PLATO’S ARGUMENT FOR THE FORMS IN PARMENIDES 135B-C

MSt in Ancient Philosophy Thesis

JUSTIN WILLIAM KEENA

KEBLE COLLEGE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
# Table of Contents

**Abstract**  
3

**Introduction**  
4

I. Nature of the Forms  
6

II. The Argument of *Parmenides* 135b-c: Structure  
9

III. The Argument of *Parmenides* 135b-c: Content  
14

IV. The Necessity of Forms for Objects of Thought  
27

V. The Necessity of Forms for Meanings  
34

VI. Decision and Conclusion  
42

**Works Cited**  
47
Abstract

In this paper, I interpret and examine Plato’s argument for the existence of Forms in *Parmenides* 135b-c. After highlighting several key features of the nature of Forms, I lay out in detail first the structure of the argument, and then its content. According to the interpretation I offer, Plato is claiming that immutable, non-sensible Forms are a necessary condition of all thought, communication, and philosophy. Since the reasoning behind this claim turns on why such Forms are necessary for thought, I then consecutively reconstruct the two main possibilities. Either immutable, non-sensible Forms are necessary (1) for thought to have an object or (2) for the existence of meanings. Ultimately, I decide in favor of (2), concluding that meanings are Forms, and thus requisite for thinking, communicating, and philosophizing.
INTRODUCTION

Why did Plato think that there were Forms? Based on the evidence of the dialogues, what argument(s) led him to conclude that Forms exist? While there are many plausible answers to this question, the most promising arise from what appear to be the only two direct, explicit arguments for the existence of Forms in the dialogues: Parmenides 135b-c and Timaeus 51b-52a. No doubt other arguments based on other passages can be reconstructed, but they would be indirect and implicit: that is to say, no passages besides these two purport, on their surface, to prove the thesis “Forms exist.” In order to detect others elsewhere we would have to infer the (implicit) structure of the argument from the (explicit) statements in the text. On the other hand, the passages in the Parmenides and Timaeus make it plain that they are laying out an argument whose conclusion is “…therefore Forms exist.”¹ But while the argument of Timaeus 51b-52a certainly deserves a study in its own right, Parmenides 135b-c will be my focus here. My aim in this paper is twofold: to interpret this passage correctly and to understand as far as possible the argument it advances.

The way in which I will do so is as follows. In section I, I state what I take to be the main characteristics of the Forms, whose existence Parmenides 135b-c is supposed to be proving (though it does not attempt to prove the existence of something with all of these features). In sections II-III, I take a close look at the structure (section II) and content (section III) of the argument in this passage, attempting to identify and understand each of its steps, the claims they make, and how each transitions to the next. Ultimately, the overall interpretation of the argument will be shown to turn on the claim that, without immutable, non-sensible Forms, thought will be rendered impossible. Since this can be interpreted in two major ways, it will be necessary, in order to understand the impact of the whole argument, to consider each of these options. Doing so will require treatment of certain passages in dialogues other than the Parmenides which seem to countenance each of these

options. Consequently, in sections IV and V, I turn to the evidence of other dialogues in order to reconstruct the reasoning that may be underlying Parmenides 135b-c. Either Plato is saying (section IV) that, without immutable, non-sensible Forms, thought will have no object (and hence thought will be impossible); or that (section V), without immutable, non-sensible Forms, there will be no meanings (and hence thought will be impossible). Finally, in section VI, I weigh the evidence, offer some additional considerations, and decide which of the competing interpretations is preferable.
I. Nature of the Forms

At the very heart of Plato’s metaphysics lies a sharp distinction between sensible and intelligible objects. “It is this contrast and no other,” as Verity Harte rightly observes, “that shapes the contours of his ontology.” This fact merits our attention here because Plato characterizes the nature of the Forms most often in terms of how, as the intelligible objects par excellence, they differ from sensible ones. Contrasting them with the familiar empirical objects we have perceptual contact with in our everyday lives will help to make their peculiar nature clearer; or at the very least, indicate what they are not.

Forms differ from sensible things in at least five ways. First and foremost, they are, of course, non-sensible. However, simply acknowledging that Forms cannot be perceived with our bodily senses (Phaedo 65a-66a, Timaeus 52a), without any further clarification of what this really means, would not do justice to the non-sensible nature of Forms. Plato did not just think that, with the right technology or enhanced sensual powers, we might one day be able to spot a Form. The Forms are not non-sensible in the way that, for example, ultraviolet and infrared light are. Rather, the non-sensitivity of Forms is a feature that separates them from all sensible objects as such. As intelligible objects, the intrinsic non-sensibility Forms enjoy is categorically different from the relative non-sensibility of certain objects that belong to the sensible world. Plato himself tells us, for example, that individual particles of the four elemental bodies are non-sensible, or at least non-visible (Timaeus 56b-c), just like certain wavelengths of light. However, this is due to the nature of our senses, not to that of the physical phenomena in question. Elemental particles, like ultraviolet and infrared light, are only non-sensible in a qualified way—i.e., in relation to our senses. Nothing would prevent them from being perceived by other, more powerful senses (or by our own senses when helped by technological aids). Forms, on the other hand, are non-sensible in an unqualified way—i.e., not by virtue of any relation, but intrinsically. They

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2 Harte (2008), 192-3.
cannot be sensed even in principle, because they are a wholly different kind of thing—the kind of thing that cannot be sensed. What kind of thing, then, must they be? Elemental particles are material bodies, with spatial (53c) and temporal (37d) dimensions. As such, while they may be non-sensible relatively to us, they are still intrinsically capable of being sensed: some being could, with the proper sensual apparatus, perceive them. Something that has no spatial or temporal dimensions, however, could not possibly be sensed. Try, for example, to visualize a color without spatial extension (cf. *Meno* 74e-75c), or to imagine hearing a sound without temporal extension. Now Forms, unlike colors, sounds, and elemental particles, have no temporal (*Timaeus* 37e-38a; cf. *Parmenides* 141a-b) or spatial dimensions (*Symposium* 211a; *Phaedrus* 247b-c: Forms are ἀσχημάτιστος; *Timaeus* 50c-d: the Forms do not exist in χώρα or space, only their likenesses do). Hence, as non-spatiotemporal entities, they cannot possibly be perceived. To say that Forms are (intrinsically) non-sensible is not just to say that we cannot see or feel or hear them; it is to say that their mode of being by nature precludes their ever possibly being seen or felt or sensed in any way. It is, in short, to claim that they must exist in a non-spatiotemporal manner. Given that Plato contrasts Forms with sensible objects as such, non-sensibility/non-spatiotemporality is arguably the most basic, fundamental property of a Platonic Form.

Second, Forms are essences. To know a Form is to know what something is, the essence or nature of something. The Form of Beauty, for example, is what it is to be beautiful (*Symposium* 211d; cf. *Republic* 533b, *Parmenides* 133d-134a, *Philebus* 62a). Sensible things, on the other hand, must participate in these essences in order to be what they are (e.g., beautiful: *Hippias Major* 289d-e, *Phaedo* 100c). Third, Forms are ontologically independent, at least of sensible things.³ They remain totally unaffected by all the changes of their sensible participants, including their coming-to-be and passing away (*Symposium* 211b), and hence would exist on their own even if all their participants ceased to be.

³ Certain Forms do seem to depend on others to exist: viz., others depend on the Form of Good (*Republic* 509a-b) or of “that which is” (*Sophist* 259a).
Sensible participants, on the other hand, would not exist on their own as they are (if, indeed, they would exist at all) without their corresponding Form(s). Fourth, a Form is numerically one: there is only one Beauty itself, only one Justice itself, only one essence of anything. What it is to be beautiful or just is one and the same for every beautiful or just thing (Symposium 212a, Republic 476a; cf. Euthyphro 5d, 6d; Meno 72b-73d; Laches 191e, 192b). Unlike the multitude of sensible objects that participate in these essences, Forms cannot be multiplied. Fifth, they are immutable. Unlike sensible things, they cannot change in any possible way and always remain the same (Phaedo 78d; Republic 479a, 479e, 484b; Philebus 58a, 59a-c, 61d-62b; Timaeus 52a). Other features could be added (e.g., acting as exemplars/paradigms), but these suffice to illustrate the general flavor of Plato’s position.

Such, then, is the kind of thing whose existence Plato was trying to prove in Parmenides 135b-c: something whose nature differs radically from sensible objects in (at least some of) the five aforementioned ways. The argument of the Parmenides does not, however, seek to prove that something exists which has all five features. Instead, it focuses on demonstrating the existence of something with at least two of them (immutability and non-sensibility). Even so, we are still being confronted with a challenge to admit into our metaphysics, if not a fully-fledged Form, at least something strikingly Formlike: an immutable, non-sensible, really existing thing.

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4 Immutability is explicitly mentioned in the argument; but non-sensibility must be implied, given how the argument wishes to prove that there is a Form “of each thing,” where the things in question must be sensible, empirical objects. Something over and above sensible objects—i.e., something non-sensible—must be in question.
II. The Argument of *Parmenides* 135b-c: Structure

Before analyzing the content of the argument of *Parmenides* 135b-c it will be helpful to analyze its form or structure. There are two important features to notice on this front: (1) the way in which the argument is presented and (2) the type of argument it is.

