

CHRISTOPH POETSCH

CONCEPTUAL PATTERNS
IN PLATO'S PARMENIDES



VITTORIO KLOSTERMANN


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1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine we were given a text by a certain author that we could divide with some certainty into separate sections. The number of these segments would therefore be quite clear, while there might be one section about whose status and separateness we were unsure. Imagine further that we were uncertain what these sections are all about, whether they share a single subject or deal with different subjects, whether there is any subject to them at all, or whether they might ultimately be a mere joke. Imagine that we had other texts by the same author – earlier as well as later ones than the one we are concerned with –, whose systematic intentions and whose concepts are significantly clearer to us than the text in question. In fact, we might have even further hints: for instance, if the passages preceding the segmented text raise some systematic problems (which we understand more or less), and claim that the segmented text somehow provides solutions to these problems. To any decipherer of an unknown script or to any archaeologist trying to understand an incomprehensible inscription, a situation similar to this one would come close to paradise.

One very natural thing would be to carefully study the segmented text with regard to the occurrences of concepts which we know are likely to be significant from the other texts of this author. Of course, this could reveal that these crucial concepts are randomly spread through all the sections and hence that there are no distinct patterns observable with regard to their distribution. From this we would probably conclude that the different sections are likely not to deal with different aspects of this author's thoughts. However, this analysis could also reveal significant conceptual patterns. It could reveal, for instance, that crucial concepts are not randomly scattered throughout the sections, but that their occurrences form characteristic patterns because of varying degrees of density and concentration in the various sections. In their overall appearance, these patterns might even be systematically meaningful

to us. This would doubtlessly be a very strong indication how to understand these different sections and their relation to one another. Additionally, these patterns might even provide a hint as to the status of that one special section about whose status we are unsure.

The present study attempts to prove that such conceptual patterns in fact exist in Plato's *Parmenides*. In the first part of this dialogue we famously find a young Socrates who advocates what at least appears to be very similar to Plato's Theory of Forms in dialogues like the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. And famously we find this young Socrates perplexed and completely unable to defend his position against a number of objections raised by an old Parmenides. But instead of bidding farewell to the forms, Parmenides provides, in the second part of the dialogue, an exercise by help of which he claims to enable one to counter these objections. This notoriously obscure exercise consists of eight (or nine) sections, within which Parmenides develops myriads of arguments about what he calls τὸ εἶν and τὰ ἄλλα. As it is well-known, it is all but obvious what these sections are in fact all about – even the status of one of them as a section in its own right remains controversial. Nor is it, subsequently, in any sense clear how this exercise and its arguments should actually be able to provide help in saving the forms against the objections in the first part of the dialogue.

Plato's *Parmenides* is hence a text to which – obviously – all the characteristics mentioned at the outset apply, while roughly 2,400 years of intense discussion and careful research have not brought us anywhere close to a broader scholarly consensus. I dare not claim to end these discussions (I suspect they never will, which is in fact a good sign in some sense). But I claim to provide some evidence by help of the conceptual patterns that might be of general interest for every approach to this difficult text. In the following, I shall therefore try to clearly distinguish between, on the one hand, observations on these patterns and conclusions I consider as fairly uncontroversial with regard to the evidence (chapter 3) and, on the other hand, such arguments and conclusions that imply more far-reaching claims and a more concrete interpretation of the given evidence (chapters 4–5). Thus, I hope, the evidence and results of the former will still be valuable to those who will not follow every aspect of my further interpretation in the latter chapters. Those are the two first main steps of this study. Subsequent to them, in a concluding third main step, I shall then exemplarily address the question as to how these results might actually be able to tackle the difficulties and problems that are raised in the first part of the dialogue with regard to the Theory of Forms (chapter 6). Hence, this study aims to address, in a general manner, the two

main questions that scholars are facing with regard to Plato's *Parmenides*: What is its second part all about? How can the second part provide a solution to the problems in the first part?

