANG Zhou in Chinese history, as the figurehead of a particular intellectual discourse, is much more than the historical ZHUANG Zhou who lived in the Warring States period and was the putative author of the *Zhuangzi*.⁹⁷

There are also independent considerations specifically relevant to the *Zhuangzi* that might help defuse concerns around the lack of a single authorial voice therein. In particular, there is something distinctive about the case of *Zhuangzi* as a philosophical persona which makes it perfectly acceptable, if not fitting, that we should struggle to trace views back to *him*. The issue here has to do with the assumption that the text needs to have a single, consistent authorial voice in the first place (whether ‘original’ or textually constructed). As I argue in Chapters 3–4, radical interrogative scepticism – the stance which I argue the *Zhuangzi* embodies

⁹⁴ See Jiang (2016, 40–41).

⁹⁵ In the Greek tradition, similar methodological issues might be thought to arise in the case of the (putative) historical figure Pythagoras, and his relationship to ‘the Pythagoreans’ or ‘the Pythagorean tradition’ – or between the figure of Orpheus and the ‘Orphics’ or Orphism.

⁹⁶ Jiang (2016, 45).

⁹⁷ Jiang (2016, 45–56).

– destabilizes authorial intent as a measure of exegetical success. As we will see, the hallmark of Zhuangzi’s sceptical approach is that it does not commit to any particular philosophical thesis or doctrine. This approach or ‘stance’, which we will see is a distinctly haphazard one, runs through the heterogeneous *Zhuangzi* as a whole. Zhuangzi is not concerned to come down on the side of one view over another. By its very nature, this approach shirks any authoritative *parti pris*, and indeed the text itself mirrors this fact by featuring characters other than and in addition to the persona Zhuang Zhou who (i) embody the sceptical stance (e.g. Wang Ni or Confucius), or (ii) affirm a dogmatic position, only to be undermined by a competing view sometimes put forward (noncommittally) by the persona Zhuang Zhou (as in the case of the debate between Huizi and Zhuangzi in the ‘happy fish’ anecdote, which I explore in Chapter 3).⁹⁸ In this sense it is apt that different (historical) authorial voices should form the background of the text’s composition, mirroring as they do the lack of a *textual* authoritative voice which interrogative scepticism brings with it. In Chapter 4 I discuss a key passage from *Zh.* 33 that conveys the text’s self-conscious reflection on the construction of a distinctly Zhuangzian, *non-authoritative* authorial voice.⁹⁹

For the purposes of this Thesis, I will henceforth bracket the issue of historical authorship, and instead foreground our (reluctant) textual author, ‘Zhuangzi’, in my discussions of the text.

⁹⁸ One illustrative example to be found in *Zh.* 4 is Zhuangzi’s seeming endorsement, via the persona Confucius, of the idea that *yi* 義 (‘rightness, duty’) – a Confucian virtue – and *ming* 命 (‘fate’ or ‘life-span’) jointly place constraints on the world. In *Zh.* 2, by contrast, Zhuangzi calls on us to “forget the years, forget rightness (*yi* 義)”. The conflict is thus glaring, and arises within the “Inner Chapters” (Jiang 2016, 48) – and so also presents a challenge for the purist approach. I discuss the juxtaposition of conflicting views as part and parcel of Zhuangzi’s sceptical strategy in Chapters 3–5.

⁹⁹ For the relevance of certain programmatic, meta-textual comments in *Zh.* 33 (along with sections of *Zh.* 27) to the question of textual authority in the *Zhuangzi*, see Fried (2022a, esp. 271–272).

Unless otherwise stated, the edition (or ‘base text’) of the *Zhuangzi* I use throughout this Thesis is that of Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1985), abbreviated as ‘G’, and followed by: chapter number of the *Zhuangzi*/page number. I also provide a correspondence to the Harvard Yenching *Zhuangzi Yinde* 《莊子引得》 edition (1986 [1947]), abbreviated as ‘HY’, followed by: page number/chapter number of the *Zhuangzi*/line number.¹⁰⁰ Unless otherwise noted, translations of the classical Chinese are my own.

¹⁰⁰ Where relevant I will also occasionally refer to the *Laozi*, for which I use as my base text Lou (2008), henceforth abbreviated as ‘L’, followed by: stanza number of the *Laozi*/page number.

Chapter 3 – The limits of human cognition as grounds for epistemic humility

Zhuangzi was taking a stroll with Parmenides...

Zhuangzi: “How do I know that what I call knowing is not ignorance? How do I know that what I call ignorance is not knowing?”¹

Parmenides: “Because the same thing is there for thinking and for being.”²

Zhuangzi: “How would I know that?”³

Parmenides: “For you could not know what-is-not (for that is not feasible), nor indicate it. ... the decision about these matters depends on this: is it or is it not? But it has been decided, as is necessary, to let go the one as unthinkable, unnameable (for it is not the true Road), but to allow the other, so that it is, and is true.”⁴

Zhuangzi: “In reality, is there something to which words refer? Or was there never something to which words referred?”⁵

Parmenides: “It is necessary to say and to think that what-is is; for it is to be, but nothing is not.”⁶

Zhuangzi: “Yet we don’t yet know of something and nothing which truly is and which truly is not. Now, I have already referred to something, yet I don’t yet know whether my reference really refers to something or whether it really refers to nothing.”⁷

On the face of it, Parmenides and Zhuangzi form an unlikely pair of philosophical interlocutors; not only historically, but also philosophically. They embody what are usually thought to be radically opposed philosophical stances. The fictional exchange above, comprised of quotes from Parmenides’ fragments and the *Zhuangzi*, seemingly places them in opposed camps: the solemn dogmatist

¹ G2/92=HY6/2/66.

² DK28=LM19 B3=D6.8; this is the weaker of two possible readings left open by the Greek, as I discuss below. Unless otherwise specified, I use Gallop’s (1984) translation, with modifications.

³ G2/91=HY6/2/64.

⁴ B2.7–8=D6.7–8 followed by B8.15–18=D8.20–23.

⁵ G2/63=HY4/2/23–24.

⁶ B6.1–2=D7.1–2 Here I follow one of Tor’s (2017, 304) proposed translations.

⁷ G2/79=HY5/2/50–51.

versus the restless, inquisitive sceptic. Parmenides seems self-assured in his ability to access reality, and to talk about it. Zhuangzi is unsure whether words and arguments really get us anywhere, or even whether they latch onto anything at all. Parmenides makes assertions; Zhuangzi asks questions. In many ways, the gap between the two thinkers, in terms of both philosophical worldviews and argumentative tone, could not be greater.

Or so it seems. As seen in Chapter 2, Parmenides is widely considered an unapologetic dogmatist, *the* triumphalist rationalist *par excellence*. Zhuangzi, by contrast, is typically thought to have advocated some sort of sceptical position, which, according to two influential readings that I challenge in this Chapter, involves either (1) an assault on reason itself, tantamount to anti-rationalism,⁸ or (2) perspectival relativism (as opposed to absolutism).⁹ This Chapter will nuance the apparently stark opposition between the two thinkers, showing that – at the level of their most deep-seated epistemological concerns – Parmenides and Zhuangzi had much more in common than meets the eye. Both were worried about the limits of human cognition, and how that impacts the extent to which humans can know, and *claim* to know, reality. This is a central concern animating both thinkers, which has been widely underestimated as a feature of their respective philosophies, but which I maintain can be brought into sharper relief through a fresh dialogical approach.

As the fictional dialogue above suggests, part of the challenge is that many of Parmenides' programmatic, surface-level statements seem to speak to epistemological optimism. Indeed, one of the takeaways of the *Alētheia* is that thought pertains to *what-is*, and that what-is is intelligible, so that cognitive success

⁸ See Chapter 2, n. 62.

⁹ See Hansen (1983, 2000 [1992], 2014). As Raphals (1994, 504) remarks, attributing “skeptical relativism” (as Hansen 1983, 27 does) to Zhuangzi is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron: the relativist holds that we *can* know, but that knowing is relative to one's perspective.

seems *ipso facto* guaranteed. However, closer scrutiny of second-order issues raised by the surviving fragments, within both the *Alētheia* and the *Doxa*, as well as framing sections of the proem, suggests a much more complicated picture. In particular, to *whom* (or to what) successful cognition (of being) is attributed in the *Alētheia* is left unclear; what or who the unnamed subject of thinking (which somehow aligns with being, in the *Alētheia*) is, is never specified. Many scholars tacitly assume that the *kouros*, the privileged mortal who receives the goddess' revelation, is its unnamed subject. Yet we have no explicit, much less clinching textual evidence for this view. In fact, there are a number of textual reasons to suppose that Parmenides does not omit accidentally to identify the *kouros* as a cognizer of being.

It is surprising that this exegetical issue has attracted little or no attention. As seen in Chapter 2, however, the dominant interpretation of Parmenides is informed, and in some cases even *underpinned*, by habitual expectations to which we have grown accustomed based on the persistent *mythos-logos* narrative: whereby Parmenides is taken to be an epistemological optimist who has almost miraculously forgone the sceptical sensibilities of his predecessors, lest his philosophy bear traces of the old theologies foregrounding the limitations of human knowledge, and the gap between human and divine cognition. The influence of a Platonic and Aristotelian view of god-likeness (*homoiōsis theōi*) which tends to be superimposed onto the 'Presocratics' starting with Parmenides, compounds the problem. All this contributes to the view that Parmenides necessarily accommodates "epistemological traffic" between human and divine cognition, allegedly signifying a radical break with the epistemological pessimism of his predecessors Xenophanes and Hesiod.

While the explicit use of the expression *homoiōsis theōi* traces to Plato and Aristotle, the idea that humans can become gods or *like* gods may be found in earlier sources, going back to Homer. At the same time, however, epistemological pessimism tends to be foregrounded in many of these earlier sources. This is clear in Xenophanes' epistemology (DK21=LM3 B34=D49), wherein our limited mortal perspective is presented as inescapable, so that our beliefs (at least about divine matters, but perhaps also about other things) turn out necessarily to be fallible.¹⁰ While the idea that a divine perspective is within mortal reach is apparent in Hesiod's *Theogony* (his Muses, after all, are meant to endow the poet with a divine perspective on the world¹¹), an important caveat must be made: for Hesiod, we mortals (or poets) *can never be certain* of the truth-value of instances of divine disclosure mediated through this divine perspective.¹² In Chapter 4, I consider the interpretive possibility that Parmenides, too, implicitly questions the truth-value of the account disclosed from within the divine perspective in the *Alētheia*.¹³

While some form of scepticism is often attributed to Zhuangzi, his specific worries about human cognition and his corresponding reservations about humans' claims to knowledge are often downplayed as serious and reasoned aspects of his philosophy – despite overwhelming textual evidence to the contrary. Scholars are often intent on (i) branding Zhuangzi's thought gratuitously playful and/or sophistical; on (ii) declaring him to be an anti-rational mystic who rejects the value of language; or on (iii) moving from scepticism to perspectival (or subjective) relativism on his behalf, thereby forgoing the possibility of a radically sceptical stance which holds back from dogmatic pronouncements as to how things are.

¹⁰ Bryan (2012, 102); Tor (2017, 316).

¹¹ See Clay (2003, 72, 182) for this "divine viewpoint".

¹² Tor (2017, 317).

¹³ Against Bryan (2012, 58, 100–104) and Tor (2017, 309–318).

Through the dialogical approach, I revisit Parmenides' and Zhuangzi's second-order concerns without importing *a priori* expectations inherited from the scholarly traditions prevailing over the last two to three centuries.

In his famous paper entitled "Idealism and Greek philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley missed" (1982, 19), Myles Burnyeat argued that realism – the basic idea that "there is something there" – was essentially an unquestioned presupposition in most of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. Bracketing the issue whether Burnyeat was right about this general diagnosis, the point to which I wish to draw attention here is the claim Burnyeat makes about Parmenides: namely, the thesis that Parmenides was not animated by the question whether the mind can be in touch with anything at all, but rather *how it could fail to be*. Certainly Parmenides takes it as a starting point that mind or *noos* (but not necessarily a *human* mind) must be in touch with something that *is*. The core idea is that thought implies thinking *of something*, that thought cannot hook up to nothing, or to what-is-not. In other words, thought requires an object.¹⁴ That is the principle whose explicit expression Burnyeat traces to Parmenides. As will become clear, Parmenides also posits that what-is is in turn intelligible. And this gives us two core Parmenidean tenets: what is thinkable is *something real*, and *what-is* is *thinkable*. These starting points guide Parmenides' entire epistemology.

A question we need to ask (addressed in §§1.1–3) is *whose thinking* Parmenides has in mind here. Contrary to the widely held view that Parmenides displays obvious epistemological optimism about humans' ability to cognize being, no obvious answer is forthcoming. That the thinkability, or intelligibility, of being is not associated with ordinary humans or mortals (*brotoi*) is exegetically and

¹⁴ An object which may coincide with thought itself, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

philosophically beyond dispute. Parmenides deplors (via the unnamed goddess of the poem) the fact that ordinary mortals invariably confuse being and not-being, remaining in a perpetual state of utter ignorance. However, whether cognition of being is within the reach of the privileged mortal of the poem, the *kouros*, who receives the goddess' revelation, is a more complicated matter. Scholars widely assume that it *is* – a view which I dispute in this Chapter.

But what happens if you build an epistemology on altogether less definite assumptions, remaining agnostic as to whether thought is or is not of something, as to whether what is real is or is not intelligible, and as to whether there really is anything at all? Zhuangzi is animated precisely by the possibility that the mind might *not* be in touch with things;¹⁵ indeed, he considers the view that what we take to be real might be a dream.¹⁶ His doubt stems from problems he diagnoses regarding the apparent limits of human perspectives on the world, which destabilize our ability to trust our beliefs about how things are even in cases where these beliefs are universally shared. This in turn raises questions about the status of humans' claims to knowledge: how might one take such claims seriously (recognizing the extent to which they *might* get us somewhere), while also taking the full measure of the epistemic uncertainty with which they are fraught?

This Chapter shows that doubts about humans' ability to access reality can coexist with (and indeed be motivated by) markedly different views and starting

¹⁵ Burnyeat missed that this major (but often marginalized) thinker shared with modern European philosophy a central preoccupation with this kind of doubt. Betraying the hold of the *mythos-logos* narrative, he treats Greek philosophy as interchangeable with “the ancient tradition” and presents Descartes as “going beyond *all ancient precedent*” (1982, 40, my emphasis).

¹⁶ This raises the problem of pinning down *whose* illusion this would be – an objection often raised against dream arguments for scepticism. This problem is humorously (if inconclusively) broached at the end of *Zh. 2*, wherein Zhuangzi wakes up from a dream in which he dreamt that he (Zhuang Zhou) was a butterfly, and wonders not merely whether he is not really Zhuang Zhou, but also whether he might turn out to be a *butterfly* dreaming he is Zhuang Zhou (G2/111=HY7/2/94–96). In §2.2 I discuss a different dream argument put forward by Zhuangzi via the character Chang Wuzi in *Zh. 2*.

points as to (1) the nature of thought and speech; and (2) the knowability and even the existence of reality.¹⁷ With this in mind, two further points will emerge from studying Parmenides' and Zhuangzi's musings on human cognition. In the case of Parmenides, one can both be a realist with a dogmatic thesis and, at the same time, seriously entertain the possibility that knowledge might be beyond the reach of humans. And secondly, with Zhuangzi, one can be a radical sceptic and still make epistemic progress through the sceptical stance itself.

§1. Parmenides on the limits of human cognition and the problem of knowledge

One of the best-known features of the *Alētheia* is Parmenides' attack on ordinary human perspectives on being – which involve the recognition of change, motion, variations in time and place, etc. While scholars disagree about the consequences for Parmenides' broader philosophical project,¹⁸ *that* he has a critique of how humans typically conceive of being is beyond dispute. Most scholars also agree, again based on claims made in the *Alētheia*, that Parmenides (a human himself) was committed to the idea that being is *intelligible*.¹⁹ This is usually taken

¹⁷ The extent to which one can coherently express doubts as to the possibility of human knowledge as either a putative realist (Parmenides) or as a sceptic (Zhuangzi) will be addressed more systematically in the next two Chapters. In Chapter 4 I also consider the speculative possibility that Parmenides himself turns out to be a sceptic who forgoes, or throws into doubt, the realist premises of the *Alētheia*.

¹⁸ Not least because what exactly this project is supposed to be remains widely contested. On this point, see Bryan (2020a); Kraus (2013); and Palmer (2009a; 2020 [2008]).

¹⁹ Leshner (2008, 475) goes so far as to claim that Parmenides “humanizes knowing”, so that “the human mind [is] declared capable of knowing truths that pertain to all times and places”. In most cases however, scholars take the cognitive act involved – which they attribute to a privileged few humans – to be somehow guided by the divine (e.g. Long 1996, 146–147; Curd 2002, 135; Curd 2015) or to be the result of a process of divinization (e.g. Cornford 1952, 120; Roloff 1970, 171–172; Hussey 1990, 37; Sedley 1999, 114; Göbel 2002, 158–166; Drozdek 2007). See Bryan (2012, 102–104) for the putatively Parmenidean view that “epistemological traffic” is possible between “human and divine understanding”, whereby humans are able to attain certain knowledge via divine revelation. See also Bryan (2020b, 92–93) for an endorsement of the *homoiōsis theōi* model along these lines. Tor (2015, 2017) argues that while the cognitive act at issue is within the reach of humans, it amounts not to thinking *qua human* (as per the physiological account of human cognition at

to imply that Parmenides believed that being is intelligible *to humans*.²⁰ On the face of it, this tension might seem superficial, since the fact that humans are presented as going astray in the way they think and talk about being does not in and of itself rule out that being might be the kind of object that they could *come to* grasp correctly. Yet Parmenides gives us many reasons to doubt this possibility in both the *Doxa* and the *Alētheia*.²¹

§1.1. The account of human cognition in the Doxa, and supporting evidence in the Alētheia

Fragment B16=D51 constitutes one of our most important pieces of evidence for Parmenides' views about human cognition:

ὥς γὰρ ἐκάστοτ' ἔχει κρᾶσιν μελέων πολυπλάγκτων,
τὼς νόος ἀνθρώποισι παρέστηκεν· τὸ γὰρ αὐτό
ἔστιν ὅπερ φρονέει μελέων φύσις ἀνθρώποισιν
καὶ πᾶσιν καὶ παντί· τὸ γὰρ πλεον ἔστι νόημα.

For just as it possesses on each occasion the mixture of *much-wandering limbs*,
So too is mind present to humans; for that which thinks is the same thing,
namely the nature of the limbs,
both in each and every human; for the full is thought.²²

This fragment provides an account of cognition which pertains specifically, and emphatically, to human beings (ἀνθρώποισι, B16.2=D51.2). This account applies to *each and every human being* (ἀνθρώποισιν | καὶ πᾶσιν καὶ παντί, B16.3–4). It is therefore a *universalizing* account of human cognition, which does not leave

B16=D51, discussed in §1.1 below), but to thinking *qua* (*quasi*-)god – that is, with one's hot, fiery soul.

²⁰ This point has been raised by Bryan (2020a); though its ramifications for Parmenides' epistemology, in particular the prospect of epistemic progress in the poem, has received virtually no consideration.

²¹ In Chapter 4 I more speculatively discuss corroborating evidence from the proem.

²² I follow Coxon (2009 [1986], 379) and LM in reading παρέστηκεν (based on Theophrastus' report at B16.2=D51.2 against Diels' (2003 [1897]) proposal that we accept Aristotle's *παρίσταται*.

room for exceptions.²³ The crux of the theory is that some kind of mixture (*krasis*) of two basic, opposite elements (as we learn from doxographical evidence) governs *all* human thought processes, and *inescapably* so.²⁴ According to Theophrastus' testimony (A46=D52), the mixture is comprised of Hot and Cold. The principle that cognition is of like-by-like plays an important role: if we are made of two elements (light and night, or hot and cold, or rare and dense, etc.),²⁵ *and* cognition is explained on the basis of like-by-like, then we cognize light and night, and/or mixtures and contrasts of light and night. This explains why humans perceive things in terms of a *dualism* or contrast between sensory opposites,²⁶ rather than grasping the ideal object of cognition described in the *Alētheia*: being.

Some scholars have attempted to bracket or defuse the issue, on the basis that the account of human cognition in the *Doxa* (at B16=D51) is supposedly not Parmenides' own, emphasizing its positioning in the *Doxa*, which for a long time was deemed to offer an entirely false account. But this verdict on the *Doxa* raises the well-known problem that it makes it all the more perplexing *why* Parmenides wrote the *Doxa* at all, developing its cosmology for the better part of his poem, and including within it many ground-breaking scientific insights.²⁷ A more subtle point is that in fragment B10=D12, the goddess repeatedly urges the *kouros* to *learn* about

²³ Note that a variant of ἐκάστοτ' ('each time, on each occasion') at B16.1=D51.1, attested in one of the manuscripts of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, is ἑκάστος ('each human'). If this is the correct reading, then the passage further emphasizes the *universalizing* scope of the account of human cognition. Most commentators accept the former (see Coxon 2009 [1986], 248 for a defence), though like Tor (2017, 176, with n. 23) I take it that ἑκάστος cannot be conclusively excluded. Gallop (1984, 86) accepts ἑκάστος.

²⁴ See further Tor (2017, 169–182) for a reconstruction of Parmenides' theory of human cognition based on B16=D51 and supportive doxographical evidence. For the ineluctability of this process as underpinning all human cognition, see again Tor (2017, 196ff.), who however does try to leave room for the idea that the *kouros* is capable of non-human thinking, that is, a kind of thinking which is qualitatively different from what the goddess tells us about human cognition. It is this supposition which I challenge below.

²⁵ Cf. the account given at B8.50–61=D8.55–66, discussed below.

²⁶ Tor (2017, 169–182; 196).

²⁷ For Parmenides' novel scientific theories, see e.g. Kraus (2013, 489–96); Casertano (2012, 21–49); Cerri (2012); and Mourelatos (2012).

the things mentioned in the *Doxa*, and to *know* (*eidenai*) them, using charged epistemic language.²⁸ This has often made scholars uncomfortable,²⁹ since it is usually assumed that only being is allowed to be an object of learning or knowledge for the *kouros*' *noos*. Curiously, however, this is the one passage where the *kouros* is explicitly and unequivocally named as the subject of a verb of knowing (in this case, *eidenai*): “you shall know (εἶσῃ/εἰδήσεις)” – not once, but twice (B10.4=D12.4; B10.5=D12.5). The objects of knowledge at issue here are not being, but astronomical theories firmly rooted in the universe of the *Doxa* (cf. B11=D11). I will return to the implications of Parmenides' choice of the verb *eidenai* here in relation to Doxastic objects, as opposed to *noein* or *gignōskein* – both of which are by contrast used in the *Alētheia* (without a specified subject), with *being* as their object.³⁰

This observation adds weight to recent efforts to rehabilitate the *Doxa* as part and parcel of Parmenidean philosophy. After all, if it turns out that the *kouros* is urged to know astronomical theories, then we really ought to take these theories seriously. The *Doxa* is routinely presented in the ancient doxography as carrying doctrinal authority, and as conveying Parmenides' *own doctrines* within the realm of natural philosophy,³¹ which subsumes questions around the nature of human

²⁸ See B10.1=D12.1 (“you shall know”, εἶσῃ); B10.4=D12.4 (“you shall learn”, πεύσῃ; recalling the proem, at B1.31=D4.31: “you shall learn these things [i.e. mortal beliefs]”, ταῦτα [βροτῶν δόξας] μαθήσῃ); and B10.5=D12.5 (“you shall know”, εἰδήσεις). For a discussion of this last issue, see Tor (2017, 166, 200–202; 2015, 20). Leshner (1994, 27) claims that B10=D12 might instead belong to the *Alētheia* – but how could such objects of inquiry square with the sole admissible object of thought in the *Alētheia*, viz. being?

²⁹ See Leshner (1994, 27) and especially Curd (2015).

³⁰ Note that Parmenides also uses *noos* and its cognates, as well as the verb φρονέει (as at B16=D51; see also B7.2=D8.2; B8.54=D8.59), in relation to the wayward *noos* of mortals, which fails to grasp being. I return to this point below.

³¹ Tor (2015, 6, with n. 13 and 20 with n. 57) and Bryan (2018) have drawn attention to this trend – one with which they themselves identify in their interpretations of Parmenides. See also Kraus (2013, 489). For Parmenides as ‘a founder of *natural philosophy*’ (ἀνὴρ ἀρχαῖος ἐν φυσιολογίᾳ), see Plutarch *Adv. Col.* 1114C.

cognition. That the goddess provides a negatively framed characterization of the *Doxa* in fragment B8=D8 of the *Alētheia* is not sufficient to establish that the *Doxa* is in fact *false*.³² What she says is not that it is false, but that it presents a *deceitful ordering* (κόσμον [...] ἀπατηλὸν, B8.52=D8.57), which is lacking in ‘true trust’ (πίστις ἀληθείης, B1.30=D4.30) – as opposed to being a ‘trustworthy account’ and ‘thought’ *about* reality.³³ These pronouncements are compatible with the thought that the *Doxa* offers an authoritative and correct account of how misguided mortal thinking functions, admitting as it does of objects that are incompatible with the requirements of what-is in the *Alētheia*.³⁴ Put differently, the point that the content of mortal thinking is called into disrepute in the *Alētheia* does not mean that the exposition as to *how* such deficient cognition comes to pass – whereby, say, locomotion and changes in colours are perceived by mortals to be real (see B8.40–41=D8.45–46) – is itself disreputable.³⁵

The *Alētheia* presupposes, and alludes precisely to, such an account at B8.50–61=D8.55–66:

ἐν τῷ σοι παύω πιστὸν λόγον ἡδὲ νόημα
 ἀμφὶς ἀληθείης· δόξας δ’ ἀπὸ τοῦδε βροτείας
 μάθανε κόσμον ἐμῶν ἐπέων ἀπατηλὸν ἀκούων.
 μορφὰς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν·
 τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἐστίν—ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσίν—
 τὰντία δ’ ἐκρίναντο δέμας καὶ σήματ’ ἔθεντο
 χωρὶς ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων, τῇ μὲν φλογὸς αἰθέριον πῦρ,

³² Pace Barnes (1982 [1979], 123).

³³ In Chapter 4 I discuss the implications of the characterization of the *Alētheia* as offering a ‘trustworthy account’ (*piston logon*) and ‘thought’ (*noēma*) that is about or *circles around* reality (*amphis alētheiēs*, B8.50–51=D8.55–56). I understand *alētheia/alētheiē* to denote not ‘truth’ as an attribute of thought or language but fundamental (objective) reality. Where the adjective *alēthēs* is used, I take it to denote what is ‘true’ in the sense of being ‘genuine’ or ‘real’, or to characterize true accounts of the nature of fundamental reality. See similarly Tor (2017, 156, with n. 2); Coxon (2009 [1986], 282–283); and Palmer (2009a, 89–93).

³⁴ Bryan (2018, 20ff.).

³⁵ Some commentators believe that the very existence of mortals and (by implication) mortal thinking is precluded by the account of being in the *Alētheia* (see e.g. Mackenzie 1982; see also Chapter 5, where I explore the numerical monist interpretation of Parmenides). Even if this were true, it does not tell us anything about why the *Doxa* in particular is deceptive; after all the *Alētheia* itself features references to wayward *brotoi*, a *kouros*, and a goddess.

ἥπιον ὄν, μέγ' [ἄραιοι] ἐλαφρόν, ἐωυτῶι πάντοσε τωυτόν,
 τῶι δ' ἐτέρωι μὴ τωυτόν· ἀτὰρ κἀκεῖνο κατ' αὐτό
 τὰντία νύκτ' ἄδαϊ, πυκινὸν δέμας ἐμβριθές τε.
 τόν σοι ἐγὼ διάκοσμον εὐκότα πάντα φατίζω,
 ὥς οὐ μή ποτέ τις σε βροτῶν γνώμη παρελάσσει.

Here I stop my trustworthy speech to you and thought
 About truth; from here onwards learn mortal beliefs,
 Listening to the deceitful ordering of my words;
 For they established two forms in their minds for naming,
 Of which it is not right to name one – wherein they have gone astray –
 And they distinguished opposites in body and established signs
 Apart from one another: here, on the one hand, aethereal fire of flame,
 Which is gentle, very light, everywhere the same as itself,
 But not the same as the other; but on the other hand, that one too by
 itself
 In contrast, ignorant night, a dense and heavy body;
 All this arrangement I proclaim to you as plausible;
 Thus no opinion of mortals shall ever outstrip you.

Notice that the reference to a *systemic* mortal error – whatever the precise nature of that error might be – confirms that some sort of deficiency is endemic to mortals' very modes of thinking and perceiving.³⁶ We should not lose sight of the fact that the critique of human cognition happens explicitly and repeatedly in the *Alētheia*, not in the *Doxa*. Concerns around the limitations of human thinking can thus hardly be dismissed within the remit of those interpretations which purport to rely exclusively on the *Alētheia*.³⁷

Consider also B6.4–9=D7.4–9:

[...] βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδὲν
πλάζονται, δίκρανοι· ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν
 στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλαγκτὸν νόον· οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται
 κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φύλα,
 οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταυτόν νενομίσται
 κοῦ ταυτόν, πάντων δὲ παλίντροπός ἐστι κέλευθος.

[...] mortals knowing nothing
 Wander, two-headed; for helplessness in their
 Breasts guides their *wandering mind*; and they are carried

³⁶ Bryan (2018, 24).

³⁷ For the assumption that elucidating the philosophical arguments of the *Alētheia* constitutes a sound foundation for interpreting Parmenides' poem as a whole, as exemplified by logical readings à la Russell (in his *History of Western Philosophy*, 1972 [1945]) and Owen (1960), but also by more recent approaches like that of Wedin (2014, 5), see Bryan (2020a, 224) and Tor (2015; 2017).

Deaf and blind alike, dazed, uncritical tribes,
 By whom being and not-being have been thought both the same
 And not the same; and the path of all is backward-turning.³⁸

Notice that human cognitive activity is repeatedly described as ‘wandering’, both in the *Doxa* and in the *Alētheia* passages.³⁹ And recall that at B16=D51 – our key passage from the *Doxa* – we hear of a mixture of “much-wandering limbs” (μελέων πολυπλάγκτων, B16.1=D51.1). But at B6.5–6=D7.5–6 as well, mortals are presented as “wandering” (πλάζονται) and as having a “wandering mind” (πλαγκτὸν νόον). At B8.54=D8.59 we are told that they have gone astray (πεπλανημένοι εἰσίν). Thus it seems the same systemic failure of the human mind runs through not just the *Doxa* but also the *Alētheia*.⁴⁰

A striking feature of the programmatic statements in the *Alētheia* which somehow align thinking/cognizing (*noein*) with being is that they are pointedly vague about *whose* cognitive activity is at issue. If human thought were the focus of those passages, we would have expected it to be specified as such – and somehow explained – given the explicit analysis of the nature of human cognition in the *Doxa* (B16=D51), and the repeated assault on mortal thinking throughout the *Alētheia*.

³⁸ The archetype of our manuscript of Simplicius reads πλάττονται (‘invent’) rather than πλάζονται (‘wander, err’) at B6.5=D7.5. I follow Diels (2003 [1897], 72–73) and Coxon (2009 [1986], 59, 300) in taking this to be a corruption of πλάζονται (cf. πλαγκτὸν, ‘wandering’).

³⁹ As discussed below, Zhuangzi similarly uses the image of wandering (*you* 遊/游) to describe a distinctly human activity, and more specifically a shared human conception of what it is to be happy (which may or may not extend to non-human animals). Elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, we find the image of the wandering heart-mind (*you xin* 遊心) cast in a more positive light than in Parmenides, and usually associated with specifically human efforts (not necessarily successful) to become attuned with the world.

⁴⁰ Tor (2017, 197).

§1.2. The pairing of thinking/cognizing and being in the *Alētheia*, and their unnamed subject

As mentioned above, scholars generally assume that the *kouros* of the poem (widely thought to be Parmenides) has an ideal cognitive relationship to being. However we need to tread carefully here; apart from what we have seen concerning Parmenides' explicit attack on mortal thinking, Parmenides never explicitly names either ordinary humans (or mortals, *brotoi*), or even the privileged *kouros*, as the subjects of *successful acts* of thinking/cognizing (*noein*). In fact, on all of those occasions in which mortals are named explicitly as subjects of *noein* in the *Alētheia*, a *cognitive failure* is imputed to them.⁴¹ An overlooked point in the scholarship is that in the much-cited lines of the *Alētheia* that speak of being and *noein* as somehow going together,⁴² Parmenides holds back from identifying a specific subject of *noein*. This parallels his reluctance to specify an explicit subject of being (*einai*) in B2=D6 and B8=D8 (which is, by contrast, a widely acknowledged point). In these cases, scholars hardly think that Parmenides means that humans are the implicit subject of *einai*. So why should we assume or infer that humans are – or are included in – the implicit subject of *noein*?

Before examining these passages more closely, we need to consider terminological points relating to the verb *noein* and its cognates, notably *noos*. I have so far translated the verb *noein* as 'thinking' or 'cognizing'; but this term is more loaded. In a seminal three-part study of these terms from Homer to the 'Presocratics', Kurt von Fritz (1943; 1945; 1946) finds that *noein* is etymologically related to an Indo-European stem involving a sense of smelling, but that by Homer's

⁴¹ See again B6.4–9=D7.4–9; B7.3–5=D8.3–4; B8.38–41=D8.43–46; B8.50–4=D8.55–59.

⁴² See B3=D6.8; B6.1=D7.1; B8.34–36=D8.39–41 (discussed below).

time it becomes associated with the faculty of sight.⁴³ When a hero comes to realize that the person before him is really a god in disguise, as opposed to what he first appeared to be, one “sees” that this is so, even though this cannot be known purely through sense-perception.⁴⁴ It is a cognitive act which extends beyond the surface appearance, and thereby discerns the truth of the matter (von Fritz 1945, 224).⁴⁵ The Homeric notion of *noein* thus cannot be reduced to pure sense-perception; rather, what is often at issue is the self-reflective apprehension of a situation, object, or person.⁴⁶

Also relevant for our purposes is the Homeric act of *noein* associated with the gods, which is superior in range to what is available in ordinary human perception – a “mental vision, which not only penetrates deeper but also ‘sees farther’ both in space and in time than our eyes”, and thereby “makes far-off things present” (von Fritz 1943, 91).⁴⁷ This is a cognitive act by which one visualizes objects that are remote in both space and time and penetrates to the truth of the matter. This last Homeric usage is worth bearing in mind in light of fragment B4=D10, which I examine in §1.3 below.