(1) The argument is put into the mouth of Parmenides, who has just finished providing Socrates, his partner in conversation, with a series of problems about the Forms’ existence and nature (130a-135a). Summing up, he comments on the variety of problems and the remarkable talent it would require for someone to understand the Forms in detail and, presumably, be able to overcome the relevant difficulties (135a-b). It is at this point that he turns to the alternative philosophical position, according to which the Forms do not exist. At first he had been working under the supposition that Forms of such-and-such a nature existed: but this generated a host of problems (chief among them, difficulties for participation, the Largeness Regress, and the apparent fact that the Forms would be unknowable to us). Because of these problems, he now weighs the philosophical merit of the opposite supposition: that there are no such Forms. But as Parmenides goes on to elaborate in the argument of 135b-c, there are weighty problems generated by this supposition as well. On the one hand, the existence of Platonic Forms creates many puzzles. “But on the other hand (ἀλλὰ μέντοι),” as Parmenides says when introducing the argument, “if in turn someone will not allow Forms of things to exist, when he looks to all [the problems raised] just now and others like them,” then other problems will be generated as well, specifically the demise of διάνοια and the destruction of τὴν τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν (135b-c). The meaning of these consequences will be explored in detail in the next section. For now, notice that Parmenides has put us in a bind: we are in trouble whether we accept the existence of Forms or not. The earlier part of the dialogue had presented us with the first horn of a dilemma: Parmenides’ well-known puzzles about the existence of Platonic

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5 All translations are my own.
Forms. But now he presents us with the second horn of that dilemma (ἀλλὰ μέντοι): the problems raised by the nonexistence of Platonic Forms. In short, the argument of 135b-c presents itself as the second horn of a philosophical dilemma.

(2) The fact that the argument is the second horn of a dilemma is linked to the type of argument it is. In the first horn, Parmenides puts significant pressure on the supposition that Forms exist by deriving various difficulties, absurdities, and paradoxical conclusions from it. The overall bent of his argument thereby encourages the one who makes that initial supposition to reject it and accept its contradictory opposite. By giving up the initial supposition (that Forms exist), from which the problems are derived, and accepting its contradictory opposite (that Forms do not exist), those problems would disappear. This is, of course, the strategy of a reductio ad absurdum. The first horn of the dilemma is of this type.

But if we must give up the supposition that Forms exist, we must accept the supposition that they do not exist. This is, as we have already seen, the very supposition that generates the second horn of the dilemma. Thus the first horn, which employs the strategy of a reductio, leads straight to the second. But notice that the second horn also employs the same strategy. If we suppose that Forms do not exist, as the argument of 135b-c begins, certain problems arise, as the argument immediately deduces. Thus, just as before, in order to avoid these problems, we are now under a certain amount of pressure to give up our initial supposition (and revert to that of the first horn, thereby looping us in an endless cycle: that is the dilemma). The second horn of the dilemma, the argument of 135b-c, is in fact a reductio ad absurdum. Two additional points must now be made.

(3a) While the two horns are parallel insofar as they are both cast in the same form of argument (the reductio), and inversely symmetrical insofar as they both begin with the supposition that the other is trying to disprove, they are not accorded equal weight. Parmenides indicates that, while the first horn generates some difficult problems, they are not insurmountable (135a). It may take a “very naturally clever man” to overcome them, but
they can be overcome. While the first reductio ad absurdum does, it seems, result in certain problems, it does not fully live up to its name insofar as it does not result in strict, absolutely inescapable absurdity. It is remarkable, then, that Parmenides makes no such concession to the second horn, treating it as tersely and conclusively as if it were the final nail in a coffin.

“What, then, will you do about philosophy?” he asks Socrates immediately following the brief argument, and “Where will you turn when these [Forms] are unknown?” The implied answers are: nothing and nowhere. Philosophy itself will be irretrievably lost without Forms. There is no hint of hope that this consequence can be overcome, unlike those of the first horn. This suggests that the difficulties generated by the nonexistence of Forms are even more dire, more “weighty,” than those derived from their existence—so dire, it seems, that they cannot be overcome.

The observation that the two horns were not accorded equal “weight” is strongly corroborated by the fact that the second horn, the short argument of 135b-c, which spans only seven lines, is set over against the first horn, which takes up five full Stephanus pages. This little argument must, then, be a sufficient match for the whole series of critiques that constitute the first horn. If, therefore, the consequences of 135b-c were not greatly significant, the argument from which they are derived would not adequately function as the second horn of a complete dilemma (as Plato presents it to be). Only consequences whose force met or exceeded the collective force of all the consequences of Parmenides’ earlier critiques would create a complete, binding dilemma. Thus, if the first horn puts some pressure on the supposition that Forms exist with each of its arguments, the second horn must put enormous pressure on the supposition that Forms do not exist with its single argument. Any interpretation of the content of Parmenides 135b-c must, therefore, sufficiently explain the enormity of that pressure. This is the first interpretative criterion.

(3b) But it must also be pointed out that it is not just the abstract supposition “Forms do not exist” which the argument of 135b-c is pressuring. It is specifically pressuring (i)
“someone” (τις) who has (ii) accepted that supposition on the basis of certain arguments, whether those elaborated in the first horn of the dilemma or “others like them” (135b). It is not simply an abstract proposition or thesis that is being criticized and reduced to absurdity, but (i) any person (τις) who (ii) objects to it on grounds similar or identical to those expressed in Parmenides 130a-135a. Something such a person is doing or committed to must be under attack in 135b-c.

We know that the argument of 135b-c is intended to threaten (i) a person in some way, and not just an abstract proposition, because of the way in which it is formulated. The argument of 135b-c is not cast in impersonal, abstract terms like the puzzles of 130a-135a had been. It retains the same personal subject throughout: “if in turn someone (τις) will not allow Forms of things to exist, when he looks to all [the problems raised] just now and others like them,” then “he won’t even have a place to turn his διάνοια,” and “thus he will totally destroy the power of διαλέγεσθαι” (135b-c). It is his particular predicament that is being described. It is he whom Parmenides (the speaker in 135b-c) spells out the consequences for, he who is threatened with the results of his position. Parmenides does not give the impression of merely reducing this person’s abstract position to absurdity in a philosophical vacuum, content to derive inconsistent propositions from it in the realm of pure logic, as he had earlier. Something more than just the logical consistency of a philosophical position must be at stake: something that that person is committed to, or even in the process of doing, must be in peril. The consequences of his position have, so to speak, “escaped” the realm of pure logic and now confront him in a more practical way.

But (ii) what sort of person is he? All we know about him is that he is moved to object to the existence of the Forms “when he looks to all [the problems raised] just now and others like them” (135b). In other words, he is the sort of person who thinks that Forms don’t exist because of reasons identical or similar to those given in the first horn of the dilemma.
Therefore, because 135b-c is specifically pressuring this sort of person, the unpalatable consequences of denying the existence of the Forms (the demise of διάνοια and διαλέγεσθαι, not to mention philosophy) must be unpalatable to him, if anyone. They must undermine or threaten something that he, precisely as a person who objects to the thesis “Forms exist” on the basis of the critiques of the first horn (or similar ones), is ipso facto committed to, or even in the process of doing. This is not to say that every such person must be able to easily realize the philosophical trouble he is in (though the enormity of the trouble he must be in, as the first interpretative criterion demands, suggests that he would be). Nor is it to say that the argument of 135b-c will necessarily convince him. It is only to say that everyone who objects to the existence of Forms because of Parmenides’ earlier critiques (or similar ones) must have something in common which the second horn threatens or imperils. Something which some of them may, but others may not, be committed to would not suffice. Any satisfactory interpretation of the content of 135b-c must account for this as well. This is the second interpretative criterion.
III. THE ARGUMENT OF Parmenides 135b-c: CONTENT

We are now ready to embark on our examination of the content of the argument in 135b-c. Aware of how it is presented (as the second horn of a dilemma) and its logical form (as a *reductio*), we can now analyze the argument as a whole:

But on the other hand, said Parmenides, if in turn someone will not allow Forms of things to exist, when he looks to all [the problems raised] just now and others like them, and does not distinguish some Form of each single thing, he won’t even have a place to turn his thought (οὐδὲ ὅποι ἥκει τὴν δύναμιν ἐξει), since he doesn’t allow that the Idea of each thing is always the same, and thus he will totally destroy the power of discourse (τὴν τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν). (135b-c)

There are six key steps to the argument. The first four are explicitly stated here, while the final two, which are tacitly relied upon to complete the argument (because of its nature as a *reductio*), were sufficiently obvious to have been omitted. Putting them into proper order (and recasting them in an impersonal, logical form), we have:

1. Forms do not exist and (therefore) a Form for each thing cannot be distinguished.
2. Therefore there is not an Idea for each thing that is always the same.
3. Therefore there won’t be any place to turn one’s thought.
4. Therefore the power of discourse will be totally destroyed.
5. But (a) we do have a place to turn our thought, because we do think (i.e., in making this very argument, and also in arguing against the existence of Forms), and (b) the power of discourse is not destroyed, because we do discourse (i.e., in making this very argument, and also in arguing against the existence of Forms).
6. Therefore the initial denial was mistaken, and Forms do exist (or more fully: there is an Idea/Form† for each thing that is always the same).