By implementing the method that I shall describe in chapter 2, the first main step of this study will prove that the second part of the *Parmenides* appears as a surprisingly coherent whole in its bigger picture (chapter 3). The conceptual patterns strongly suggest that there is a kind of vertical 'ontological shift' through the eight (or nine) sections (§§ 5–7). This shift, however, is not a simple linear, but a more complex one (§ 11). These results will, at least, prompt the assumption that there is indeed some thematic shift in the sections and that Parmenides speaks of different subjects or aspects of reality throughout the exercise. In the sense of this more complex shift, these investigations in the first step will show that there is a special connection between the notorious corollary of the second section and the fifth section (§ 8). This connection has, to the best of my knowledge, remained largely unnoticed so far. Besides that, the investigations of the first main step will point out that there is a striking tripartition of being, becoming/passing away, and appearance to be observed (§§ 5–7; 10–11), while one commonly expects only a bipartition of these general ontological realms and a coincidence of the latter two in Plato.

The second main step of this study will then provide a more systematic and more far-reaching interpretation of the evidence (chapters 4–5). Within this step, I shall argue that a coherent way of interpreting the totality of the conceptual patterns is to suppose four main subjects to be treated in the second part of the *Parmenides*: the physical cosmos, the (World) Soul, the realm of forms, and a first principle of the forms (§ 12). A concise geometrical analogy will be provided to explain how the sections of the exercise relate to these four main subjects (§ 12). This account will thereby propose that the sections of Parmenides' exercise can be divided into two general types: those sections that circumscribe a certain subject *in itself* and those sections that do not introduce a new subject, but instead describe the *relation* between two subjects (§ 13). In this important respect, the present study differs significantly from all those approaches that tried to locate some kind of linear arrangement of different ontological subjects or realms in the sections of the exercise (§ 13). Within this context, it will also be argued that the famous corollary of the second section is not to be understood as one main section in its own right since it is concerned with the same subject as the fifth section (§§ 12; 16–17). The corollary thus fulfils a crucial task in connecting the first and the second half of Parmenides' exercise. By providing additional

conceptual patterns that support the proposed interpretation, I shall furthermore show that the given statistical results strongly suggest a different and more complex systematic understanding of Plato's ontology in general, and the crucial concept of participation in particular. By taking up the remarked tripartition from the first step, I shall argue that the second part of the *Parmenides* suggests not a bipartite, but a *tripartite* ontology for Plato, wherein becoming/passing away as such happens primarily on the level of the soul, while it is only then mirrored or displayed in the physical realm of appearance (§ 19). It will furthermore be shown that this also prompts a more nuanced understanding of participation (§ 19).

In order to build all these results on firm ground, a more extensive elaboration of the method is needed beforehand – a method which in its aim to identify patterns in a given large amount of data resembles the core thoughts of today's data science (chapter 2). Explaining this method will include some technical details in statistics (§§ 1–2). These might be a little bit dry, but they will decisively strengthen the objectivity of the present approach. Hence I hope the results and their objectivity will justify this *μακροτέρα καὶ ἀκριβέστερα ὁδός*. To those who are either unfamiliar or in general uncomfortable with statistics, the arguments of this study will however remain accessible throughout. All that is needed will be intuitively graspable and will ultimately boil down to two questions (§ 2). Those who are not primarily interested in the technical details of the argument and want to delve right into the more systematic results are therefore advised to read the introducing paragraphs of § 1 as well as § 2 for a rough overview of the approach, and then to leap right to § 5 and maybe read the more technical details in §§ 1; 3–4 afterwards.

The third main step of this study will ultimately address the question of how the evidence of the conceptual patterns is actually able to provide an answer to the objections that Parmenides raises in the first part of the dialogue (chapter 6). This will be done by an analysis of two exemplary and well-known aporias: the objection that Parmenides himself labels the 'Greatest Aporia' (§§ 24–25) and the one that is known as the first 'Third Man Argument' (§§ 26–27). It will be argued that in the case of the latter the terminology, among others, provides a decisive link between the aporia in the first part of the dialogue and the conceptual patterns in the exercise. It will hence be reconstructed how a Socrates who is instructed by the exercise is able to counter the argument (§ 26). With regard to the Greatest Aporia it will especially be shown how the special relation between the corollary and the fifth section may play a decisive part in overcoming this problem (§ 24).