Two further points are worth noting.

The first is that, as von Fritz shows with reference to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, especially in cases where the verb *noein* is used in the present tense, “[s]tress is then always laid on the visualization of the situation as a whole, *not on the process of reasoning by which we may gradually arrive at this visualization*”.⁴⁸

⁴³ See also Leshner (1981, 8–9).

⁴⁴ Consider the realization, in the Homeric universe, that the person appearing in the shape of an old woman is, in fact, the goddess Aphrodite (von Fritz 1943, 89; 1945, 224). As von Fritz puts it, “[t]his deeper insight itself is then also considered a function of the *vóoc*” (1945, 224).

⁴⁵ See also Leshner (1981, 11–12, 15).

⁴⁶ Tor (2017, 183).

⁴⁷ See also Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 68).

⁴⁸ von Fritz (1943, 90), my emphasis. See e.g. *Il.* I.577, XXIII.305; *Od.* IV.148, XVI.136, XVII.193, 281, XVIII.223, XX.309, 367.

Thus while *noein* is not reducible to ordinary sense-perception, neither does it amount to a process of reasoning, or to the *result* of such reasoning, whether about the truth or anything else. As von Fritz (1943, 90) shows, it is not originally associated with any kind of reasoning at all, whether inductive or deductive; rather, it is something like a “sixth sense which penetrates deeper into the nature of the objects perceived than the other senses”. Alexander Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 69–70) explicates this archaic use of *noein* as “cognitive awareness directed to ultimate reality” – an act which is emphatically not “discursive” or “ratiocinative”. James Lesher (1994, 4) sums it up as “that in us by which we enjoy a direct view of reality”. This will become important in Chapter 4, where I consider the possibility that Parmenides believed being to be within our cognitive reach only insofar as we could grasp it *indirectly* through deductive reasoning, by working our way critically through the goddess’ argumentative account (cf. B7.5=D8.5; B8.80=D8.55), rather than by a direct cognitive grasp (*noein*) of it. Human reasoning, I argue, does not give us *direct* cognitive access to being: direct apprehension of reality, is, I will suggest, beyond our cognitive reach. This is why Parmenides refrains from naming humans as subjects of *noein*.

Here I part ways with von Fritz (1945), who argues that Parmenides departs not just from Homer but also from Hesiod, Xenophanes, and Heraclitus in using the term *noein* to refer to the act of ‘reasoning’, even if he stresses that “the intuitional element in the *vóoç* is still most important” and that “[i]t is still the primary function of *vóoç* to be in *direct touch* with ultimate reality” (1945, 240–242, my emphasis). The putative association between the use of (deductive) reasoning and the cognitive act of *noein* is far from obvious in the relevant fragments.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Pace* also Lesher (1994, 5–6).

The second point is that, as von Fritz has shown, from Hesiod onwards, one's *noos* or ability to *noein* is not always *infallible*. Specifically, this usage may occur when one mentally *visualizes* a fixed plan or purpose in response to, for example, a dangerous situation (1945, 223–224), and opts for a plan of action which turns out not to be in one's interest. This provides context for the fact that *noos*, in Parmenides, is not always a “success” word. As discussed above, on all those occasions in which the subject of *noein* or the possessor of a *noos* is named explicitly as a human in the *Alētheia*, what is involved is a cognitive failure.⁵⁰ In the case of the *Doxa* (B16=D51), we are given an account of the physiological apparatus of the human *noos*, which however is not conducive to cognition of being.

Yet there seems to be some daylight between cognitive failure and unmitigated cognitive success. It certainly looks as though the *kouros* fares better than ordinary mortals, who are entirely ignorant (βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδέν, B6.4=D7.4), even if he does not have direct cognitive access to being (by an act of successful *noein*). In the proem, Parmenides suggests that the *kouros* has *been set* on the road that leads “a man in the know” – an *eidōs phōs* – through all cities (B1.2–3=D4.2–3). Notice that the perfect participle *eidōs* comes not from *noein* but from the verb *eidenai* (etymologically, ‘to have seen’). In Homer, this verb's usage ranges from an act of vision whose object remains *indistinct* or *indefinite* to one in which an object's importance is fully understood and identified (much like *noein*).⁵¹ Thus a ‘man in the know’, in keeping with the Homeric usage, might denote someone whose cognitive state is on a spectrum between vague, indirect apprehension to more determinate, direct understanding. This is also the verb Parmenides uses in

⁵⁰ As Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 175, with n. 28) notes, this usage need not involve any kind of logical inconsistency on Parmenides' part, building on Ryle's (1949, 149) insight that “success” (or “achievement”) words sometimes appear in contexts denoting failure.

⁵¹ Von Fritz (1945, 223); Leshner (1981, 8–9, 12–13).

B10=D12 to denote knowledge of Doxastic things – not of being – which is somehow within the *kouros*' reach. Both the participle *eidōs* (without an object) and the term *kouros* likely hark back to the *initiate* of mystery rituals,⁵² which reinforces the idea that the *kouros* is somehow privileged and better off than ordinary mortals. However there is no implication here that he *already has* or even that he *will* have direct access to being.⁵³ The supposition that the *kouros* already has knowledge – which might *prima facie* be encouraged by the perfect participle *eidōs* – is incompatible with the basic point that he is *en route* to learn and to know. At the end of the proem, the goddess specifically tells him that he *will* learn all things (B1.28=D4.28), but she never subsequently says that the *kouros* actually comes to know these things.⁵⁴ Learning about and inquiring into *x* need not mean coming to know *x*, let alone having full and direct cognitive access to *x*.⁵⁵

We should also note that, in the opening line of the proem, the *kouros* is presented to us as being guided by *thumos* ('heart, ardour, will, spirit, thought', B1.1=D4.1), a term which in the Homeric context suggests a conative faculty, which impels one's actions through volition.⁵⁶ This Homeric usage might suggest that the *kouros* stands out from ordinary mortals in actively seeking after

⁵² See e.g. Tor (2017, 255, with n. 78); Kraus (2013, 455); Palmer (2009a, 58); Kingsley (1999, 62); Coxon (2009 [1986], 272); and Burkert (1969, 5, with n. 11).

⁵³ Pace e.g. Curd (2015) and Torgerson (2006, 25, 30, 41). See further Tor (2017, 278) and Mansfeld (1964, 225–229).

⁵⁴ As Leshner (1994, 26) observes, even if she had said it, it would not be obvious why this would be the case. Recall that even in B10=D12 we find the use of the future tense in similar cognitive contexts.

⁵⁵ In Chapters 4–5, I discuss different interpretive and philosophical consequences we might draw from these comments.

⁵⁶ Tor (2017, 260, with n. 95); Coxon (2009 [1986], 270). See Homer, *Od.* XIV.339. For *thumos* as an instrument of thought, see however *Il.* II II.409 (as discussed by Leshner 1994, 9–10 and Darcus Sullivan 1996).

knowledge,⁵⁷ even if this will only take him *so far* (“as far as *thumos* might go”, ὅσον τ’ ἐπὶ θυμὸς ἰκάνοι, B1.1=D4.1).⁵⁸

Let us now take a closer look at the key passages.

B3=D6.8:

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι

- (i) For it is the same to think and to be⁵⁹
- (ii) For the same is (there) for thinking and for being⁶⁰

Interpretations of this fragment and of other lines grouping *noein* and being in the *Alētheia* differ greatly over exactly how being and *noein* relate to one another. However all minimally carry the implication that being is intelligible.

Historically, reading (i) has had many supporters. Following Diels and Kranz, many scholars have taken Parmenides to advocate a particularly strong relationship between being and thinking, namely one of *identity* or *coextensiveness*: “*Dasselbe ist Denken und Sein*”, i.e. “Thinking and being are the same” – implying that being is itself cognitive.⁶¹ However the interpretive camp which has garnered the most support in contemporary literature takes Parmenides to posit that (ii) the

⁵⁷ von Fritz (1943, 82) remarks that whenever *noos* in Homer approaches the meaning of “wish”, there is a clear connection between the realization of a present situation and the vision of a *desired* future, including the visualization of a way in which this desired future state *may be reached*. For a similar usage among lyric poets, see Darcus (1978, 26).

⁵⁸ Is Parmenides suggesting that the *thumos* carries the *kouros* as far as it can go, but no further? For a loose parallel that emphasizes the limits of human intelligence (*mētis*) as well as the shortcomings of (human) *noos*, see Empedocles, DK31=LM22 B2.7–9=D42.7–9.

⁵⁹ In recent scholarship, see e.g. Long (1996, 132); Sedley (1999, 120); and Robbiano (2006, 57–58) for interpretations along these lines.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Burnyeat (1982, 15); KRS (246); Coxon (2003); Palmer (2009a, 118–122); and Wedin (2014, 202–229).

⁶¹ Long’s (1996, 132, n. 13) endorsement of the DK reading, which he calls the “mind/being identity” translation, implies a qualified notion of identity between being and cognition, so that “[...] Parmenides does not accept a strict or *type* identity of being and thinking, with the implication that *what it is to be* is the same in essence or definition as *what it is to think*, but holds, rather, that they are *coextensive types*, such that their *tokens* are identical: every instance of being is an instance of thinking, and vice versa”. I return to this reading in Chapter 5.

object of thinking is identical to the subject of the verb ‘to be’, following Eduard Zeller’s proposal that Parmenides has recourse to datival infinitives at B3=D6.8 (as at B2.2=D6.2): literally, “for the same is for thinking and for being” – in other words, “for the same is (there) to be thought of and to be”.

Now let us consider B6.1=D7.1:

χρή τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ’ εὖν ἔμμεναι

- (i) What is for speaking and thinking must be (i.e. What can be spoken of and thought of must be)
- (ii) It is necessary to say and to think that what-is is⁶²
- (iii) It is necessary that speaking and thinking be real and true⁶³

The Zeller-type, non-identity approach (i.e., the second reading of B3=D6 sketched above) reads this passage as a claim about how being is tied to what is thinkable. On this construal Parmenides is taken to say that (i) *what can be thought of and spoken of must be*. This presumes that *to eon* is an articular participle with potential force, with the infinitives placed in between: “what is [available] for thinking and speaking has to be”. Critics have argued that this reading is linguistically strained.⁶⁴ The line could just as well (if not more easily, from a linguistic standpoint) be taken to suggest that (ii) it is necessary to say and to think that being is (or in another variation: it is necessary to say and to think that this is being⁶⁵); or, finally that (iii) it is necessary that speaking and cognizing be real-and-

⁶² Or similarly: “It is necessary to say and to think this: what-is is”.

⁶³ See (noncommittally) Tor (2017, 304).

⁶⁴ This once-orthodox reading was adopted by Burnet (1930 [1892], 174); Cornford (1939, 31); Owen (1960, 94–95); Furth (1968, 119); Ketchum (1990, 177); and (tentatively) Kraus (1987, 79–80). For criticism of this rendering on both philosophical and linguistic grounds, see Tor (forthcoming a); Tor (2017, 304, with n. 207); and Kahn (1988, 260–261).

⁶⁵ See Coxon (2009 [1986], 58); LM (2016, vol. V, 41).

true (where $\epsilon\acute{o}\nu$ is taken as a predicate and $\xi\mu\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha\iota$ as the copula).⁶⁶ This last translation might also lend itself to the identity or coextensiveness reading sketched above (whereby what-is and the thinking subject, as well as the *object* of thought, are construed as being the same). But on any of these interpretations Parmenides does suppose, minimally, that what-is is intelligible. I take it that this passage further implies a kind of normative necessity tying *noein* to being,⁶⁷ whereby an idealized act of *noein* necessarily implies apprehension of being (whether or not this is an act of self-cognition, as the identity reading would require).

Another set of key passages grouping being and *noein*, but without specifying a subject, is to be found in fragment B8=D8. Consider B8.34=D8.39:

ταὐτὸν δ' ἔστι νοεῖν τε καὶ οὐνεκεν ἔστι νοήμα

- (i) Thinking and that which prompts thought [*scil.* being] are the same⁶⁸
- (ii) The same thing is there to be thought and is why there is thought⁶⁹
- (iii) Thinking and thinking that [it] is are one and the same⁷⁰

Interpretation (i) is congenial, once again, to the reading which takes being and *noein* to be identical or coextensive. Interpretation (ii), by contrast, is in the spirit of the Zeller-type reading. Reading (iii) takes *houneken* as ‘that’ (as opposed to ‘because of which’), and is more open-ended.⁷¹

⁶⁶ See Kahn (1988, 260–261); (noncommittally) Tor (2017, 304, with n. 207).

⁶⁷ Cf. Necessity (*Anangkē*, B8.30–31=D8.35–36) and Justice (*Dikē*, B8.14–15=D8.19–20) as ‘tying’ being within fetters. For the idea of normative necessity, see Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 175).

⁶⁸ Long (1996, 136); see also Sedley (1999, 120).

⁶⁹ For readings along these lines, see e.g. Palmer (2009a, 164).

⁷⁰ See e.g. Cornford (1939, 34) and Robinson (1975, 630).

⁷¹ See Tor (2017, 305).

In the two lines immediately following this passage (B8.35–36=D8.40–41), the intimate connection between being and thought is presented as taking its support from *what has been said* (ἐν ᾧ πεφρατισμένον), with no subject specified:⁷²

οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἐόντος, ἐν ᾧ πεφρατισμένον ἔστιν,
εὐρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν

For *in what has been said* you will not find thinking separate from being

At B8.15–17=D8.20–22, similarly, the judgment according to which there is only one true path which both is and is thinkable is not attributed to any particular person (“the decision about these matters depends on this”, ἡ δὲ κρίσις περὶ τούτων ἐν τῷδ’ ἔστιν; “it has been decided”, κέκριται).

It is true that the goddess does at several turns address the *kouros* directly, urging him (1) to steer clear of certain roads of inquiry (B6.3–5=D7.3–5; B7.2=D8.2) and (2) to “judge by argument” (κρῖναι δὲ λόγῳ) her “testing rich-in-struggle” (πολύδηρην ἔλεγχον, B7.5=D8.5).⁷³ At B2.7–8=D6.7–8, she addresses him in the second person, telling him that he *could not know nor point out* (οὔτε [...] ἂν γνοίης [...] | [...] οὔτε φράσαις) that which is not:

οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐόν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν) οὔτε φράσαις.

For *you could not know* what-is-not (for that is not feasible),
Nor could you point it out.

⁷² Most interpreters, that is, take the subject to be unspecified. For a discussion of this passage and what the subject of the verb ‘has been expressed’ (πεφρατισμένον ἔστιν) is, see Tor (2017, 305–307). The impersonal construal (‘in what has been expressed’), whereby the ‘in which’ (*en hō*) clause is taken implicitly to refer to the preceding verses, i.e. to the preceding arguments, is the one I prefer here, as it seems to make the most sense – but as Tor notes, the subject could also be taken as ‘it’ (*scil.* thinking/cognizing, *to noein*, at the end of the sentence). On either reading, the line does not indicate that the *kouros* (or any human) has been directly cognizing being through this section of the poem, unless we supply the assumption (not on the basis of anything that the line says, on any construal) that the *kouros* is a subject capable of this kind of thinking.

⁷³ For a detailed discussion of the *poludēris elenkos*, see Leshner (1984).

This line makes clear that the act of *knowing* (*gignōskein*⁷⁴) not-being is impossible: it is “not feasible” (οὐ [...] ἀνυστόν) for anyone. This claim might seem to imply that the *kouros* could in some sense come to know (*gignōskein*) what-is; but it does little to clarify the nature or extent of his future epistemic relation to what-is.

The goddess goes on to repeat the injunction at B8.7–9=D8.12–14, explicitly addressing the *kouros* in the second person, saying she won’t allow him to say or think/cognize (νοεῖν) *from* what-is-not:⁷⁵

[...] οὐτ’ ἐκ μὴ ἐόντος ἔάσω
φάσθαι σ’ οὐδὲ νοεῖν· οὐ γὰρ φατὸν οὐδὲ νοητόν
ἔστιν ὅπως οὐκ ἔστι. [...]

[...] Neither from what-is-not *shall I allow*
You to say or think: for *it cannot [or: ought not] be said nor thought*
That [it] is not; [...]

If we take *noein* to refer to the success word here, then it makes good sense for the goddess to say that one simply cannot (successfully) *noein* on the basis of what-is-not,⁷⁶ or indeed have what-is-not as one’s object of (correct) *noein*. Parmenides also seems to think that the only true referent of words or ‘names’ is (unqualified) being,⁷⁷ which would suggest that even ‘speaking’ of what-is as being mixed with what-is-not is, in fact, *impossible*. But the passage still does not tell us that the *kouros* can actually *noein* being.

⁷⁴ I follow Snell (1924, 28f.) and Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 69, with n. 53) in taking this cognitive verb to carry a loaded sense akin to *noein*, that is “knowing a thing as it really is”, consistent with its widespread ‘Presocratic’ usage.

⁷⁵ Cf. B8.17=D8.22: non-being is itself unnameable (ἀνόνημον) and un-*noein*-able (ἀνόητον). See also B2.6=D6.6: the path of what-is-not is *utterly unlearnable* (παναπευθέα).

⁷⁶ This meshes well with interpretations (i) and (ii) of B8.34=D8.39, discussed above.

⁷⁷ I discuss a core piece of evidence to this effect in the much-discussed line B8.38=D8.43 in Chapter 5, n. 24.

Still, many scholars argue that Parmenides believed that humans could momentarily ascend to a (quasi-)divine cognitive state, in which they are purportedly able to cognize being. On this view, Parmenides made room for a process of assimilation to the divine, where the content of this divine perspective is assumed to have a certain truth-value.⁷⁸ This would explain how (at least some) humans could have an unmitigated and correct grasp of being.⁷⁹ I cannot here do justice to the careful arguments and speculative reconstructions of Parmenides' putative theology that scholars have argued for or aired to vindicate this approach. The basic worry I have, however, is that at no point do we get a clear statement to the effect that the *kouros* actually ascends to cognition of being; if anything, the text seems pointedly *not* to commit itself to such a view. In addition, we have a clear precedent in Xenophanes – whose conception of the divine is almost certainly in the background of Parmenides' conception of being⁸⁰ – for a reluctance to grant that the limitations of human cognition can ever be fully transcended, let alone momentarily abandoned in the ascent to unmediated, divine cognition.⁸¹ And as has emerged, Parmenides' fragments repeatedly suggest that humans – including privileged, semi-enlightened ones like the *kouros* – are apparently constrained in the ways they try to conceptualize being.

⁷⁸ As discussed at the start of this Chapter, this last assumption is not obvious.

⁷⁹ See n. 19 above for proponents of this kind of view.

⁸⁰ Xenophanes' one supreme god is, among other things, unmoving, invariable, unchanging, undisturbed, steadfast, lying by itself as a unified 'whole', and ungenerated (DK 21=LM8 B14.1=D12.1, B26=D19, B24=D17). For these echoes, see e.g. Tor (2017, 314–315) and Bryan (2012, 93–104; 2020b, 91). For Xenophanes' probable influence on Parmenides on the specific issue of the limits of human knowledge, see Nehamas (2002, 46) and Robinson (1989, 157–158). For a critical overview of the doxographical evidence relating Xenophanes to the Eleatics, see Brémond (2020).

⁸¹ See Bryan (2012, 102) for a reading of Xenophanes according to which mortals are "limited to thinking about anything *from a certain perspective*", in a way that the Xenophanean (supreme) god is not – precisely because human nature "restricts the kind of cognition one can have". But Bryan (2012, 58) does not think this view carries over in Parmenides.

§1.3. ‘Visualizing’ being as a way out?

The one instance that might be thought of as an exception is found at B4.1=D10.1 – a line which explicitly introduces the theme of mental vision and perspectives. In this passage, the goddess addresses the *kouros* in the second person, and on one line of interpretation, invokes his mind (*noos*) in positive terms:

λεῦσσε δ’ ὅμως [*or*: ὁμῶς] ἀπεόντα νόῳ παρεόντα βεβαίως

- (i) See those things, which, remote though [reading ὅμως] they are, are yet firmly *present to thought*.⁸²

However several other translations are possible, including:

- (ii) *Gaze* equally [reading ὁμῶς] upon absent things *with your mind* as present and do so firmly.⁸³
- (iii) Behold things though [reading ὅμως] *absent for [that is, from] the mind*, are securely present.⁸⁴

Scholars typically endorse a reading along the lines of (i), according to which the goddess is appealing to *things present to thought, although* (reading ὅμως) they are (seemingly) absent. This would seem to speak broadly in favour of the orthodox view according to which the *kouros* has a privileged cognitive relationship to being. However, syntactically speaking, νόῳ (‘with/to the mind’), ὅμως (‘nevertheless’, ‘even’, ‘although’), and βεβαίως (‘firmly’) can all be taken to

⁸² Trans. Laks and Most (2016, 53), my emphasis. Gallop (1984, 57); McKirahan (2010 [1994], 146); Curd (2004 [1998], 67); and KRS (262) adopt similar translations.

⁸³ For the λεῦσσε [...] νόῳ reading, see Sedley (1999, 122); Tor (2017, 221: “gaze [...] with your mind”); Cassin (1998, 93); and Coxon (2009 [1986], 60). Both Coxon and Cassin, interestingly, take βεβαίως to modify the *act of gazing itself*, rather than “things present” (παρεόντα).

⁸⁴ See Graham (2002, 37).

modify different parts of the sentence, with some readings directly undermining the idea that being is already ‘present’ to (the *kouros*) thought (as in (ii) and (iii)).

Indeed, according to (ii), the *kouros* is being urged to gaze *with the mind* upon things absent, as being present – suggesting that being is not an unproblematic object of his thought, and that some sort of cognitive effort is needed for him to ‘see’ being. On this construal, these things do not stop being absent, but the *kouros* is urged somehow to visualize them *as if* they were present.

Interpretation (iii) is also syntactically possible. On this reading, the mind (*noos*) is no longer cast in clearly positive, idealized terms – to the contrary, it seems to be associated with the kind of cognitive act that *fails* to grasp being’s ‘presence’.

It should be noted, finally, that the accentuation we choose to supply in the word ομως – i.e. the decision whether to opt for the concessive conjunction ὅμως (‘nevertheless, although’), as most scholars do, or to prefer the adverb ὁμῶς (‘equally’), as in (ii) – also has implications for our overall interpretation of the line. Favours ὁμῶς (‘equally’) is the fact that this adverb aptly anticipates the homogeneity condition of being, laid out repeatedly in fragment B8=D8 – first at B8.5=D8.10, “all together” (ὁμοῦ πάν); then at B8.22=D8.27, “Nor is it divisible, *since it is all alike*” (οὐδὲ διαιρετόν ἐστιν, ἐπεὶ πάν ἐστιν ὁμοῖον); and then finally in the context of the sphere analogy, at B8.49=D8.54, “it is present within the bounds *equally*” (ὁμῶς ἐν πείρασι κύρει).⁸⁵ The implication of equality and homogeneity would also fit nicely with what immediately follows B4.1=D10.1, since Parmenides connects the line (‘for’, γὰρ, B4.2=D10.2) to the thought that

⁸⁵ See also the implication of equality, ‘*the same*’ (ὁμόν), at B8.47=D8.52, in the sphere passage (discussed in Chapter 4). For ὁμῶς, see e.g. Sedley (1999, 122, with n. 14) and Kraus (2005, 256). As Kraus (unpublished) remarks, words based on the stem ὁμ- (ὁμόν, ὁμοῦ, ὁμῶς, ὁμοῖος – all of which are found in the *Alētheia*) are etymologically cognate with εἶς, ἄμα, ἅπαξ, and involve a sense of singularity, unity, and/or sameness.

being *cannot be cut off from itself* or *dispersed* (at B4.2–3=D10.2–3), again anticipating B8.22=D8.27.

If Heraclitus had written these lines, perhaps more ink would have been spilt on their syntactical and semantic ambiguity.⁸⁶ Parmenides may have *deliberately* left several interpretations open for our critical consideration.⁸⁷ A similar point might be made about B3=D6, which seems especially indeterminate between two readings,⁸⁸ both of which are plausible from a grammatical point of view. The expectation that Parmenides had a single determinate view in mind at every juncture is certainly one to which we are accustomed (recall that the *mythos-logos* narrative impels us to see him as the first truly *clear* philosopher⁸⁹), but this too is an assumption which we might come to reconsider.

On any interpretation of B4.1=D10.1, the fact that there is still a filtered human perspective lurking in the background, qualifying the mental act of vision at issue, is made clear by the plurals *pareonta* and *apeonta*, since these are obvious violations of the strictures placed on being (for what-is cannot be ‘cut off’ from itself, B4.2=D10.2). In light of this, it is difficult to see how B4.1=D10.1 could count as evidence for unmediated or *direct* cognitive access to being.⁹⁰ As I argue in Chapter 4, what this mental act of *looking* consists in is fleshed out in the sphere

⁸⁶ For Parmenides as an obscure writer, see R14=Proclus, *In Tim.* 2.105a–b.

⁸⁷ See Graham (2002, 37) and Nehamas (2002, 47–48) for similarities to Heraclitus. For the possibility of deliberate ambiguity, vagueness or obscurity in Parmenides, see also Bryan (2020a) and (with respect to the proem) Mansfeld (1995) and Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 16). For the challenges posed by ambiguities both in syntax and in vocabulary in Parmenides, see Mourelatos (2008 [1970], xxvi).

⁸⁸ Pace Palmer (2009a, 106–136). For “a certain crankiness in his [Parmenides’] venerable syntax” at B3=D6, which “prevents us from ever being quite sure” about which interpretation to opt for, see Sparshott (1972, 110; cf. Gallop 1984, 57 and Bossi 2015, 27, n. 19).

⁸⁹ Although Barnes (1982 [1979], 122) – who lamented the “almost impenetrable obscurity” of the poem – is an outlier in this respect.

⁹⁰ Curd (2004 [1998], 52), for instance, adopts interpretation (i), and claims this line is an indication of “[o]ne whose *noos* is focused on what-is” and “has a direct, clear, and single-minded grasp of it”. She does not acknowledge the problem of the plurals.

analogy, which tells us precisely what it would mean to *visualize* being with our mind's eye, steadfastly (βεβαίως) – with an eye to being's *equality* (ὁμῶς).

§2. Zhuangzi's radical interrogative scepticism

§2.1. “Equalizing” one's assessment of things

The second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, entitled *Qi wu lun* (齊物論) or “The Equalizing Assessment of Things”⁹¹ (henceforth *Zh. 2*), has long been recognized to contain some of the text's most explicit philosophical argumentation.⁹² While the modern consensus on this chapter is that Zhuangzi exhibits some form of scepticism, there is wide disagreement as to the precise nature and scope of that scepticism.

A strong contingent of interpreters reads the text as being sceptical purely about language, and in some variations, about discursive argumentation or propositional knowledge in particular.⁹³ This interpretation takes its cue from the long tradition of scholarship which attributes a mystical worldview to the *Zhuangzi* (discussed in Chapter 2). On this view, Zhuangzi is concerned to vindicate the ineffability of reality (however paradoxical this might seem, given the book that survives), but not to undermine or question the possibility of wordless or non-propositional knowledge.⁹⁴ Yet, as will be discussed in §2.2, Zhuangzi's scepticism takes aim even at questions of the utmost practical importance, such as the question whether life is preferable to death.⁹⁵ He also repeatedly draws attention to the

⁹¹ Following Ziporyn's translations (2009; 2020).

⁹² See e.g. Hansen (1983, 31) and Wong (2022, 641).

⁹³ For the view that Zhuangzi's alleged scepticism is purely about propositional knowledge, see Ivanhoe (1993; 1996) and Eno (1996).

⁹⁴ For a critique of the assumption that Zhuangzi's scepticism does not also apply to the famous ‘skills stories’, which proponents of the anti-language reading tend to invoke as instances of ‘practical’ or ‘ethical’ knowledge (allegedly) vindicated in the *Zhuangzi*, see Chiu (2018) and (focusing on the Inner Chapters) Schwitzgebel (2019).

⁹⁵ Wong (2005, 94).

relativity of perception, which he takes as a reason to doubt our ability to know things. Scepticism about language and concepts is too weak to account for these kinds of sceptical reflections.⁹⁶

I side with a minority of scholars who take Zhuangzi to adopt a much more radical brand of scepticism, which does not make any declarative claims about how things are, including as to whether language does or does not reach reality.⁹⁷ The stance I have in mind is radical interrogative scepticism, which is agnostic even about whether knowledge is possible.⁹⁸ On this view, Zhuangzi does not subscribe to any philosophical dogma or thesis.

In the ancient Greek tradition, radical interrogative scepticism is exemplified by Sextus Empiricus' (second or third century CE) version of Pyrrhonism, which involves the suspension of judgement (*epochē*) about propositions as to how things are. More specifically, given a certain proposition, by psychological necessity one withholds assent about it as well as about its opposite, being unable to decide whether that proposition is true or not given the equipollence of reasons supporting both views. This leads to a kind of tranquillity or equanimity (*ataraxia*). Pyrrhonian sceptics suspend judgement even on the issue of *the possibility of knowledge*: we are not in a position to decide whether or not we can obtain (or have) knowledge. I argue that Zhuangzi exhibits precisely this kind of attitude toward the problem of knowledge,⁹⁹ although not with the result of

⁹⁶ Wong (2005, 94).

⁹⁷ Raphals (1994); Wong (2005); Trowbridge (2006); and (noncommittally) Schwitzgebel (2018, 328, with n. 9).

⁹⁸ I borrow the labels 'radical interrogative scepticism' (and 'radical declarative scepticism' below) from Wong (2005) and Moser (1999, 88).

⁹⁹ Trowbridge (2006) and Raphals (1994) attribute to the *Zhuangzi* a nondogmatic brand of scepticism akin to that of Sextus. While Kjellberg (1994) draws parallels between Pyrrhonian and Zhuangzian scepticism, his interpretation of the latter is closer to the anti-language/anti-propositional knowledge interpretation sketched above (see 1994, esp. 123). Wong (2005) attributes 'radical interrogative scepticism' to Zhuangzi, without mentioning Sextus. In later discussions, Wong (2006; 2017; 2022) characterizes Zhuangzi's stance as 'constructive skepticism', to

attaining equanimity. The characteristic sense of *restlessness* which emerges from the *Zhuangzi*, as I argue further in Chapter 4, speaks to the tensions underlying his ways of navigating epistemic uncertainty and the prospect of epistemic progress.

The hallmark of an interrogative sceptic is that she does not commit to any particular philosophical thesis or doctrine. The declarative sceptic (or negative dogmatist), by contrast, does commit to one or more views. Variations of these views include: the thesis that (1) *we do not know anything*; or the stronger claim that (2) *we (human beings) cannot know anything*; or the even more radical view that (3) *knowledge is impossible*. All of these views are forms of negative dogmatism or radical declarative scepticism, which are at odds with radical *interrogative* scepticism. In what follows and in Chapter 4, I argue that Zhuangzi steered clear of committing to any of these theses. Furthermore, I argue that there are profound philosophical reasons why he would have refrained from endorsing such forms of *affirmative*, and ultimately self-defeating, scepticism.

§2.2. *Overview of the evidence*

Numerous pieces of evidence, both positive and negative, can be adduced in support of the radical interrogative interpretation of Zhuangzi's scepticism.

First, nowhere does Zhuangzi plainly affirm that knowledge is impossible.¹⁰⁰ Zhuangzi's scepticism expresses itself not through theses or doctrines, but through a perpetual questioning of people's judgments (including his own 'in the present moment').¹⁰¹ A seemingly trivial point is the sheer number of

emphasize "the connotation of a purpose underlying the act of questioning: that of revealing or discovery of more of what there is" (2022, 639, n. 1). While I agree that the 'constructive' aspects of Zhuangzi's thought bear emphasizing, I see them as the outcome rather than purpose of Zhuangzi's radical questioning.

¹⁰⁰ Wong (2005, 100); Raphals (1994, 503).

¹⁰¹ Wong (2005, 101).

sentence-final interrogative particles (such as *hu* 乎, *fu* 夫, *zai* 哉, *ye* 邪, *ju* 詎) in *Zh.* 2, which speak to a general lack of conclusiveness in the text. Granted, not all of the uses of interrogatives in *Zh.* 2 are significant in this way. However many do arise in places where Zhuangzi specifically (1) interrogates the knowledge claims of those who claim to know; and (2) seems to withhold assent as to whether things *inherently* are a certain way, simply because they appear to be so.

Most often, Zhuangzi's word for 'knowledge' or 'knowing' is *zhi* 知. This is a term which he often (though not always) associates with *human* knowledge, which does not have an absolute claim to truth, and which is qualified in different ways in different contexts.¹⁰² I offer an example of how this works in my discussion of the 'happy fish' story in §2.4 below.

There is more direct, positive evidence for the view that Zhuangzi is an interrogative sceptic. The clearest piece of evidence relates to the problem of disagreements arising between two fundamentally opposed perspectives. Consider the case of the Confucians and Mohists, who cannot both be right since their perspectives exclude one another:

故有儒墨之是非，以是其所非而非其所是。欲是其所非而非其所是，則莫若以明。

And so we have the 'That's it, that's not' [*shi fei* 是非] of Confucians and Mohists, by which what is it for one of them for the other is not, what is not for one of them for the other is. If you wish to affirm what they deny and deny what they affirm, the best means is clarity (*ming* 明).¹⁰³

¹⁰² See Meyer (2015) for the idea of a "truth claim with no claim to truth" in *Zh.* 17. See also Harbsmeier (1993, 22–23). Note that in Sextus Empiricus, too, knowledge claims get qualified in such a way as to square with the radical sceptical stance (see especially *PHI*.206–207).

¹⁰³ G2/63=HY4/2/26–27. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 52), modified.