The move from (1) to (2) is neither mysterious nor difficult to grasp, since it simply spells out what kind of thing the denier of Forms is rejecting: viz., something “that is always the same,” something permanently stable or immutable, which corresponds to some common character or aspect in its various participants. As we already know, Forms are by nature immutable; therefore, to deny that they exist is to deny that there is “an Idea for each thing

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† I take τίδος and ἴδετα in this passage to be either synonymous (as often in Plato), or to amount to the same thing. This accords with the previous context: for example, in 132c the two are equated (whether as synonyms or as co-referential terms, it matters not which). The ἴδετα in 135c is, moreover, said to be τὴν αὐτῆν ἓξει, and it is *prima facie* difficult to see how something less than a Platonic τίδος could be “always the same” (Aristotelian universals might do the trick, but they are not in question here). Cf. Gill and Ryan (1996), 133 n.10, 138; Rickless (2007), 65 n.5, 97.
that is always the same.” The transition from (2) to (3), however, is more obscure. But while the reasoning behind this transition is not obvious, the general shape of the requisite move is clear: the denial of certain metaphysically privileged objects (at the very least, given that they are Forms, something non-sensible) that are always the same (i.e., immutable) entails that thought will have no place to turn. Thus, non-sensible, immutable Forms are somehow a condition of the possibility of thought. This is the underlying principle of the transition from (2) to (3). Since the bulk of the argument’s weight rests on this transition, I will spend sections IV and V considering the two most likely candidates for the reason why Forms are a condition of the possibility of thought, and VI deciding between them.

The transition from (3) to (4) is the only other contentious and obscure move in this argument. There are three issues at stake. First, the meaning of διαλέγεσθαι in (4) (which I have translated, somewhat controversially, as “discourse”), which determines the claim that (4) is making; second, the meaning of “thought” (τὴν διάνοιαν) in (3), which delimits, but does not decide, the claim that (3) is making; and third, the precise claim that (3) is making, which, as I will argue, admits of two major interpretations. Thus, (3) will transition to (4) in two possible ways, depending on the claim it is making. That is to say, there are two possible reasons on account of which (3) the demise of thought (διάνοια) leads to (4) the destruction of “the power of discourse (διαλέγεσθαι).” As we shall see, either (3) thought will have no object or (3) thought will have no content or meaning, thus causing its demise; but either way, without thought, (4) no thought(s) could be expressed or communicated by “the power of discourse.”

But the precise claim that (3) is making does not only affect how the argument runs “downwards;” it also affects how the argument runs “upwards” as well. For if it is making one claim, it requires the transition from (2) to justify that claim; but if it is making another, a different justification will be required. If (3) is claiming that thought will have no object, it must be demonstrated why immutable, non-sensible Forms are required for thought to have
an object (thus enabling the possibility of thought). But if (3) is claiming that thought will have no content or meaning, it must be demonstrated why immutable, non-sensible Forms are required for the existence of meanings (thus enabling the possibility of thought). The reasons behind these two competing interpretations, which explain why Forms are a condition of the possibility of thought, will be explored in sections IV and V. In the present section, however, I will tackle the three issues which set up that interpretative disjunction, in the order enumerated above, and conclude by noting the two possible transitions from (3) to (4).

But first, to complete our bird’s-eye view of the whole argument, let us briefly consider the two final transitions, namely from (4) to (5) and (5) to (6). They are easy enough to follow and require little or no defense. Since the content of (5) depends wholly upon the interpretation of (3) and (4), to settle the meaning of the latter is to settle the meaning of the former. And insofar as (5) and (6) merely purport to finish the *reductio*, they should not pose a problem.

I propose to start at the bottom of the argument and work my way to the top. With (6) granted and the content of (5) depending partially upon the interpretation of (4), we are first confronted with the problem of how to translate *διάλεγεσθαι* as it appears in (4). The issue is whether to translate it technically, as philosophical “dialectic,” or non-technically, as “discourse” or “conversation” or “communication” in general.

Someone might wish to understand *διάλεγεσθαι* as “dialectic” for the following reasons. First, it would commit Plato to a weaker claim: for it would surely be a more radical assertion to maintain that the nonexistence of Forms destroys discourse in general than that it destroys philosophical discourse, dialectic, in particular. Second, one might

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7 Specifically, an instance of *modus tollens*, as Peterson (2000), 19-20 has pointed out.

8 Those who endorse the technical reading include, for example, Fine (1988), 130, though she does not argue for it and seems less certain of it in (1993), 133, 313 n.41. Gill and Ryan (1996), 51 n.82, also take “dialectic” to be somewhat technical, but without fully explaining why; likewise Crombie (1963), 332. For a commentator who *argues* (though open-endedly) for dialectic in the technical sense, see Rickless, (2007), 97-8. However, not all commentators who translate “dialectic” take it technically: Prior (1985), 83.

9 Those who endorse the non-technical reading, on the other hand, include Cornford (1939), 99-100; Ackrill, (1971), 208; Sayre (1996), 94, 324 n.75; Allen (1997), 203; Peterson (2000), 19 and (2008), 401.
detect a hint that philosophical dialectic was intended in Parmenides’ remark immediately following the argument of 135b-c. By saying that he thinks Socrates would be “well aware” (μάλλον ὄρθοςται) of such a consequence as the destruction of διάλεγομαι, Parmenides is perhaps revealing that, since he recognizes the particular importance which philosophical dialectic has for Socrates the definition-seeker, he would expect Socrates to be especially cognizant of anything which effected its ruin. Likewise his follow-up question to Socrates (“What will you do with philosophy [now that διάλεγομαι has been destroyed]?”) may be taken to indicate that a philosophical διάλεγομαι was intended. Finally, there is the remarkable fact that the same phrase τὴν τοῦ διάλεγομαι δύναμιν (in different grammatical forms) appears in places where Plato is indisputably discussing dialectic, notably Republic 6-7 (511b, 532d, 533a).10 So perhaps Plato is relying on our understanding of the Republic’s notion of dialectic here in the Parmenides.

Against the plausibility of this view I wish to level the following counter-arguments. First, the textual evidence of the Parmenides is not in its favor. The other two uses of this verb in the dialogue, one of them very soon after the argument of 135b-c, are non-technical and simply mean “converse” or “discuss” (126c-d, 135d). If its appearance at 135c is an instance of the technical sense, it is anomalous. Second, we would consequently have to suppose that Plato is wholly relying upon our knowledge of specific passages in another dialogue (Republic 511b-c, 531e-534c) to grasp his meaning, without a reminder or unambiguous hint.

Third, if Plato did have his Republic theory of dialectic in mind when writing Parmenides 135b-c, we would expect him to have been paying attention to his technical vocabulary. We would, therefore, reasonably expect his use of δύναμιν in step (3), defined as a technical term in the Republic alongside dialectic, to carry its own special sense as well. As it turns out, however, there are significant problems if this is the case. For dialectic,

10 Also Philebus 57c; however, since this was written after the Parmenides, Plato cannot be relying on our understanding of it here.
according to the *Republic*, dispenses with hypotheses\(^\text{11}\) by trying to uncover their ultimate foundation and thus achieve knowledge (ἐπιστήμη); it is precisely contrasted with διάνοια, which is confined to making use of hypotheses (e.g., in arithmetic and geometry) and thus can never attain the privileged understanding of ἐπιστήμη (533c-e). Now in *Parmenides* 135b-c, we are told that (at least part of) the reason why the power of dialectic would be destroyed is because one’s διάνοια has no “place to turn.” But if διάνοια meant what it did in the *Republic* as a technical term, then why would its having no “place to turn” preclude the power of dialectic? Why would the loss of a hypothetical power with lower epistemic prospects preclude the operation of a non-hypothetical power with higher epistemic prospects? Why couldn’t the dialectician, who “does away with hypotheses” anyways (*Republic* 533c), not carry on without διάνοια? It is true that the exercise of διάνοια is strongly encouraged for the philosopher as a suitable stepping-stone to prepare him or her for the exercise of νόησις and dialectic (524d-531d); but it is nowhere asserted to be strictly necessary. Even 533a states, not that dialectic can *only* reveal the truth to one versed in the mathematical, geometrical, and astronomical disciplines (which would make such studies, and διάνοια with them, strictly necessary to achieve dialectic), but that only dialectic can reveal it to such a person (which instead emphasizes the special nature of dialectic): “The power of dialectic alone (ἡ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμις μόνη) can reveal it to the one experienced in the [disciplines] we went through just now, and it is possible by no other [power] (ἄλλη δὲ οὐδαμῇ)” (533a). This is immediately followed by a parallel claim about what *only* dialectic can do (namely, systematically investigate the being of each thing itself, 533b), once again emphasizing its special nature.\(^\text{12}\) Plato, then, has not claimed that the exercise of διάνοια is necessary for the exercise of dialectic.

\(^{11}\) Thus it seems futile to take Parmenides’ method of hypothesis as practiced in the second part of the dialogue as an exercise of dialectic, as some do: for instance, Gill and Ryan (1996), 51-2 n.82.

\(^{12}\) Even if Plato did think that certain propaedeutic studies were necessary to achieve dialectic, this would apparently contradict what he says about dialectic elsewhere (*Phaedrus* 269a-270e, *Philebus* 16b-17a), “where he takes the contrary view that it is impossible to be scientific in any field of activity *until you are a dialectician*”: Robinson (1953), 75, emphasis mine.
So we are still left to wonder why διάνοια’s having nowhere to turn would preclude dialectic from operating. Of course, the fact that there are no Forms would, it seems, ultimately preclude both διάνοια and dialectic from having somewhere to turn. But then that would be the reason responsible for the destruction of dialectic, not διάνοια’s having nowhere to turn, as Plato requires (καὶ οὐτῶς, Parmenides 135c). The technical sense of διάνοια, therefore, seems to offer no reason why its demise would preclude dialectic. Thus, if διάνοια were being used technically in step (3), it would empty that part of Parmenides’ argument of any apparent explanatory power.

The fact is, if Plato had been using technical vocabulary in Parmenides 135b-c, διάνοια would not have been the natural or obvious choice of terms. If he had wanted to make it plain why the demise of some mental state would entail the destruction of dialectic, he would have chosen the mental state parallel to dialectic. He would have said that if ἐπιστήμη or νόησις had nowhere to turn, then dialectic would lose its power, not διάνοια. For ἐπιστήμη/νόησις is the epistemic state dialectic is aiming to achieve, and its demise would easily explain why, without it, dialectic becomes impossible. Choosing διάνοια instead either shows that Plato was not using technical language, or was relying on some obscure relationship between διάνοια and dialectic that the Republic itself does not help to explain. This is a very good reason to think that διάνοια was not being used in its technical sense; which is, in turn, a good reason to think that neither was διαλέγεσθαι.

The clinching argument against taking διαλέγεσθαι as “dialectic,” however, lies in the fact that to do so would violate the two interpretative criteria laid out in section II. First, we observed that 135b-c, as a short yet powerful second horn of a binding dilemma, must put enormous pressure on the supposition that Forms do not exist. But if διαλέγεσθαι merely means “dialectic,” no such pressure is created. If, on the one hand, dialectic is simply defined as the mental process that grasps Forms and the first principle, as the Republic’s pronouncements on it (511b-c, 533b-c) might lead one to think, then no pressure
is created at all. For if Forms do not exist (nor, presumably, any first principle such as the Form of the Good), and dialectic is what explores the Forms, then there would of course be nothing for dialectic to explore, and its power would be destroyed. The destruction of dialectic in this sense is simply entailed by the supposition that Forms do not exist by definition; hence it cannot also serve as an independent reason to reject that supposition (i.e., put pressure on it).

But if, on the other hand, Plato did not intend to define “dialectic” so narrowly, then a certain amount of pressure would be put on the claim that “Forms do not exist.” In 135c διαλέγεσθαι might mean, not the specific exploration of Forms, but the exploration of the natures of things in a more general sense. The consequence of denying Forms would not now be the (trivial) destruction of that which knows the Forms, but also the (much more substantial) destruction of that which knows the real natures of things, even if these are not necessarily Forms. But even on this reading, the pressure the loss of dialectic in this sense would put on the claim that “Forms do not exist” would be, at most, merely on a par with the pressure created by any one of Parmenides’ critiques in the first horn. It would not be as enormous as the first interpretative criterion demands: it would not meet or exceed the force of all Parmenides’ critiques put together. For instance: Parmenides argued that Forms, if they existed, would be totally unknowable to us (134c-135a); this would simply be balanced by the claim that, if there are no Forms, then we could not know the real natures of other things. Hence the combined weight of all Parmenides’ critiques in the first horn would far outweigh the consequences of the loss of dialectic, even in this sense. Thus if dialectic, even in this sense, were to be destroyed, we would not be sufficiently motivated to reassess our supposition that Forms do not exist, as the first interpretative criterion demands. 135b-c would fail to create the second horn of a genuine dilemma. If, however, διαλέγεσθαι means “discourse” or “communication” in a broad, non-technical sense (and if διάνοια means “thought” in an equally broad, non-technical sense), then 135b-c would create a
sufficiently (indeed, exceedingly) binding dilemma. For now, anyone who articulates (or even thinks) the supposition that Forms don’t exist would be refuted out of their own mouth (or head), thus being driven back to the first horn by an irresistible necessity. It would not even be possible for them to question the existence of the Forms, if their nonexistence entails the destruction of speech (and thought). They would presuppose, in short, the very position they intend to refute in the very act of attempting to refute it, thereby reducing them to an even greater absurdity than all the arguments of the first horn put together could possibly hope to achieve. The first interpretative criterion would be more than satisfied, since the pressure of the second horn would not only meet but even exceed the pressure of the first.

Interpreting διαλέγεσθαι as “dialectic” in any technical sense also fails to satisfy the second interpretative criterion. We saw that 135b-c is intended to threaten anyone who might object to the existence of Forms on the basis of the first horn’s arguments (or similar ones). Possible objectors must all have something in common which is undermined by the second horn. Now we know that they must all engage in thinking (because they act as if they had a “place to turn” their δίναμιν by thinking of objections to the Forms) and discoursing (because they exercise τίν τού διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν by articulating those objections). We do not, however, hear a word about their commitment to dialectic in any special sense; nor is any such commitment necessarily entailed by accepting, even tentatively, the validity of Parmenides’ critiques (or similar ones). It is possible for someone to be motivated by the first horn, feeling the force of Parmenides’ various critiques (or something like them), without being committed to dialectic in any sense. But in that case, if διαλέγεσθαι means “dialectic,” and the upshot of the second horn is that dialectic would be destroyed, this conclusion would pose no threat whatsoever to him—which is precisely what the second criterion forbids. The conclusions of 135b-c must threaten all those who are motivated by Parmenides’ critiques of the Forms (or similar ones).
I conclude, then, that taking διαλέγεσθαι as “dialectic” in 135c is an inadequate interpretation. Taking it to mean “discourse” or “conversation” or “communication” simultaneously relieves us of all the foregoing problems, satisfies the two interpretative criteria, and provides Plato’s argument at 135b-c with precisely the compelling force it purports to have, both as the second horn of a dilemma and as a reductio ad absurdum. For if discourse in general is impossible without the Forms, then, to avoid the patent absurdity of discoursing or conversing about the nonexistence of Forms, we are forced to reconsider the first horn of the dilemma. Thus, it is precisely the stronger claim that we must attribute to Plato (i.e., that “the power of discourse” will be destroyed, not merely the power of dialectic).

Most of the foregoing arguments about διαλέγεσθαι can be run with regard to διάνοια as well. First, it is only the non-technical, generic sense of “thought” that satisfies the two interpretative criteria. The demise of a restricted, technical, philosophical sense of διάνοια has not nearly the same impact as the demise of all thinking; and the exercise of thought in general is, of course, something all those who would object to the Forms must ipso facto be committed to. Second, as we have already seen in some detail, serious difficulties of interpretation would arise surrounding the connection between διάνοια and διαλέγεσθαι if both were being used technically. But if διαλέγεσθαι is not being used technically—to add a third point—then there is more reason to think that διάνοια is not either; not only because we would expect a parallelism of terms, but also (and more importantly) because Plato would not be entitled to conclude that, if a specific type of διάνοια met its demise, then διαλέγεσθαι in general would be destroyed. He requires the broad, generic sense of “thought” to preclude something as broad as “communication” or “discourse.” Fourthly, just as we saw in the case of διαλέγεσθαι, all the other uses of διάνοια in the text of the Parmenides are non-technical. In its four other appearances (143a, 158c, 165a, 165b) it means something as generic as our “thought” or “mind”—in fact,
the same phrase τῇ διάνοιᾳ is repeated in each instance and could easily be rendered “in thought” or “by thinking” or “in one’s mind” or “mentally”—and there is no reason to suppose that things are otherwise at 135b. The non-technical sense, then, seems to designate either the generic faculty of intellectual cognition or the exercise of that faculty, without regard to the specific nature of that exercise: i.e., whether the thought in question is a mere opinion or judgment, an act of knowledge or understanding, a true insight or a false belief, or something else altogether. That διάνοια can encompass most, if not all of these is evident from Republic 476d, where it is used generically to encompass other kinds of cognition, designating both knowledge (γνώμην) and opinion (δόξαν). Likewise in Phaedo 65e-66a, where it means intellectual cognition in general as opposed to sense perception. In these instances, διάνοια is not being singled out to fulfill any special or technical duty. Plato makes it clear when he is using it as a technical term (e.g, Republic 533b-d). Parmenides 135b, like Republic 476d and Phaedo 65e-66a, is not one of those cases.

We can now appreciate the true import of Parmenides’ remark immediately after the argument of 135b-c. Having just pointed out that the power of external communication or διάλεγεσθαι will be impossible without Forms (not to mention the demise of thought or διάνοια), he then asks Socrates, “What will you do with philosophy?” Without the power of διάλεγεσθαι, which must include the ability to articulate statements and assertions, there can be no ability to articulate philosophical statements or assertions either. If conversation in general is rendered impossible, so must philosophical conversation in particular. Likewise in the Sophist, the Eleatic Stranger concludes that, if “we were deprived of speech (λόγος), we would be deprived of philosophy” (260a). Plato is making the same move in both dialogues: drawing a narrower application (to philosophy) of a much wider-reaching (epistemic/linguistic) premise. The same type of move is made more than once in Parmenides 135b-c. Just as the demise of thought entails (as one particular consequence) the destruction of the means by which we express our thoughts to others, viz. dialogue, so
does the destruction of dialogue entail (as one particular consequence) the impossibility of philosophical dialogue. The argument is shaped, so to speak, like a funnel, moving from the wider to the narrower. Newer, more specific consequences are drawn out as it progresses. This is, in fact, yet another reason not to take διαλέγεσθαι as “dialectic;” for if we did, then Parmenides’ remark would be borderline redundant, failing to draw out any new consequence (and thereby destroying the more elegant “funnel” shape). For he would then be saying: “Now that the heart and soul of philosophy, philosophical dialectic, is demolished, what will you do with philosophy?” On the reading parallel to Sophist 260a, however, he is adding another consequence to the argument: “Now that the power of dialogue itself is demolished, what will you do about philosophy?”