Famously, the Confucians and Mohists had conflicting perspectives on what constitutes moral goodness. The partiality which is characteristic of the Confucian conception of benevolence (*ren* 仁) – sometimes referred to as “graded compassion” given that the benevolence one shows to family members was expected to be stronger than for strangers¹⁰⁴ – is in direct tension with the Mohists’ competing conception of benevolence (*ren* 仁), which is premised on the idea of *impartial* (or *inclusive*) care (*jian'ai* 兼愛).¹⁰⁵ Thus, whereas the Confucians prescribe that one be partial towards one’s own family, the Mohists insist that one be as concerned for the stranger’s family as for one’s own. Each position might be seen to have its merits, and certainly robust arguments were provided by proponents on either side of the debate.¹⁰⁶ In fact, in different parts of the text, Zhuangzi contemplates aspects of both views through different characters.¹⁰⁷

As Zhuangzi suggests in an incisive passage toward the end of *Zh.* 2, one cannot side with either camp without *already* being partial or sympathetic to one of the two:

既使我與若辯矣，若勝我，我不若勝，若果是也，我果非也邪？
我勝若，若不吾勝，我果是也，而果非也邪？其或是也，其或非
也邪？其俱是也，其俱非也邪？我與若不能相知也，則人固受其
黜闇。吾誰使正之？

Suppose you and I get into a debate (*bian* 辯), if it is you not I that wins, is it really you who are on to it, I who am not? If it is I not you that wins, is it really I who am on to it, you who are not? Is one of us on to it and the other of us not? Or are both of us on to it and both of us not?

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Confucius’ *Analects* XIII.18; *Mengzi* 7A15.

¹⁰⁵ See e.g. *Mozi* XVI.1a.

¹⁰⁶ Wong (2017, 57–58). See Jiang (2018; 2021, 115–183) for recent discussions of the debate’s importance in classical Chinese philosophy.

¹⁰⁷ *Zh.* 4 has the character Confucius (Zhong Ni) present love of one’s parents as inevitable: “That a son should love his parents is fate – you cannot erase this from his heart-mind” (子之愛親，命也，不可解於心，G4/155=HY10/4/40). But in *Zh.* 17, we find another character making the Mohist-sounding pronouncement: “Embrace the ten thousand things impartially – how could there be one you should give special support to?” (兼懷萬物，其孰承翼？，G17/584=HY44/17/44). Trans. Watson (1968, 59, 182), modified.

If you and I are unable to know where we stand, others will surely be in the dark because of us. Whom shall I call in to decide it?¹⁰⁸

As David Wong (2005, 100) remarks, the question Zhuangzi is raising relates to:

how it is that we can validate our claims to know about an independent reality without begging the question, since we support our claims to knowledge by reference to other claims that either must be accepted on faith or belong to a network of mutually supporting claims.

Zhuangzi goes on explicitly to highlight the risk of infinite regress, since it is not only the two sides that beg the question against one another, but also proponents of third and fourth perspectives (and so on *ad infinitum*):

使同乎若者正之，既與若同矣，惡能正之！使同乎我者正之，既同乎我矣，惡能正之！使異乎我與若者正之，既異乎我與若矣，惡能正之！使同乎我與若者正之，既同乎我與若矣，惡能正之！然則我與若與人俱不能相知也，而待彼也邪？

If I get someone of your party to decide it, being already of your party how can he decide it? If I get someone of my party to decide it, being already of my party how can he decide it? If I get someone of a party different from either of us how can he decide it? If I get someone of the same party as both of us to decide it, being already of the same party as both of us how can he decide it? Consequently you and I and he are all unable to know where we stand, and shall we find someone else to depend on?¹⁰⁹

There is a worrying sense in which settling disputes between two opposed parties is intractable, given that whatever way of settling the dispute one proposes will in turn be in need of confirmation, and so on *ad infinitum*.¹¹⁰ This sort of

¹⁰⁸ G2/107=HY7/2/84–87. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 60), modified.

¹⁰⁹ G2/107=HY7/2/87–90. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 60).

¹¹⁰ There is an interesting link here to Pyrrhonian scepticism (briefly discussed by Kjellberg 1994, 115–117), wherein the theme of disagreements that arise in philosophical debates figures prominently as a basis for the suspension of judgement. See especially Agrippa's 'five modes' (see Barnes 1990 and Sienkiewicz 2019) and Aenesidemus' 'ten modes' of suspension of judgement (see Annas and Barnes 1985; Hankinson 1995, 120–136, 151–181; and Morison 2011), as reported by Sextus (*PHI*.164–177; *PHI*.31–163).

worrisome epistemic stalemate is foundational for Zhuangzi's interrogative scepticism.¹¹¹ It will not do simply to call on the faculty of reason as a means of adjudicating between alternatives: if all parties use reason and provide equally strong arguments that support contradictory conclusions (as in the case of the Confucians and Mohists), whose 'reasoning' should be trusted? In *Zh. 2*, Zhuangzi deploys another argument against the (Mencian) claim that the cultivated heart-mind (*cheng xin* 成心) is authoritative. The argument seems to be that if everyone's judgment has authority, no one's has: "But if you go by the complete heart-mind and take it as your master, who is without such a master?" (夫隨其成心而師之，誰獨且无師乎？ G2/56=HY4/2/21). We find no endorsement of a sceptical *thesis* here; the argument rather functions as a dialectical move against a dogmatic position.¹¹²

So we are at an impasse. What, one might ask, is the state of 'clarity' (*ming* 明) or the 'use of clarity' (*yi ming* 以明) to which Zhuangzi refers as the best course of action in the face of the Confucians' and Mohists' disagreement? Lisa Raphals (1994, 513–514) explicates it as a state of equanimity, resulting from the achievement of a parity of arguments on both sides of the debate – not unlike Pyrrhonian *ataraxia*.¹¹³ Yet unlike Sextus, Zhuangzi exhibits distinctly ambivalent attitudes toward equanimity, and at times contemplates the merits of *anxiety* over equanimity, such as in the case of the famous story of the skilful chef 'Cook Ding' in *Zh. 3*.¹¹⁴ In Chapter 4 I return to the sense of anxious hesitation that Zhuangzi's

¹¹¹ Wong (2005, 100).

¹¹² Raphals (1994, 506).

¹¹³ See similarly Lai and Chiu (2013, 528), without the comparison to Sextus. See also Kjellberg (1994, 123–124), who however argues that Zhuangzian equanimity differs from Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* in that it is sometimes directed at other ends.

¹¹⁴ McLeod (2019). See Meyer (in progress) on how *Zh. 18*, which is purportedly about "perfect happiness" (*zhi le* 至樂) – as the chapter title suggests – actually conveys a strong sense of angst.

sceptical questioning elicits, and how it informs a tension at the heart of his sceptical stance. A more cautious way of understanding the mention of the ‘use of clarity’ (*yiming* 以明) here is to see it as describing Zhuangzi’s ascent to an epistemically preferable cognitive state precisely in virtue of recognizing the impasse.¹¹⁵

Another set of passages in *Zh.* 2 confirms that Zhuangzi does not pronounce himself on the correct view to hold, precisely because he harbours worries about the basis on which one would make such a judgment, including as regards the deepest existential questions. Consider the following passage, in which Zhuangzi has the character Zi-Qi lament that:

終身役役而不見其成功，茶然疲役而不知其所歸，可不哀邪！人謂之不死，奚益？其形化，其心與之然，可不謂大哀乎？人之生也，固若是芒乎？其我獨芒，而人亦有不芒者乎？

All our lives we labour as slaves, and we do not see success. Weary and thus worn out from our labouring, not knowing where we will end up again – how can we not lament this? As for people saying that this situation is at least not death, what benefit is there to it? When one’s body transforms [i.e. decays] – and one’s heart-mind along with it, also – how can this not be called a great sorrow? Are humans’ lives inherently so muddled as this? Or is it that I alone am muddled? Among humans, is there anyone who is in fact not muddled?¹¹⁶

The passage raises the possibility that most human beings might be ignorant in holding the (conventional) view that life is better than death. Indeed, one might think that death is better than a life spent like a slave.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ For a similar reading, see Lai and Chiu (2013, 536) and Radice (2001, 33, 35). For an overview of different interpretations, see He (2021).

¹¹⁶ G2/56=HY4/2/19–21.

¹¹⁷ Elsewhere in *Zh.* 2 the character Wang Ni associates “the perfect man” (*zhiren* 至人) with indifference to life and death (G2/96=HY6/273); and in *Zh.* 6 the “genuine man” (*zhenren* 真人) is associated with “not knowing” (*bu zhi* 不知) anything about loving life and hating death (G6/229=HY15/6/7–8; see Kjellberg 1994, 122). However, in the famous death scene of Zhuang Zhou’s wife in *Zh.* 18 (G2/614–615=HY46/18/15–19), we certainly do not get the impression that indifference to life and death is being *prescribed*; quite the contrary, Zhuang Zhou is deeply engaged in the moment, but vacillates between uncontrolled weeping and cheerful singing. Even when Zhuangzi is at his most ‘engaged’, he exhibits a kind of hesitant ambivalence between conflicting views on life and death.

Later on in the chapter, Zhuangzi contemplates just this view in the voice of another character, Chang Wuzi:

予惡乎知說生之非惑邪！予惡乎知惡死之非弱喪而不知歸者邪！

How do I know that taking pleasure in life is not a delusion? How do I know that we who hate death are not exiles since childhood who have forgotten the way home?¹¹⁸

Once again Zhuangzi questions how one knows some perspective – in this case, the widely shared (human) view that life is delightful and death hateful – to be true. This is because, as these two passages jointly suggest, it is an open question whether (i) we can really know those with whom we disagree to be ignorant; and by implication whether (ii) we can really know that we ourselves hold the correct view. The scepticism is then explicitly generalized: (iii) is it ever the case that any human being is known *not* to be ignorant?

But Zhuangzi's scepticism does not stop here: he is not content to conclude that all humans *necessarily* are ignorant. For even *this* is a thesis which one has no more basis to commit to than its opposite.

Zhuangzi makes this point indirectly by having Chang Wuzi deploy a sophisticated dreaming analogy, which unsettles the supposition that he himself has got things right any more than his interlocutor (Qu Quezi, who appears to be sympathetic to Confucius' views):

方其夢也，不知其夢也。夢之中又占其夢焉，覺而後知其夢也。
且有大覺而後知此其大夢也，而愚者自以為覺，竊竊然知之。
[...] 丘也與女，皆夢也；予謂女夢，亦夢也。

While dreaming you don't know it's a dream. You might even interpret a dream in your dream – and then you wake up and realize it was *all* a dream. Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream. And yet the foolish imagine they are already awake. [...]

¹¹⁸ G2/103=HY6/2/78–79. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 59).

Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you're dreaming,
I'm dreaming too.¹¹⁹

The point that “[w]hile dreaming you don’t know it’s a dream” is a familiar move in the sceptic’s battery of arguments against the dogmatist: how does the dogmatist know that what she is certain about is not in fact false or baseless, just as she believes countless things to be true in her dreams which are false?¹²⁰ But Chang Wuzi adds a further layer of nuance here: we are not, as a result of the dream scenario, entitled to conclude that what now seems self-evident to us – such as the newfound conviction that we do not actually have knowledge, or the view that taking pleasure in life is actually a delusion – just *is* the fact of the matter. For as the analogy suggests, we can imagine an ultimate state of enlightenment or a ‘great awakening’ (*da jue* 大覺), which stands to our waking state as our waking state stands to our dreaming state. This raises the possibility that if we could occupy such a view (assuming there were such a view), we would realize that whatever we now believed to be true in our (apparently) more ‘enlightened’ state was in fact just a fool’s dream, or even a dream within a dream!¹²¹ The upshot is that neither Chang Wuzi nor his opponents can be sure that they have things right at all.

Earlier on in *Zh. 2*, Zhuangzi makes it clear that we cannot be sure that we are ignorant, this time via an exchange between the characters Gaptooth and Wang

¹¹⁹ G2/104=HY6/2/81–83. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 19).

¹²⁰ This anticipates (*inter alia*) Descartes’s dream argument, e.g. at *Principles of Philosophy* §4=Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, eds. and trans. (1984, 193).

¹²¹ A similar dream argument appears in the intellectual autobiography of the Islamic philosopher al-Ghazālī (*The Rescuer from Error*, §85–86=Khalidi 2005, 62–63). Unlike Descartes and like Zhuangzi, al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111) argues that we have no good reason to think that there isn’t some *even more* enlightened cognitive state (in this case, that of the Sufi mystics), such that if we could get into that enlightened state then we could realize that things which seem self-evident to us in our waking state – like the proposition ‘10 is greater than 3’ – are in fact unsubstantiated.

Ni, and in connection with the question whether one can know something on which all creatures (including non-human creatures) agree:

齧缺問乎王倪曰：「子知物之所同是乎？」曰：「吾惡乎知之！」
「子知子之所不知邪？」曰：「吾惡乎知之！」「然則物无知邪？」曰：「吾惡乎知之！雖然，嘗試言之。庸詎知吾所謂知之非不知邪？庸詎知吾所謂不知之非知邪？」

Gaptooth put a question to Wang Ni.

‘Would you know something of which all creatures agreed “That’s it [*shi* 是]”?’

‘How would I know that?’

‘Would you know what you did not know?’

‘How would I know that?’

‘Then does no creature know anything?’

‘How would I know that? However, let me try to say it – “How do I know that what I call knowing is not ignorance? How do I know that what I call ignorance is not knowing?”’¹²²

Gaptooth’s question might be interpreted in at least two different ways.

The first reading is more epistemological: is it the case that something counts as knowledge because all creatures agree to it? As A.C. Graham (2001 [1981], 59) observes, Wang Ni’s resistance to answering the question might suggest that he doubts that there can be an *independent point of view* from which to judge a universally shared opinion. This anticipates the problem of settling disputes (discussed above) that is introduced later in the chapter, since the issue in that case also relates to the problem of finding an independent point of view from which to make a judgement which is not itself already subject to a *parti pris*.

Alternatively, and probably more relevantly given what follows, one could take the question to be whether there is such a thing as something upon which all

¹²² G2/91–92=HY6/2/64–66. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 58), modified. I here render *wu* 物 not as ‘thing’, but as ‘creature’, since *wu* 物 can have this narrower meaning and seems warranted given what follows in the passage.

creatures agree.¹²³ One way of expanding on this worry is to suggest that humans' most basic means of access to the world (i.e. sense-perception), might itself be subject to worrisome distortions. This is due to the limited set of sensory stimuli that are available to us *qua* the sort of creatures that we are.¹²⁴ I might doubt, for instance, that I know that the sky is very blue (to take an example from *Zh.* 1¹²⁵) because I can never clarify the claim that all creatures agree on this. In fact, I have reasons to doubt that the sky really looks the same to non-humans, such as the giant bird Peng.

A passage in *Zh.* 2 which immediately follows the exchange between Gaptooth and Wang Ni on how one knows that one knows (discussed above) is also illuminating. Wang Ni asks Gaptooth:

且吾嘗試問乎女：民溼寢則腰疾偏死，鱗然乎哉？木處則惴慄恂懼，猿猴然乎哉？三者孰知正處？

Moreover, let me try a question on you. When a human sleeps in the damp his waist hurts and he gets stiff in the joints; is that so of the loach? When he sits in a tree he shivers and shakes; is that so of the ape? *Which of these three knows the right place to live?*¹²⁶

Wang Ni goes on to invoke apparently conflicting animal perspectives on beauty, noting (facetiously¹²⁷) that even women universally acknowledged by humans to be beautiful appear not to make any positive impression on non-human

¹²³ Wang Ni's retort to Gaptooth's proposed definition of knowledge – according to which if we all agree that *x*, then we know that *x* – raises a puzzle upon which Zhuangzi does not comment overtly, but which might be taken to be implicit in the exchange: namely, how could Wang Ni possibly sign up to something on which there is *universal* agreement if he hadn't signed up to it already? And if he had not signed up to it already (he is, after all, a questioning inquirer), then it is not the case that all creatures agree on it. If Gaptooth's tentative definition of knowledge is one of the things to which Wang Ni has not signed up (as Wang Ni's retort suggests), then by its own lights this definition of knowledge fails. I thank Shaul Tor for this observation.

¹²⁴ See Wong (2005, 102), who mentions the examples of the quail, the dove, and the giant bird Peng in *Zh.* 1 as a case in point.

¹²⁵ G1/4=HY1/1/4.

¹²⁶ G2/93=HY6/2/66–67. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 58), my emphasis.

¹²⁷ For the humorous undercurrent of this passage, and its relevance to Zhuangzi's anti-dogmatism, see Moeller (2022, 292).

animals. Hence one might query whether humans can claim to know what is truly beautiful in the world, given the apparently conflicting views animals have on beauty (assuming beauty is at all relevant to non-human perspectives ¹²⁸) – something which Wang Ni puts in the form of a question:

毛嬙麗姬，人之所美也，魚見之深入，鳥見之高飛，麋鹿見之決驟。四者孰知天下之正色哉？自我觀之，仁義之端，是非之塗，樊然殽亂，吾惡能知其辯！

Mao Qiang and Lady Li were beautiful in the eyes of men; but when the fish saw them they plunged deep, when the birds saw them they flew high, when the deer saw them they broke into a run. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world? In my judgement the principles of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and justice (or righteousness, *yi* 義), the paths of “That’s it, that’s not” [or: “right and wrong”, *shi fei* 是非], are inextricably confused; how could I know how to discriminate between them?¹²⁹

Notice that the differences Wang Ni gleans from observing non-human animals do not lead him to advocate hard relativism, according to which reality is somehow relativized to the perceiver, with the result that each perspective is equally correct. He firmly resists making this move. Observing that *perception* is relative (e.g. to the kind of species one belongs to) rather functions as a further incentive to *interrogate* one’s claims to know how things really are, and to resist assuming that things objectively *are* what one perceives them to be.¹³⁰ Wang Ni implicitly connects his worries about differences among animals and the relativity of perception to a different kind of disagreement, one which distinctively arises among

¹²⁸ The problem that anthropocentric bias informs how humans interpret conflicting perspectives (would fish really find Mao Qiang ‘ugly’?) is arguably implicit in the passage, given Wang Ni’s mention of benevolence or what is sometimes translated as *humaneness* in the next line. For the Confucians as for the Mohists, benevolence (however understood) is what sets humans apart from animals. The underlying issue of anthropocentrism is raised more explicitly in the ‘happy fish’ anecdote, as discussed in §2.4.

¹²⁹ G2/93=HY6/2/69–70. Trans Graham (2001 [1981], 58), modified.

¹³⁰ Cf. Aenesidemus’ first and eighth modes of the suspension of judgement, according to which things appear different on the basis of differences among animals (mode 1: *PH* I.40) and the relativity of perception (mode 8: *PH* I.135).

philosophers: that regarding the ethical concepts of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and justice or righteousness (*yi* 義), which he associates with *shi fei* 是非 distinctions (“that’s the case and that’s not the case”).¹³¹

Following the logic of his reasoning about conflicting perspectives earlier in the passage, it appears that the concepts of *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義 are deemed ‘confused’ to the extent that different groups of people endorse contradictory conceptions of them, and yet all claim to “know” what they amount to. Recall that in the passage we considered above, opposing Confucians and Mohists, Zhuangzi made the point that each camp affirms (*shi* 是) what the other denies (*fei* 非). I gave the example of the Confucians’ and Mohists’ opposing conceptions of benevolence (*ren* 仁), which seemed an apt illustration of the problem of resolving disputes between two fundamentally opposed perspectives. Here it appears that Gaptooth has something similar in mind: it seems impossible to adjudicate which perspective on *ren* and *yi* brings with it the correct *shi-fei* judgement, as each camp has arguments supporting its position, and the arguments *we* draw on to settle the dispute will again raise the problem that they too are in need of independent confirmation, *ad infinitum*. This insight, or moment of ‘clarity’ (*ming* 明), is what stops us from assenting to one view over the other.¹³²

¹³¹ Cf. Aenesidemus’ tenth mode (*PH* I.145–155), according to which things appear different, *inter alia*, on the basis of conflicting dogmatic suppositions.

¹³² Read in tandem with the imagery of clarity explored above, this seems to be the force of Zhuangzi’s earlier point in *Zh.* 2 that “demonstration by debate always leaves something unshown” (*bian ye zhe you bu jian ye* 辯也者有不見也, G2/83=HY5/2/58; trans. Ziporyn 2020, 17).

§2.3. *Animal differences as a motivation for radical interrogative scepticism*

The issue of cross-species differences is foundational for Zhuangzi's scepticism, and is on a par with that of differences arising among different people. The insistence with which Zhuangzi appeals to non-human perspectives should therefore not be reduced to the status of mere metaphorical devices.¹³³ On the contrary, we have begun to see how the issue of differences among animals (both human and non-human) is directly related to the broader issue whether, and if so with what qualifications, knowledge is possible. This feature of the *Zhuangzi* is significant, and has been underestimated in other parts of the text that emphatically engage with the issue of the gap between species.¹³⁴ Chief among these is the “Autumn Floods” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (*Zh.* 17'), which concludes with the famous ‘happy fish’ anecdote, in which Zhuangzi and his interlocutor Huizi contemplate the question whether we can know that fish are happy. Since this much-discussed passage is hotly debated, and has been seen to advocate anything from perspectival relativism to the possibility of cross-species communication, I examine it in some detail. I argue that the passage challenges us to take seriously the gap between species, and to grapple with the seemingly intractable problem that our (human) perspective on the world is filtered by an anthropocentric lens. As Zhuangzi repeatedly reminds us, the way the world *appears* to us seemingly varies depending on the kind of creature we are. This observation constitutes a key

¹³³ Pace D'Ambrosio (2022, 2), who argues that Zhuangzi appeals to animals and non-human figures solely as metaphors for people, to make “broadly applicable arguments” that have little or nothing to do with worries about anthropocentrism. For the compatibility of ‘allegorical’ and ‘literal’ interpretations of the animal figures, see Özbey (2022, 738, with n. 12).

¹³⁴ A notable exception is Wong (2005), who relates the issue of cross-species difference to radical epistemological scepticism in the *Zhuangzi*. The example of fish is mentioned approximately thirty times in the *Zhuangzi* – more than any other non-human animal (Beaney 2021, 363). That Zhuangzi repeatedly turns to the case of fish – a creature with which it is especially hard for us to identify – seems precisely to emphasize the gap between species (see Parkes 1983, 238; Perkins 2010, 121; and Beaney 2021, 363).

motivation for Zhuangzi's radical form of scepticism, and has important consequences for the question whether, and if so with what qualifications, humans can ever claim to have knowledge.

§2.4. A case study in Zh. 17: Can humans know fish to be happy?

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰：「儵魚出游從容，是魚樂也。」惠子曰：「子非魚，安知魚之樂？」莊子曰：「子非我，安知我不知魚之樂？」惠子曰：「我非子，固不知子矣；子固非魚也，子之不知魚之樂，全矣。」莊子曰：「請循其本。子曰『女安知魚樂』云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。」

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling (*you* 遊) on the dam of the Hao River. Zhuangzi said, "How these minnows jump out of the water and play about (*you* 游) at their ease (*cong rong* 從容)! This is fish being happy (*le* 樂)!"

Huizi said: "You, sir, are not a fish, how (*an* 安) do you know (*zhi* 知) what the happiness of fish is?"

Zhuangzi replied: "You, sir, are not me, how (*an* 安) do you know (*zhi* 知) that I do not know (*bu zhi* 不知) what the happiness of fish is?"

Huizi said: "I am not you, sir, so I inherently don't know you; but you, sir, are inherently no fish, and that you don't know (*bu zhi* 不知) what the happiness of fish is, is [now] fully [established]".

Zhuangzi replied: "Let's return to the roots [of this conversation]. By asking "how (*an* 安) do you know (*zhi* 知) the happiness of fish", you already knew (*zhi* 知) that I know (*zhi* 知) it, and yet you asked me; I know (*zhi* 知) it by standing overlooking the Hao River".¹³⁵

This passage has in recent decades been seen to advance a form of relativism which precludes objectivity. While the resulting position is often framed as a sceptical one, such a view would amount to a form of negative dogmatism, predicated on the dogmatic assertion that objective knowledge is impossible, so that knowledge is relativized to the perceiver. I argue that the central concern of the two

¹³⁵ Trans. Meyer (2015, 335), modified. Note that in this passage I follow Fan's (2013, 508) edition of the *Zhuangzi*, which presents some minor (but philosophically significant) deviations from the text in Guo's edition (see G17/606=HY45/17/87–91). This is a Song version of the text, the *Nan hua zhen jing* 《南華真經》 edition of the *Xu gu yi cong shu* 《續古逸叢書》.

philosophical personae in the passage – Zhuangzi and Huizi – is not primarily with the epistemic standards of human judgements, but with the problem of species-specific perspectives.¹³⁶

The picture that emerges from the bulk of modern discussions in the secondary literature is that Zhuangzi *either* (1) commits himself to fallacious argumentation (whether willingly or unwillingly); *or* (2) endorses a relativistic theory of reality, in which objective truth (and with it the idea of a metaphysical absolute) is ruled out.¹³⁷

The strongest grounds for (1) consist in Zhuangzi's inference at the end of the passage, since, *prima facie*, it is at best a *non sequitur* – and at worst sophistical – to conclude that because Huizi asked for Zhuangzi's grounds for knowing *p*, therefore he already knew that Zhuangzi knew *p*. However, I will argue that the inference is not only valid but also gestures at a deep insight in Zhuangzi's musings about the issue of animal differences.

The most influential attempt at saving Zhuangzi from the charge of sophistry or irrationality has been made by Chad Hansen (followed in many respects by Norman Teng), who proposes an interpretation along the lines of (2).¹³⁸

¹³⁶ I am not alone in adopting such an approach. Kuwako (2015, 142) argues that the passage is concerned with “the problem of interspecies understanding of minds” as opposed to the more general problem of other minds (which typically dominates discussions of the passage). Perkins (2010) highlights “species difference” as the core issue, and discusses the role that the example of fish plays (here and elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*) in deflating the primacy of humans. However, neither analyses the passage in great detail. I do so in Cantor (2020; see also a summary of my view in Beane 2021, 374). What follows is a modified version of that article, with additional connections drawn to the broader view I take on the *Zhuangzi*.

¹³⁷ D'Ambrosio (2022, 11–12) has recently presented a third position, according to which the persona Zhuangzi is just making a joke, with no serious point being made in the process. On his view, the passage merely serves to prevent the text's ‘ossification’. But if no philosophical point is at stake, to what end is the ‘de-ossification’ of the text directed? Apart from the fact that jokes can (and often) do have a serious dimension (not least in the *Zhuangzi*, see e.g. Wong 2005, 99 and Moeller 2022), we would do well to avoid those readings that undersell the philosophical significance of passages such as these.

¹³⁸ Though see recently Beane (2021), who offers a solution in terms of what he calls the ‘Connective Perspectivist Interpretation’. On this view Zhuangzi does not claim to *know that* the fish are happy, but only makes a claim about fish happiness inasmuch as ‘it is *like* his and Huizi's

Hansen (2003a, 159) claims that, having deemed any reflection on an absolute view of the world to be irrelevant, Zhuangzi “consistently resists [...] invitations to state the ‘view from nowhere’”. It is not always clear whether Hansen thinks that (a) the absolute view is simply non-existent, and hence inaccessible to anyone (which would be congenial to his relativist interpretation); or whether he thinks that (b) the absolute view is non-existent because it is ultimately inaccessible to humans; or even whether he takes (c) the absolute view to be irrelevant (though *real*) inasmuch as it remains unknowable to humans. Hansen does not consistently seem to have (a) in mind, since he does not appear to reject the absolute view *per se*.¹³⁹ For this reason, it does not seem like he could sign up to (b) either. But (c) seems to be in tension with Hansen’s relativist reading, and also presumes a degree of anthropocentrism which is alien to the *Zhuangzi*.¹⁴⁰

Let us note that Huizi himself starts out being concerned with the species-specific issue:

Huizi said: “You, sir, are not a fish, how (*an* 安) do you know (*zhi* 知) what the happiness of fish is?”

Hansen thinks that, from the start, Huizi is committed to a particular kind of subjective relativism, which dictates that the perceiver can only know whatever is true of one’s inner self. On Hansen’s view, Zhuangzi’s distinct version of relativism – which he calls “perspectival relativism” (2003a, 148) – does not assume an

happiness’ (2021, 375) – so that what Huizi is invited to do is to ‘recognize the analogy’: Huizi, like Zhuangzi, already knows the fish are happy to the extent that he can recognize it as *like* his (and Zhuangzi’s) happy human activity. I return to this interesting interpretation below and in Chapter 4.

¹³⁹ “The cosmos does not make judgments. The point of view of the cosmos (or any absolutist point of view – including the perfect man) is so irrelevant as to be unintelligible to us as we seek ways in this world” (Hansen 2003a, 159).

¹⁴⁰ For Zhuangzi’s interest in non-human animals, see e.g. Liu (2002); Perkins (2010); Parkes (1983); Kuwako (2015); and Özbey (2022). According to Liu’s (2002, 381; see Özbey 2022, 737) calculation, Zhuangzi mentions birds of 22 species, 15 kinds of aquatic organisms, 32 types of land animals, 18 types of insects, and 37 kinds of plants.

exclusively first-person epistemic standard. This, he thinks, enables Zhuangzi (unlike Huizi) to avert the charge of self-refutation. Norman Teng's (2006) response to Hansen rightly disputes that Huizi assumes an exclusively first-person standard from the outset, since the worry Huizi raises is the problem of species-specific perspectives – in this case, whether Zhuangzi, *qua* human, can know fish happiness.

Huizi explicitly broaches the generic idea of fish happiness, as opposed to speaking about particular fish being happy, as Zhuangzi does. It is true that the phrase attributed to Zhuangzi – *shi yu le ye* 是魚樂也 – is usually translated as “such is the happiness of fish”, since most translators take *shi* 是 (“such”) to focus the *ye* 也 (copula “is”) and take there to be an implied *zhi* 之 which nominalizes *le* 樂 (the *P*ness of *x*).¹⁴¹ Yet an alternative translation, which does not presume a suppressed *zhi* 之, and instead reads *shi* 是 as an indexical (“this”), and *le* 樂 as an adjective, is simply “this is fish being happy” (*x* is *p*). I opt for the latter translation, since the abstract idea of “fish happiness” arrives later on in the passage (whereby *le* 樂 is explicitly nominalized with the particle *zhi* 之). We should therefore avoid smuggling in an abstract notion of fish happiness in the earlier line.

A third linguistic point is the pun on the verb *you* (遊/游), which has two different referents in the passage; it describes both (1) the friends *wandering* along the dam and (2) the fish *meandering* about in the water, which are described as

¹⁴¹ The implications of the absence of the particle *zhi* 之 in editions based on the *Xu gu yi cong shu* 《續古逸叢書》 (such as Fan 2013, 508) have not to my knowledge been discussed in any great detail, even though many scholars follow this version. Note that later Qing dynasty editions (as reproduced in e.g. Guo 1985, 606) include the particle *zhi* 之, and thus instead read: *shi yu zhi le ye* 是魚之樂也. It is possible that the inclusion of this particle is a later addition, though it is not my intention to defend that claim here. A more important motivation for adopting the Song variant, for my purposes, lies in its philosophical interest.

doing so *at leisure* (*cong rong* 從容). Presumably the two friends are also at their leisure, since they are freely taking a walk together. The text composition signals that the two men are engaging in a human activity which they feel to be *parallel* to the experience of fish; both activities are felt to be a kind of *you*-ing (“wandering”), and because both appear to be leisurely, they are deemed a source of happiness in both the case of the men and that of the fish.¹⁴²

What is initially at stake is not the issue of relating with other human subjectivities, but the broader issue of accessing the experience of *non-persons*. Huizi is intuitively talking about the same fundamental problem as that broached by Zhuangzi; and he struggles with its implications in a philosophically sincere way. But he is not fully aware of the distinctly *human* perspective from which he speaks about “fish happiness”.

Huizi’s initial objection already betrays his assumption that fish happiness has meaning beyond the human purview, since he thinks that being a fish would in principle give one access to fish happiness. Moreover, Huizi does not speak about *those particular fish* being happy, as Zhuangzi seems to do at the start of the anecdote, but about the problem of not being a fish *in general*. The question is no longer centred on the issue of whether “these fish are happy” (*shi yu le ye* 是魚樂也), but on the criteria on the basis of which one thinks there is fish happiness more broadly (*yu zhi le* 魚之樂).

Zhuangzi’s reply to Huizi’s objection, however, is *prima facie* equally problematic:

¹⁴² See e.g. Jullien (2007 [2005]), Fraser (2014), and Virág (2017, 133–62) on how *you* 遊 ties into Zhuangzi’s reflections about happiness (*le* 樂) more generally.

Zhuangzi replied: “You, sir, are not me, how (or ‘from where’, *an* 安) do you know (*zhi* 知) that I do not know (*bu zhi* 不知) what the happiness of fish is?”

Zhuangzi seems to be casting doubt on the possibility that Huizi could know what he himself knows (or does not know), on the basis that Huizi is not Zhuangzi. His assumption thus seems to be that if you are not *x*, you clearly do not know anything about the mental states of *x*. Huizi explicitly accepts the soundness of this line of reasoning:

Huizi said: “I am not you, sir, so I inherently don’t know you ...”¹⁴³

Huizi’s point seems to be “I don’t know you” in the sense of “I don’t know what is going on in your mind”. This view is different from other-minds scepticism, since in a perspectival way Huizi may still be said to know other people, trees, and tables. But his view does imply the following: “I am not you so I can only know how you are relative to me”.¹⁴⁴ But then Huizi violates this premise, since, despite not being Zhuangzi, he claims to know at least one thing about what Zhuangzi does and does not know:

but you, sir, are inherently no fish, and that you don’t know (*bu zhi* 不知) what the happiness of fish is, is [now] fully [established].

Thus Huizi claims that Zhuangzi does not know what the happiness of fish is. But he cannot claim to know this, since the standard of knowing employed here – i.e. knowing by inference – is no longer open to him now that he has endorsed the

¹⁴³ *wo fei zi, gu bu zhi zi yi* 我非子，固不知子矣。 Note that this construction marks a strong statement, whereby *gu* 固 (‘strongly, inherently’) is followed by a particle denoting the end of a process (*yi* 矣).

¹⁴⁴ Hansen (2003a, 154) calls this the “what it is like first person” standard of knowing.

first-person standard.¹⁴⁵ Zhuangzi, with his question, has whimsically led Huizi to refute himself, and has thereby discredited the objection that he, Zhuangzi, cannot know the happiness of fish.

Whatever comical dimension there may be to Zhuangzi's trap, one might still protest, on Huizi's behalf, that Zhuangzi too, in asking his question, seemed to commit himself to the first-person standard, thereby refuting his own claim that he knew fish happiness. There is however a deep philosophical point in Zhuangzi's question, which is not self-undermining; rather, it draws attention to the differences in points of view which arise *between people* when they disagree about something. Zhuangzi is giving Huizi a fair chance to defend his view on the basis of *where he is saying it from*.