Having sufficiently determined the meaning of διάνοια, διαλέγεσθαι, and the meaning of step (4) in the argument of 135b-c, we must now confront the next issue to be resolved: disambiguating the precise claim step (3) is making. Only then can we fully understand the two possible reasons why (3) the demise of thought must result in (4) the destruction of “the power of discourse” or communication. What, then, is being asserted by saying that (3) one’s thought will have no “place to turn”? It is clear enough that somehow, thought will be fundamentally vitiated; that, for some reason, successful thoughts will be precluded. Why might this occur?

The answer arises from the nature of thought. There are two ways in which thought as such might be fundamentally vitiated, precluding the possibility of successful thoughts. For every thought must, first of all, have an object (something it is about) and, second, involve some meaning(s) (which provide its contents). Object-less thoughts, as well as content-less/meaning-less thoughts, are equally impossible. Hence, when Plato says that thought will have no “place to turn,” he might mean either that thought will have no object,  

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13 At this point there is another significant resonance with the Sophist: “Thought (διάνοια) and speech (λόγος) are the same, except the former is the silent, internal conversation (διάλογος) of the soul with itself” (263e). Thus the demise of διάνοια, the soul’s internal διάλογος, would necessarily result in the destruction of the power of external διαλέγεσθαι.
or that there will be no meanings, and hence thought will have no contents. In either case thought will have no “place to turn,” thus sufficiently explaining why the very power of communication (not to mention philosophy) will have been destroyed.

Two points in the argument of *Parmenides* 135b-c will vary according to which of these claims step (3) is asserting: first, the transition it makes to step (4), and second, the move it requires from step (2) to justify itself. If, on the one hand, Plato is relying on the insight that thoughts must have objects, then he is saying that (3) without any object for thought, without any “place” for it “to turn,” there will be nothing for thought to be about. No thought will be about anything. But—here is the transition to (4)—since thoughts that are not about anything are impossible, there would be no thoughts; and if there were no thoughts, then (4) “the power of discourse,” by which we express our thoughts to others, would be totally destroyed. But if the claim of (3) is that there will be no object for thought, it requires the transition from (2) to explain why, without immutable, non-sensible Forms, thought will have no object. Forms must somehow be a condition of the possibility of objects of thought (and hence of thought itself, “the power of discourse,” and philosophy as well).

If, on the other hand, Plato is relying on the insight that thoughts must have content/in-volve meanings, then he is saying that (3) without any meanings, thought will have no “place to turn” because all thoughts will be meaning-less/content-less. Once again, since such thoughts are impossible, there would be no thoughts; and without thoughts, (4) “the power of discourse” would be destroyed along with them. But if the claim of (3) is that no thought will involve any meanings, it requires the transition from (2) to explain why, without immutable, non-sensible Forms, there would be no meanings to liaise with thought. Immutable, non-sensible Forms must somehow be a condition of the possibility of meanings (and hence of thought, language, and philosophy).

Though the transitions these two readings of step (3) make to step (4) are very
similar, the justifications they demand from the transition from step (2) are quite different.\textsuperscript{14} The first requires immutable, non-sensible Forms as a condition of the possibility of objects of thought; the second requires immutable, non-sensible Forms as a condition of the possibility of meanings. Since deciding between these two justifications would decide between the way the rest of the argument runs, it will now be our task to determine which Plato intended, and why. Doing so will take us, in many cases, farther afield from the \textit{Parmenides}. In sections IV and V I will lay out the nature of the options between which we must choose, making use of the evidence of other dialogues as required, and in VI I will make my choice.

\textsuperscript{14} There is, in fact, a \textit{third possible reading}, corresponding to a third possible justification, which can, however, safely be put aside. I have been assuming that, when Plato says thought “won’t even have a place to turn,” the fundamental problem for thought lies with (some violation of) the nature of thought, and not with the thinking subject. Destroying all possible objects of thought, on the one hand, or all meanings, on the other, constitutes just such a problem for the nature of thought. But suppose Plato is saying that, without Forms, there will be a fundamental problem \textit{with the thinking subject}: he won’t be able to think without Forms, not in the sense that the lack of objects or meanings prevents it, but because Forms help to structure the world for him from within, like Kantian categories. While this interpretation is technically possible, it turns Plato into an idealist, which is unacceptable. Even in the \textit{Parmenides} itself, Plato denies that Forms can be thoughts, i.e. entities merely in minds (132b-c). Burnyeat (1982), 20-3 has pointed out Plato’s ‘swift and brutal’ refutation of idealism in this passage.
IV. THE NECESSITY OF FORMS FOR OBJECTS OF THOUGHT

According to the first interpretation to be examined, Forms must exist in order for thought to have an object; otherwise, there will be no thought, discourse, or philosophy. We should, first of all, notice that Plato explicitly acknowledges the insight upon which this interpretation is based: namely that every thought, by its very nature and structure, must have an object, something that it is of or about or directed towards or “turned to.” He acknowledges this principle in the Parmenides itself, when he makes Socrates and Parmenides grant that every act of thought (νόημα) must necessarily be “of something” (τινός, 132b; cf. Republic 476e, Theaetetus 188e-189b, Sophist 262e-263c). For every act of thought (τὸ νόημα), there must be something that is thought (τὸ νοούμενον, 132c).

Why, then, might Plato have maintained that, without existing Forms, thought would have no object? What state of affairs would have to obtain in order to make “there is no object for thought” true, such that the absence of Forms might account for it? There seem to be three possible solutions, only one of which, however, stands out as a plausible interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c.

First, Plato seems to have held, as I shall argue below, that thought can only be about something that exists. If so, he might be saying in Parmenides 135b-c that there would be nothing for thought to be about, no object for it to “turn to,” if nothing at all were in existence. In this case he would have to demonstrate that without existing Forms, nothing else would exist either. Second, he might be relying on the idea that, if there were no thinking beings in existence, there would be no such thing as thought, as a result of which there would be no objects of thought either. In this case he would have to demonstrate that without an existing Form of Soul or Thinking Being, for instance, there would be no thinking beings. All the arguments and assumptions required to make these first two interpretations plausible would, however, be rather difficult to establish. Moreover, they do not fit the text of Parmenides 135b-c very well. Plato gives no indication that the existence
of all things, or even of souls or thinking beings, is in peril. The theme is, if anything, epistemological or even linguistic (thought, communication, philosophy), not metaphysical.

The third option, which is fully in keeping with the epistemological theme of 135b-c, has to do with what is required to become an object of thought. For every thought, as we know, there is something that is thought. This presupposes, of course, that the thing that is thought is thinkable (i.e., cognitively accessible). If something were not thinkable, that thing could not become an object of thought. Here, then, is a purely epistemological reason why thought would be deprived of any object: everything has somehow been rendered unthinkable. Plato may very well be claiming in 135b-c that, without Forms, nothing would be thinkable (in which case, (3) thought would have no object, (4) “the power of discourse” would be destroyed, and philosophy would be precluded). Call this the “thinkability-interpretation.” Let us explore this possibility, focusing first on the Forms, and then on other kinds of beings.

We begin, as the argument of Parmenides 135b-c dictates, by supposing that Forms do not exist. Would they still be thinkable? Not if Plato held, as he seems to have in at least some dialogues, that only what exists can be an object of thought. In Parmenides 132c, immediately after it is granted that thought must be of something, it is also granted that thought must be of “something that is” (ὄντος). As is well known, the verb “to be” in Greek can be used veridically (“is true”), predicatively (“is so-and-so”) or existentially (“exists”). However, a veridical reading of ὄντος is out of the question, since it is possible to think what is false (Theaetetus 193b-194b, Sophist 263d-264b). Is there any reason, then, to conclude that ὄντος was being used existentially rather than predicatively? An existential reading is in fact strongly suggested, if not demanded, by the context. Socrates, attempting to recover the numerical unity of each Form in the wake of the Largeness Regress, had ventured to say that perhaps Forms are thoughts (132b). Parmenides is now trying to refute this proposal, partially by relying on the principle that every thought must be of what is. On
a predicative reading, however, this principle would provide no apparent reason why
Socrates’ proposal would be problematic. But on an existential reading, it provides a
compelling reason. If Forms are thoughts, and thoughts must be of something that exists,
then Forms must be thoughts of something that exists. But, as Parmenides points out (132c),
this existing something will itself be a Form (for instance, the Form-thought Largeness
would be a thought of Largeness). And because this second, existing Form must be extra-
mental (since, if it were a mental entity, things would participate in our thoughts and
absurdities would result: 132c), a whole new duplicate set of existing, extra-mental Forms
would be generated on top of the original Form-thoughts. Thus, due to the existential force
of ὄντος, the numerical unity of the Forms would be destroyed once again, undercutting the
very motivation of Socrates’ proposal and thereby refuting it. Ὅντος, then, should be taken
existentially; in which case, Plato is claiming, at the beginning of 132c, that thought must be
of what exists. If we ask why he would assert something so odd (and, at least without further
qualification, incorrect), the answer would seem to lie in the argument of Theaetetus 188c-
189b, where he makes the parallel assertion that it is only possible to have an opinion about
something that exists. Just as to opine nothing at all is not to opine (189a), so, Plato may
have argued, to think nothing is not to think. Total nonexistence, it seems, cannot be
cognized. In reasoning this way, he would seem to have been influenced by the historical
Parmenides, who counseled the readers of his poem to bar their thought from the path of
“what is not” (μὴ ἐόντος) as something “neither speakable nor thinkable (νοητόν)” (DK
B8.7-8; cf. Sophist 238c, where τὸ μὴ ὁν is labeled ἀδιανοητόν, “unthinkable,” as well as
“unspeakable and unutterable”). But if it is impossible to think of nothingness, of total
nonexistence, then something must at least exist in order to become an object of thought.
Consequently if, as Parmenides 135b-c begins by supposing, the Forms do not exist, they
would not be thinkable.