The ambiguity on the meaning of *an* 安 – which in classical Chinese may convey both the spatial idea 'from where' and the explanatory 'how' (much like the English 'whence') – is of central importance here.¹⁴⁶ Given Zhuangzi's playful references to location throughout the passage, such an ambiguity seems to suggest that one's actual place in the world has implications for how one can claim to know something about that world. Indeed, having presented Huizi with the truism that "you are not me", Zhuangzi asks *an* (whence) he knew that Zhuangzi did not know fish happiness.

When Zhuangzi asks Huizi for a 'from where' clarification in terms of a 'you'/'not me' distinction, he is granting that Huizi might see the world in a

¹⁴⁵ See Hansen's discussion (2003a, 153–154) of the self-refuting nature of Huizi's argumentation here. For a similar interpretation based on the ancient commentary by Guo Xiang 郭象, see Williams (2018, 95–100).

¹⁴⁶ Graham (2001 [1981], 123) famously argues that the use of the interrogative *an* 安, understood most literally as 'whence', implies that knowledge claims are relative to the standpoint one occupies in the world.

different way, *qua* the individual that he is, and so have grounds unbeknownst to Zhuangzi, for thinking that Zhuangzi does not know fish happiness. But Huizi ends up providing an explanation which is internally incoherent. Hence Zhuangzi is free to drop the person-specific issue of perspective, and return to the original issue, the broader *species-specific* one: “Let’s return to the roots [of this conversation] ...”.

Importantly, the very idea of fish being happy was not questioned in Huizi’s objection. In fact it is Huizi who introduces fish happiness as an *abstract* concept. When Huizi challenges Zhuangzi’s epistemic grounds for claiming to know fish happiness, he is already speaking from within their shared human purview.

Huizi’s truism that Zhuangzi is not a fish shows some appreciation of the problem, but the ensuing conclusion that Zhuangzi could not know fish happiness assumes that there is such a thing as fish happiness outside the human purview. In working with their limited, human tools of engagement with the world, Huizi (though he was reluctant to admit it) and Zhuangzi intuitively recognized the happiness of fish; but only Zhuangzi had anticipated with what qualifications this could be true: namely, insofar as it belonged to their shared human purview. When Zhuangzi speaks of fish being happy and describes them as *you*-ing, he is plausibly reflecting on the conditions for a flourishing “fish existence”, in accordance with ideals of flourishing that intuitively apply within the human sphere (*le* 樂, *you* 遊). But then the standards by which he is assessing the existence of fish happiness are inherently human. Hence the limits of the judgement that “this is fish being happy”.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ For the alternative view that *you* 遊, in the specific context of the ‘happy fish’ passage, establishes a continuity between humans and fish which allows humans to share in the fish’s happiness, see Moeller (2015, 249–250). Perkins (2010, 128) also suggests that *you* 遊 is here associated with the possibility of cross-species communication. While our starting points are similar, my approach also differs from Kuwako’s (2015), insofar as I do not take Zhuangzi to be making claims about fish

Given the emphasis on the interlocutors' particular *positionality* – on the dam, overlooking the Hao River – and Zhuangzi's qualification that he knew that the fish were happy *from that vantage point*, we seem to have a self-conscious reflection on the specifically perspectival reach of this knowledge claim. The dam is an apt marker of a human worldview: it is a man-made barrier imposed on the natural environment, which emphatically separates human subjects from the world of fish.¹⁴⁸ Zhuangzi is embracing the 'what-is-it-like-ness' of looking at the world as a human in that moment, while also acknowledging that this vantage point is not necessarily absolute; it is unapologetically from a certain place, and not from nowhere: "I know (*zhi* 知) it by standing overlooking the Hao River".

We are still left with the difficulty that Zhuangzi's inference, according to many scholars, is invalid:

By asking "how (*an* 安) do you know (*zhi* 知) the happiness of fish (or: *that the fish are happy*)", you already knew (*zhi* 知) that I know (*zhi* 知) it,¹⁴⁹ and yet you asked me

In fact, Zhuangzi's inference is valid according to the principle of conversational implicature within pragmatics.¹⁵⁰ For instance, in asking "how did you come home?", one is already presupposing that *you came home*; *whether* you came home is not really at issue. In the same way, by asking how he knew fish happiness, Huizi might be taken to presuppose that Zhuangzi did know fish

happiness in a way that extends beyond his specifically human purview; the point is precisely that claims about the happiness which *actually* arises in fish are unassertible (*pace* Kuwako 2015, 145).

¹⁴⁸ I thank Dirk Meyer for this observation.

¹⁴⁹ Note that the Chinese leaves unspecified what exactly Zhuangzi knew. Indeed, *zhi* 之 may be taken to refer to Zhuangzi's initial contextual claim that *such is fish being happy*, rather than *such is the happiness of fish* (in the abstract), which is how Huizi frames the problem in his criticism of Zhuangzi.

¹⁵⁰ See e.g. Davis (2014) on Grice's theory.

happiness.¹⁵¹ Moreover, if we take seriously that the ambiguity on the meaning of *an* 安 is at play in the passage, as most commentators do, the fact that Huizi is asking *from where* Zhuangzi knows further suggests that the *fact that* he knows it is not being questioned.

Still, one might worry that Zhuangzi's reply eludes Huizi's objection, to the extent that he has not proved how he knows fish happiness. However, once we appreciate the point Zhuangzi is making about the shared *human* point of view from which one identifies and speaks of fish happiness, things become rather clearer.

Huizi accepted the very idea of fish happiness because he agreed with Zhuangzi's identification of minnows jumping out of water and "playing about" as an instance of fish being happy. The fundamental issue which is lost on Huizi, but which Zhuangzi playfully gestures at, is that we have no idea whether the happiness of fish would amount to anything outside our human purview. This is why Zhuangzi stresses that he knew the fish were happy *from where he stood on the (man-made) dam*. The problem we face as humans is that our knowledge always seems to be 'from somewhere', rather than being perspectively neutral or absolute. From the perspective of human-oriented conceptions of happiness we are inclined to say that these are happy fish, but we are unable to decide whether this perspective is in fact wholly, or partially, or not at all faithful as a representation of fish as they in fact are.

¹⁵¹ Hansen (2003a, 155) anticipates this solution, but thinks it would in this case amount to "sophistry", since he holds that "in a challenge to knowledge, the phrase 'how do you know' normally has the opposite presupposition" (2003a, 155). Hansen is certainly right that, taken on its own, the "how do you know" phrase is ambiguous (in Chinese as in English), and that in this sense the implicature that one does know does not necessarily obtain. But in the context of the passage, crucially Huizi *did know* that Zhuangzi knows from the outset, as betrayed by his abstract recognition of fish happiness upon seeing the minnows swimming at their ease. Hence Zhuangzi's response exploits the implicature *that Huizi knows*.

Zhuangzi's positionality in the passage, accompanied by his (human) friend Huizi, plausibly suggests a circumspect reflection on the limitations of human claims to knowledge. Zhuangzi's "knowledge" (*zhi* 知) of fish happiness is avowedly *from a certain place*, and does not make any *absolute* claims to truth. Nor however is Zhuangzi thereby endorsing relativism, for he has no more reason to endorse relativism than he does to accept absolutism. I suggest that the qualifier here is not one which *relativizes* the view that fish are happy to the human purview, but one signalling that the view is one intuitively shared among humans (rather than one they would be inclined to *disagree* about, as in the case of the nature of benevolence), without any accompanying claims as to whether it in fact is or is not the correct view to hold.¹⁵² Zhuangzi thus points not only to the challenge posed by disagreements among humans, but also to that posed by *what humans share in common*. For in this common ground our human blind spots are at their strongest, even if it might seem a strong basis for epistemic progress.

Taking stock

Despite starting from markedly different premises, Parmenides and Zhuangzi both end up grappling with what follows from a concern that human

¹⁵² In his analysis of the passage, Beaney (2021) argues that while Zhuangzi is, broadly speaking, a perspectivist (in the sense that he believes that we can only know something from within a particular conceptual scheme or ethical practice), this does not mean that he is wedded to relativist conclusions (e.g. the view that all perspectives are equally valid). Zhuangzi appeals to "relativist arguments", as Beaney puts it, "to combat dogmatism", but this does not make him a relativist. Beaney instead tentatively suggests that Zhuangzi might be wedded to a "broader (metaphysical) conception of a oneness that underlies and unites the various perspectives". Wong's (2022, 643; see Wong 2009) reading of Zhuangzi as a "constructive skeptic" similarly commits him to some kind of underlying unity in the world. As I discuss in Chapter 5, I do not think Zhuangzi ultimately takes a definite view on the question whether there is or is not metaphysical oneness, though he does leave it open as a possibility.

cognition is (or appears to be) limited, so that they both end up refraining from attributing unqualified knowledge to humans.

Parmenides gestures at a lack of cognitive fit between human beings and the object of inquiry he calls ‘what-is’. In the next Chapter, I will unpack the philosophical reasons why Parmenides held this view, drawing inspiration from what we have learned by engaging with Zhuangzi’s own concerns about human cognition: namely, that human knowledge appears to be perspectival, rather than absolute. Zhuangzi cannot (and does not) even claim to know this much with any certainty. He does however adapt his epistemic attitudes in light of the possibility, qualifying his knowledge claims accordingly in terms of ‘*knowing from*’.

There is another way in which Zhuangzi presses us to reckon with the limits of what we can know, and to do so self-reflectively. As I discuss in Chapter 4, Zhuangzi explores the potential for a way of knowing which *is* within human reach: analogical reasoning, or what we might call ‘*knowing as*’ – which, fraught with limitations though it is, might nevertheless occasion modest epistemic progress. Having seen how the recourse to analogical reasoning in the *Zhuangzi* is directly and explicitly related to Zhuangzi’s second-order concerns about what we can know and say about reality, I suggest that we may have missed an important feature of Parmenides’ philosophy: his recourse to analogical reasoning as a way of pushing the limits of human thought. We saw that, at B4.1=D10.1, the *kouros* is urged (in the second person) to visualize being *with the mind* in a particular way. What this mental act of visualization amounts to, I will argue, is elucidated through a striking instance of analogical reasoning, elaborated in fragment B8=D8, wherein the *kouros* is invited to think about being *in terms of* a sphere.

Chapter 4 – Pushing the limits of thought: epistemology through analogical reasoning and indirect argumentation

Overview

In Chapter 3, we saw that both Parmenides and Zhuangzi harbour worries about human cognition. The surprising point in the case of Parmenides was that he turned out to be significantly less optimistic than is generally supposed about what the *kouros* (let alone any ordinary human) knows, which undermined the traditional view of Parmenides as a *triumphalist* rationalist. It also emerged that Zhuangzi could not be the anti-rationalist or negative dogmatist that he has often been taken to be, precisely because his nuanced and cautious stance on the question of what can (and cannot) be known leads him to question the viability of perspectival claims to knowledge.

In this Chapter I discuss two fundamental features which Parmenides' and Zhuangzi's philosophies share in common: the use of analogical reasoning and what I call indirect argumentation. These are relatively well-known aspects of Zhuangzi's thought, in part because the *Zhuangzi* itself offers explicit reflections on Zhuangzi's idiosyncratic use of analogies and unusual argumentative strategies, as well as rhetorical tools, in several programmatic passages. However scholars have underestimated the extent to which his sophisticated use of analogies and noncommittal expression of arguments and theses allow him to pre-empt a major objection to his sceptical stance (discussed in §§1.1–2): namely, that his reliance on words and arguments apparently commits him to theses.

Drawing inspiration from Zhuangzi's self-reflective use of analogies, and from the text's explicit reflections on his implicit and indirect argumentation, I

show in §§2.1–2 how attending to Parmenides’ use of analogical reasoning in the *Alētheia* further problematizes the assumption that he takes being to be within our direct cognitive reach. I argued in Chapter 3 that Parmenides appears to leave some daylight between cognitive failure and cognitive success: while the *kouros* cannot cognize (*noein*) being, he is impelled to somehow ‘visualize’ (*leussein*) being (B4=D10). Parmenides’ use of a verb of sight here meshes well with early conceptions of cognition and knowledge that I took to inform his epistemic vocabulary (in particular, his use of the verbs *eidenai* and *noein*). It also suggests that Parmenides was centrally interested in the question of perspectives: the goddess appeared to be asking the *kouros* to ‘broaden’ his gaze to include things (seemingly) absent from his mental purview.

I argue that the sphere analogy of B8.42–49=D8.47–54 builds on this vision-oriented conception of epistemic progress, but that in doing so, it highlights the impossibility of a perspectively neutral view on being. I suggest that the sphere analogy provides rich imagery for thinking about the kind of view one would have on being *if* it were possible to have direct access to it, while at the same time emphasizing that such a view is beyond human – including the *kouros*’ – reach. In §2.3 I ask what might follow from Parmenides’ view that our cognition of being is at best indirect. Here I tentatively sketch two competing possibilities. One takes Parmenides to stand by the arguments of the *Alētheia* as a reliable route to knowledge *about* reality (even if not to direct cognition of being). The other takes him to question the arguments and premises of the *Alētheia* itself, including as regards being’s knowability or intelligibility.

§1. Zhuangzi's scepticism and his recourse to analogies

§1.1. *Objections to Zhuangzi's scepticism*

In Chapter 3, I argued that Wang Ni's resistance to answering Gaptooth's questions might suggest that he doubts (1) that there can be an *independent point of view* from which to judge a universally shared opinion; or (2) that there is such a thing as something upon which all creatures agree, since they seem to have irreducibly *conflicting* perspectives on, say, what the right habitat is. Both interpretations are consistent with Zhuangzi's interrogative scepticism. Wang Ni also refuses to make pronouncements as to whether anyone can claim to know anything, including that one is ignorant.

One question is whether Wang Ni is supposed to be epistemically better off than the dogmatist, and if so, whether this is a problem for the radical interrogative stance he appears to embody. Is the sceptic better off than the triumphalist dogmatist, who believes she has a firm grasp of reality and that she therefore has knowledge? Is Wang Ni better off than, say, the Confucian or the Mohist, who are each persuaded that they are right and that the other is wrong? The text seems to present this character's way of approaching the world as somehow superior or preferable to that of his dogmatic counterparts. But this might seem to undermine his sceptical stance, since one might ask what, if anything, makes his attitudes to knowledge superior; and if he answers, he might be committing himself to dogma.

The Zhuangzian interrogative sceptic can respond to this worry. After all, unlike the negative dogmatist, the interrogative sceptic has not *excluded* that she might still achieve knowledge, or that she might have already achieved it unbeknownst to her. Wang Ni does not know the basis on which he could know whether he really has knowledge or ignorance: "How do I know that what I call

ignorance is not knowing?” Having abstained from drawing any conclusions about the possibility or impossibility of knowledge, the interrogative sceptic averts self-refutation.

Still, the dogmatist could press the interrogative sceptic by pointing out that she has recourse to language and arguments. It might seem that the sceptic is committing to the objectivity of language and to the validity of arguments on either side of a debate, even if she does not have an opinion as to which has the upper hand. To assume that language is somehow objective, and that arguments can have a certain strength to them, might be seen as an avowal of knowledge; and so the interrogative sceptic, according to her dogmatic critic, refutes herself. But Zhuangzi has ways to pre-empt such worries about the allegedly self-refuting character of his use of language and arguments.

There are several ways in which we could unpack the worry that language is assumed to be objective in the *Zhuangzi*. The first is that (1) language is apparently taken to *refer* to something – to have an object. A more robust conception of objectivity might involve (2) not only the idea that the things of which one speaks are real, but also that one describes them and identifies them in ways that are fully correct. Thirdly, it might seem as though Zhuangzi accepts a conception of objectivity understood as (3) intersubjectivity: a view counts as objective if it is shared among humans – where this latter conception falls short of an objective notion of truth as being mind-independent.

Let us begin with the view that (1) language refers to something. Zhuangzi might seem committed to the claim that words at least mean something, in the sense that they allow him to communicate with others. But consider the following passage,

wherein Zhuangzi first implies that words refer to things (they are not just gibberish), before subjecting this intuition to sceptical scrutiny:

夫言非吹也，言者有言，其所言者特未定也。果有言邪？其未嘗有言邪？其以為異於‘音’，亦有辯乎，其無辯乎？

Words are not merely the blowing of air. Speaking requires words; and that which the words express is especially unfixed. In reality (*guo* 果), is there something to which words refer? Or was there never something to which words referred? One considers them to be different from the chirping of baby birds. But is there actually (*yi* 亦) a distinction? Or is there no distinction between them?¹

This passage evidently problematizes the very meaningfulness of language (the chirping of birds does not seem to refer to things), but neither affirms nor denies that words really do pick things out. Might speech just be noise, like the chirping of birds, or the blowing of air?

Elsewhere, Zhuangzi introduces an analogy strikingly reminiscent of Sextus' (and Wittgenstein's) ladder,² suggesting that one 'forgets' words once the object in question has been grasped:

荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃；蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；言者所以在意，得意而忘言。吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉！」

A fish trap is there for the fish. When you get the fish, you forget the trap. A snare is there for the rabbits. When you get the rabbit, you forget the snare. Words are there for the intent. When you get the intent, you forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with him?³

¹ G2/63=HY4/2/23–24.

² The parallel with Wittgenstein's ladder has been noticed by Van Norden (2011, 154).

³ G26/944=HY75/26/48–49. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 224).

Zhuangzi does not call for the total abandonment of words: even the person who has ‘forgotten’ words will eventually enter into conversations again. Likewise, assuming the sceptic will keep inquiring into things, she will return to using words.

There is more to such comments than considerations merely about the possibility of reference. They also appear to involve considerations about reality itself: perhaps our language tries to refer to things, but there might not be anything to which words refer.

This brings me to (2) the idea that language not only refers to things but also describes and identifies them in ways that are *fully correct*. Via different personae, Zhuangzi appears to endorse certain approaches to a situation *in the present moment* in a way that can be communicated through language; however this need not imply complete confidence in words’ ability to describe reality.⁴ For instance, Zhuangzi presents the persona Confucius as having changed his mind after fifty-nine years – so that what he “presently pronounced right” (*jin zhi suo wei shi* 今之所謂是) was what he formerly pronounced wrong. This led him to disclaim (*xie* 謝) knowledge, rather than lay claim to it.⁵

The same point might be made about the Zhuangzian sceptic’s noncommittal use of arguments.⁶ Indeed, the intimate connection between the sceptic’s use of language and her appeal to opposed dogmatic arguments is encouraged by several passages in *Zh.* 2:

⁴ On how the ‘engaged’ passages of the *Zhuangzi* can be squared with radical interrogative scepticism, see Wong (2005, 2017) and Kjellberg (1994, 120–121).

⁵ G27/952–953=HY75/27/10–12. See a similar passage in *Zh.* 25 (G25/905=HY71–72/25/51–54) involving Confucius’ contemporary, Qu Boyu, to which I return in §1.3. Cf. *Analects* II.4, where Confucius claims to have achieved knowledge later in his life.

⁶ In *Zh.* 6, the act of ‘forgetting’ is associated with relinquishing one’s previously held beliefs and values (Kjellberg 1994, 123). ‘Forgetting’ might thus be understood as a Zhuangzian counterpart of Pyrrhonian ‘suspension of judgment’.

言辯而不及,

When words make an argument [*bian* 辯⁷], they fail to reach everywhere.⁸

A little earlier on, we are told that:

大辯不言

Greatest argument [*bian* 辯] uses no words.⁹

But what would it mean to ‘argue’ without words? How could one ‘know’ the sort of argument that got beyond (the partiality of) language? This is a question which Zhuangzi asks a bit later:

孰知不言之辯，不道之道？

The argument [*bian* 辯] that uses no words, the Course [*Dao* 道] that is not a course [*Dao* 道]¹⁰ – who “understands” these things, who could know them?¹¹

Zhuangzi’s answer, as we might expect, is extremely tentative. It takes the form of an interesting analogy, which hints at the possibility that one might *come closer* to knowledge that is not contingent on words, even if there is no such thing as a wordless argument:

若有能知，此之謂天府。注焉而不滿，酌焉而不竭，而不知其所由來

⁷ While *bian* 辯 is usually rendered simply as ‘to distinguish’ (as a verb) or ‘distinction’ (as a noun), it often refers to the act of naming accompanied by reasoning. Hence it is justified to gloss the term as ‘argument’. ‘Argument’ proceeds via discrimination, so that words fail to reach everywhere. There is a similar connection between the notion of ‘dividing’ and that of ‘judging’ in the Greek term *krinein*, found in both senses in Parmenides.

⁸ G2/83=HY5/2/59. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 18).

⁹ G2/83=HY5/2/59. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 57).

¹⁰ Graham (2001 [1981], 57) translates *bu dao zhi dao* 不道之道 as “an untold Way”.

¹¹ G2/83= HY5/2/61. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 18), modified.

If there is some kind of knowing them [i.e. the argument that uses no words, the Course that is not a course], it could only be what we might call the Heavenly Reservoir [*tianfu* 天府]: poured into without ever getting full, ladled out of without ever running out, ever not-knowing its own source.¹²

The closest we get to an ‘argument without words’ is this Heavenly reservoir [*tian fu* 天府],¹³ which is never depleted. Even if the sceptic contemplates all the words and arguments available to her, the reservoir will never be quite full: there will always be something left ‘unshown’. At the same time, the reservoir will never be empty: we do not ever get rid of words and arguments for good; the inquiry is always ongoing. The arguments are always changing and unfinished. Perhaps trying to add all the words and arguments to the reservoir is the closest we get to communicating with no words at all. To take the analogy one step further, the closest we get to unexpressed and inexpressible understanding is something like a second-order awareness about the seeming inadequacy of all our many (ever-increasing) words and arguments.

This image brings to mind Zhuangzi’s much-discussed, if rather obscure, reference to ‘goblet words’ or ‘spill-over sayings’ (*zhi yan* 卮言), which he evokes in *Zh.* 27 and *Zh.* 33.¹⁴ *Zhi* 卮, in these contexts, is usually thought to refer to a vessel that tips when it is too close to being full, and then straightens again. The kind of speech Zhuangzi has in mind sounds like the sort of speech involved in the Heavenly Reservoir image;¹⁵ namely, the kind of talking and use of words that is self-aware about its own limitations, and draws our attention to its limitations.

¹² G2/83= HY5–6/2/61–62. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 18).

¹³ On this metaphor, see He (2021, 7–8).

¹⁴ See e.g. Fried (2022a, 277–279); Graham (1989, 201); Lloyd (2018a, 31); Trowbridge (2006, 260); and Wen (2011, 82).

¹⁵ For other intertextual echoes linking the notion of *zhi yan* 卮言 (as described especially in *Zh.* 27) to analogies in *Zh.* 2, see Fried (2022a, 278–279).

The final conception of objectivity, understood in terms of (3) human intersubjectivity, holds that a shared human perspective (which relies on words to be communicated), is in some sense objective. But as discussed in Chapter 3, in numerous passages Zhuangzi queries whether a shared human perspective could ever be assumed to be objective. Certain facts on which humans seem to agree (e.g. ‘these fish are happy’) do not obviously hold outside a human purview; and this is something which we humans have the capacity to realize. This realization underpins Zhuangzi’s *qualified* claim that he knows fish to be happy *from where he stands*. Zhuangzi thus resists the implication that language is objective, understood in the third sense laid out above.

Recall that in the ‘happy fish’ anecdote we were invited to think about fish happiness *in terms of* human happiness. Such was the import of the qualification that Zhuangzi knew the fish were happy *from* the (man-made) dam. And herein lies a tentative perspectival claim: we ‘know’ fish happiness, but with qualifications (this is a ‘knowing-from’ claim). Zhuangzi does not know that the fish are happy unqualifiedly – to say that much would be to step beyond the bounds to which he can confidently commit. A different way to think about this qualified claim to knowledge, I suggested, takes its cue from analogical reasoning: the happiness of fish is known to us only insofar as it is *like* the happiness from within our shared human perspective.

§1.2. Analogical reasoning as modest epistemic progress

In his recent exposition of the ‘happy fish’ anecdote, Michael Beaney observes that:

Huizi interprets Zhuangzi as claiming to know that the fish are happy, but the attempts to justify this—or its negation—break down. [...] Zhuangzi only claims to know fish happiness to the extent that it is like his and Huizi’s happiness, to which attention is drawn in the careful construction of the happy fish dialogue.¹⁶

However, Beaney (2021, 375) ultimately takes Zhuangzi actually to stand by this use of analogy unreservedly, so that he takes it to offer a correct standard by which to judge fish happiness independently of any human perspective. Beaney’s interpretation assumes that Zhuangzi’s epistemology takes up the Mohist conception of knowledge (*zhi* 知) as “connecting” (*jie* 接), which, as he puts it, is itself understood as “recognizing its *likeness* to an appropriate model or standard (*fǎ* 法) for having those features”.¹⁷ Yet there are serious reasons to doubt that Zhuangzi would unreservedly endorse such a conception of knowledge.

A basic tenet of Mohist epistemology is that the use of (objective) models or standards (*fa* 法 or *yi* 儀) allows us to make correct judgments (whether in the realm of ethics, semantics, epistemology, or logical reasoning).¹⁸ Yet Zhuangzi clearly questions the Mohists’ optimistic reliance on models and analogies as a means of acquiring objective knowledge.¹⁹ One strong indication of this lies in Zhuangzi’s appeal to the image of the ‘Heavenly potter’s wheel’ (*tian jun* 天鈞) in *Zh.* 2 (G2/70=HY5/2/40),²⁰ to convey the sage’s *lack of commitment* to fixed standards of correctness. This appears to be a subversive reworking of an image found in the *Mozi* (XXXV–XXXVII): the spinning potter’s wheel (*yun jun* 運鈞).

¹⁶ Beaney (2021, 375). Beaney’s interpretation of the exchange between Zhuangzi and Huizi as revealing an instance of analogical reasoning builds on Teng’s (2006) interpretation.

¹⁷ Referencing *Mozi* IV (“Models and Standards”).

¹⁸ For the centrality in Mohist thought of *fa* (models) and their connection to analogical reasoning, see e.g. Fraser (2020 [2002]).

¹⁹ See further De Reu (2010, 46).

²⁰ The image also appears in *Zh.* 23 (G23/792=HY63/23/45) and (assuming *tianjun* 天鈞 is interchangeable with *tianjun* 天鈞) in *Zh.* 27 (G27/950=HY75/27/10).

Mozi had originally used the image to claim that any judgment we make must be based on (fixed) ‘standards’ of correctness – for to make judgments without standards (*yi* 儀), Mozi tells us, is *like* (*you* 猶) trying to ascertain where the sun will rise and set *while one is on a spinning potter’s wheel*, which is futile. As we saw in Chapter 3, Zhuangzi also explicitly attacks Mohist dogmatism in *Zh.* 2.

Repeatedly and pointedly, Zhuangzi invites us to be suspicious of the unreflective projection of human standards onto the world, and of the presumption that human standards really do ‘hook up’ to reality independently of how we humans conceive of it. We should have learned by now to expect a much more circumspect and modest use of analogies on the part of Zhuangzi, one which is clearly not in the service of making unqualified claims about how things are.

When Zhuangzi claims to know ‘these fish’ to be happy, he builds an implicit qualification into this knowledge claim, emphasizing that he knows this *from a certain place*. He is signalling that the perspective he occupies is one shared among humans, without, as we saw in Chapter 3, any additional claims as to whether it is or is not the correct view to adopt. Put differently, this is a perspective whose standard is avowedly a *human-oriented* conception of happiness. But that is as far as it goes.

Elsewhere we are shown how human-oriented conceptions of happiness transposed onto the (non-human) animal realm can *backfire*. In *Zh.* 19 we hear about a ruler who finds a bird roosting on the outskirts of Lu (Confucius’ hometown), and resolves to make it happy by feeding it meats and playing music as he would do with a human guest. But the bird does not eat or drink; if anything, it appears miserable. In a parody of the Confucian “Golden rule” (cf. *Analects* V.12, XII.2, XV.24), the narrator of the story, Bian-zi, concludes that: “This is called

trying to nourish a bird with what would nourish oneself” (此之謂以己養養鳥也).²¹ This anecdote implicitly challenges Confucian anthropocentric conceptions of benevolence (*ren* 仁), and highlights comically the pitfalls of taking one’s human purview as absolute.

But recognizing the *limits* of analogies, of taking *x* (human happiness) as a standard for *y* (fish ‘happiness’) or *z* (bird ‘happiness’), is itself a form of epistemic progress: one moves beyond the narrow purview which simply assumes human happiness as the correct and absolute standard. In this sense, appealing to analogies self-reflectively actually puts Zhuangzi in a better position to grapple with the limitations of his purview, and in doing so to expand it ever so modestly.

§1.3. Zhuangzi’s indirect argumentation

We also need to consider Zhuangzi’s use of indirect argumentation.²² By ‘indirect argumentation’ I mean the use of a wide range of literary and rhetorical devices as well as framing and compositional features of the text that make oblique philosophical points, for instance regarding the limits of what can (and cannot) be known, and of what can be said of such limits. These reflections are often presented noncommittally through literary masks or personae, as well as through Zhuangzi’s signature “double-question form”.²³ They are also communicated in ways that are

²¹ G19/666=HY51/19/74–75. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 156). For connections between the ‘happy fish’ anecdote and this story, see also Özbey (2022, 740).

²² The expression is Porat’s (2022, 241). See also Meyer’s (in progress) notion of “silent argumentation”, which he takes to involve arguments produced by extra-semantic information embedded in the compositional form of the text.

²³ For Zhuangzi’s use of the “double-question form”, especially in *Zh.* 2, see Porat (2022, 242–243). See also Allinson (1989, 25–27: “the double-headed question”) and Chiu (2015, “dilemmatic questions”). Møllgaard (2007, 71–72) compares Zhuangzi’s use of “double-questions” to Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment (or *epochē*), encapsulated by the Sextan version of the slogan *ou mallon*, “no(thing) more” (see *PH* I.188–91); for a discussion of the Pyrrhonian expression *ou mallon*, see Castagnoli (2010, 256–277). See also Wong (2005, 101) for Zhuangzi’s perpetual questioning as part and parcel of his radical interrogative stance.

often paradoxical, figurative, ambiguous, and/or avowedly tentative. One gets the impression that Zhuangzi is anxiously second-guessing not only the characters animating his philosophical dialogues and anecdotes, but also himself as a narrative voice. A case in point is Zhuangzi's reflections, as an external narrator, on Qu Boyu's newfound realization that what he presently considers right might well turn out to be wrong:

人皆尊其知之所知而莫知恃其知之所不知而後知，可不謂大疑乎！
已乎已乎！且无所逃。此所謂然與，然乎？

All humans esteem what their knowing knows, but no one knows how to know only by relying on what their knowing does not know. Is this not the greatest perplexity of all? Enough! Enough! There is nowhere to escape it! This is called saying both “it is right” and “is it right?”²⁴

Initially the tone is almost sententious and dogmatic, but trails off on a note of disquiet and ambivalence. Zhuangzi constantly risks becoming the target of his own radical questioning,²⁵ but he is anxiously self-reflective about this. The text performs Zhuangzi's second-guessing of his own claims through the fourfold use of the emphatic final question particle *hu* 乎.²⁶ By the end he literally puts a question mark on his assessment of humans' inability to take the measure of their own epistemic limitations: It is right and *Is it right?* (*ran hu* 然乎?)

We find an explicit reflection on Zhuangzi's idiosyncratic rhetorical manoeuvres and indirect argumentation in a central programmatic passage of the closing chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (Zh. 33):²⁷

²⁴ G25/905=HY71–72/25/52–54. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 213), modified.

²⁵ See similarly Porat (2022, 241).

²⁶ This particle, as the above translation and punctuation suggest, sometimes conveys remarks closer to an exclamation, which (as in other languages) highlight the speaker's sense of astonishment or doubt.

²⁷ The textual history of this passage is heavily debated, with some scholars arguing that it dates to the earliest phase of composition (for an overview, see Fried 2022a, 269–270). For my purposes it is sufficient that it figures in the final composition of the text, since it is the textual author (rather than the putative historical Zhuangzi) in whom I am interested.

以謬悠之說，荒唐之言，無端崖之辭，時恣縱而不儻，不以臧見之也。

He [Zhuang Zhou] used ridiculous and far-flung descriptions, absurd and preposterous sayings, senseless and shapeless phrases, indulging himself unrestrainedly as the moment demanded, uncommitted to any one position, never looking at things exclusively from one corner.²⁸

It is hard to overstate this passage's significance. It is the most explicit formulation of Zhuangzi's radically interrogative stance in the text, spelling out his lack of commitment to theses or to partial perspectives. It also clarifies that Zhuangzi's 'stance' does not take the form of anything approaching *systematic* questioning or doubting; on the contrary, Zhuangzi's inquisitive attitude is spontaneous, and disjointed.

The passage continues:

以天下為沈濁，不可與莊語，以卮言為曼衍，以重言為真，以寓言為廣。

He considered the world so sunken in the mire that it was pointless to say anything in earnest, so he used spillover-goblet words (*zhi yan* 卮言) for unbroken extension of his meanings, citations of weighty authorities (*zhong yan* 重言) for verification, words put into the mouths of others (*yu yan* 寓言) for broad acceptance.²⁹

The passage invokes three literary and rhetorical devices, also mentioned in *Zh. 27* (G27/947=HY75/27/1). The first we have already come across: Zhuangzi draws on 'goblet words' (*zhi yan* 卮言) – which often take the form of analogies or metaphors – with the effect of delivering a deliberately ambiguous (or 'porous') message that shirks definite commitments.³⁰

²⁸ G33/1098=HY93/33/64. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 272).

²⁹ G33/1098=HY93/33/65. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 272).

³⁰ Chiu (2015).

The second is his use of ‘weighty’ or ‘respected’ words (*zhong yan* 重言), which captures his frequent appeal to reputable opinions of respected authorities (not unlike Aristotelian *endoxa*) in the midst of confronting different, and often conflicting, views on a topic.³¹

The third relates to Zhuangzi’s use of literary masks: ‘words put into the mouths of others’; or, more literally, ‘(externally) lodged words’ (*yu yan* 寓言).³² This is the strategy by which Zhuangzi attributes claims to (more or less) fictional characters so as to give them a fair hearing,³³ especially where these views conflict. As Burton Watson (1968, 373) puts it, these are “imputed words”, rather than claims endorsed *in propria persona*. But scholars have also rightly seen a connection between this notion of ‘lodged words’ and the location-bound (or ‘lodged’) perspective Zhuangzi sometimes invokes in making qualified knowledge claims, such as in the ‘happy fish’ anecdote.³⁴

The passage goes on to connect these rhetorical and literary features to Zhuangzi’s rejection of anthropocentrism and speciesism, and to his haphazard use of words and arguments:

獨與天地精神往來而不敖倪於萬物，不譴是非，以與世俗處。其書雖瑰瑋而連犴无傷也。其辭雖參差而諷詭可觀。彼其充實不可以已

³¹ There is some debate as to whether Zhuangzi has in mind ‘weighty’/‘respectable’ (*zhong* 重) words or ‘repeated’ (*chong* 重) words here, although perhaps the semantic ambiguity is intended: arguments from authority tend to have weight because they are often repeated (see Fried 2022a, 276–277).

³² For the etymology of *yu* as “to find external lodging, in the house of another”, see e.g. Fried (2020a, 275). For a discussion of ongoing debates over the precise implications of this term, see Fried (2020a, 275–276) and Porat (2022, 248–249).

³³ See *Zh.* 27, where *yu yan* 寓言 are described as being “borrowed from outside for the purpose of exposition” (*jie wai lun zhi* 藉外論之, G27/948=HY75/27/1).

³⁴ See Graham (2001 [1981], 25–26) and Lai (2008, 151, with n. 7).

In his aloneness he came and went, joined only by heaven and earth and the purest kernels of imponderable spirit, but still never arrogantly separated himself off from the creatures of the world (*wanwu* 萬物), for he reprimanded none of their views of right and wrong and thus was able to get along with worldly conventions. Although his writings are a string of jades and baubles, their intertwining twistings will do one no harm. And even though his words are uneven (*cenci* 參差), their very strangeness and monstrosity are worthy of contemplation. For their overabundance is truly an unstoppable force.³⁵

Notice that Zhuangzi's words are characterized as being *uneven* (*cenci* 參差).

We have seen that Zhuangzi often asks loosely connected questions, deploys disjointed anecdotes and weaves together obscure metaphors and analogies. At times his language appears to be deliberately abstruse, bordering on the incomprehensible.³⁶ At other times his use of language is as argumentative as can be – such as in his exposition of the two parties in a debate that beg the question against one another (Chapter 3), or in his challenge against numerical monism (to which I turn in Chapter 5); but without losing sight of its own epistemic uncertainty. His words and arguments hang together as loosely connected jades and baubles, rather than being tightly strung together. His questioning is haphazard rather than methodical, erratic rather than consistent. Zhuangzi's attitude is not quite a method, nor can he easily be accused of signing up to one.

§2. Parmenides' use of analogical reasoning

§2.1. *Shifting perspectives in the sphere analogy*

Let us now return to Parmenides. We have seen that being and thinking/knowing (*noein*) are repeatedly presented as going together in the *Alētheia*,

³⁵ G33/1098–1099=HY93/33/65–67. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 272).

³⁶ At the end of *Zh.* 1, Huizi accuses Zhuangzi of using big and useless words (“Now these words of yours are big but useless”, 今子之言，大而無用，G1/39=HY3/1/44), an accusation which Zhuangzi answers by using impenetrable metaphors – as if to confirm (albeit indirectly) his friend's point. See Porat (2022, 247).

but in such cases the subject of the act of thinking/knowing is not personalized. By contrast, in cases where thinking *is* personalized in the *Alētheia*, what we have is either (i) a *failure* to cognize being, with ordinary mortals explicitly identified as the culprits; or (ii) as in the case of the privileged *kouros* at B4.1=D10.1, a less hopelessly misguided but still indirect cognitive relationship to being, framed in terms of *an act of mental vision*.

This act of mental vision, I suggest, is cashed out in the sphere analogy of B8=D8, which hinges on the notion of completeness or perfection.³⁷ Given the absence of explicit doxastic or epistemic vocabulary in the passage, the subjectivist or ‘perspectivist’ interpretation of the sphere analogy I defend here is somewhat speculative; but I take it to be strongly supported by what we have seen in Chapter 3 concerning the theme of visualization underlying Parmenides’ epistemic vocabulary, and, crucially, the irreducibly human perspective from which the *kouros* is impelled to ‘see’ being at B4=D10.³⁸ Indeed B4=D10 foregrounds the theme of mental visualization from a perspective which is evidently not absolute or neutral (recall the plurals *apeonta* and *pareonta*), even if it is in some sense a better or ‘broader’ view than that adopted by most mortals. We also considered a lexical reason for supposing that the sphere analogy was being anticipated in B4=D10: this was the possible use of the adverb ὁμῶς (‘equally’, B4.1=D10.1), which in the sphere analogy cannot be mistaken for the concessive conjunction ὅμως (B8.49=D8.54).

³⁷ Note that the Greek σφαῖρα does not always refer to a geometrical sphere; it is also an ordinary term for ‘ball’ (i.e. a sphere full of stuff). *Odyssey* VI.100, 115 and Plato’s *Phaedo* 110b7 are examples of the latter use (see Gallop 1984, 19, with n. 58; Mourelatos 2008 [1970], 124; Tarán 1965, 155; Fränkel 1960, 196; and Jameson 1958, 15, with n. 3). I take it that the abstract, geometrical flavour of the relevant passage in Parmenides is a reason to favour rendering the term as ‘sphere’ (rather than ‘ball’).

³⁸ I am not alone in reading the sphere analogy in perspectival terms. See especially Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 129–130), whose interpretation of the sphere in terms of an ‘external view’ I engage with below.

Let us consider the passage in full:

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πεῖρας πύματον, τετελεσμένον ἐστί,³⁹
 πάντοθεν εὐκύκλου σφαίρης ἐναλίγκιον ὄγκῳ,
 μεσσόθεν ἰσοπαλὲς πάντῃ· τὸ γὰρ οὔτε τι μείζον
 οὔτε τι βαιότερον πελέναι χρεόν ἐστι τῇ ἢ τῇ.
 οὔτε γὰρ οὐκ ἐὼν ἔστι, τό κεν παύοι μιν ἰκνεῖσθαι
 εἰς ὁμόν, οὔτ' ἐὼν ἔστιν ὅπως εἴη κεν ἐόντος
 τῇ μᾶλλον τῇ δ' ἥσσον, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστιν ἄσυλον·
 οἱ γὰρ πάντοθεν ἴσον, ὁμῶς ἐν πείρασι κύρει.

And so, since there is an outermost bound, it [*scil.* what-is] is completed like the expanse of a sphere nicely circular from everywhere,⁴⁰ equally balanced in all directions from the centre.

For this [*scil.* what-is] may not be somewhat bigger nor somewhat smaller here or there. For there neither is what-is-not, which might stop it from reaching

the same [i.e. sameness], nor is it in any way possible that what-is should be here more and there less than what-is, since all of it is inviolate.

For being from everywhere equal to itself, it is present within the bounds equally.⁴¹

The first point to notice is that being ('what-is') is explicitly *compared* (ἐναλίγκιον, 'similar to, like') to a sphere – or more specifically, to the expanse

³⁹ I here borrow Diels' punctuation (2003 [1897], 38), which is followed by Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 123). Most commentators (including LM) follow Kranz in moving the comma after πάντοθεν, translating 'completed from all sides' (see Fränkel 1962, 409; Mansfeld 1964, 102; Tarán 1965, 86; and Guthrie 1969, 43). However, my argument does not hang on this punctuation, since πάντοθεν must apply both to *to eon* and to the sphere in order for the comparison to hold. The point is precisely that just as a sphere's outermost limit is *ipso facto* uninterrupted ('complete') from all directions, so too *to eon* is limited in such a way as to be whole and unmoved, on which see B8.39=D8.44.

⁴⁰ I take issue with the common translation of πάντοθεν as 'from every side', and prefer the more literal 'from everywhere' or 'from every direction', since spheres don't have sides.

⁴¹ B8.42–49=D8.47–54. Trans. Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 123), modified.

(ὄγκῳ) of a *well-rounded* sphere.⁴² It is thus widely taken to be a simile, metaphor⁴³ or analogy,⁴⁴ which hinges on the idea of completeness or perfection (‘completed, perfected’, τετελεσμένον). Historically, however, the sphere passage was often taken to offer a literal description of being.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that, grammatically speaking, “equally balanced in all directions from the centre” (μεσσόθεν ἰσοπαλὲς πάντῃ) is said of ‘what-is’ (and not of the sphere) – a point which David Sedley (1999, 121) has argued suggests the sphere ought to be taken literally as a description of ‘what-is’. While I do not think we need to make this inference,⁴⁶ and follow most recent scholars in viewing the sphere as an analogy or conceptual metaphor, I do think that an adequate non-literal reading needs to explain what role

⁴² The term I translate as ‘expanse’ is typically rendered by scholars as ‘mass’ or ‘bulk’, ὄγκος. The term is well-attested in geometrical contexts to refer to ‘volume’, without necessarily implying materiality. An *abstract* idea of ‘volume’ (as opposed to material ‘bulk’) seems to be at play in certain passages in Aristotle: see e.g. *De Generatione et corruptione* I.321a12, where a distinction is made between *sōma* and *ogkos*, the former being clearly material, whereas the latter need not be (see similarly *Physics* IV.1, 209a). For Aristotle’s usage of *ogkos*, see Pfeiffer (2016, 379–380 with n. 37). For the abstract idea of *ogkos* in Greek mathematics, see e.g. Archimedes, “On Floating Bodies” i., Prop. 7, Archim. ed. Heiberg ii. 333. 21–336. 13. Simplicius reports that Zeno had an argument to the effect “that what has neither magnitude nor solidity nor *ogkos* would not even exist” (*in Phys.* 139.9f.; DK29=LM20 B2=D7); but nothing about this statement (which in any case is not directly ascribed to Zeno) implies that *ogkos* is material. Empedocles’ use of the term (at DK31=LM22 B100.13=D201a) equally leaves open that he has in mind an abstract notion of volume. We can thus agree with Mourelatos that there is no reason to favour a translation of *ogkos* as a physical term, ‘mass’, over a more abstract geometrical term denoting ‘three-dimensional spread’ (2008 [1970], 126) or ‘volume’. Coxon (2009 [1986], 338) renders *ogkos* as ‘volume’, though he does not distinguish between the physical volume of a substance or body (i.e. its bulk) and a geometrical notion of volume (which need not imply materiality).

⁴³ According to Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 124; see also 37–38), “[m]etaphor, in the sense of ‘model’ is the appropriate concept”.

⁴⁴ See Curd (2004 [1998]).

⁴⁵ The debate surrounding literal versus metaphorical readings of the sphere stretches back to antiquity. For an early literal reading, see Plato’s *Sophist* (244e). Explicitly materialistic interpretations of Parmenidean being (which take the sphere to be a literal account of being) can also be found in the ancient doxography (e.g. Theophrastus, *ap. Alexander, in Metaph.* 31.12, and Eudemos, *ap. Simpl. Phys.* 143.4–5). Relatively modern followers of this line of interpretation include Zeller (1881 [1844–1852]); Diels (2003 [1897]); Patin (1899, 524–527); Burnet (1930 [1892]); Tarán (1965, 150–151); and, more recently, Sedley (1999). Simplicius argued against literal readings (*Phys.* 143.4–5), and is followed by most recent commentators.

⁴⁶ Mourelatos (2008, xxxvii) concedes the syntactical point, but does not accept the further inference that what-is is literally spherical, on the grounds that if what-is has any shape (even spherical shape) then it cannot be indivisible.

the focus on the *centre* plays in the analogy with being – a feature of the sphere which is usually peripheral to non-literal interpretations.

Let us briefly note that the usual geometrical practice of construing circles and spheres in terms of their radius and especially their centre (and not simply in terms of their circumference or surface, respectively) was widely shared among Presocratic, classical, and Hellenistic thinkers. As early as Homer we find numerous references to the property of being ‘equal everywhere’,⁴⁷ used in reference to a round shield. So central is the notion of ‘equality everywhere’ to this round object that it is chosen as a formulaic epithet for it.⁴⁸ The centre is also specifically mentioned with reference to a shield in the *Iliad* (see μέσος at XI.33–35). This might suggest that the equidistance between the centre and the extremities was already taken to be an essential property of circular objects, prefiguring the mathematical definition of circles to be found in Plato (*Parmenides* 137e2–3), Aristotle (e.g. *Meteorologica* III.5), and the later Euclid.⁴⁹ Given its definitional importance, it is unsurprising that the focus on the centre of circular and spherical objects (and on what is equidistant from the centre) is so pronounced even in earlier archaic Greek literature.⁵⁰ This makes it all the more plausible that Parmenides’ emphasis on the centre of the sphere at B8.44=D8.49, in the context of a proof for being’s completeness or perfection, is supposed to do work.⁵¹

⁴⁷ See πάντοσ’ ἔσση at *Iliad*, V.300; VII.250; XI.61, 434; XII.294; XIII.157, 160, 803; XVII.7, 43, 517; XX.274; XXI.581; and XXIII.818. See also πάντοσ’ ἔσση at *Iliad* XIII.405. For a discussion, see Wersinger (2014, 60 with n. 10).

⁴⁸ Wersinger (2014, 60–61).

⁴⁹ See e.g. *Elements*, Book I, Definitions 15–17.

⁵⁰ The Pythagorean Philolaus (who post-dates Parmenides, but predates Plato) ascribed an important role to the middle both in his conception of a geometrical sphere and in his cosmology. For his reference to “the middle of the sphere (ἐν τῷ μέσῳ τᾶς σφαίρας)” in explicating the beginning of the cosmos, see DK44=LM12 B7=D15. See further Wersinger (2014, 59).

⁵¹ As both Plato and Aristotle recognized, there is a particular way of being *complete* or *finished* that applies to a sphere rather than, say, a cube, or any other solid – which hinges on the relation of equidistance between the centre and the extremities. Thus Aristotle (*De Caelo* II.3, 286b10–II.4,

At the end of the proem, Parmenides' goddess connects the notion of a heart (ἤτορ) to that of well-roundedness, urging the *kouros* to “learn the unshaken *heart* of *well-rounded* reality” (πυθέσθαι [...] Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἀτρεμῆς ἤτορ, B1.28–29=D4.28–29).⁵² This anticipates reference to the *well-rounded* sphere (εὐκύκλου σφαίρης, B8.43=D8.48), equally balanced *from the centre*, in the analogy itself.

Let us consider the analogy more closely, drawing on Mourelatos' (2008, xxxv–xxxvi) helpful discussion of four ‘tests’ for the success of sphere-making:

- (1) πάντοθεν εὐκύκλου (“nicely circular from everywhere”)
- (2) μεσσόθεν ἰσοπαλὲς πάντη (“equally balanced in all directions from the centre”)
- (3) οἷ ... πάντοθεν ἴσον (“equal to itself from everywhere”)
- (4) ὁμῶς ἐν πείρασι κύρει (“remains uniformly within the limits”)

Notice how in the two first tests, the focal point of the analogy plainly moves from (1) an external view to (2) an internal one: we move from the outside (πάντοθεν) to the sphere's centre (μεσσόθεν).

Test (1) shows that a sphere must be circular from everywhere – visually speaking, it must be well-rounded *from all angles of view* or *perspectives* – if it is to count as ‘complete’ or ‘perfected’. Here a multiplicity of perspectives from around the sphere's *outer limit* is at play.

287a11), like Plato before him (see especially *Timaeus* 33b4–8), saw the sphere as the most perfect or complete of all solids.

⁵² The adjective εὐκυκλέος ‘well-rounded’ is contested, as discussed in §2.3.2 (n. 68) below.

In test (2) the focus shifts to the centre of the sphere, whose balance or equilibrium is cashed out in terms of the notion of equality in all directions – that is, in terms of the equidistance between the centre and the extremities.⁵³

Test (3), according to Mourelatos, conveys the sphere's perfection abstractly: "it is the sphere and only the sphere that displays the same outline no matter how one looks at it" (2008, xxxvi). The focal point thus shifts once more to the outside (see again *πάντοθεν*). Notice, however, that it is by virtue of its constant radius that the sphere looks the same 'from everywhere'.

Test (4) reiterates the sphere's homogeneity, which ostensibly lies in the equality of the radius⁵⁴ – bringing the focus back to the inside ('within the limits', *ἐν πείρασι*), specifically the centre, of the sphere.

Earlier in the passage, the sphere (or 'being' in the analogy) is said not to be any bigger or smaller here than there, recalling the implication of symmetry (stemming from the equality of the radius in all directions) in test (2).⁵⁵

⁵³ There is some controversy surrounding the exact meaning of the term *ισοπαλῆς* (which I here render as 'equally balanced'). Tarán (1965, 144ff.) and others follow Fränkel (1960, 196) in taking *ισοπαλῆς* to be a synonym of *ισόρροπον*, i.e. 'equally balanced', 'in equilibrium'. See also KRS (252) and LM (2016, 49). Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 123, n. 24) points out that the more literal sense of the term – from *palē*, 'wrestling match' – implies armies in a deadlock or wrestlers in a tie, meaning something like 'of equal strength'. Mourelatos' translation of the term as 'pushing out equally' (2008 [1970], 123) or, similarly, as '*exhibiting equal resistance*' (2008, xxxv) is close to the first translation, with an added emphasis on the fact that the equilibrium emerges dynamically – out of a struggle of opposing forces. His translation need not exclude the notion of equilibrium understood as symmetry. As Tarán (1965, 156) cautions, we should not read too much into words that imply movement or dynamism, since Parmenides uses similar terms in other passages which clearly do not imply actual movement (see e.g. *πελάζειν* at B8.25=D8.30; cf. also Fränkel 1962, 406, n. 16 and Owen 1960, 96). Mourelatos resists the traditional translation because he worries the notion of equilibrium is typically understood by its proponents *in physical terms*; he is concerned that it misleadingly makes mass the relevant point of comparison, rather than a more abstract concept of balance or symmetry. Yet we need not understand balance or symmetry in physical terms: the geometric notion of symmetry predicated on the equality of the radius is amply supported by the text (as discussed below).

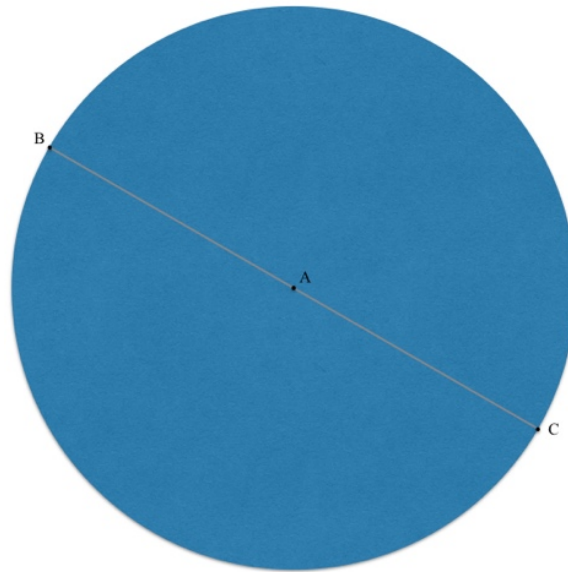
⁵⁴ We find a parallel in Plato's *Timaeus* – which is brimming with echoes of Parmenides' sphere analogy (see Ballew 1974, 202) – for conceiving of the *homoiotēs* of a sphere in terms of the equality of the radius, and not in terms of the homogeneity of substance. See further Mortley (1969, 344).

⁵⁵ Sedley (1999, 121) also takes the equality of the radius to be intimately connected to the homogeneity condition ("neither bigger [*μείζον*] or smaller [*βαιότερον*] here than there", B8.44–45=D8.49–50; see also B8.47–48=D8.52–53).

Mourelatos offers different (albeit compatible) accounts of test (4):

[t]o say of something that it *κύρει*, “is present, obtains, exists,” equally within the bounds is a way of saying [1] that it is symmetrical, and that its symmetries are all equal, pair by pair. Alternately, [2] this may be taken to refer indirectly to the test of rotation: the sphere is the only solid which, if rotated on any of its axes, will not move outside its bounds [...].⁵⁶

Under interpretation (1), Mourelatos appears to be making the point that the fourth test amounts to checking that the distance from any given point on the outer bound of a sphere to its centre is the same as that between the centre and the diametrically opposed point on the outer bound. It is, in short, a verification that the sphere has a consistent radius:



$$\overline{AB} = \overline{AC}$$

⁵⁶ Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 127).

Mourelatos thus grants that the argument plausibly brings into focus the equality of radius (*pace* Tarán 1965, 158).⁵⁷ Yet he insists that the analogy between being and the sphere really hangs on (external) shape:

The fact that ὅγκῳ is anticipated in the text by “of a ball nicely circular from every side” makes it certain that the analogy dwells on the external curvature of the sphere.⁵⁸

He explicitly downplays the centred view, and even denies its viability altogether:

the viewpoint is not that of an observer who looks at the inner circumference of some all-encompassing spherical container, *with the observer situated at or near the center*, but rather of someone who views a spherical object *from the outside*.⁵⁹

I disagree. Recall that in test 2 (B8.44=D8.49), the very line Mourelatos cites in the above passage, a centred view is brought into focus:

equally balanced in all directions (πάντη) *from the centre* (μέσσοθεν).

One can hardly deny that the focal point here shifts from the sphere’s outer contours to its centre. But apart from this textual evidence, test (4) crucially introduces the concept of *limit*, a component of the sphere which was not discussed in tests (1) to (3). A philosophical point Mourelatos does not discuss is that it is this notion of limit which, coupled with the condition of internal homogeneity, rules out movement *within* the sphere, and by implication (the passage of) time.⁶⁰ Indeed to

⁵⁷ See Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 126, n. 29).

⁵⁸ Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 126).

⁵⁹ Mourelatos (2008, xxxvii), my emphasis.

⁶⁰ For the question whether Parmenides’ account of being rules out time, rather than just the passage of time, see e.g. Evans (in progress); Sedley (1999, 118); Sorabji (1983, chapter 8); and Owen (1966).

remain uniformly (ὁμῶς...κύρει) *within limits* suggests a lack of movement (the sphere is *not* ever-expanding, for instance), making it impossible for time to be experienced *from within it*.

I must concede to Mourelatos, however, that the term *pantothēn* at B8.43=D8.48 (test (1)) does suggest that the sphere is initially being envisaged from the outside:

like the expanse of a ball nicely circular *from everywhere* (πάντοθεν),

Mourelatos is right to suggest that an external point of view is being honed meaningfully in the analogy, even if he does not fully clarify why this is so. The reason is that in the very attempt to describe or think about a sphere *qua* sphere, one necessarily needs to step outside of it, so to speak. The very recognition of the sphere's circular shape (εὐκύκλου) presupposes an external view, since the fact that the sphere is spherical is not intelligible from the perspective of its centre. A centred viewer would not be able to fathom the outer boundaries of the sphere from where she stood, since there would be nothing she could *distinguish* the sphere *from*; the sphere's boundaries could only be recognized as such insofar as they were seen to divide the sphere off from something else (which would require an external view). That this is not an anachronistic assumption to impute to Parmenides is confirmed by the fact that Melissus made what-is limitless (see DK30=LM21 B2=D3, B3=D4) precisely because he worried that limits presuppose some multiplicity – the rationale being that one thing is delimited *from another*. Sedley (2007, 136–137, with n. 6) claims that Melissus' view that the universe is infinite was the default

Either way, the absence of motion from within the sphere at least rules out that time is *perceptible* from its centre. Schofield (1970) however argues that the relevant lines (B8. 5–6=D8.10–11) rule out neither time nor the passage of time, but only that being came into being or will perish.

assumption among (pre-Parmenidean) Ionian natural philosophers. If this is right, then it seems unlikely that Parmenides did not consider the difficulties which placing *limits* on being entails.⁶¹

Of course, a geometrical sphere is not actually visible (just as being is not actually visible at B4=D10). We need to suppose that the geometrical object were in some sense visible – with its boundary, say, coloured uniformly both on the inside and on the outside, for example in blue.⁶² From the outside we would be able to discern that the object in question were a sphere, precisely because it would be separated off from something different; but on the inside we would not be able to see the limit *as a limit* – much as one does not see the sky's limit when one looks up and sees blue all around.

Notice that all this would also be true in the case of any other solid. What is specific about the sphere, however, is the particular kind of homogeneity which characterizes it; a viewer standing in the centre of the sphere would have exactly the same view no matter where she looked, by virtue of the equality of the radius – the basis for the sphere's perfection and homogeneity. In the case of a cube, by contrast a centred viewer would be able to see corners, walls, etc. as she rotated around the centre. From the centre of a sphere, her gaze would be moving around but would not be able to perceive any variation, since everywhere she looked nothing would change: everything would look uniformly blue. And a fitting consequence of this is that, from within the sphere, she would not even be able to have a conception of *motion* or *time*.

⁶¹ For fundamental differences between Melissus' and Parmenides' assumptions about completeness, see Harriman (2019, 65–96).

⁶² Compare Plato, *Phaedo* 110b–c, wherein we are invited to imagine seeing the earth from above as a ball (*sphaira*) “divided into patches of various colours”.

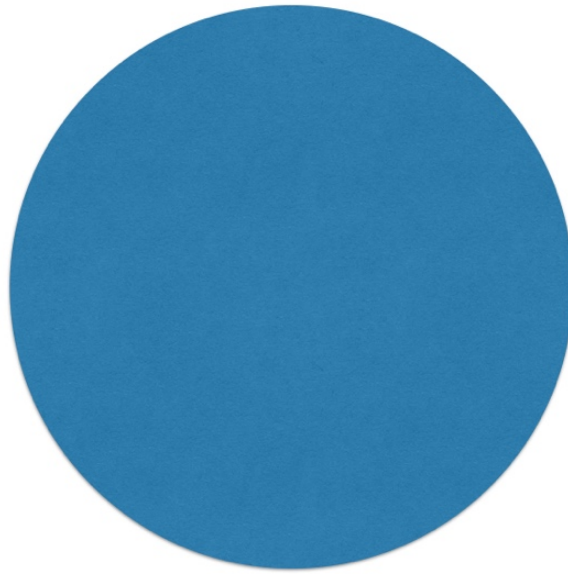


Figure 1 – The External View

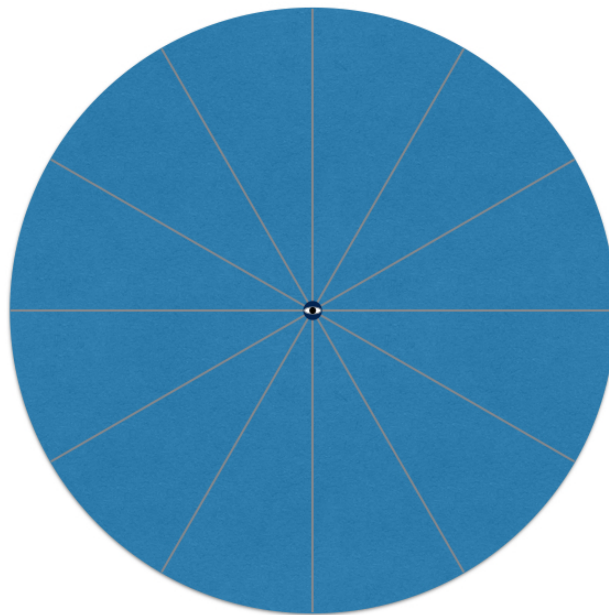


Figure 2 – The Centred View

§2.2. Philosophical implications of the sphere analogy

As I have analysed it, the sphere analogy offers a much more substantive framework for thinking about perspectival neutrality than Mourelatos' external

reading does. No matter in which direction I look *from the centre*, reality will look the same, and in this sense all perspectives will collapse into one. By contrast, if we imagine an external viewer moving her gaze around in all directions while remaining positioned in one place, her view would obviously change (for instance, she would stop seeing the sphere's outer boundary at some point). In short, the external view is still bound to be perspectival, even if the sphere has the specific property that no matter where one looks at it from, it will look the same (test (3)). By contrast, as long as the observer stands exactly at the centre of the sphere, her field of vision – and the degree of clarity with which she takes in her surroundings – will always be the same, in whatever direction she looks.

The second point is that, from within a sphere of the kind that Parmenides describes, change, motion, and time are inconceivable, which accords much better with the account of the attributes of being in the *Alētheia* than does the strictly external view. This is true irrespective of the view one takes on the nature of Parmenides' ontology.⁶³

But again a hypothetical observer at the centre of the sphere would not know that she is inside a sphere, let alone at its centre. Indeed, while she would see no difference no matter in which direction she looked, she could not explain why this

⁶³ Including, *inter alia*, numerical monism (see Chapter 5), Curd's predicational monism (1991; 2004 [1998]), Palmer's (2009a) modal interpretation of 'being', as well as other kinds of more 'generous' ontological interpretations. For instance, taking a view *external* to being would involve an obvious violation of numerical monism. To take another example, Curd (2004 [1998], 93–94) avowedly adopts Mourelatos' external view (see Mourelatos 2008 [1970], 124–130) to support her predicational monist interpretation, which says that there are no predicational divisions within what is (this is how we are to understand the claim that being cannot be cut off from itself and that it is continuous): should being be *F* it is all and only *F*, with no allowance for it also being *G* (predicational plurality is banned). In the context of the sphere, Curd thinks the relevant point of comparison is between 'the single character [of being]' – namely, its one predicate – and the external shape of a sphere, which is always invariant no matter how one looks at it. I submit that the additional focus on the centre, however, would better suit her purposes: beyond the generic notion of uniformity, the centred view also specifically rules out *internal divisions or variations*, which is exactly what predicational monism requires.

was so. The explanation for her unchanging view is that she is at the centre of the sphere, but this insight would only be available to an external observer.

To take this point one step further, a paradox Parmenides might be gesturing at is that in speaking or indeed thinking about the sphere, he must think of it as bounded by something; but there are no candidates for this something. Talking and thinking about the sphere presupposes getting beyond its limits; it is to speak and to think of that which is inconceivable and unsayable from within.

This may reflect a more general tension at play in Parmenides' argumentation and musings about being elsewhere in the *Alētheia*. The point might be that in speaking and thinking about the limits of thought – about the limits between the thinkable and the unthinkable, which we have seen are tied to the limits of being – one somehow has to think and speak about the unthinkable. But the fact that our view admits of the unthinkable suggests that something is amiss – that it is not the view of being that one would have if one had an uncomplicated, ideal relationship with being. Seen this way, the analogy would seem to suggest that we are incapable of taking a perspectively neutral view on being. What we are given in the *Alētheia* is reasoning, thinking, and mental visualization which *circles around* reality – “trustworthy reasoning and thinking *about/around* reality” (πιστὸν λόγον ἡδὲ νόημα | ἀμφὶς ἀληθείης, B8.50–51=D8.55–56), to use the goddess' terms – but not a direct view of it. The notion of ‘circling around’ reality, as Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 190–193) has suggested, may well be a live metaphor.

The upshot of Parmenides' sphere analogy, I suggest, is that to get anywhere near grasping being, we must as it were change our view on it. As the analogy goes, we must take up a ‘centred’ view of it. Yet this shift in perspectives seems at odds with Parmenidean being, since the latter is not the kind of thing which could be

subject to different perspectives. Still, such variation in perspective seems an inescapable feature of our cognitive lives, so that any attempt at grasping being will be filtered by it. Parmenides thus seems to worry that our view on being is inescapably perspectival, remaining indirect and roundabout – try as we may to get to the core of it. Being is an object of which we can at best have an *approximate* view *with our mind's eye*, to use the image from B4=D10 which we considered in Chapter 3 – a picture which the sphere analogy vividly, if imperfectly, fills in.

§2.3. *Parmenides' indirect argumentation?*

On my interpretation, the sphere analogy further underscores Parmenides' reservations about humans' cognitive relationship to being, while at the same time leaving open the possibility of some kind of perspectival or indirect access to it – at least for those who attend to the goddess' account in the *Alētheia*. It is now time to consider what the basis for such indirect access to being might be.

§2.3.1. *An indirect approach to being?*

One possibility, which I can only sketch here, is that Parmenides takes being to be within our indirect cognitive reach inasmuch as we become aware of it through arguments or proofs that entail its nature. That being is ungenerated (ἀγέννητον), imperishable (ἀνώλεθρον), whole (οὔλον), unique/one-in-kind (μουνογενές), steadfast (ἀτρεμές), and complete (τέλειον)⁶⁴ seem to be truths about it which we can come to know through deductive reasoning (or through something very close

⁶⁴ B8.3–4=D8.8–9. I depart from LM in emending ἡδ' ἀτέλεστον ('not-yet-to-be-completed') to ἡδὲ τέλειον ('and complete'), since the former is in tension with B8.32=D8.37 (οὐκ ἀτελεύτητον, 'not incomplete') and B8.42=D8.47 (τετελεσμένον, 'completed', in the sphere analogy). For alternative emendations, see Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 95–96).

to deductive reasoning)⁶⁵ following the chain of arguments in the *Alētheia*. Fittingly, Parmenides identifies these features of being as ‘signposts’ or ‘proofs’ (*sēmata*, literally ‘signs’), which he describes as being *on the way* of what-is (B8.1–4=D8.6–9).⁶⁶ There seems to be a *double entendre* here on *sēmata* as (i) physical signposts *en route* to being and (ii) proofs that imply being’s nature.⁶⁷ Assuming we grant the goddess’ premises in the *Alētheia*, we will necessarily be *led* to the conclusion that there is such a thing as being with such and such features. While we cannot know being directly, we can follow the chain of deductive reasoning that reveals to us its nature. However, the point stands that we do not have being as a direct object of cognition.

Jenny Bryan (2012, 90–93, 107) argues that the reference to *pistis alēthēs* denied to mortal opinions in the proem (B1.30=D4.30) should be read as expressing “the genuine cogency possessed by deductive arguments about the nature of Being”. On this view what is presented as being trustworthy is not reality itself, but rather the arguments that imply its nature. This is supported by the fact that in the *Alētheia* itself, we find reference to a ‘trustworthy account’ (*piston logon*) which is *about*

⁶⁵ For a detailed analysis of deductive reasoning in the *Alētheia*, see Wedin (2014). See also e.g. McKirahan (2008; 2010 [1994], 150–173); Warren (2014 [2007], 79); Osborne (2006, 229); Long (1996, 143–144); KRS (241); and Folit-Weinberg (2022a). McKirahan (2008) argues that we do not quite find a deductive chain of reasoning (in which the conclusion of one argument or series of arguments forms a premise of the next), but that provided some premises are supplied in a charitable spirit the arguments are valid (and yield Parmenides’ conclusion in the *Alētheia*). Note that different interpreters take different views on how to separate the various proofs or ‘signposts’ given in the *Alētheia* (with some also including e.g. the attributes given at B8.26–31=D8.31–36 and B8.38–41=D8.43–46 as being argued for).