16 But see Fine (1988), 142 and (1993), 139, 316 n.65.
What, then, about other things? Why should everything else lose its thinkability due to the nonexistence of Forms? Two arguments based on the end of the Cratylus would seem to explain this result. Cratylus 440a-b considers what would happen if the Forms changed due to “Heraclitean” flux, forever ceasing to be what they were. It does not matter, for our purposes, whether Plato thought there was in fact Heraclitean flux or not, nor whether without Forms, Heraclitean flux must inevitably result. Cratylus 440a-b is of interest to us solely because it imagines a situation that reveals, albeit indirectly and with limited success, the necessity of immutable, non-sensible Forms for the thinkability of all things (according to the first argument) or at least of changing things (according to the second). By revealing the necessity of immutable, non-sensible Forms for the thinkability of things, it follows that if Forms did not exist at all, those things would not be thinkable.

Cratylus 440a-b specifically considers what would happen to our knowledge if the Essence or Form of knowledge (αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος…τῆς γνώσεως) were in Heraclitean flux. The first argument based on this passage considers, on the basis of this precedent, what would happen to our thoughts if the essence of thought were in flux. What, then, happens to our knowledge if the Form of knowledge itself were to change? As it turns out, we could not have knowledge of anything:

But it isn’t even reasonable to say that there is knowledge, Cratylus, if all things are changing and nothing remains. For if, on the one hand, that thing itself, knowledge, did not change from being knowledge, then knowledge would always remain, and there would be knowledge. If, on the other hand, the Form of knowledge itself changed from being knowledge, it would at that moment change into a different Form than knowledge and there would be no knowledge; and if it were always changing, there would always be no knowledge. By this account, there will neither be anyone knowing nor anything known (440a-b).

If what it is to be knowledge, the Form of knowledge, were to change, then no knowledge that we have would be knowledge any longer; for what it is to be that sort of thing would have changed. Without the Form or Essence staying the same, the things that have the same character or essence as it would not stay the same either. Moreover, if what it is to be
knowledge has changed, so must what it is to be knowable. For “knowable” means “capable of being an object of knowledge;” but what it is to be knowledge has itself changed. Hence, if there would no longer be any knowledge due to a change in the Essence of knowledge, neither would there be anything knowable.

Such consequences would, we can reasonably conjecture, apply to the essence of thought and individual thoughts. For while Plato never acknowledges a Platonic Form of thought, he does seem to acknowledge that there is some essence of thought, that what it is to be a thought is defined in a certain determinate way. We have already seen, for example, his claim that thought must have an object—a fact that arises from its very nature or essence. Now if that essence were (somehow) to change, it would have the same impact for individual thoughts and thinkability that the change in the Form of knowledge had for individual acts of knowledge and knowability. Without the essence of thought remaining the same, there would be no thoughts; for what it is to be a thought would have changed. There would be nobody thinking nor anything thought. Nor, moreover, would anything even be thinkable (for this, too, would have changed, since what it is to be thinkable depends on what it is to be a thought).

Thus, in order for anything to be thinkable, the essence of thought must remain the same. The thinkability of things requires an existing, stable essence of thought for at least as long as they are thinkable. But why, we may now ask, must this essence be a permanently stable (i.e., immutable), non-sensible, Platonic Form or Formlike entity? At this critical point, unfortunately, the argument splits in two, since it cannot, by its own resources, satisfactorily answer that question. If, on the one hand, it were antecedently granted, as is reasonable, that essences are non-spatiotemporal entities, it would follow that the essence of thought required for thinkability must be both non-sensible and immutable. For to be non-spatiotemporal is to be non-sensible (recall section I); and if change is only possible in time, but essences are non-temporal beings, they could not possibly change (and thus, are
immutable). On this view, then, it would indeed be necessary for at least one non-sensible, immutable, Formlike essence to exist in order to enable the thinkability of all things, in which case the argument would be successful. But if, on the other hand, it were not antecedently granted that essences are non-spatiotemporal entities, the argument would only be able to show that at least one essence is necessary for the thinkability of all things for as long as they are to be thinkable. But for this, all that the argument requires is a time-bound essence retaining its identity diachronically. Why introduce an immutable, non-sensible, Platonic Form/Essence, if a time-bound essence could do the job just as well? Thus, on its own, the argument would not seem to demand an immutable, non-spatiotemporal, Platonic Essence, unless we admit on other grounds that essences are not the sort of thing that can be temporal or spatial or mutable. It is, therefore, a weakness of the overall argument that it must, in order to be successful, rely on premises and/or arguments outside of its own resources.

The second argument based on the *Cratylus* takes the notion of Forms changing in a different direction. It attempts to show that, if the Form or essence of some property $F$ were always changing, then we could never think of a thing’s becoming $F$. Thus, if the process of becoming $F$ is to be thinkable, some stable essence $F$-ness is required.\(^{17}\) Take the Form of Beauty. As long as it remains what it is, and we have some intimation of its nature, we can think of a thing’s coming to have that property. When a sculptor selects a suitable block of stone, initially “all was but on point to begin and yet unshaped;”\(^ {18}\) but through his artistic labors and patient expertise it slowly achieves form and elegance, becoming a beautiful statue. But if what it is to be beautiful were always changing, then we could never make sense of the stone’s (or statue’s) “becoming beautiful.” What would it mean to say or think that the stone is *becoming* beautiful, if beauty is never one, stable thing towards which the stone could make progress over time? Thus, in order for us to recognize the diachronic

\(^{17}\) See similar (though more ambitious and less spelled out) arguments in Cherniss (1936), 453-4, and Silverman (2000), 148 n.56.
\(^{18}\) Tolkien (1977), 20.
process of the stone’s becoming beautiful precisely as a process of becoming beautiful from one moment to the next, the essence of beauty by which we recognize it as such would have to remain the same, at least during the time we are so recognizing it. No process of becoming $F$ is thinkable, then, unless the essence of $F$-ness by which we think it remains the same for at least the time of our thinking it.

Several objections could be raised against this second argument. It is enough to observe, however, that it is just as vulnerable as the first to the charge that its requisite essences need not be immutable or non-sensible. All the argument demands are essences that must remain stable throughout a process of change, if that process is to be thinkable as a certain type of change. It is certainly possible that those essences are immutable, non-sensible, Platonic entities; but why must they be?

The thinkability-interpretation as a whole, then, while making significant strides in the direction of demonstrating the existence of Platonic, Formlike entities (as the argument of Parmenides 135b-e requires), must ultimately depend on additional philosophical commitments and/or arguments in order to work.
V. THE NECESSITY OF FORMS FOR MEANINGS

Alternatively, Plato is claiming in *Parmenides* 135b-c that Forms are a condition of the possibility of meanings (and hence of thought, communication, and philosophy as well). Without Forms, meanings would not exist. This must mean either that (a) all meanings *are* Forms, or (b) all meanings somehow derive their existence from Forms, or (c) some meanings are Forms and some derive their existence from Forms.\(^{19}\) I will argue that Plato thought that (a) all meanings are Forms. Call this the “meaning-interpretation.” It should be noticed straightaway that, if this were his position, it would noticeably strengthen his case in *Parmenides* 135b-c. For then he would not be tacitly relying on a whole argument or series of arguments to make his case (as he would if he were depending on the somewhat complex notion that “Forms are required to make everything thinkable”), but on something much more straightforward, albeit still philosophically potent (a simple correlation of meanings with Forms). The argument of 135b-c would then achieve a note of simplicity, lacking the somewhat untoward complication of the thinkability-interpretation.

Before showing why *all* meanings as such have a claim to be Platonic Forms, or at least strikingly Formlike, we shall need to demonstrate that Plato thought of at least *some* meanings as being Forms. This is, in fact, not so difficult a task. There is solid, direct, widespread evidence that, for Plato, the meanings of certain words were Forms. In several places spanning the middle and late dialogues—the *Parmenides* included—we come across the notion of “eponymy” or derivative naming (*Phaedo* 78d-e, 102b, 103b; *Parmenides* 130e-131a; *Timaeus* 52a; cf. *Republic* 596a). We learn that certain words properly designate a Form, but that its sensible participants may also be called by that name, albeit only derivatively. “Beautiful” properly names the Form of the Beautiful itself; but we may call other things “beautiful” as well (for example, men or horses or clothes: *Phaedo* 78d-e)

\(^{19}\) Past scholars have recognized a connection between Forms and meanings, though which option(s) they endorsed is usually unclear, and none (to the best of my knowledge) offer much, if any, sustained argument in its favor. Cornford (1939), 100, and Rickless (2007), 98, may have been arguing for (a) or (c). Moravcsik (1960), 118, seems to countenance (b). Kahn (1972), 568-70; Bestor, (1980), 39; Bostock (1986), 207-9, take at least some meanings to be Forms.
insofar as they participate in Beauty. Parmenides sums up the doctrine nicely in the
dialogue that derives its own name from him:

There are certain Forms, from which the other things participating [in
them] derive their names (τὰς ἔπωνυμὰς αὐτῶν ἴσχειν): for example,
things participating in Likeness become like, in Greatness great, and in
Beauty and Justice, just and beautiful (130e-131a).