⁶⁶ For *sēmata* as ‘signposts’ or ‘markings on the route’ (in this case, to what-is), see Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 25, n. 40). Note that Aristotle takes the cognate term *sēmeion* to denote a piece of evidence invoked in argument (*Rhetoric* I.2, 1357a22–33; see Bryan 2012, 83, with n. 90).

⁶⁷ For the Homeric usage of *sēma* in the senses of both ‘proof’/‘evidence’ and ‘signpost’, see e.g. Bryan (2012, 83) and Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 25, with n. 40). Parmenides also uses the term in the *Doxa* at B10.2=D12.2 to describe stars, which presumably brings into focus their function as ‘signs’ or ‘signposts’ for sailors. See also B8.55=D8.60 for its use in the context of the goddess’ diagnosis of mortal error, which seems to lie in their invocation of two ‘signs’ or pieces of evidence (roughly, Light and Night) as the basis for their cosmology.

reality (*amphis alētheiēs*, B8.50–51=D8.55–56), rather than being a trustworthy account of reality itself.

We might thus take the text to raise the possibility that while we cannot directly cognize being, we can have, as direct objects of thought, arguments from which we can securely deduce the nature of being.

§2.3.2. The sceptical reading

An entirely different possibility is that Parmenides puts a question mark on the very status of the premises and argumentation of the *Alētheia*, opening the way for a sceptical or aporetic reading of the poem as a whole. This reading would constitute a particularly strong challenge to the commonplace view (underpinned by the *mythos-logos* narrative) according to which, as Coxon puts it, “Parmenides’ poem is dominated by the conviction that human beings can attain knowledge of reality” (2009 [1986], 20). Given the findings of Chapter 3 and the foregoing analysis of the sphere analogy, we are now in a position to consider the possibility of a diametrically opposed interpretation.

Admittedly, the case for the sceptical reading is highly speculative and inconclusive. That said, with the help of the dialogical approach we have come to appreciate that Parmenides does not merely appeal to deductive reasoning; he also draws on what we might call *indirect* or *implicit* argumentation, for example through (i) what he leaves unsaid (who or what is the subject of *noein*, never mind being?); through (ii) his exploitation of linguistic and syntactical ambiguity; and through (iii) his use of analogical reasoning.

With this in mind, let us revisit the proem’s all-important programmatic statements about the *Alētheia* and the *Doxa*:

[...] χρὲν δέ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι
 ἡμὲν Ἀληθείης εὐπειθέος ἀτρεμεῖς ἦτορ
 ἡδὲ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθείης.

[...] It is necessary that you learn everything,
 Both the unshaken heart of well-rounded⁶⁸ reality
 And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no real trust (*pistis*
alēthēs).⁶⁹

The fact that the introductory section of the poem announces the trustworthiness of the arguments of the *Alētheia* and warns against the untrustworthiness of mortal opinions – and does so dogmatically – might seem to be clinching evidence for Parmenides’ endorsement of the theses of the *Alētheia*. These framing comments, in fact, would appear independently to confirm the positive programmatic statements given within the *Alētheia* itself. (Recall, once again, that, at B8.50–51=D8.55–56, we are told that the goddess has offered a ‘trustworthy account’ (*piston logon*) about reality.⁷⁰) We might even think that this is the single strongest argument against the sceptical reading.⁷¹

My response is this. It is indeed the proem which initially vouches for the trustworthiness of *Reality* (*Alētheia*). But the status of the proem itself is highly uncertain. The concern here is that the guarantors of *Reality* – starting with the

⁶⁸ I depart from LM in reading εὐκυκλῆος (‘[well-]rounded’) instead of εὐπειθέος (‘[well-]persuasive’) in this line. The former is attested in Simplicius’ version of the text (which, as discussed in Chapter 2, is usually considered especially reliable), whereas εὐπειθέος is attested in Sextus, Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, and Clement of Alexandria. A third variant found in Proclus, εὐφειγῆος (‘brilliant’), is least reliable since Proclus was likely quoting from memory (Coxon 2009 [1986], 283). Traditionally most modern scholars accepted εὐκυκλῆος. These include Diels (2003 [1897], 54–57); DK; Cornford (1939, 30); Guazzoni Foà (1966, 346); Ballew (1974, 191–192); Tarán (1965, 7, 16); Guthrie (1969, vol. 2, 9); Barnes (1982 [1979], 141); Cordero (1984); Mansfeld (1995, 232); Palmer (2009a, 378–380); and Tor (2017, 155). The variant εὐπειθέος has been adopted by e.g. LM; Coxon (2009 [1986], 284); Mourelatos (2008 [1970] 154–157); Cassin (1998, 73); Gallop (1984, 52); Curd (2004 [1998], 21, see n. 53); Long (1996, 142, n. 30); Finkelberg (1988, 65); Fränkel (1962, 402, 11); Mansfeld (1964, 122); McKirahan (2010 [1994], 145 – but he mentions the εὐκυκλῆος variant); and Jameson (1958, 21–25).

⁶⁹ B1.28–30=D4.28–30.

⁷⁰ At B2.3–4=D6.3–4 we are also told that “the one [i.e. the road] that ‘is’, and that it is not possible that ‘is not’, is the path of conviction (*peithous ... keleuthos*) (for it accompanies reality)”. Trans. LM, modified.

⁷¹ For this point, see Tor (forthcoming a) in response to Cherubin’s aporetic reading of the poem (2017; 2018).

unnamed goddess of the proem, who is the narrative voice behind the arguments of the *Alētheia* – are themselves not part of *what is being guaranteed*. Indeed the goddess, the *kouros*, the mares carrying the *kouros*, the Gates of the paths of Light and Night, and so on, do not qualify as genuine objects of thought or knowledge by the lights of the *Alētheia*. And this difficulty stands no matter what interpretation of Parmenides’ ontological views we might take: we do not need to postulate that these things are *nonexistent* (as the numerical or ‘strict’ monist reading would assume) to appreciate that they can never be candidates for ‘being’, the one true object of thought or cognition.⁷² The paradox is that to guarantee the truth and trustworthiness of the *Alētheia*, we somehow need to vindicate the reliability of the Doxastic world in which the proem is anchored. But if we grant its reliability, then the *Alētheia*’s internal programmatic statements about the *Doxa*’s deceptiveness (B8.51–52=D8.56–57) become self-undermining.

Seen this way, the proem is not just ambiguous but also an outright problematic source of support for the *Alētheia*’s credentials. As many scholars have noticed, the proem is characteristically vague, which may well have been intended.⁷³ Typically, however, what scholars focus on here is the ambiguity that arises at the level of the topography of the *kouros*’ journey, and the blurring of a range of religious and literary models on which Parmenides appears to be drawing

⁷² This observation, I submit, is novel. While Mackenzie (1982) and Cherubin (2017; 2018) pave the way for a sceptical reading, both presuppose that Parmenides is wedded to numerical monism, an interpretive possibility to which I turn in Chapter 5, but which is not necessary to motivate the sceptical reading. Cherubin (2017; see also 2018) argues for a thoroughly ‘aporetic’ interpretation of Parmenides which she motivates by implicitly attributing to him numerical monism. On her reading, Parmenides deliberately problematizes the truth of the *Alētheia* in (allegedly) making it depend on the opinions of mortals, which (though she does not spell this out) are in tension with numerical monism. While Mackenzie (1982, 9) takes Parmenides to stand by his thesis (which she too assumes to be numerical monism), and pointedly denies that he was either a nihilist or a sceptic (preferring to call him a “working philosopher”), she suggests that he took the dialectical interplay between perception and reason to lead to mutual destruction of both – implying a rather more complicated epistemological picture than that usually associated with Parmenides.

⁷³ Mansfeld (1995); Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 14–16); Tor (2017, 254, with n. 76 and 347–359).

– fusing, for instance, aspects of both *anabasis* and *katabasis*, as well as many other, sometimes conflicting eschatological motifs derived from Hesiod, Homer, mystery initiations, and so on.⁷⁴ But as Jaap Mansfeld (1995) has argued, there is plausibly more to the proem’s ambiguity, which has to do with its very *raison d’être* as a framing and expository section of the poem.

Mansfeld notes that later Greek thinkers like Aristotle took the proem’s general function across different literary genres – from epic poetry to forensic oratory – to be that of, on the one hand, attracting the reader’s attention, and on the other hand, announcing and introducing the subject matter at hand, so that the listeners “may know beforehand what it is about and understand what to expect” (ἵνα προειδῶσι περὶ οὗ ὁ λόγος καὶ μὴ κρέμῃται ἡ διάνοια, *Rhetoric* III.14, 1415a12–13). For this latter point, Aristotle provided the following rationale: “For what is indeterminate (*to aoriston*) leads astray; so he who, so to speak, hands them [i.e. the listeners] the point from which to start (*archē*) enables them to cling to it and to follow the account (*logos*)”.⁷⁵

For Aristotle, then, a proem needs to avoid indeterminacy or vagueness, and give us a clear *starting point* on the basis of which to follow the account which it serves to introduce. Interestingly, the early Greek philosopher Diogenes of Apollonia (fl. fifth century BCE), one of Parmenides’ successors, apparently anticipated the substance of Aristotle’s remark:

λόγου παντὸς ἀρχόμενον δοκεῖ μοι χρεὼν εἶναι τὴν ἀρχὴν
ἀναμφισβήτητον παρέχεσθαι, τὴν δ’ ἐρμηνείαν ἀπλὴν καὶ σεμνὴν.

⁷⁴ For an overview of conflicting interpretations of the proem’s topography, see Tor (2017, 347ff., with n. 1).

⁷⁵ *Rhetoric* III.14, 1415a14–15. Trans. Mansfeld (1995, 225), modified.

It is my view that it is necessary, when one begins any account (*logos*), to provide a starting-point (*archē*) that is free of ambiguity (*anamphisbētēton*), and a style that is simple and dignified.⁷⁶

As Mansfeld (1995, 226) has observed, one might infer from this remark that Diogenes was rejecting the *modus operandi* of some of his predecessors. Mansfeld hypothesizes that Parmenides, along with Heraclitus and Empedocles, was one of Diogenes' implicit targets. Rather than following the rule formulated by later thinkers, these philosophers “announce the theme or (part of the) subject of their work in such a way that one can only understand, or hope to understand, what is meant *after having studied the whole*, or at least all that remains”.⁷⁷ In support of this claim, Mansfeld finds evidence in the programmatic statements of the proem, whose obscurity he rightly points out has been unduly downplayed. For instance, why are we not told outright that Parmenides will talk about ‘what-is’ or being (*esti, to eon, eon*), as opposed to the mysterious formula “unshaken heart of well-rounded reality” (Ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἀτρεμὲς ἦτορ, B1.28–29=D4.28–29)?⁷⁸ Assuming Parmenides did write εὐκυκλέος (‘well-rounded’) and not εὐπειθέος (‘well-persuasive’) in this line, what relative clarity we do get on these lines comes only later on from B8=D8, and more specifically from the sphere analogy discussed above.⁷⁹ It is there that we learn the sense in which reality might be thought of as *well-rounded*, and how this bears on the account of being throughout the *Alētheia*.

⁷⁶ DK64=LM28 B1=D2. Trans. LM, modified.

⁷⁷ Mansfeld (1995, 226), my emphasis.

⁷⁸ See Mansfeld (1995, 230). This is bracketing the profound obscurity of the subsequent lines of the proem, B1.31–32=D4.31–32, whose text is however highly uncertain.

⁷⁹ I am in any case unpersuaded that *eupitheos* would make for a more natural or self-explanatory reading. It is not clear why Parmenides would speak of the unshaken heart of reality as being “well-persuasive” at this point in the poem, or in what sense he could be understood to have a normative conception of persuasion. What’s more, it is unclear why *reality itself* ought to be deemed persuasive, rather than the path that attends upon it (B2.3–4=D6.3–4) and the account that is *about* it (B8.50–51=D8.55–56), as specified in the *Alētheia*. See Palmer (2009a, 379–380) for this last worry.

Indeed, as my analysis of the analogy has shown, we even come to find, in retrospect, that well-roundedness is programmatic for the account of being's intelligibility.

In a Heracliteanizing vein, Parmenides might be deliberately muddying the waters right from the outset, shrouding the poem's starting points in mystery so as to draw the reader into the *logos* (or *mythos*⁸⁰) of the poem until the end. We do not have a clear idea of what the end (let alone the whole) of the poem looked like,⁸¹ which inevitably leaves us at least partly in the dark as to the relationship Parmenides envisaged between the *Alētheia* and the *Doxa*. If we dismiss the *Doxa* and its objects as either false or unreliable based on the programmatic statements of the *Alētheia*, then the reliability of the *Alētheia* risks in turn being challenged, since its own reliability is announced and guaranteed by Doxastic objects in the poem. But if the *Doxa* is somehow fully reliable or true, then the conclusion of the *Alētheia* will be thrown into doubt: how could being accommodate Doxastic objects?

Whether Parmenides might have come to endorse a negative dogmatic thesis according to which nothing can be known or cognized, or a more radically sceptical stance according to which we ought to keep inquiring even on the question as to the knowability and cognizability of being and/or Doxastic things, is entirely uncertain, and is unlikely to be determined in the absence of new evidence. Interestingly, there is ancient doxographical support for both these interpretations. Cicero (*Acad.* II.74=DK21 A25=LM19 R1) declared that Parmenides accepted the (negative dogmatic) thesis that nothing can be known. The wider context of his

⁸⁰ As noted in Chapter 1 (§1.1), Parmenides associates *mythos* (and not just *logos*) with the correct path of reality.

⁸¹ There are however inconclusive reasons to suppose that B19=D62 constituted the final lines of the *Doxa*, and perhaps also of the poem as a whole, based on Simplicius' comments in his *Commentary on Aristotle's On the Heavens* VII.558.3–11. See also LM (87, n. 1).

claim and discussion with Lucullus suggests that some Academic Sceptics (possibly Carneades and Arcesilaus) attributed to Parmenides a view according to which all things are *non-cognitive* (resonating with the Academic *akatalēpsia* thesis). Plutarch (*Col.* 1121F–1122A) reports that Arcesilaus attributed not only *akatalēpsia* but also *epochē* (the suspension of judgment) to Parmenides.⁸² Since we are urged to keep learning even well into the *Doxa* and the prospect of epistemic progress concerning both being and Doxastic things appears to be part of the poem's (uncertain) promise, one might speculate that he may have adopted a stance closer to the second view.

Taking stock

I have argued that the practices of analogical reasoning in Zhuangzi and Parmenides show that the former cautiously makes room for epistemic progress, such that he isn't the unmitigated anti-rationalist or negative dogmatist we often take him to be; while the latter turns out not to be the unmitigated triumphalist rationalist we might think he is, since his use of analogies actually destabilizes the idea that the *kouros* (or any other human) can directly cognize being.

I argued that Zhuangzi not only uses analogies successfully to pre-empt objections concerning his use of words and arguments, but also appeals more constructively to analogies in such a way as to occasion a tentative broadening of perspectives. Zhuangzi teaches us that the self-reflective use of analogical reasoning can both give rise to modest epistemic progress and bring the limits of what is thinkable and knowable into sharper relief.

⁸² The viability of aspects of these ancient interpretations as a response to the historical Parmenides has been too hastily dismissed by Brittain and Palmer (2001).

This helped us appreciate the complex role which analogical reasoning plausibly plays in Parmenides. On the one hand, the sphere analogy profoundly destabilizes the assumption that humans (the *kouros* included) could ever achieve an absolute or direct view of being. But at the same time, it appears to give us some reason for cautious optimism: shifting our view on being – from the ‘outside’ to the ‘centre’ – does put us in a position to entertain what a perspectively neutral view of being would amount to, albeit indirectly.

I then attempted, speculatively and more tentatively, to spell out two distinct ways of cashing out what follows from the implication that the *kouros* has indirect cognitive access to being. On the first reading, Parmenides turns out to be rather optimistic with regard to our ability to learn about reality’s nature through deductive reasoning, even if reality itself remains beyond the reach of our direct cognitive grasp. The alternative route I put on the table took seriously the potential use of deliberate ambiguity and indirect argumentation in the poem, to the point of unsettling even the reliability of surface-level comments about the *Alētheia*’s epistemic status. Since on this view the reliability of the premises and arguments of the *Alētheia* is thrown into doubt, Parmenides might be taken to have renounced or in some way qualified his doctrinal commitment to the *Alētheia*. He might even turn out to be an out-and-out sceptic, committing himself in the end neither to the *Alētheia* nor to the *Doxa* but presenting us with a complex philosophical puzzle.

In Chapter 5, I consider a third interpretive possibility: the numerical monist interpretation. On this view there would be another way of explaining why Parmenides never identifies any individual cognizer of being: namely, that his conception of being precludes the *existence* of individual cognizers. This would explain why cognizing (*noein*) being is impossible for humans, including the *kouros*.

Drawing on Zhuangzi's sceptical reflections on the expressibility and knowability of numerical monism, and his radical willingness to consider arguments both for and against the view, I also show that numerical monism might be a less naïve and incoherent view to hold than has often been presumed.

Chapter 5 – The spectre of numerical monism and the self-refutation challenge

Parmenides: “A single story of a route still | is left: that it is; on this route there are signs | very numerous: that what-is is ungenerated and imperishable; | whole, one-in-kind, steadfast, and complete; | nor was it once, nor will it be, since it is now, all together, one, continuous”.¹

Zhuangzi: “Now that we are one, can I still say something? Already having called us one, did I succeed in not saying something? One and what we say makes two, two and [their] unity make three. Proceeding from here even an expert calculator cannot get to the end of it, much less a plain man”.²

Overview

In Chapters 3 and 4, we saw that Parmenides holds back from identifying a specific subject of cognition in relation to being. Nowhere are we told *who* (or *what*) does the thinking or cognizing which somehow ‘aligns’ with being. Contrary to widely held scholarly opinion, in large part underpinned by the *mythos-logos* narrative, Parmenides problematizes the nature of our cognitive engagement with being. In Chapter 4, I explored some philosophical reasons why Parmenides harboured worries about humans’ ability to cognize being, focusing on what the sphere analogy suggests about the perspectival nature of human cognition. That our cognition of being is at best indirect for Parmenides might point in several different directions. One possibility I suggested is that Parmenides takes being to be within our indirect cognitive reach inasmuch as we deduce its nature from arguments. Another is that Parmenides might instead turn out to be a kind of sceptic; this

¹ B8.1–6=D8.6–11 (reading οὐλον μουνογενές at B8.4=D8.9). Trans. Gallop (1984, 65), modified.

² G2/79=HY5/2/53–55. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 56), modified (with modifications taken from Fraser 2020 [2005]).

assumes that we are permitted to take seriously that the programmatic statements found in the proem, which vouch for the trustworthiness of the *Alētheia*, are themselves untrustworthy. Both possibilities stand regardless of our interpretation of Parmenides' ontological views.

I now explore a different (though not necessarily incompatible) hypothesis as to why Parmenides never identifies any individual cognizer of being: namely, that the particular conception of being laid out in the *Alētheia* precludes the *existence* of individual cognizers in the first place. The view I have in mind, widely attributed to Parmenides ever since antiquity, is numerical monism: the view that there is only one thing. This view, however, does not imply naïve optimism about the possibility of metaphysical inquiry – contrary to what the traditional numerical monist interpretation of Parmenides usually supposes.³

I will not attempt to demonstrate that numerical monism is the only legitimate interpretation of Parmenides' ontological reflections, nor will I try to prove that Parmenides definitely meant to argue for such a view, or even that his claims about being imply numerical monism. Given how underdetermined the evidence is – as reflected by the proliferation of interpretations of Parmenides' ontology in recent years⁴ – the task of uncovering a single, definite ontological position in Parmenides' fragments seems difficult, if not impossible. The view that the *Alētheia* expresses numerical monism is, nevertheless, one which can be evidenced plausibly by the text, and which generations of ancient thinkers and modern interpreters have adopted.⁵ This Chapter considers what would follow *if*

³ Here I am following aspects of Cherubin's (2017; 2018) and Mackenzie's (1982) interpretations, both of which take Parmenides' second-order concerns seriously in their assessment of his putative commitment to a numerical monist thesis.

⁴ See Chapter 3, n. 18.

⁵ Melissus, who was active a generation after Parmenides, was clearly committed to numerical monism, and built on Parmenidean foundations. Plato's portrayal of Parmenides as a numerical

this were in fact Parmenides' view, and assesses how that would bear on his second-order worries about human cognition.

I also show why it helps to think about this issue with an eye to how Zhuangzi engaged with the hypothesis of numerical monism – that is, as a sceptic without any particular commitment as to the theory's truth or falsity. As A. C. Graham has noticed, Zhuangzi had an argument against monism which is very similar to one of Plato's arguments against Parmenidean monism in the *Sophist* (the so-called 'names argument') – centred on the problem of speaking of the one thing there is.

In §1 I discuss Plato's version of the argument, the assumptions it imputes to Parmenides, and what exactly it accomplishes – both as an attack on numerical monism generally and as a specific challenge to Parmenides. I also examine various ways in which numerical monism has been cashed out both historically and in the recent secondary literature, with varying degrees of stringency placed on the requirement that there be only one thing.

In §2 I bring these findings to bear on Zhuangzi's own version of the names argument in *Zh.* 2, which I call the 'words argument'. Despite forming part of one of the most heavily discussed chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, and despite the fact that

monist will be discussed below, in connection with his names argument in the *Sophist*. However, many scholars have argued that Plato read Parmenides through a Melissan lens (Reale 1970, 105–123; Cordero 1991, 115–118; Fronterotta 2000, 31–46; Ferrari 2005, 85–86; McKirahan 2010 [1994], 302; Mansfeld 2016, 86; Brémond 2017, 158–161; Ferro unpublished), and that this informs the interpretation of Parmenides as a numerical monist in the early reception history. Aristotle is sometimes also thought to have attributed (at least in some places) numerical monism to Parmenides; for a recent reconstruction of his interpretation of Parmenides along these lines, see Clarke (2019). Palmer (2009a, 44) claims that both Plato and Aristotle took Parmenides to be a 'generous monist' rather than a strict numerical monist. The Epicurean Colotes (*ap.* Plutarch, *Col.* 1114A-D) clearly read Parmenides as being committed to numerical monism, as discussed below. Modern proponents of numerical monist interpretations of Parmenides include Guthrie (1969); Furth (1968); Cornford (1939, 29); Raven (1966 [1948]); McKirahan (1994; though he recanted this view in the 2010 Second Edition, see 165); McCabe (2000; see n. 1; see implicitly Mackenzie 1982); Wedin (2014); and Sattler (2020).

Guo Xiang (Zhuangzi's most famous ancient commentator) provided an interpretive key to it, Zhuangzi's words argument has received relatively little attention. I therefore draw on valuable insights from the literature addressing Plato's names argument to shed light on the mechanisms of its Zhuangzian counterpart and on its discussion in Guo Xiang. The dialogical perspective with Plato brings into focus the fact that Zhuangzi's argument against monism does not presuppose just any kind of monism. It specifically presupposes *numerical* monism. This position is required for his argument to get off the ground.

In §3 I identify a point of difference between the Zhuangzian words argument and its Platonic counterpart, which concerns the status that the argument holds in the thinkers' respective philosophies. Unlike Plato, Zhuangzi is not concerned to refute monism as false. While he subjects that view to sceptical scrutiny, he does not take a position on whether numerical monism is or is not the fact of the matter. Zhuangzi is clearly alive to the (at least *prima facie*) absurd consequences of taking numerical monism to be true. But his radically interrogative stance allows him to entertain the possibility that numerical monism might nevertheless be true.

§1. The case for Parmenidean numerical monism

Even if they do not conclusively show that Parmenides was committed to numerical monism, certain features of fragment B8=D8 give the strong impression that Parmenides was thinking about a single entity. Specifically: (i) Parmenides claims that being is 'one' (ἓν) at B8.6=D8.11⁶; (ii) Parmenides repeatedly refers to

⁶ Proponents of the predicational monist interpretation of Parmenides (Curd 2004 [1998]; Curd 1991; and more obliquely Mourelatos 2008 [1970]) deal with the presence of *hen* ('one'), which taken on its own speaks in favour of numerical monism, by proposing that we need not add a comma after 'all' (*pan*) – ὁμοῦ πᾶν[,] | ἓν, συνεχέας (B8.5–6=D8.10–11) – so that *hen* is part of the attribution of

‘being’ as *eon*, which functions as a substantive participle and as the subject of predicates, and is sometimes accompanied by a *definite* article (τό)⁷ – features which could naturally be interpreted as suggesting reference to a *particular thing*; and (iii) he says explicitly that nothing else is (B8.12–13=D8.17–18, B8.36–37=D8.41–42), and on the face of it uses the verb ‘to be’ in an unqualified way – implying that only this particular thing is allowed any sort of being whatsoever.⁸

There are two different ways in which Parmenidean numerical monism might be cashed out. According to strict numerical monism – an idea which finds its first explicit expression in Plato (though he himself does not accept the view)⁹ – there can only be one thing in a very strong sense: even the existence of more than one property (whether or not such a property is essential to the one thing there is) is ruled out. A less stringent version of numerical monism, which I call ‘moderate numerical monism’, also holds there is still just one thing, though it is possible for it to have different properties essential to it (say, the property of ungeneratedness, imperishability, etc.). This latter version of numerical monism can be squared more readily with Parmenides’ fragments. A still more lax version of numerical monism (call it ‘generous numerical monism’¹⁰), which is clearly at odds with Parmenidean strictures, might allow for the one thing that is to be a complex superstructure or superorganism – of which, say, humans and trees are all parts or aspects.¹¹

cohesiveness to what-is. On this view lines B8.5–6 convey a single thought about the *internal* unity and cohesiveness of what-is, which we might then translate: “since it is now all [of it] together one, cohesive” (Curd 1991, 254).

⁷ With the definite article: B4.2=D10.2; B8.19=D8.24; B8.32=D8.37; without the article: B6.1=D7.1; B8.24=D8.29; B8.25=D8.30; B8.33=D8.33; B8.47=D8.52.

⁸ The predicationist monist camp might reply that other aspects of the *Alētheia* justify retroactively qualifying the verb ‘to be’, so that *to eon* might be taken to refer to a *kind of thing* rather than to a particular thing. But taken at face value, these passages do not straightforwardly lend themselves to such a reading.

⁹ See also the earlier Melissus, who implicitly signs up to the view at B6=D6.

¹⁰ To borrow Palmer’s (2009a, 38) label.

¹¹ For a strained interpretation of Parmenides along these lines, see Sisko and Weiss (2015). Better candidates for generous numerical monism are the Stoics (whose cosmic god was in some sense

Numerical monism, cashed out in the first two ways outlined above, raises the well-known difficulty that it rules out the possibility of a separate thinker thinking of the one being, and makes the existence of a human audience impossible. We know from Plutarch that this implication was recognized in Greek antiquity by the Epicurean Colotes, and was seen to track a tension underlying Parmenides' argument. In a treatise entitled *On the fact that according to the doctrines of the other philosophers it is impossible even to live* (Περὶ τοῦ ὅτι κατὰ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων φιλοσόφων δόγματα οὐδὲ ζῆν ἔστιν), Colotes reportedly maintained that "Parmenides plainly abolishes everything by postulating one being" (πάντ' ἀναιρεῖν τῷ ἔν ὃν ὑποτίθεσθαι τὸν Παρμενίδην, Plut. *Col.* 1114D), so that he "has prevented us from living" (ζῆν ἡμᾶς κεκώλυκε, 1114A).¹²

§1.1. The self-refutation challenge

It is of particular interest that numerical monism is the target of one of Plato's best-known arguments against Parmenides in the *Sophist* – the so-called 'names argument' (244b6–244d13). The latter draws attention to the self-refuting tension underlying Parmenides' putative endorsement of numerical monism, centring on the problem of *naming* the one thing there is.

The names argument targets "those who say that the all is one" (τῶν ἔν τὸ πᾶν λεγόντων, 244b6),¹³ which recalls Plato's line of attack against Parmenides in

identical to the world-order); with a possible precedent in Heraclitus and in the cosmology of the Derveni Papyrus, wherein some version of numerical monism is apparently compatible with a heterogeneous structure (PDerv. Col. 16.3–6). Zhuangzi contemplates similarly generous versions of numerical monism, for instance in connection with Confucius in *Zh.* 22, as discussed below.

¹² See also Plut. *Col.* 1114B, where it is specified that an implication of Parmenides' view is that the "inhabited cities in Europe and Asia" are abolished. For an analysis of Colotes' polemic against Parmenides based on Plutarch's reports, see Kechagia (2011, 112–121) and Tor (2017, 157).

¹³ Scholars who take the argument to be specifically concerned with debunking 'strong' or 'strict' numerical monism include McCabe (2000, 69); Castagnoli (2010, 219–20); Gill (2012, 95); and Tor (forthcoming a).

the dialogue bearing the latter's name (see *Parmenides* 128a8-b1: ἔν [...] τὸ πᾶν).¹⁴

While the argument does not explicitly target Parmenides, it is evidently partly directed at him.¹⁵ Independently of Plato's own views about Parmenides, the thesis that the all is one harks back to Parmenides' thesis that 'being' is "all together, one" (ὁμοῦ πᾶν, ἔν, B8.5–6=D8.10–11) – the passage in the extant fragments which has generally been taken as evidence of his putative commitment to numerical monism.¹⁶

§1.2. Plato's names argument against numerical monism in the *Sophist*

Let us consider the relevant passage in Plato's *Sophist* (244b6–d13):

- b6 ΞΕ. Τί δέ; παρὰ τῶν ἐν τό πᾶν λεγόντων ἄρ' οὐ
b7 πευστέον εἰς δύναμιν τί ποτε λέγουσι τὸ ὄν;
b8 ΘΕΑΙ. Πῶς γὰρ οὐ;
b9 ΞΕ. Τόδε τοίνυν ἀποκρινέσθων. "Ἐν πού φατε μόνον
b10 εἶναι;"—"Φαμὲν γάρ," φήσουσιν. ἦ γάρ;
b11 ΘΕΑΙ. Ναί.
b12 ΞΕ. "Τί δέ; ὄν καλεῖτε τι;"
b13 ΘΕΑΙ. Ναί.
c1 ΞΕ. "Πότερον ὅπερ ἔν, ἐπὶ τῷ αὐτῷ προσχρώμενοι
c2 δνοῖν ὀνόμασιν, ἢ πῶς;"
c3 ΘΕΑΙ. Τίς οὖν αὐτοῖς ἢ μετὰ τοῦτ', ὃ ξένη, ἀποκρισις;
c4 ΞΕ. Δῆλον, ὃ Θεαίτητε, ὅτι τῷ ταύτην τὴν ὑπόθεσιν
c5 ὑποθεμένῳ πρὸς τὸ νῦν ἐρωτηθὲν καὶ πρὸς ἄλλο δὲ ὅτιοῦν
c6 οὐ πάντων ῥᾶστον ἀποκρίνασθαι.
c7 ΘΕΑΙ. Πῶς;
c8 ΞΕ. Τό τε δύο ὀνόματα ὁμολογεῖν εἶναι μηδὲν θέμενον
c9 πλὴν ἐν καταγέλαστόν που—
c10 ΘΕΑΙ. Πῶς δ' οὐ;
c11 ΞΕ. Καὶ τὸ παράπαν γε ἀποδέχεσθαι τοῦ λέγοντος ὡς
d1 ἔστιν ὀνομά τι, λόγον οὐκ ἂν ἔχον.
d2 ΘΕΑΙ. Πῆ;
d3 ΞΕ. Τιθεῖς τε τοῦνομα τοῦ πράγματος ἕτερον δύο λέγει
d4 πού τινε—
d5 ΘΕΑΙ. Ναί.
d6 ΞΕ. Καὶ μὴν ἂν ταυτόν γε αὐτῷ τιθῇ τοῦνομα, ἢ μηδε-
d7 νὸς ὄνομα ἀναγκασθήσεται λέγειν, εἰ δὲ τίνος αὐτὸ φήσῃ,

¹⁴ Tor (forthcoming a).

¹⁵ Note that Parmenides is explicitly named shortly before the argument is introduced (at *Sophist* 244c4–6; d4–6).

¹⁶ See McCabe (2000, 60) for these echoes.

- d8 συμβήσεται τὸ ὄνομα ὀνόματος ὄνομα μόνον, ἄλλου δὲ
d9 οὐδενὸς ὄν—
d10 ΘΕΑΙ. Οὕτως.
d11 ΞΕ. Καὶ τὸ ἐν γε ἐνὸς ἐν ὄν μόνον καὶ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐ
d12 τὸ ἐν ὄν.
d13 ΘΕΑΙ. Ἀνάγκη.

- b6 Visitor: ‘Well, then; shouldn’t we do our best to find out from those who
b7 say that the all is one (ἐν τὸ πᾶν) what ever they mean by ‘being’?’
b8 Theaetetus: ‘How should we not?’
b9 Visitor: ‘Then, let them answer this: ‘I suppose you say that there is only
b10 one.’ ‘We do’, they’ll say, won’t they?’
b11 Theaetetus: ‘Yes.’
b12 Visitor: ‘Well, then; do you call anything “being”?’
b13 Theaetetus: ‘Yes.’
c1 Visitor: ‘Is that just what you call “one”, using two names for the same
c2 thing? Or what?’
c3 Theaetetus: ‘What answer do they have after this, Visitor?’
c4 Visitor: ‘It’s clear, Theaetetus, that for someone who advances this thesis
c5 it’s not the easiest thing of all to answer the present question, or any other
c6 question whatsoever.’
c7 Theaetetus: ‘How so?’
c8 Visitor: ‘Surely it’s ridiculous to admit that there are two names when
c9 he does not posit anything but one.’
c10 Theaetetus: How could it not be?
c11 Visitor: And it would be completely <ridiculous> to accept that someone
d1 said that there is a name, if it has no account.
d2 Theaetetus: How?
d3 Visitor: If he affirms that the name is different from the thing, then
d4 surely he mentions two things.
d5 Theaetetus: Yes.
d6 Visitor: And indeed if he affirms that the name is the same as the thing
d7 itself, either he will be forced to say that it’s a name of nothing, or, if
d8 he says that it’s <the name> of something, then it will follow that the
d9 name is only a name of a name, but of nothing else.
d10 Theaetetus: That is so.
d11 Visitor: And <it will follow that> the one is one of one only, and also
d12 that the one is of the name.
d13 Theaetetus: Necessarily.¹⁷

The thesis under scrutiny, that “the all is one” (244b6), is taken to be tantamount to numerical monism: there is only one thing, or, put differently, only one thing that exists.¹⁸ The Eleatic Visitor deploys two arguments: (i) the monist cannot state that the one is, and (ii) she cannot name the one. This assumes that the

¹⁷ Trans. Castagnoli (2010, 219, 221–222), modified.

¹⁸ McCabe (2000, 69); Castagnoli (2010, 220).

‘one’ precludes any kind of multiplicity.¹⁹ Yet in positing that there *is* only the one (244b9–10), the monist has already granted (the existence of) ‘being’ (244b12), as well as the ‘one’; and so now we have two things. The moderate numerical monist, unlike the strict numerical monist, could at this point insist that the one thing there is both is and is one (since ‘being’ and ‘oneness’ are essential features of the one entity). But, the argument goes, a name is already a thing, so that even the moderate numerical monist would have to grant that there are at least two things because there are two names (‘one’ and ‘being’). Even granting that ‘being’ and the ‘one’ refer to the same thing (244c1–2), the numerical monist has allowed the existence of two names (δυσὶν ὀνόμασιν, 244c2), thus admitting the existence of at least three things (the two names and what they name) instead of just the one thing (244c8–9).

Merely positing a single name presupposes distinguishing between a signifier or name (*onoma*) on the one hand, and a signified or referent on the other (*pragma*), which again implies the existence of at least two things (244d3–4).

Hence the numerical monist cannot even talk about the ‘one’, on pain of refuting herself. Luca Castagnoli (2010, 220–221) has shown that we have self-refutation on our hands, and more specifically, *operational* self-refutation (to use J. L. Mackie’s (1964) terms).²⁰ The problem, Castagnoli (2010, 220) argues, is not just that the particular way in which the monist has presented her thesis is incompatible with its content (which would imply merely *pragmatic* self-refutation), but also that “there is no alternative way of coherently advancing it”.

¹⁹ Horan (2019) argues that this concept of the ‘one’ is more fully developed by Plato in the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* and is in the background of the names argument in the *Sophist*.

²⁰ Operational self-refutation arises in cases where there is no way to express numerical monism that does not falsify it (since the very fact of asserting it falsifies its content). Operational self-refutation differs from *absolute* self-refutation in that the latter requires that the position be demonstrably false *because it entails its own falsehood*, independently of its being expressed or thought of in any way.

Plato underscores the fact that the monist encounters problems as soon as she tries to *speak of*, *affirm* or *advance* her theory.²¹ The crux of the argument is that the monist proceeds to *name* (καλεῖτέ, 244b12) the one thing, which implies the existence of at least two predicates or names, ‘being’ and the ‘one’ – which, in addition to their referent, makes three, and so on. The monist is also hard-pressed to *respond* (ἀποκρινέσθων, 244b9; ἀπόκρισις, 244c3; ἐρωτηθὲν, 244c5; ἀποκρίνασθαι, 244c6)²² when asked about her theory, or about anything at all (244c5–6): which highlights the impossibility of any dialectical exchange whatsoever – since as soon as she uses even a single word, she admits the existence of at least two things.

A further point (which Plato does not make explicit) is that the monist’s own existence as a separate thinker or as a talking subject (as distinct from ‘being’ or ‘the one’) is ruled out by (strict or moderate) numerical monism. M. M. McCabe’s point (2000, 71) that numerical monism does not merely rule out the (human) monist’s speech, but also her ‘cognitive processes’ is well taken.

The monist is therefore condemned to silence. She could not even offer an account of her position without refuting herself (244c11–d1). If pressed to explain herself, she could not concede that she mentions two names to refer to a single thing. Saying that the name is the same as the thing would make the monist vulnerable to *reductio ad absurdum*: either she is forced to deny that the name refers to anything, which is absurd (244d6–7); or she is forced to grant that it is indeed a name of something (244d7–8), but only of itself. The numerical monist would then end up

²¹ See λεγόντων, 244b6; φατε, 244b9; φάμεν, 244b10; φήσουσιν, 244b10; ὑποθεμένῳ, 244c5; θέμενον, 244c8; του λέγοντος, 244c11; τιθεῖς, 244d3; λέγει, 244d3; τιθῇ, 244d6; λέγειν, 244d7; and φήσει, 244d7.

²² There is an etymological link between some of the Greek terms used here denoting ‘to respond’ and the Greek term for ‘dividing’ (*krinein*) – which might seem to add weight to Plato’s point that ‘to respond’ is ‘to divide’.

having to say that the name ‘one’ is a name of the name ‘one’ (244d11–12), which is nonsensical.

§1.3. Implications of the names argument for Parmenidean numerical monism

Assuming we accept that Parmenides advocated strict or moderate numerical monism, as Plato suggests, it is hard to see how we might reject Plato’s argument. But one might protest on Parmenides’ behalf that we are taking monism, even *numerical* monism, too strongly. For are words really the kind of thing which is subject to the monistic principle that there is only one thing? Haven’t we established that it is possible for there to be only one thing, but for this one thing to have different properties that are essential to it, consistent with moderate numerical monism? The mere fact that these properties could be conceptually distinguished would not thereby imply that they were *separate* from being.²³ On the other hand, Parmenides seems to think that the term ‘being’ does indeed refer to being, which presupposes that the word ‘being’ does indeed exist, quite apart from being itself; and so he is once again open to challenge on the basis of admitting the existence of one thing too many.²⁴

²³ For a discussion of this point in connection with Parmenides’ attitudes to language, see Tor (forthcoming a).

²⁴ Parmenides identifies being as the true referent of mortal names in the much-discussed line B8.38=D8.43 (see Tor 2017, 206); and this implication does not hang on whether we read the line as (i) τῷ πάντ’ ὀνόμασται (as per e.g. Woodbury 1958; Vlastos 2008; Burnyeat 1982, n. 22; KRS, 252; Sedley, in progress) or as (ii) τῷ πάντ’ ὄνομ’ ἔσται (as per DK; LM; Kingsley 2003, 190–191; Mourelatos 2008 [1970], 386–387; Coxon 2009 [1986], 334; Tor 2017, 204–206), both of which have good manuscript support. My own view is that (ii) is the more convincing text, though the point stands regardless of whether we read the line as (i) or (ii). Indeed, both plausibly yield the implication that being is taken to be the true referent of mortal naming. Proponents of (i) usually take τῷ to be a dative pronoun, yielding “to it [*scil. to eon*] have been assigned all the names [which mortals have set up...]”, as proposed by Woodbury (1958). Critics have however pointed out that the construction for ‘to assign a name to something’ is always *onomazesthai* + the particle *epi* + dative – and yet the particle is glaringly absent in Parmenides’ text. Sedley (in progress) has recently proposed that it is here dropped for metrical reasons (whereas Parmenides would have included it in prose, as he allegedly does in a dictum which Sedley argues is attributed to him by Simplicius, on which see Chapter 2, n. 73). Yet the construction *onomazesthai* + dative speaks to a use of the dative of agency, which in the context of B8.38=D8.43 would be nonsensical (“by it [*scil. being*], all things have been

The issue is not so much that being has properties. In and of itself this would not be a problem for moderate numerical monism, since we could say on behalf of Parmenides that the properties of imperishability, ungeneratedness, etc. are not separate from being and have no existence independent of it. The issue is that the existence of (1) a term ‘being’, as well as of (2) the referent of that term, still undermines moderate numerical monism (as does the existence of (3) the term ‘imperishable’, and so on).

Plato’s line of attack retains its force even against moderate numerical monism, inasmuch as it operates dialectically: the numerical monist (even on the moderate version that allows for conceptual distinctions) would still be refuting herself as soon as she opened her mouth. The very act of speaking would imply that there are two, or even three or four, things: (1) the term ‘being’, (2) being, and, we might add (though Plato does not specify this), (3) the physical utterance, and (4) the utterer (even if notionally, (4) could be identical with (2)²⁵). Thus even moderate numerical monism falls prey to operational self-refutation: there is still no way of *speaking* coherently of a universe in which there is only one thing with many properties.

named...”). For this objection to (i), see Tor (2017, 206, n. 93) and Mourelatos (2008 [1970], 386). To get around this problem, one could adopt an alternative reading of (i), as proposed by Burnyeat (1982, n. 22; followed by e.g. KRS, 252), which takes τῷ to mean ‘therefore’, and assumes – in a rather strained way – a suppressed subject of *onomastai* (‘it’, i.e. being). But regardless of which gloss on (i) we choose, the claim on either construal is that being is the *true referent* of the naming in which mortals engage. The same goes for the best (and, to my mind, the only convincing) interpretation of (ii). While proponents of this second reading have tended to presume that Parmenides means to dismiss names as empty (i.e. as having no true referent at all) – “Therefore (τῷ), all those things will be [mere] name which mortals have set up...” – the required qualification of ‘name’ as ‘*mere* name’ (implying that being is not the reference of mortal naming) is nowhere to be found in the Greek. A more plausible reading of (ii), proposed by Kingsley (2003, 190–191; picked up by Mourelatos 2008 [1970], 386 and Tor 2017, 205–206), takes the τῷ to be a demonstrative pronoun referring to the nominee (see τό at B8.37=D8.42), i.e. being: “all things will be its name” (literally “all things will be a name for that [*scil.* being]”) – a construction for which there is an excellent parallel in Homer (*Od.* XIX.409).

²⁵ Being a self-thinker and ‘self-talker’ could be essential properties of being, though in this case we would be faced with the problem that the speaker/being is incorrectly assuming that she is talking to *someone else*.

Assuming Parmenides was wedded to moderate numerical monism, was he conceivably *aware* of the self-refuting tension underlying his thesis? We have good reasons to think so, given the extent of his second-order restraint outlined in Chapters 3 and 4. However I did not there assume that Parmenides was committed to numerical monism; so how do his worries about being's intelligibility for humans (surveyed in Chapters 3 and 4) impact his putative commitment to numerical monism?

If we assume that Parmenides was wedded to numerical monism, we can see why it would be all the more pressing that he should resist the supposition that the *kouros* might even in principle cognize being. After all, being – construed as the only entity there is – rules out the *kouros*' very existence (not to mention his cognitive faculties and thoughts). Recall, moreover, that Parmenides does not lay out the thesis of the *Alētheia in propria persona*, but instead makes a goddess his mouthpiece; he also appeals to an analogy (which, lest we forget, is but an approximation) to convey what a neutral view on being would be like. And as we have seen, he resists presenting humans (including the *kouros*) as having being as a direct object of thought – i.e., as having an unproblematic cognitive relationship to being. All of this might be explained by a commitment to numerical monism. I will return to the possibilities these reflections leave open after considering an illuminating challenge to numerical monism found in the *Zhuangzi*. This argument is driven not by the conviction that numerical monism is false, but rather by worries about whether we could ever know such a theory to be true.

§2. Zhuangzi's words argument

§2.1. *The context of Zhuangzi's words argument and its force*

天下莫大於秋豪之末，而大山為小；莫壽乎殤子，而彭祖為夭。

'In the world, nothing is bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, yet Mount Tai is small; nothing outlives a dead child, yet Pengzu [the Chinese Methuselah] died young.

[the monist thesis]

天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。

Heaven and earth were born together with me, and the myriad things and I are one'.

[the words argument]

既已為一矣，且得有言乎？既已謂之一矣，且得无言乎？一與言為二，二與一為三。自此以往，巧歷不能得，而況其凡乎！故自无適有至於三，而況自有適有乎！

Now that we are one, can I still say something? Already having called us one, did I succeed in not saying something? One and what we say makes two, two and [their] unity make three. Proceeding from here even an expert calculator cannot get to the end of it, much less a plain man. Therefore if we take the step from nothing to something we arrive at three, and how much worse if we take the step from something to something!²⁶

First, let us consider the monist thesis itself, which is introduced just before the words argument in *Zh. 2*:

天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。

Heaven and earth were born together with me, and the myriad things and I are one.²⁷

Taken on its own, it is far from obvious what exactly this monist view amounts to (or even that it is a monist thesis). It is helpful to note a few salient

²⁶ G2/79=HY5/2/51–55. Trans. Graham (2001 [1981], 56), modified (with modifications in part taken from Fraser 2020 [2005]).

²⁷ G2/79=HY5/2/52–53.

terminological points, and relevant intertextual references in the passage to other parts of the *Zhuangzi*.

First, the notion of *tiandi* 天地, literally ‘Heaven and Earth’, is a well-established shorthand in classical Chinese texts for ‘the world as a whole’, ‘the universe’, or the cosmos – comprising not only the sky and earth but also the entire natural world.

Second, the term *wanwu* 萬物, meaning literally ‘the ten thousand things’ or ‘the myriad things’, also generally denotes the *totality* of things (including living beings) in the world (much like the Greek *myrioi/myria*, whose literal meaning is ‘ten thousand [people/things]’, but comes to mean ‘countless [people/things]’ or an ‘infinity [of people/things]’).²⁸ It is clear that some strong, all-encompassing claim of unity is being made.

Third, the claim seems to refer to a thesis apparently advanced by the ancient ‘logician’ or ‘sophist’ Huizi 惠子, who, as we saw in Chapter 3, is portrayed as a dialectical opponent of Zhuangzi elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*. The claim of unity recalls Huizi’s ‘tenth thesis’ (whose context I elaborate below), known to us from *Zh.* 33:

汜愛萬物，天地一體也。」

Care for the ten thousand things without exception; heaven and earth are one unit/body.²⁹

The ethical thrust of the first part of Huizi’s tenth thesis indicates that, like most ‘logicians’ associated with the so-called School of Names (*mingjia* 名家),

²⁸ On whether *wanwu* 萬物 denotes ‘infinity’ in the context of Huizi’s tenth thesis, discussed below, see Harbsmeier (1998, 296).

²⁹ G2/1102=HY93/2/73–74.

Huizi exhibits some affinity to later Mohist thought – whose most fundamental tenet (discussed in Chapter 3) was the doctrine of ‘inclusive’ or ‘impartial’ care (*jian'ai* 兼愛). Scholars have therefore conjectured that Huizi sought to provide a metaphysical basis for this ethical tenet: in this case, some kind of (metaphysical) monism.³⁰

Supporting the implicit association of the monistic statement in our passage with Huizi’s tenth thesis is the fact that Huizi is mentioned by name earlier on in *Zh.* 2, and presented as counting among debaters preoccupied with disputations involving attributes like “hard” and “white”.³¹ This speaks to Zhuangzi’s general association of him with the School of Names, whose core concern was with pinning down the relation between names (*ming* 名) and stuff (*shi* 實, objects, events, situations) – in other words, the relation between words and their referents.

Consider again the series of obviously false statements at the beginning of our passage:

天下莫大於秋豪之末，而大山為小；莫壽乎殤子，而彭祖為夭。

In the world, nothing is bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, yet Mount Tai is small; nothing outlives a dead child, yet Pengzu [the Chinese Methuselah] died young.

These statements appear to be alluding to Huizi’s theses, listed in *Zh.* 33:³²

- (1) 「至大无外，謂之大一；至小无內，謂之小一。
- (2) 无厚不可積也，其大千里。

³⁰ See Fraser (2020 [2005]) and Hu (2020 [1922], 113).

³¹ More specifically, he is presented somewhat mockingly as one of several men who “ended up in the foolishness of ‘hard’ and ‘white’” (*gu yi jian bai zhi mei zhong* 故以堅白之昧終, G2/75=HY5/2/45). See further Fraser (2020 [2005]) and Graham (2003 [1978], 173). One of these debaters, Gongsun Long 公孫龍 (whose discourses Zhuangzi alludes to in *Zh.* 2 and mentions by name in *Zh.* 17 and *Zh.* 33), was centrally concerned with how names (*ming* 名) could properly pick out things (*shi* 實).

³² See also *Xunzi* 3.1.

- (3) 天與地卑，山與澤平。
- (4) 日方中方睨，物方生方死。
- (5) 大同而與小同異，此之謂小同異；萬物畢同畢異，此之謂大同異。
- (6) 南方无窮而有窮，
- (7) 今日適越而昔來。
- (8) 連環可解也。
- (9) 我知天下之中央，燕之北，越之南是也。
- (10) 汜愛萬物，天地一體也。」

- (1) The largest unit has nothing outside it. Call it the Great Oneness. The smallest unit has nothing within it. This is called the Small Oneness.
- (2) “What has no thickness [or: dimension³³] cannot be piled up³⁴, and yet it extends for a thousand miles.
- (3) Heaven is as low as earth, and the mountain as level as the lake.
- (4) Just as the sun slants as soon as it reaches high noon, things start dying as soon as they are born.
- (5) When a great sameness is considered different from smaller sameness, these can be called only small samenesses and small differences. But all things being at once ultimately the same and also ultimately different can be called the truly great sameness and the truly great difference.
- (6) The south is both bounded and boundless.
- (7) One can go to Yue today and arrive yesterday.
- (8) Linked hoops can be unhooked.
- (9) I know the centre of the world: it is north of the state of Yan [in the north] and south of the state of Yue [in the south].
- (10) Care for all things without exception; heaven and earth are one unit/body.³⁵

Statements like “Mount Tai is small” and “nothing outlives a dead child” seem to hark back to Huizi’s third and fourth theses respectively.³⁶ Zhuangzi also alludes almost verbatim to thesis 7 earlier on in *Zh. 2*.³⁷

³³ For ‘dimension’, see Harbsmeier (1998, 294).

³⁴ Hu (2020 [1922], 111) renders *bu ke ji ye* 不可積也 (rendered by Ziporyn as “cannot be piled up”) as “cannot have magnitude” – making a possible parallel to Zeno conspicuous, as discussed below.

³⁵ G2/1102=HY93/2/70–74. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 273), modified.

³⁶ See G2/56=HY4/2/22. Another striking lexical and conceptual echo to thesis 4 appears earlier on in *Zh. 2* (G2/66=HY4/2/28: 雖然，方生方死，方死方生；“But by the same token, once there is birth there is death, and once there is death there is birth”).

³⁷ G2/56=HY4/2/22: 未成乎心而有是非，是今日適越而昔至也。 (“The ‘this is the case’ and ‘this is not the case’ in a not-yet fully-formed heart-mind are like ‘going to Yue today/presently and arriving (there) yesterday/formerly’”). These parallels are noticed by e.g. Ziporyn (2020, 13, n. 9; 14, n. 15; 273, n. 21 and 22) and Fraser (2020 [2005]).

This suggests that Zhuangzi is alluding to Huizi's tenth thesis in putting forward the monist doctrine, which he then proceeds to challenge.³⁸

Several scholars have suggested that Huizi's monism roughly amounts to Eleatic monism – including Hu Shih (2020 [1922], 113), Chad Hansen (2003b, 139–140), and cautiously, Chris Fraser (2020 [2005]).³⁹ Hansen presumes that Parmenidean monism amounts to what I have called *strict* numerical monism above, and it is this view that underlies his interpretation of Huizi's tenth thesis.⁴⁰ Yet as I discuss in §2.2 below, it is unclear how Huizi's premises can be taken to imply the conclusion that reality is *devoid of distinctions*.

As Fraser (2020 [2005]) has argued, the ten theses attributed to Huizi largely turn on the idea that distinctions are relative to a perspective, which has the result that they can be reconfigured or collapsed as we shift perspectives. His fifth thesis is important for our purposes, since it suggests that on some scale or another, anything can be deemed “the same” or “different”.⁴¹ The same/different relation operates at the level of both kind relations and part-whole relations. In terms of kind relations, one might say that animals can be the same in being of the kind *horse*, yet

³⁸ Harbsmeier (1998, 295) notices the parallels, but claims they speak to “profound common perceptions” between Huizi and Zhuangzi, with the qualification that “[...] what for Hui Shih [Huizi] was a result of some logical definitions was for Chuang Tzu [Zhuangzi] the starting point of a philosophy of life”. I am unconvinced that these views were endorsed by Zhuangzi himself – not least because, in the immediate context in which we find them in the text, Zhuangzi actually proceeds to challenge the monist thesis to which these other theses are conceptually related. In commenting on the Huizi-like statements preceding our passage, Fraser (2020 [2005]) rightly remarks that “the text's stance is fundamentally critical of Hui Shi”.

³⁹ Hu (2020 [1922], 113), Graham (1969, 140; 1989, 75–76, 140), and Harbsmeier (1998, 298, 293) have also suggested that the paradoxes of Eleatic thought have much in common with Huizi's theses.

⁴⁰ Hansen (2003b, 139–140) understands Parmenidean monism to imply that reality is free of distinctions: “Parmenidean monism [...] is the denial not merely of dualisms but of distinctions. It commits one to a peculiarly strong version of one-ness, that is, not merely of some underlying natural continuity. Parmenidean monism denies all qualitative and quantitative difference. [...] It tends to be associated with mystical epistemic doctrines and semantics because, typically, it is hard to prove or to state without paradox. [...] Something like this may be the conclusion of Zhuangzi's philosophical companion, Hui Shi”. This interpretation of Parmenides sounds like ‘strict’ numerical monism, since even *conceptual* distinctions concerning being's features are ruled out.

⁴¹ See Fraser's (2020 [2005]) translation of thesis 5: “The same on a large scale but different from what is the same on a small scale, this is called ‘same and different on a small scale’. The myriad things all being the same or all being different, this is called ‘same and different on a large scale’.”

be different in colour. As for the part-whole relation, deeming all things “the same” is deeming them all parts of the same whole (whereas deeming them “different” can be understood as separating them off as individual parts of that whole). However, Huizi does not *deny* distinctions, *pace* Graham (1989, 79).⁴² As Fraser (2020 [2005]) argues, Huizi *embraces* the ‘contradictions’ inherent in distinctions (which he fails to qualify properly), and “explains them by appeal to constantly shifting perspectives or standards for distinguishing same and different”.

According to Fraser, it is precisely the assumption that reality is divisible in indefinitely many ways that motivates Huizi’s monism. As Fraser (2020 [2005]) puts it: “All of the resulting distinctions are ‘real’ in the sense that the features of things on which they are based indeed exist. The distinctions are not delusory. The problem is that neither are they privileged or fixed: they can be replaced by alternative schemes of distinctions”. The question is how Huizi makes the move to monism, as suggested by thesis 10.⁴³ And, moreover, what version(s) of monism does thesis 10 leave open? Scholars suppose that thesis 10 implies that reality is fundamentally undifferentiated and devoid of distinctions, and by implication numerically ‘one’ in the strict sense laid out above.

Hansen (2000 [1992], 262–263) proposes that Huizi fell prey to the verification fallacy, confusing what we can know with what is real. He thinks Huizi fallaciously inferred from perspectivalism about distinctions that reality actually is

⁴² Graham suggests that Huizi reasoned that “[s]ince division leads to contradiction don’t divide at all”.

⁴³ Fraser (2020 [2005]) points to several reasons for thinking that the monist thrust of thesis 10 should be taken to be privileged over (rather than parallel to) the other theses (not least 1 and 5, whose perspectivalism is in tension with thesis 10). The most obvious lies in the theses’ sequence: as the final thesis, it is natural to read the monist thesis as the “conclusion” or “main theme”. It is also the only thesis which is presented as grounding an ethical doctrine, perhaps suggesting that it constituted Huizi’s ultimate metaphysical position. Finally, thesis 10 makes a conspicuously *absolutist* (as opposed to a perspectival) claim; one does not read, for instance, that ‘heaven and earth are in one respect one body and in another respect many’; rather, the claim is simply that heaven and earth are one (without qualification).

undifferentiated, via the hidden verificationist premise that a distinction exists only if we can know it to exist. Fraser (2020 [2005]) proposes that we take Huizi to have been merely inconsistent in believing that *not drawing any distinctions at all* could avoid the problem of perspectival differences (or more specifically, the problem that any scheme of distinctions may be deemed “admissible” or “inadmissible”, by reference to some standard or other). Strictly speaking, however, even the scheme that consists in drawing no distinctions at all is one way of distinguishing things among many, and in this sense is no more privileged than any other – something which Huizi (allegedly) fails to appreciate.

On both these accounts, Huizi supposedly concluded that reality is numerically one in an especially strong sense – one which does not admit even of conceptual distinctions. On these views, what makes Parmenides’ and Huizi’s stances vulnerable to a similar sort of critique is not merely their view that there exists only one thing, but also that there exists only one thing that is devoid of any real internal divisions (even if Parmenides, unlike Huizi, might allow for conceptual distinctions to be made about it). If this is the correct interpretation of Huizi’s monism, then we might conclude that Huizi, like Parmenides, becomes exposed to operational self-refutation, and that this is what the words argument implicitly shows.

The thrust of Zhuangzi’s words argument in our passage seems to be that Huizi’s monism cannot be stated coherently:

既已為一矣，且得有言乎？既已謂之一矣，且得无言乎？一與言為二，二與一為三。自此以往，巧歷不能得，而況其凡乎！故自无適有至於三，而況自有適有乎！

Now that we are one, can I still say something? Already having called us one, did I succeed in not saying something? One and what we say makes two, two and [their] unity make three. Proceeding from here even an expert calculator cannot get to the end of it, much less a plain

man. Therefore if we take the step from nothing to something we arrive at three, and how much worse if we take the step from something to something!⁴⁴

The crux of the critique is that merely in speaking about the One, the monist already posits two things:

(1.i) the signified (the one metaphysical entity) and (1.ii) the signifier (the word ‘One’);

or alternatively, (2.i) the one metaphysical entity and (2.ii) the statement ‘we are one’⁴⁵.

Both interpretations are possible readings of the classical Chinese, though (2) is more plausible here. This is because Zhuangzi’s emphasis does not seem to be on naming or names (*ming* 名), but rather on speaking and words (*yan* 言) more broadly – hence my decision to refer to Zhuangzi’s argument as the *words* argument, and not the *names* argument. On this second interpretation, the issue Zhuangzi raises is that making statements like ‘we are One’ (see the monist thesis to the effect that *wanwu yu wo wei yi* 萬物與我為一, ‘the myriad things and I are one’) already undermines the numerical monist thesis.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ G2/79=HY5/2/53–55.

⁴⁵ Ziporyn (2009, 16, my emphasis) sides with the first interpretation in rendering *yan* 言 in the singular at a crucial juncture of the argument: “But if we are all one, can there be any words? But since I have already declared that we are ‘one’, can there be no words? The one and the *word* are already two, the two and the original unnamed one are three”. Ziporyn’s more recent translation (2020, 17) is closer to interpretation (2): “The one and the *saying* are already two...”.

⁴⁶ This is how Graham (2001 [1981]) and Fraser (2020 [2005]) read the argument. Graham (2001 [1981], 56) briefly notes the parallel to Plato’s *Sophist* by pointing out that “He [Zhuangzi] observes that in saying it [i.e. everything is one] the statement itself is additional to the One which it is about, so that already there are two (Plato makes a similar point about the One and its name in the *Sophist*)”. To my knowledge the most detailed (if still brief) analysis of the argument in the secondary literature is found in Fraser (2020 [2005]). The translations of Watson (1968, 43: “The one and what I said

But even on this second interpretation, the argument works in a very similar way to Plato's names argument:

- (1) Simply in speaking about the One, we have two ("One and what we say makes 2");
- (2) But then two is also a thing, and so now we have two in addition to the statement about it, and so now we have at least three things;
- (3) There is then a threat of infinite inflation: not only do two and the statement about it make two additional things to the one and the statement about it, but three is also a thing, and so now we have three and the statement about it, and so on *ad infinitum*;
- (4) As such, "even an expert calculator cannot get to the end of it".

Assuming Zhuangzi is targeting either strict or moderate numerical monism, then it seems the words argument works well, in that it effectively shows Huizi's position to be absurd (as it is operationally self-refuting).

It is noteworthy that Guo Xiang's commentary introduces the technical term for names (*ming* 名) in its analysis of the argument – alongside the term *wei* 謂, which might be taken to imply 'statements' or 'assertions' more broadly, as Christoph Harbsmeier suggests in his translation. Guo Xiang's commentary on the passage runs as follows:

夫名謂生於不明者也。
 [...]
 既謂之一即是有言矣。

about it make two"), Mair (1998, 19: "One and speech makes two"), and Ziporyn (2020, 17) are also in the spirit of interpretation (2).

夫以言言一，而一非言也，則一與言為二矣。
 一既一矣，言文二之。
 有一，有二得不謂之三乎？

Names and assertions have their origin in lack of clear understanding.
 [...]

 Since one asserts the one, then there is something one says.
 When we use words to express the one and the one is not [the] words,
 then the one together with the words count as two.
 The one is one thing, the words make it two.
 When there is the one [thing], and there are two [things], can one not
 call these three?⁴⁷

Guo Xiang's analysis admits both readings laid out above: the one whereby the issue has to do with the name of the thing (interpretation (1)); and the other whereby the issue has to do with the statement about the thing (interpretation (2)). Harbsmeier's rendering of *yan* 言, 'words', in the plural is not a necessary reading of the Chinese, though it is certainly a possible translation, and makes good sense if we take the issue to be with statements about the One, rather than (merely) its name.

So far Zhuangzi's argument has bite, whether as a challenge to strict or moderate numerical monism. Before raising worries about the view which this reconstruction of the argument imputes to Huizi, there remains one issue in need of elucidation: namely, the force of Zhuangzi's distinction between 'nothing' or 'non-being' (*wu* 无) and 'something' or 'being' (*you* 有) in the course of the words argument. This is another interesting point of difference from Plato's version of the argument.

Implicit in Zhuangzi's reasoning here is the idea that the one is somehow tantamount to *nothing*, whereas the statement about it is *something*. Thus, from the

⁴⁷ I here borrow and adapt Harbsmeier's (1992b, 129) translation. See also the commentator Hu Wenying 胡文英 (1751): "Since we call them one, then we cannot reckon that there is nothing we say" (既謂之一則算不得無言也; cited in Harbsmeier 1992b, 129, modified).

one (which is nothing/non-being) to the statement about it (which is something/being), we have three: the one, the statement about the ‘one’, which is two, and now we have three – and here we start going from something to something, so that the situation is now *worse* from the point of view of the person who wants there to be only one thing. For the monist now has not just two, but three, and so on *ad infinitum*; hence Zhuangzi’s lament about the proliferation of ‘somethings’. The move ‘from something to something’ (or ‘from being to being’) therefore seems to refer to the proliferation of things in the infinite inflation.⁴⁸

The way in which Zhuangzi seems to align non-being or nothing (*wu* 无) with the One squares well with some early (fourth-century) cosmological models,⁴⁹ wherein *wu* 无 is often conceptually related to *Dao* 道 (literally, ‘Way’) or the One (*yi* 一) as the most fundamental thing, conceptualized as being somehow utterly undifferentiated; whereas as soon as we introduce divisions, then we have beings/things that are (*you* 有).⁵⁰ A key assumption found in these texts is that for

⁴⁸ There is a loose parallel for this kind of worry about the rampant multiplication of things in another Eleatic, Zeno (DK29 B3=LM20 D11), which however turns the argument on its head: the *pluralist* has to assert both that there are many things and that there are going to be indefinitely many things.

⁴⁹ Here I have in mind early (proto-)Daoist cosmological texts known to us, for example, through archaeological finds at *Guodian* (see Chapter 2, n. 57); but also parts of the transmitted *Laozi*. While I do not think we can be certain of a Laozian influence on *Zh. 2*, it is philosophically interesting to consider such a possibility. As we saw, while overt references to the *Laozi* cannot be found in the Inner Chapters (unlike in the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters), Fried (2022b) argues that they bear the mark of a more indirect Laozian influence, and that the direction of influence is unlikely to be the reverse. For the view that the *Guanzi* 管子, especially the *Nei ye* 內業 or “Inward learning” sections (usually thought to predate the fourth century BCE), includes even earlier (proto-)Daoist cosmological theories that plausibly inform the critiques found in the *Zhuangzi*, see Roth (1999, 173–200) and Porat (2022, 253).

⁵⁰ The cosmological primacy of ‘the Ultimate One’ (*tai yi* 太一) is evident, as its name suggests, in the text *The Ultimate One Gives Birth to Water* (*Tai Yi Sheng Shui* 太一生水, unearthed at *Guodian* 郭店, and dated to the fourth century BCE). The cosmological primacy of ‘the One’ (*yi* 一) is also apparent in an unprovenanced and unproveniened manuscript, *All Things are Flowing in Form* (*Fan Wu Liu Xing* 凡物流形), which is thought to have been looted at or near *Guodian*. The primacy of ‘the One’ can also be gleaned from parts of the transmitted *Laozi* (especially *Laozi* 10, 14, 22, 39), although it is absent from the *Guodian Laozi* excavated materials. For these echoes and their putative historical relevance to the cosmological passages found in the *Zhuangzi*, see Perkins (2015; 2016a). Note that in one passage of the *Guodian Laozi* materials, we encounter the view that all things ultimately arise from nothing (*wu* 无/無; see Perkins 2016a, 187). Still in other places, *Dao*

there to be beings or things (*you* 有; *wu* 物), there need to be divisions. I venture that Zhuangzi might be engaging dialectically with views of this kind – a possibility supported by Zhuangzi’s apparent allusion to cosmological theories before introducing Huizi’s thesis. In particular, he launches into a discussion about what existed in the ‘beginning’ (*shi* 始), as distinct from a time before the ‘beginning’ existed, and so on (G/79=HY5/2/49). The text then raises the problem whether we are actually referring to anything at all when we talk about ‘something’ (*you* 有) as opposed to ‘nothing’ (*wu* 无). For while ‘something’ and ‘nothing’ are mutually contradictory categories, naming something as ‘nothing’ is still to call it something:

俄而有无矣，而未知有无之果孰有孰无也。今我則已有謂矣，而未知吾所謂之其果有謂乎，其果无謂乎？

Suddenly, there is ‘nothing’, yet we don’t yet know of something and nothing which truly (*guo* 果) is (*you* 有) and which [truly] is not (*wu* 无). Now, I have already referred to something (*you* 有), yet I don’t yet know whether my reference really (*guo* 果) refers to something or whether it really (*guo* 果) refers to nothing (*wu* 无).⁵¹

The passage preceding Zhuangzi’s argument might be seen to connect cosmological speculations about the *Dao* or the One (the entity that is logically and ontologically prior to the ‘beginning’ in the cosmological process), conceptualized as nothing (*wu* 无), to the problem of *naming* this metaphysically basic entity. For if this entity is really nothing (*wu* 无), aren’t we still turning it into *something* as soon as we speak of it as ‘nothing’ (*wu* 无)?⁵²

is sometimes afforded cosmological priority over the One, as at *Laozi* 42, and in parts of the Guodian *Laozi* materials. For the conceptual association between the One (*yi* 一), no-thing (*wu* 无), and *Dao* 道, see especially *Laozi* 14 (L14/31–32).