What the words or names “beautiful,” “just,” “great,” and “like” most properly mean is the
corresponding Essence or Form, what it is to be that property or attribute. This is fully in
keeping with the account of naming in the Cratylus, according to which “names signify the
essence (τὴν οὐσίαν) to us” (436e; cf. 393d, 428e). For in the case of names like
“beautiful” and the rest, what they mean or signify is not just any essence or οὐσία, but the
Platonic Essences themselves, to which Plato accorded the special honor of being the
supreme οὐσία (e.g., Phaedrus 247c: οὐσία ὑπὸ τός οὐσία). The Cratylus also tells us that
the one who fashions the names of each thing “is able to put its form (εἶδος) into letters and
syllables,” again making use of a word Plato specially applied to the Forms (390e). Thus, in
the case of names like “beautiful” and the rest, it can only be the Platonic Form or εἶδος of
Beauty that is being given a name (Hippias Major 289d: εἶδος; Symposium 211b, 211e:
μονοειδές). What such names mean or signify must be their corresponding Form.

Thus, however dimly we may be aware of it, whenever we understand, to any
degree, the concepts or meanings signified by words such as “beautiful” or “just,” we are
somehow apprehending (or, for Plato, recollecting) a Form. For to understand the word
“beautiful” is to understand the meaning of that word, however imperfectly; and to
understand the meaning of “beautiful” is to understand what it is to be beautiful, i.e., the
essence of being beautiful—which is, for Plato, the Form of the Beautiful itself. The Forms
are the very meaning of such words as “beautiful” or “just,” precisely by being Essences.

There is, then, direct textual evidence that at least some meanings are Forms. More
will be said later on about why all meanings should be taken as Platonic, Formlike entities.
For now, however, notice that, if at least some meanings are Forms, then Plato’s argument at
Parmenides 135b-c will appeal to anyone who admits that words have meanings (or at least words like “beautiful,” “just,” etc.). Resting on such (apparently) minimal philosophical commitments, the argument will then be able to appeal to a very broad audience, unlike an argument based on an edifice of more complex reasoning proving that without immutable, non-sensible Forms, nothing would be thinkable. Three advantages of the meaning-interpretation of 135b-c, then, are already apparent: its significantly broader appeal, simplicity, and direct basis in Platonic texts.

The meaning-interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c also gains significant support when examined side by side with another text: the well-known passage of the Sophist that attempts to demonstrate the necessity of a “communion” or “interweaving of Forms.”

Recall that, on either interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c, the denial of Forms leads to the destruction of “the power of discourse” or communication. Similarly, Sophist 259e claims: “Disassociating each thing from everything [else] is the complete destruction of all statements (πάντων λόγων): for speech (λόγος) comes to be for us on account of the interweaving of Forms with one another (τὴν ἀλλήλους τῶν εἰδών συμπλοκήν).” Both Sophist 259e and Parmenides 135b-c claim that some fundamental problem with the Forms will have irreparably destructive consequences for language and communication. We would therefore expect the philosophical moves being made in each passage to parallel one another. But if any interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c is parallel to Sophist 259e, it is the meaning-interpretation; the thinkability-interpretation does not accord with it in nearly so obvious a manner. For it is not the power of the Forms to bestow thinkability on things that is being credited with making statements and speech possible, as we would expect on that interpretation, but rather certain relationships that obtain among them (ἀλλήλους). If, however, we accept the meaning-interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c, then the claim of Sophist 259e makes very good sense indeed. For if no meanings could combine with one another—if there were no interweaving of Forms—then no two meanings could be
combined in any predication or assertion, thus precluding all statements or λόγοι. But if meanings/Forms do combine and blend in certain definite ways but not in others (as Plato repeatedly insists: 252e-253a, 254b-c, 256b-c, 261d), if there are indeed certain determinate relationships among them, then we have a plausible account of why certain statements make sense (or at least, can be true) and other statements, those that try to combine Forms that do not interweave, do not make sense (or at least, are false). Given that Plato goes on, in Sophist 261d-262e, to maintain that every statement or λόγος must necessarily consist of combinations of nouns and verbs that are meaningful, such a reading of 259e becomes very attractive. Only certain combinations of words produce speech (262b-e) because only certain meanings can be combined. This is not necessarily to decide in favor of Ackrill’s meanings/concepts-centric interpretation of Sophist 259e, but rather to recognize its deep resonance with a parallel interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c.

We have shown that at least some meanings are Forms. But the question must now be faced: why claim that all meanings are Forms, or at least sufficiently Formlike entities (i.e., immutable and non-sensible objects), as the argument of Parmenides 135b-c requires? The thinkability-interpretation failed to satisfactorily demonstrate why its requisite essences were immutable, non-sensible, Formlike objects. If the meaning-interpretation succeeds in demonstrating why meanings must be Formlike, it will have gained a significant advantage over its competitor.

Once again, there is a text ready to hand that gives direct support to the meaning-interpretation, this time helping to explain why all meanings as such are Platonic, Formlike entities. It comes, in fact, from the Parmenides itself. At 132b Socrates suggests, in the wake of the Largeness Regress, which would have infinitely multiplied each Form, that perhaps the Forms exist only as thoughts in our minds. He does this, as he tells us, precisely in order to avoid such egregious multiplication and to preserve the numerical unity of each

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20 On the debate about whether the interweaving of Forms is necessary for either the (a) meaningfulness or (b) truth of statements, see Ackrill (1971); Moravcsik, (1960); Heinaman (1982-3).

21 Ackrill (1971). For responses, see Moravcsik, (1960); Peck, (1962); Heinaman (1982-3).
Form: οὕτω γὰρ ἀν ἐν γε ἐξαστον εἶη (132b). Although Plato rejects the notion that Forms are thoughts, he seems to accept Socrates’ insight that multiple thoughts in multiple minds could all retain a single identity. In what, then, does this identity consist? The fact that only one Form would exist, as a thought, in multiple minds (ἐν ψυχαῖς, 132b), shows that the identity of a thought is not impaired or affected by being “in” different minds. We can all, to put the point more colloquially, “have the same idea,” think the same thought.

But of course my thought is not your thought, even if we are “having the same idea,” insofar as we both have our own acts of thinking. Each act is numerically individual and distinct, originating in a specific thinker at a specific time and place. Talk of “the same thought” cannot be referring to individual acts of thinking; it must indicate the identical content or meaning of those acts. It is contents or meanings that unify thoughts, making them identical across space and time. By having Socrates recognize the content/meaning-identity of numerically distinct acts of thinking, Plato seems to be relying on precisely this idea.

When we grasp the full implications of this fact—that there can be identically the same content or concept or meaning re-cognized in multiple thoughts, regardless of space or time—we will realize that all meanings as such do indeed have ample right to be called Platonic, Formlike entities. Multiple people (or even the same person at multiple times and places) can have an identical content or meaning in mind, regardless of where or when that meaning happens to be present to their thought. Contents or meanings retain their total identity completely irrespective of time or place. Sensible, empirical, spatiotemporally bound objects, on the other hand, do not: by the mere fact of moving through time and space they do not remain totally identical, but change in at least an accidental way. They are never exactly as they were. But meanings cannot exist in a spatiotemporal way, because I, here (in space) and now (in time) can think some meaning or idea or proposition, and later, there (in

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23 This idea was also relied upon in the Academy just after Plato’s time, given that it was operative in the Object of Thought argument in the περὶ ἰδέων (81.25-7) and the Argument from the Sciences (79.5-6). Cf. Fine (1993), 13, 16, 124, 310 n.11, 311 n.17, and Fine (1988), 113.
another spatial location) and then (at another time) think *identically the same* meaning or idea or proposition. If the meaning *had* changed in the meantime, it would no longer be identically the same meaning, and hence I would not now be thinking precisely the same thought. But the fact that the meaning *does* remain totally identical through space and time (given that I do think precisely the same thought as before), and hence that space and time are entirely irrelevant to its identity, reveals its non-spatiotemporal mode of existence. Only what is “outside” of space and time can be totally immune to changes within space and time.

Likewise, all communication *between* persons rests upon the non-spatiotemporal existence and identity of meanings. When we communicate, we attempt to make another person understand what is “in” our minds. We want them to have just the same idea we have. If our partner in conversation were to respond to our poorly phrased explanations, “I don’t know what you mean,” we would try to rephrase our point in such a way that they would grasp the very thing we meant to say. The act of clarification—of asking someone what he or she means—is an act that presupposes the possibility of achieving a cognition of an identical idea (i.e., at least *some* totally identical “overlap” between what I understand and what you understand). A failure to communicate is a failure to mutually recognize some identical meaning. If there is not at least *something* totally identical in what the potential communicants mutually understand, they will be at complete cross-purposes, and communication will not in fact have occurred.²⁴ Meanings must retain their identity irrespective of time or place, if communication is to be possible: hence, their mode of existence cannot be spatiotemporal. If potential communicants expect to be able to understand one another, grasping an *identical* meaning, despite the fact that they exist in different locations and that communication and linguistic expression take at least some time, then what they mutually understand cannot be spatiotemporal.

As it turns out, then, non-spatiotemporal meanings are not only necessary for (3) thought to have some “place to turn” (recall that there can be no meaning-less thoughts);

²⁴ Cf. Cornford (1939), 91, 100.
they are also necessary for (4) “the power of discourse” or communication. The meaning-interpretation of *Parmenides* 135b-c thus provides an exceptionally smooth and insightful transition from step (3), the inability of any individual person to grasp a meaningful thought, to step (4), the inability of multiple persons to mutually recognize the very same meaningful thought by communication. The thinkability-interpretation, on the other hand, while it does manage the transition from (3) to (4) quite acceptably, relies simply on the fact that without thoughts, no communication of thoughts would be possible. It does not have the added note of insight that the act of communication requires, not just the existence of thoughts, but also the ability on the part of the potential communicants to access the very same, totally identical content of thought.

We are now sufficiently prepared to see why all meanings as such are metaphysically Platonic, Formlike entities. Meanings have presented themselves as unified (one and the same, identical in all circumstances) and non-spatiotemporal (and therefore incapable of being made of matter or sensible in any way). Their manner of existence as non-spatiotemporal (as well as unified/identical in all circumstances) also ensures that they cannot change in any way: for without time (and with the guarantee of total identity in every circumstance), every kind of motion and alteration is impossible. Immutability must, therefore, be added to their characteristics. Moreover, if we grant that there are certain definite, fixed relationships among meanings (an “interweaving” of meanings after the fashion of *Sophist* 259e), we would also have very good reason to think that they enjoy a necessary existence as well. If it is necessarily true, for example, that “Justice is a virtue,” then the meanings of Justice and Virtue must be inextricably, necessarily linked. But the necessity of their relationship must be based on the necessity of their being: non-necessary objects cannot ground a necessary relationship. The meanings that act as truthmakers of necessary truths must themselves enjoy a necessary existence.²⁵ Meanings are, therefore,

²⁵ This accords with Plato’s apparent belief that the same statements/propositions which are true now become false after the things they are about change (*Theaetetus* 182d, *Phaedrus* 247d-e, *Timaeus* 49d-e, 50b).
metaphysically robust entities. If they do indeed exist as necessary, immutable, unified/identical, non-spationtemporal/non-sensible entities, then they are exceedingly Formlike. All meanings, by their very nature, have a right to be called Platonic, Formlike entities. The meaning-interpretation, then, succeeds where the thinkability-interpretation has failed.

Changing, contingent beings make for changing, contingent truths; hence, necessarily unchanging propositions such as “Justice is a virtue” would seem to require necessarily unchanging truthmakers. Cf. Hintikka (1967), 6-9; Ketchum (1987), 291-4.
VI. DECISION AND CONCLUSION

As is no doubt clear by now, I favor the meaning-interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c. Several of its advantages have already been noted: its simpler, more elegant beginning (resting not on a complicated tacit argument or arguments, all of whose significance is wrapped up in the mostly implicit claims of other dialogues, but on a much more straightforward claim directly countenanced by the Parmenides itself, as well as other dialogues); its much broader appeal (which would interest anyone who admits the existence of meanings, rather than depending on prior assent to arguments attempting to prove the thesis that “without Forms, nothing would be thinkable”); its much solider corroboration from direct textual evidence (the various texts on eponymy, the Cratylus’ statements on naming, the Sophist’s insistence on the interweaving of Forms, and the Parmenides’ own recognition of the identity of multiple thoughts support meanings-as-Forms much more readily than the Cratylus countenances the thinkability-interpretation); its capacity to very smoothly and insightfully explain one of the major transitions in the argument, the move from step (3) to (4); and finally, its success in proving that meanings must be Platonic, Formlike entities. But there is another significant point to be made in its favor, after which two objections will be considered.

The meaning-interpretation better accounts for certain details of the text of Parmenides 135b-c that we have not so far had occasion to discuss: in particular, the repeated (and hence, presumably, important) claim that, without a Form “of each single thing” or an Idea “of each thing” that is always the same, thought and communication will be impossible. In other words, a multiplicity of Forms or Ideas is being asserted as necessary, a demand which the meaning-interpretation has a much easier time accommodating. The thinkability-interpretation might entail that a multiplicity of Forms is required, for example, to explain the thinkability of every type of change that there is (a Form of Beauty to enable the thinkability of becoming beautiful, a Form of Good to enable
the thinkability of becoming good, and so on). But then again, it might not; and in any case, it would require additional argument to establish why such a multiplicity is necessary. The meaning-interpretation, on the other hand, can easily accommodate this demand. Thinking as we know it obviously requires a multiplicity of meanings: some conjoin while others do not, and among them many complex relationships obtain, but it is plain from our everyday experience of thinking and communicating that we have access to a variety of meanings and thought-contents. If we wish to save the phenomena of thinking and communication, then, supposing that meanings are Forms, a multiplicity of Forms will be necessary. Some plurality of Forms, related in definite ways—precisely as the *Sophist’s* “interweaving of Forms” would have it—is required to explain our experience, and the meaning-interpretation accounts for that fact very easily.

This observation will, however, raise the following objection. If there must indeed be a Form “of each thing,” then won’t the number of Forms be needlessly multiplied? If meanings are Forms, won’t there be an unacceptably large amount of Forms? The amount of meanings that we make use of in thinking and speaking surely far exceeds the examples of Forms Plato gives us in the dialogues. Two points may be made in reply. First, the meaning-interpretation could be modified to allow for the possibility that Forms, which are basic meanings, might associate or combine with others to produce derivative meanings. The meaning of “man,” for instance, might be analyzed into the more basic “rational” and “animal.” This would be one way of achieving the admittedly large amount of meanings required by our experience of thinking and speaking without multiplying the number of Forms unnecessarily—as, indeed, Socrates is loath to do at the beginning of the *Parmenides* (130c-e). Second, it is entirely possible that Plato did indeed, in his late philosophy, embrace a very wide range of Forms, much wider than the middle dialogues had suggested. If he did, it would in fact explain an enigmatic remark of Parmenides to Socrates in the passage just referred to. Parmenides had been pressing Socrates on what range of Forms he
would admit. Socrates gives the Forms of Justice, Beauty, and Goodness an easy pass; he expresses doubt about the Forms of Man, Fire, and Water, and cannot decide whether to admit them; but Forms of Hair, Mud, and Dirt he rejects altogether. For, as he says, “to suppose that there is a Form of these things would be quite bizarre (ἄτοπον)” (130d). It is at this point that Parmenides remarks that one day, when Socrates is older and more philosophically mature, he “will treat none of these things as unworthy” (130e). This could be taken as a hint that Plato himself, who has now matured philosophically, is ready to admit Forms even of undignified, seemingly “unworthy” things such as hair, mud, and dirt. For if there is a Form “of each thing,” even Forms of these things must be admitted. There is some meaning to the words “hair,” “mud,” and “dirt,” something which we mean when we talk about them. As such, the meanings-as-Forms theory must be able to account for them. But if Plato admitted Forms of these things, what would he not have admitted? He may, in fact, have come to fully accept Republic 596a’s claim that, according to “the usual procedure, we are accustomed to posit some one Form for each of the many things to which we assign the same name.”

Another pertinent objection that could be raised to the meaning-interpretation has to do with the fact that words change their meaning, as Plato was well aware (Cratylus 418a-b). For if meanings are supposed to be non-spatiotemporal, immutable, necessary entities, how could such a change be possible? Now it is obviously true that some words designate certain meanings at one time, and then come to designate other meanings at other times. But this shift implies no change in the meanings themselves.26 “Gentleman” used to mean “a man with a coat of arms and some landed property;” now it means “a man of courtesy and respect.” Yet the two meanings of “gentleman” themselves remain altogether untouched and the same, still accessible to us, just as they always have been. It is not the original meaning of “gentleman” that has changed; only its relation to the word we once used to designate it

by. For if the original meaning itself had changed, how could we still think of it as it used to be? How could the original meaning still become wholly present to my thought now, if that meaning, having changed, belonged only to the past? How, unless its mode of existence were non-temporal?

The meaning-interpretation not only overcomes the most pressing objections to it (unlike its competitor yet again); it also, more importantly, recognizes a thematically unified, elegantly shaped argument in Parmenides 135b-c. Consider, first of all, its unity of theme. Meanings, which are Forms (or at least, metaphysically Formlike entities), are denied; if there are no meanings, there is no thought; if there is no thought, there is no communication; and, as an addendum, if there is no communication, there is no philosophy. The argument is about meanings, thinking, communicating, and philosophizing, which exhibit a definite commonality and kinship. There is a constant epistemic-linguistic theme. Second, there is an elegant, graduated, “funnel-like” shape to the series of deductions just presented. Without meanings/Forms, there can be no thoughts whose contents are provided by those meanings; without thoughts for any individual, no way individuals can communicate any identical thought to one another; without communication, no philosophical communication. One point is made after another, focusing and narrowing the consequences of denying meanings-as-Forms.

I conclude, then, in view of the evidence in its favor and its resilience to the most pressing objections, that the meaning-interpretation of Parmenides 135b-c is the correct one.

I must disagree with those who claim that “Plato is not interested in what makes language possible,” that “Forms have to be posited if the universe is to be intelligible, not if language is to be possible,” and that we should not, for various reasons, accept “the view that Forms are meanings or are posited to explain the possibility of general terms.”27 No doubt the Forms do also serve to make the universe intelligible and/or thinkable (though this is, as we saw, more difficult to establish), and Plato did not develop a robust theory of “general terms”

27 Gosling (1973), 175, 197; also Fine (1988), 123, 144 and (1993), 140.
as such. But *Parmenides* 135b-c is best interpreted as a definite indication that Plato *was* interested in problems of meaning and what makes language and communication, as well as thinking and philosophy, possible.
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