⁵¹ G2/79=HY5/2/50–51.

⁵² Note that *Laozi* §14 (paradoxically) refers to the One (*yi* 一) as something which “cannot be named” (*bu ke ming* 不可名) and “returns to nothing” (*fu gui yu wu* 復歸於無物, L14/31).

This broader context shortly before the words argument is introduced might be seen to speak to a polemic against a so-called ‘primitive Daoist’ worldview, according to which we cannot even name the One or *Dao* on pain of undermining it (for to speak of or name the One is to make distinctions, which is to align it with being/something as opposed to non-being/nothing).⁵³ If we are permitted to see this as Zhuangzi’s target in the words argument, then it would make good sense for him to attack a version of numerical monism according to which the One is utterly without distinctions, as Hansen and Fraser understand the claim.

There is a problem with this rendering, however: Huizi’s own views do not seem to square with such a stringent version of numerical monism. To the extent that it amounts to a monist view, Huizi’s tenth thesis looks rather like *generous* numerical monism, which is less obviously vulnerable to the words argument. I venture that Zhuangzi conflated Huizi’s view polemically with the ‘primitive Daoist’ view. The fact that he frames the monist thesis under attack not as amounting to the idea of there being ‘one body’ (*yi ti* 一體, as Huizi postulates in the tenth thesis of *Zh.* 33), but simply as the idea of there being ‘One [thing]’ (*yi* 一), and refrains from naming Huizi explicitly, supports the conjecture. I now turn to the significance of these different monist theses, and where this leaves the target of Zhuangzi’s words argument.

⁵³ Elsewhere (G12/424=HY30/12/37–38) Zhuangzi appears to contemplate precisely such a view, without the critical tone of *Zh.* 2: “In the great beginning, there was nothing (*wu* 无); there were neither beings (*you* 有) nor names (*ming* 名). Out of it the One (*yi* 一) arose. There was the One (*yi* 一), but it had no form (*wei xing* 未形)”. (泰初有无，无有无名；一之所起，有一而未形。)

§2.2. *The nature of Huizi's monism*

Assuming Huizi is a numerical monist in either the strict or moderate sense, then Zhuangzi's words' argument gets off the ground. It implies that Huizi falls prey to operational self-refutation as soon as he makes statements about his monist thesis. Since the force of Zhuangzi's argument seems to depend on either strict or moderate numerical monism, one might think this in and of itself suggests that Huizi was committed to one of these two views. This may be what lies behind scholars' willingness to read Parmenidean monism back into Huizi, without, however, having any obvious textual basis for doing so.

There are at least three difficulties with seeing Huizi's tenth thesis as amounting to either strict or moderate numerical monism.

The first is that most of the other theses attributed to Huizi in *Zh.* 33 turn on the idea that distinctions are relative to a perspective – such that they can be reconfigured as we shift perspectives. This suggests that distinctions are real, not that they are illusory, as Fraser (2020 [2005]) rightly notes – *pace* Graham (1989). Thesis 5 is especially clear on this point: as we saw, on some scale or other anything can be deemed 'the same' or 'different'. Huizi evidently embraces the 'contradictions' inherent in distinctions (which he fails to qualify properly). Curiously Graham, Hansen, and even Fraser all agree that Huizi somehow adopted strict or moderate numerical monism, in the sense of holding that reality is fundamentally undifferentiated and devoid of distinctions. This presupposes that in the end Huizi denied that distinctions really do exist. But surely nothing in the text *warrants* this interpretation.

Second, even if we accept that Huizi somehow fallaciously or inconsistently inferred his monist view from the fact that reality is divisible in indefinitely many

ways (as suggested by the move to thesis 10), the fact remains that he could have committed himself to a much weaker numerical monist position – namely, what I call generous numerical monism. Not only is there nothing in the move to thesis 10 that warrants imputing to him strict or moderate numerical monism, but there are other viable interpretations which are left open.

Third, there are several *positive* reasons against imputing to Huizi these stronger versions of numerical monism. We might point out that: (i) Huizi's commitment to the reality of distinctions speaks to a monist view according to which distinctions somehow *inhere* in the unity.⁵⁴ In addition, (ii) the suggestion that thesis 10 is supposed to offer a metaphysical basis for the Mohist doctrine of universal care (*jian'ai* 兼愛), as many commentators emphasize, makes little sense if we assume strict or moderate numerical monism; for surely this ethical doctrine presupposes a unity *with distinctions*: the impartial care that people must show one another presupposes the existence of people within the whole, and not of a single *undifferentiated* whole.⁵⁵ Finally, (iii) Huizi reportedly did not speak simply of the One, but rather of the one *body* (*ti* 體), in the tenth thesis attributed to him in *Zhuangzi* 33. This point is especially significant, as I will now show.

⁵⁴ A compelling example of such a view in the Greek tradition is Heraclitus (see DK22=LM9 B50=D46), for whom everything is one, but for whom pairs of opposites are not thereby eliminated; rather, they are constitutive of the unity.

⁵⁵ There is a parallel in the Greek tradition for a connection between an ethical theory rooted in one's sense of being part of a whole on the one hand, and a generous numerical monist metaphysical view on the other. According to the Stoics, one's being part of the superorganism that is the cosmos – a version of generous numerical monism – implies one's recognizing one's identity as part of this whole, so that one cares for the whole as one does for oneself.

§2.3. Implications of the ‘one body’ doctrine

One might think that Zhuangzi’s rephrasing of Huizi’s tenth thesis in *Zh. 2* is rather innocuous:

(1) Version 1 – *Zh. 2* (Zhuangzi’s target in the words argument)

天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。
Heaven and earth were born together with me, and the myriad things
and I are one.

(2) Version 2 – *Zh. 33* (Huizi’s tenth thesis)

汜愛萬物，天地一體也。」
Care for the ten thousand things without exception; heaven and earth
are one body/unit.

Graham (2001 [1981], 56) does not hesitate to render *yi ti* (一體) as found in Version 2 as ‘one unit’ – which, *prima facie*, speaks to the more non-committal sense of oneness in Version 1.⁵⁶ But taking seriously here the reference to *one body* can help clarify the position. A body, after all, does imply the existence of parts, and thus speaks to generous numerical monism rather than strict or moderate numerical monism.⁵⁷ Generous numerical monism does not rule out that people and trees exist as parts of it; on the contrary, it implies that people, trees, and all other things are somehow *interconnected* – which offers support for Fraser’s point that

⁵⁶ I say *prima facie* because, in the later Mohist context, the translation of *ti* as ‘unit’ brings to mind the technical usage of *ti* as referring to a thing which can be conceived both as a compound whole (which itself has parts) and as something which is a part of something else – both of which are at odds with strict and moderate numerical monism. Fraser (2020 [2005]) follows Graham in referring to ‘one unit’ in his analysis of thesis 10, although in discussing its connection to the Mohist ethical doctrine (which implies that people exist), he moves back and forth between ‘unit’ and ‘body’.

⁵⁷ This is consistent with the Later Mohist technical usage of the term *ti* as unit: any part/unit (say, a hand) that itself has parts (say, fingers) can also be considered a whole (see A2, B12). A *ti* in such cases is clearly not conceived of as an indivisible, partless entity.

thesis 10 advocates caring for every *thing*, every *wu* 物 (and not just for every person or living thing).

Arguably the idea of a cosmic superorganism is implicit in classical Confucian texts as well, even if it is among neo-Confucians that we find the commonplace claim that every creature in the world forms one *body* with every other (*tiandi wanwu wei yi ti* 天地萬物為一體).⁵⁸ Hagop Sarkissian (2018, 306) unpacks this idea of a superorganism in terms of a notion of kinship or connectedness that is thought to run through all living things; it is a “sense of oneness that transcends one’s own person and connects one to a larger whole”. In classical Confucian texts, an intuition about the unity and interconnectedness of all things does play a role in the ethical sphere,⁵⁹ though the metaphysical worldview or underpinnings of this intuition is, according to Sarkissian and many other scholars, not fully spelled out until the Neo-Confucians.

Significantly, however, Zhuangzi does impute the idea of a *single body* to Confucius in *Zh.* 22, and does so in the context of a *cosmologico-metaphysical* discussion involving *tiandi* 天地:

冉求問於仲尼曰：「未有天地可知邪？」仲尼曰：「可。古猶今也。」冉求失問而退，明日復見，曰：「昔者吾問『未有天地可知乎』，夫子曰：『可。古猶今也。』昔日昭然，今日吾昧然，敢問何謂也？」

[...]

仲尼曰：「[...] 不以生生死，不以死死生。死生有待邪？皆有所一體。有先天地生者物邪？物物者非物。物出不得先物也，猶其有

⁵⁸ Sarkissian (2018, 305).

⁵⁹ Consider, for instance, the ‘one thread’ that unifies the ‘way’ in the *Analects* at IV.15, which many scholars take to be related to the ‘golden rule’ doctrine laid out at XV.24: “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” (己所不欲，勿施於人。).

物也。猶其有物也，无已。聖人之愛人也終无已者，亦乃取於是者也。」

Ran Qiu asked Confucius, “Can the state before there was Heaven and Earth be known?”

Confucius said, “Yes. The past is like the present.”

Ran Qiu could think of no more questions and withdrew, but he returned the next day and said, “Yesterday I asked you if the state before there was Heaven and Earth could be known, and you said that it could, that the past was like the present. At the time this was crystal clear, but now it makes no sense to me. May I ask what this means?

[...]

Confucius said [...] “It is not life that produces death, and it is not death that ends life. Do the endings and producings depend on something else then? All have to them that which unifies them as parts of a single body (*yi ti* 一體). But if there were something before Heaven and Earth (*tiandi* 天地), could it be any specifiable being (*wu* 物)? What makes beings beings (*wu wu zhe* 物物者) is no being (*fei wu* 非物), for as soon as being has appeared, it is no longer prior (*xian* 先) to all beings (*wu* 物). It may seem as if there is something (you 有物) there, but what seems to be a something (*you wu* 有物) is only the endlessness. The endlessness of the sage’s care for others (*shengren zhi ai ren* 聖人之愛人) takes its cue from this.⁶⁰

Strikingly, Zhuangzi here relates the metaphysical notion of one body to an ethical principle specified as *caring for others*. While the Confucians’ and Mohists’ ethical doctrines differed significantly (even to the point of being contradictory, as discussed in Chapter 3), it is hard to miss the parallel here between (i) Confucius’ discussion of the one body unifying (or underlying) Heaven and Earth on the one hand, and his doctrine of loving others on the other, and (ii) Huizi’s claim that *tiandi* – the cosmos as a whole – is one body, which is linked to the (Mohist) idea of inclusive/impartial care connecting all things in thesis 10.⁶¹

⁶⁰ G22/762–763=HY60/22/70–72,74–76. Trans. Ziporyn (2020, 181), modified.

⁶¹ Compare A7 in the Later Mohist Canon: “Benevolence is care for *ti*” (*ren, ti ai ye* 仁，體愛也。). This can be taken to mean both that benevolence is caring for humanity as a whole (where *ti* is construed as the compound whole, in this case humanity/the world as a whole) and that benevolence

We now have another reason to favour generous numerical monism as a reading of Huizi's tenth thesis, which has to do with the implications of the idea of a cosmic *body*. Zhuangzi himself implies that Confucius accepted something like this idea of one *body*, which he obviously does not suggest precludes the existence of people. The fact that Huizi apparently used the expression 'the one body', and not simply 'the one', thus seems to speak to generous numerical monism, and not to strict or moderate numerical monism.

§2.4. Zhuangzi's implicit target

I have argued that Zhuangzi's words argument has significant bite on the assumption that its target is either strict or moderate numerical monism. I noted that the scholarship generally assumes Huizi's monism to be on a par with that of Parmenides, and that, if scholars are right about this – whether we specify Parmenidean monism as strict or moderate numerical monism – then the argument works very well.

Yet comparison with Parmenides may be unwarranted. As I argued in light of the evidence we have for Huizi's thought in *Zh.* 33, it seems Huizi's monism amounted to a version of generous numerical monism. It could well be that Zhuangzi was not particularly concerned to disentangle Huizi's view from other versions of numerical monism found in early (proto-)Daoist cosmological texts, wherein strict or moderate numerical monism are plausibly at issue. That Zhuangzi presented the monist thesis under attack in terms simply of the One, rather than in terms of the One body (an expression which I argued is associated with generous

is caring for units/parts of humanity/the world (where *ti* is construed as the parts of the compound whole).

numerical monism in later Chinese philosophical texts, and possibly already also in the *Zhuangzi*), suggests that he intended the argument to target strict or moderate numerical monism rather than generous numerical monism, regardless of whether this was a faithful account of Huizi's views.

But perhaps Zhuangzi's conflation of these different kinds of views makes a serious point, drawing attention to a common challenge to which they are all vulnerable: is our *uttering* the 'One' – no matter how laxly understood – *ever* defensible? Isn't the existence of the *utterance* – which is one way of understanding Zhuangzi's reference to 'what we say' in the words argument – sufficient to refute even generous numerical monism? Whether or not his opponents accepted the premise that words have referents (a premise to which, as we saw in Chapter 4, Zhuangzi himself certainly did not commit himself),⁶² weren't they still faced with the challenge that their *uttering* the 'One' itself proved the existence of at least two things: the One and the *utterance* of it? The generous numerical monist might reply that this utterance was already internal to the One it is about, so that it is not additional to it. But the counter-response, in the spirit of the words argument, would then be that, however broadly we conceive of the One, we could still make a further utterance about that whole, since (as the argument suggests) there is an *infinite* number of utterances one could make about it. This would seem to prove the existence of things over and above that whole. On this interpretation, Zhuangzi is perfectly entitled to attack both Huizi's and the (proto-)Daoists' views.

⁶² While the *Zhuangzi* is probably the first Chinese text to challenge explicitly the assumption that words have referents, some (possibly earlier) Daoist texts might seem to anticipate these challenges. Most famously, see *Laozi* 1. See further Porat (2022, 240–241) and D'Ambrosio et al. (2018).

§3. Zhuangzi's words argument as a non-committal challenge to

Parmenidean monism

§3.1. *Zhuangzi's motivations*

Another question is why Zhuangzi would bother with the words argument in the first place? What is the point of it?

According to the interpretation that Zhuangzi is a perspectival relativist (against which I levelled textual and philosophical objections in Chapters 3 and 4), Zhuangzi refuses to make any *absolutist* claim about how things are, and instead relativizes knowledge to the perceiver. As we have seen, this view is most famously defended by Hansen, and with some modifications and caveats it has also found support in the work of Fraser.⁶³ According to Fraser (2009, 446), Zhuangzi is sceptical not about our ability to judge and act in an everyday sense, “but only [about] whether we can know or justify that the norms by which we judge and act have a privileged status—that they are uniquely or ultimately (*guo*) correct—and whether we can obtain privileged knowledge of the ultimate causes of things”. Hansen and Fraser agree that Zhuangzi is sceptical about whether we can recognize absolutely correct or justified action-guiding distinctions. By ‘sceptical’ both Hansen and Fraser mean that Zhuangzi firmly *denies* such absolutist knowledge to be within our reach. On their view Zhuangzi does not remain agnostic about our ability to achieve absolutist ethical knowledge – as the more radically sceptical reading I defended throughout Chapters 3 and 4 would require.

This has important implications for the motivations Zhuangzi is taken to have in introducing the words argument against Huizi. Fraser (2009, 445) believes that Zhuangzi shares many of Huizi's relativist inclinations (especially in theses 1

⁶³ See Hansen (1983; 2000 [1992]; 2003a; 2003b; 2014) and Fraser (2009).

and 5), since Zhuangzi rejects what Fraser calls normative monism, that is to say, the view that there is a single authoritatively correct account of reality according to which one should live one's life. For Fraser, then, the sticking point between Zhuangzi and Huizi comes down to Zhuangzi's resistance to the (absolutist) move to monism (present in Huizi's tenth thesis), including its implication of an absolutist ethical framework.⁶⁴ In short, Fraser believes that Zhuangzi's words argument is meant to support his denial that monism – both as an account of reality and as an ethical principle – is true. Zhuangzi, on this view, is a kind of negative dogmatist.

Another line of interpretation I considered in Chapter 3 is the 'mystical monist' or 'anti-language' interpretation, whose problematic roots I traced in Chapter 2. In a nutshell, this still widespread interpretation amounts to the claim that Zhuangzi (like certain other Daoist thinkers): (1) rejected the ability of language to capture reality;⁶⁵ and that he was at the same time (2) committed to the idea of a metaphysical absolute, which he allegedly referred to as *Dao*⁶⁶ – following the (alleged) model of texts like the *Laozi*.⁶⁷ Proponents of this view often make a particularly strong claim about the nature of reality, or *Dao*, on behalf of Zhuangzi, amounting to the idea that (3) reality is *an indivisible whole*⁶⁸ – thus casting

⁶⁴ Fraser (2020 [2005]).

⁶⁵ Most self-described 'mystical' interpretations of the *Zhuangzi* make this claim on his behalf. One illustrative example is Watson's (1968, 3) claim that in trying to describe Zhuangzi's response to the problems of his time he "shall undoubtedly be doing violence to its essentially mystic and indescribable nature".

⁶⁶ See e.g. Lau (1963, xvii) and Schwartz (1985, 194).

⁶⁷ Here scholars often refer to *Laozi* 1 and 25, wherein the very label '*Dao*' is itself called into question.

⁶⁸ As Fraser (2009, 444, with n. 23) points out (echoing some of Hansen's complaints about the 'mystical monist' or 'primitive Daoist' interpretation at 2000 [1992], 265–272, 285–292), a view of this kind is found in Feng (1948); Schwartz (1985, 216–217; see also 192–194); Graham (2001 [1981], 9); and Ivanhoe (1993; 1996). Similar claims are made by Maspero (1978 [1927], 306–308); Feng (1948); Creel (1970, esp. 40); Schwartz (1985, 192–194, 216–217); Graham (1989, 176; see also 1969, 144); Robinet (1997 [1992], 31–34); Lundberg (1998, 213–214); Coyle (1998, 200–201); Lee (1998, 461); (noncommittally) Kohn (2014, esp. 178–179); and Porat (2015, esp. 128–129). Graham (1969, 144) specifically attributes to Zhuangzi the idea that "all language dissolves in the immediate experience of an undifferentiated world".

Zhuangzi as wedded to strict numerical monism (since it is typically claimed that linguistic or conceptual distinctions in and of themselves undermine *Dao*). This interpretation presumably supposes Zhuangzi's words argument to be an attack not on numerical monism itself, but rather on the attempt to formulate or mediate it through words. Zhuangzi himself would thus presumably have to deny (dogmatically) that words refer to anything, on pain of refuting numerical monism.

The more radically sceptical reading that I defend throughout Chapters 3 and 4 better accounts for these passages, and can also accommodate passages that express scepticism not tied to the limitations of language. On this view, Zhuangzi not only takes numerical monism to be dialectically untenable and impossible to express coherently, but he also introduces the argument as part of a broader sceptical challenge against those who would claim to *know* that reality is numerically one. On my view, Zhuangzi does not commit himself to numerical monism, nor does he dismiss it out of hand. For what if it did turn out that there really were just one thing, whether understood in strict, moderate, or generous terms? Zhuangzi seems prepared to entertain even the two more extreme versions in the background of Plato's challenge against Parmenides; after all, we find characters doubting their own existence, or their possession of a 'self', in several chapters.⁶⁹ Later in *Zh.* 2, Zhuangzi considers (via the character Chang Wuzi) the possibility that one might "achieve simplicity in oneness" (*yi cheng chun* — 成純⁷⁰); but if there were such a simple oneness, then presumably words would no longer have any meaning – indeed there would be no words at all. So how can Chang Wuzi (who in this scenario does not exist) express this possibility? Zhuangzi has Chang

⁶⁹ E.g. G1/17=HY2/1/21–22; G2/111=HY7/2/94–96; G2/45=HY3/2/3; G2/55=HY4/2/14–15; G4.148=HY9/4/28–29.

⁷⁰ G2/100=HY6/2/78.

Wuzi preface the claim by saying that he is going to speak some “reckless words” (*wang yan* 妄言), imploring his interlocutor (Qu Quezi) equally to “listen recklessly” (*wang ting* 妄聽) to these words.⁷¹ This may be a recognition on Chang Wuzi’s (and Zhuangzi’s) part that the theory cannot be coherently defended, but that it is nevertheless worthy of (reckless) consideration. Recall that Chang Wuzi was prepared to entertain the possibility that everything he takes to be real might be just a dream (as discussed in Chapter 3).

I now return to the question whether Parmenides might himself have been alive to the problems raised by numerical monism. I then discuss how this might in turn shed light on some of his reservations about human thinkers and knowers, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

§3.2. What follows from numerical monism?

We have seen that Plato’s and Zhuangzi’s similar lines of attack against numerical monism depend on the monist engaging in dialogue with her interlocutor, or at least on her trying to *formulate* her thesis using words. But apart from the question whether numerical monism could ever be defended dialectically, we should also note that as soon as Parmenides came into existence he ruled out its truth.⁷² While it may be true that the monist has been reduced to silence, and that her very existence rules out the theory, it remains that the theory – though unspeakable and indefensible – could still be the fact of the matter.⁷³ Zhuangzi is willing to entertain precisely such a possibility, despite its seemingly absurd consequences. If we do not

⁷¹ G2/100=HY6/2/76–77.

⁷² For these and other consequences of numerical monism in relation to Parmenides’ poem, see Cherubin (2017) and (though he does not himself accept the numerical monist interpretation) Tor (forthcoming a).

⁷³ See McCabe (2000, 79) and Mackenzie (1982, 8).

grant the premise that we exist as individual cognizers and speakers, then (strict or moderate) numerical monism could still be true.

One might think that Parmenidean (moderate) numerical monism leaves room for a particular kind of monistic entity (coherently) thinking itself: namely, an entity with properties like (self-)cognition, oneness, ungeneratedness, imperishability, etc. – a conception of being for which there is some textual support in Parmenides’ fragments.

§3.3. *The case for being’s self-cognition in Parmenides’ fragments*

The locus classicus for being’s self-cognition is fragment B3=D6.8: τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι. This line – rendered as “For it is the same to think and to be” – is often invoked to support what has been called the “mind/being identity” thesis (as seen in Chapter 3), according to which Parmenides asserts the identity, or coextensiveness, of thinking and being, which implies that being itself is cognitive. Read this way, this line lends itself to a (moderate) numerical monist interpretation, whereby the one thing there is has the essential property that it thinks itself. Parmenides’ reference to the unshaken heart or *mind* (*ētor*) of well-rounded reality in the proem (B1.29=D4.29) might further speak to the idea that being is itself endowed with cognition. A third piece of evidence for the idea that being itself is cognitive is more indirect: several scholars have stressed how other Greek thinkers tended to attribute divinity, vitality, as well as *intelligence* to their fundamental principles,⁷⁴ which they take to suggest that Parmenides plausibly did too.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See Long (1996, 140); Sedley (1999, 120); and Coxon (2009 [1986], 297).

⁷⁵ For a recent criticism of such an inference, see Bryan (2020b, 82–83).

There is a question about what the one entity's self-cognition would look like. Could there be more than one thought that being has about itself – say, a variety of thoughts about its own properties?⁷⁶ This would seem coherent on the 'moderate' version of numerical monism set out above; but not on strict numerical monism, since the mere attribution of a property to the one (which is already a thing), including the property that it thinks about itself (which is another thing), would be a violation of strict numerical monism.⁷⁷ Put differently, one thing thinking itself is already different from a thing that is, which is a violation of strict numerical monism. So strict numerical monism descends into incoherence even in the case of this one entity thinking itself. But a more moderate version of numerical monism, which seems to be in the spirit of Parmenides' account of being, could still in principle be true even if the one entity had the specific property of cognizing itself.

Notice that if there were such a thing as a numerically one entity that thought itself, then there would still be no way for numerical monism to be (literally) spoken about, not even by the one entity. The only entity that would exist would not be able to have a mouth – since the existence of separate organs would imply the existence of several things, which would undermine moderate numerical monism.⁷⁸ This might also be seen to raise difficulties for being's having a 'heart' or 'mind' *as a*

⁷⁶ I cannot here consider whether such thoughts would be allowed to be linguistic or propositional, as this would take us too far afield.

⁷⁷ See Plato, *Parmenides* 132b–c for the objection that if there are thoughts, then there must be a thinker.

⁷⁸ There are independent reasons to think that Parmenides is unlikely to have missed this putative constraint on his conception of being, which have to do with his predecessor Xenophanes' attack on anthropomorphism. The latter advocated for a supreme, motionless divinity endowed with cognition (see DK21=LM3 B25=D18 for the attribution of *noos* to this divinity), and explicitly guarded against anthropomorphizing the gods as having a *voice* and (humanlike) body parts: "But mortals think that the gods come to be | And have their clothes and voice and body" (DK21=LM3 B14=D12). For relevant Xenophanean echoes in Parmenides, see Bryan (2012, 98–100; 2020b, 91). Note also the goddess' description in Parmenides poem of the wayward mortals as plying "an aimless eye and echoing ear and tongue" (ἄσκοπον ὄμμα καὶ ἠχέεσσαν ἀκοὴν | καὶ γλῶσσαν, B7.4–5=D8.4–5).

part of itself. However, a point which A. H. Coxon has noticed (2009 [1986], 283) is that the heart (*ētor*) of reality and reality are presented as being interchangeable (compare B1.28–29=D4.28–29 and B8.50–51=D8.55–56). Moreover, Shaul Tor (2017, 300–301) argues that the “unshaken heart of well-rounded reality” (B1.29=D4.29) is unlikely to be a possessive genitive, since “[w]ell-rounded reality is itself, for Parmenides, identical with the indivisible what-is (recall B8.50–1), which does not have a heart as opposed to other parts”. Instead Tor proposes that it should be interpreted as a genitive of material or contents, so that “[t]he unshaken heart itself comprises the well-rounded reality”. This would be consistent with a version of the being/mind identity thesis that scholars have been inclined to glean from passages like B3=D6.8 in support of the (moderate) numerical monist reading.

Taking stock

In this Chapter, I showed that the traditional reading of Parmenides as a numerical monist brings with it a self-refutation challenge whose consequences are not immediately obvious. I sought to explicate what the nature of the self-refutation challenge at issue is, and its implications for the status of Parmenides’ thesis. In particular, I suggested that Parmenides’ putative endorsement of numerical monism falls prey to operational self-refutation – meaning that there is no coherent way for him to defend or express the thesis in a way that does not falsify it. Here I engaged with an argument against numerical monism to be found in Plato’s *Sophist*, which I showed has a close (but much less-well known) cousin in *Zh.* 2. Both versions of the argument, I submit, implicitly show strict or moderate numerical monism to be operationally self-refuting. Zhuangzi’s words argument even succeeds as an argument against *generous* numerical monism as well.

Having considered at length the question of what motivates Zhuangzi's words argument, I argued that Zhuangzi and Plato do part ways in important respects. Unlike Plato, Zhuangzi is not concerned to make a case for the falsehood of numerical monism; rather, he introduces the argument as part of a sceptical challenge against those who would claim to *know* that reality is numerically one (however numerical monism is understood). The words argument, on this view, functions as a *dialectical* move against dogmatic opponents – in this case, possibly earlier Daoists, or Huizi, or both.

Acting as both a critic and a (cautious) proponent of numerical monism in different parts of the text, Zhuangzi is prepared to launch an attack on numerical monism while also contemplating the possibility that it might be true. This is an invitation to consider the consequences of affirming numerical monism more seriously than we might otherwise be led to do in contemplating Parmenides' predicament.

I have considered what follows from taking seriously, on behalf of Parmenides, the idea that numerical monism might still be the fact of the matter. In such a world, the only admissible kind of thinking would be that which being has of itself – a conception of being and thinking for which there is some textual support. I connected this hypothesis to Parmenides' second-order restraint about the very possibility of human thought and cognition, which is exactly what we would expect from a circumspect numerical monist – one apparently wedded to his thesis but aware of its self-defeating character.

Conclusion

I have argued that widespread misconceptions about the early history of philosophy hamper engagement with ancient philosophy within a global purview.

In Chapter 1, I identified a widely disseminated and still influential narrative in the history of philosophy, according to which the emergence of (Greek) philosophy can be explained by a break from *mythos* to *logos*. I showed that this framework props up a much broader origin story: that of the emergence of so-called ‘Western Philosophy’, which is routinely framed as being interchangeable with the history of philosophy *tout court*. While less visible in specialist literature, this framework feeds implicitly into misconceptions about early Greek philosophy and underpins the continued marginalization of ancient traditions beyond Graeco-Roman philosophy. I highlighted problems that arise for the specialist of ancient philosophy when the flaws of these kinds of accounts are not confronted directly and systematically.

In Chapters 2–5, I offered two concrete cases whereby even our first-order philosophical interpretation of early philosophers is affected in major ways by these kinds of macro-narratives in the history of philosophy.

In Chapter 2, I showed that the received *mythos-logos* framework primes specialists to see Parmenides as exhibiting triumphalist attitudes to knowledge, such that he allegedly vindicated humans’ ability to know reality with almost brazen assurance. I demonstrated that this commonplace continues to seep into recent scholarship, even as it risks disregarding the true depth of Parmenides’ reflections on the problem of knowledge. Conversely, I argued that persistent historiographical and metaphilosophical biases encourage specialists of Chinese philosophy to sign up to Zhuangzi’s proverbial depiction as an anti-rational mystic who dismisses the

value of language, or as a negative dogmatist who rejects the possibility of (objective) knowledge.

In Chapter 3, I showed how approaching Parmenides' fragments afresh, freed from the interpretive burden of the *mythos-logos* framework, helps bring into focus an unobvious yet textually supported feature of his thinking: that he takes humans' cognitive relationship to being to be complicated and indirect. In tandem I demonstrated that approaching Zhuangzi's philosophy anew without being hamstrung by the inherited biases that typically underpin his marginalization from the field of ancient philosophy enables us to assess meaningfully the coherence and sophistication of his distinctively interrogative approach to philosophical inquiry. Despite starting from markedly different premises, Parmenides and Zhuangzi both worried that human cognition is (or appears to be) limited, such that they end up refraining from attributing unqualified knowledge to humans. I showed that Parmenides takes there to be a lack of cognitive fit between human beings – understood as creatures limited to a particular viewpoint on things typified by contrasts between sensory opposites – and the object of inquiry he describes as 'what-is'. Whereas Parmenides' philosophical motivations for such reservations are not immediately obvious, Zhuangzi has clear philosophical reasons for hesitating to sign up to knowledge claims. His scepticism is motivated not only by the observation of profound disagreements among humans, but also by a suspicion of what humans *share in common*: namely, the species-centric lens through which we view and interpret the world around us.

In Chapter 4, I analysed Zhuangzi's ingenious – and overtly ambivalent – use of language, analogies, and literary masks as a touchstone for rethinking his argumentative strategies. I highlighted how Zhuangzi's self-reflective appeal to

analogies allows him both to pre-empt the charge of self-refutation and to entertain seriously, though noncommittally, the viability of constructive claims about how things are. Drawing inspiration from Zhuangzi's subversive use of analogies, I argued that Parmenides' use of analogical reasoning further destabilizes the idea that the *kouros* (or any other human) can directly cognize being, building on the findings of Chapter 3. I then outlined (albeit noncommittally) two competing ways of spelling out these concerns, neither of which hangs on imputing a particular ontological view to Parmenides. The first was that we learn about the nature of reality indirectly through deductive arguments, so that reality is not altogether beyond our cognitive reach. The second was a possible sceptical reading, according to which Parmenides ultimately doubts the knowability of being, and in the end commits himself neither to the *Alētheia* nor to the *Doxa*; instead, he presents us with a complex philosophical puzzle.

My claims and conclusions about Parmenides' second-order concerns leave several subsequent interpretive avenues and outcomes open for exploration, and do not rest on ascribing to him a definite ontological theory. In Chapter 5, I considered a line of interpretation which presumes a more specific view on the ontology of the *Alētheia*. This is the once-orthodox numerical monist reading, which has almost always been associated with naïvely optimistic metaphysical inquiry. I argued however that Parmenides would have been alive to the self-refuting tension underling his (putative) thesis that there is only one thing. On this view, Parmenides never identifies any individual cognizer of being because his conception of being precludes the existence of individual cognizers. This would be another reason why cognizing being is impossible for humans, including the *kouros*. Drawing on Zhuangzi's sceptical reflections on the expressibility and knowability of numerical

monism, and his radical willingness to consider arguments both for and against the view, I also suggested that a Parmenidean version of numerical monism, while vulnerable to the self-refutation challenge, might be a less unreflective view to hold than has often been presumed.

But even numerical monism, as I have shown with the help of the dialogical perspective, is not as determinate a view as it might seem. Indeed, it can and has been spelled out in a number of ways in the history of philosophy, with different degrees of stringency placed on the requirement that there be only one thing. I showed that Zhuangzi is deliberately ambiguous as to precisely what kind of numerical monism he sets out to target through the words argument, and succeeds at challenging different versions of that view. The expectation that Parmenides must have endorsed a single, definite, and clear ontological position may itself be symptomatic of the pressures of the *mythos-logos* narrative. After all, if Parmenides thought he had an uncomplicated grasp of reality, as the narrative of triumphalist rationalism encourages us to believe, then it is natural to see him as having endorsed a specific positive view of reality, and moreover, to have endeavoured to communicate such a view clearly. I suggested that these assumptions are neither obvious nor necessary. Not only is the evidence itself under-determined – as the proliferation of interpretations of Parmenides’ ontological views in recent decades suggests – but we also cannot rule out (at least in the light of currently available evidence) the possibility of *deliberate* ambiguity on Parmenides’ part as a way of hedging on exactly what the upshot of the poem ought to be.

Through a process of conceptual cross-fertilization, this dialogical study has enriched our exploration of what follows, in concrete interpretive terms, from reconsidering grand narratives in the history of philosophy. It has demonstrated the

value of engaging critically and seriously with the broader history and historiography of philosophy, and how doing so can genuinely lead to rethinking fundamentally issues in first-order philosophical interpretation. At a metaphilosophical level, the critical study of the historiography of philosophy alongside cross-cultural and dialogical engagement is, I submit, a crucial step forward in the direction of a globally oriented ancient philosophy, ripe with new interpretive possibilities.

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