This comes down to the crucial intermediate position of the World Soul, which – as will be argued – is also Plato’s systematic answer to this problem both prior to and after the *Parmenides* (§ 25). Ultimately, it will also be sketched in outline how the other aporias may be addressed by help of the present approach (§ 28).

Before starting by introducing the method in the next chapter, let me add one crucial remark on the scope of this study. Its aim is to introduce *in general* a new approach to Plato’s *Parmenides* and to argue for its productivity in an *overall* perspective. This means that it neither provides a line-by-line commentary of the dialogue’s text nor does it claim exhaustiveness in every respect. Instead, it introduces and puts up for discussion an approach to the *Parmenides* which I consider to be new. Its most innovative feature is, in my eyes, that it provides significant new evidence on the ‘bigger picture’ of this dialogue. As I shall argue, the bird’s-eye view permits a fruitful perspective on a notoriously obscure text which was doubtlessly very influential throughout the history of philosophy, but which remains controversial and stimulating until today.

*

This book and the research behind it owes a lot to many persons. First of all, I would like to especially thank Benedikt Strobel for the many conversations we had on this project during the last few years. Even though – or perhaps: just because – our approaches to the *Parmenides* are quite different, I have benefitted immensely from our discussions on various chapters and on my method in general. I would furthermore like to thank him for the invitation to discuss some first results at the ‘Philosophisch-Philologisches Colloquium zur antiken Philosophie’ in Trier. Jakob Brüssermann has made the great effort to read the whole manuscript and with his superb sense of precision and language has provided many very valuable suggestions. I am very grateful for these improvements, which have enhanced the overall argument a great deal. Furthermore, I would like to thank Martin Avenarius, Diego De Brasi, Bill Engels, Lukas Fuhr, Andrew Gregory, Vittorio Höhle, Béatrice Liemann, Alex Long, Winfried Lücke, Peter McLaughlin, Gustav Melichar, Andrej Miotk, Carl S. O’Brien, Sebastian Odzuck, Anna Pavani, Ron Polansky, Tim O. Roth, Pauline Sabrier, Thomas A. Szlezák, Jonathan Vandenburg, and Denis Walter for supporting this project through discussions, criticism and in many other respects. Needless to say that I remain solely responsible for the remaining shortcomings.

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There is only one to whom this book can be dedicated: my teacher Jens Halfwassen, who died all of a sudden, at the age of only 61, in February 2020, shortly after this project had taken its very first steps. He knew its main theses, had encouraged it several times and was looking forward to the results. To those who are familiar with his work, it will be obvious what the present study owes to him. In those places where I disagree with him, I am sure he would have welcomed the dissent: he himself time and again referred to the highly discursive context of the Old Academy, which left pretty much no theorem of its founder unquestioned. This Academic context always was his paradigm of philosophical *συνουσία* and *διαλέγεσθαι*.

2. THE PRESENT APPROACH

This chapter provides an overview of the method which forms the basis of the present study. This includes a few remarks on the textual basis and an explanation of the technical details. I shall first state some preliminaries (§ 1), then give an account of the statistical approach (§ 2). After that, I provide an overview of previous research which is of interest with regard to the present study (§ 3). Those who are primarily interested in the systematic results rather than in the technical details of the argument are advised to have a quick glance at the first paragraphs of § 1 and at § 2, and then to take a leap right to § 5. In order to evaluate the argument in its full depth, a closer reading of the present chapter is of course required.

§ 1. Method and Preliminaries

In the jungle of arguments that forms the second part of the *Parmenides* it is doubtlessly easy to lose sight. While one tries to cautiously follow Parmenides' arguments – which sometimes seem to be quite strange or simply fallacious – one easily loses sight of the bigger picture and risks to miss the forest for the trees. The present approach tries to contribute to this bigger picture by 'zooming out', as it were. This will be done by what I call 'conceptual patterns'. By this I mean the quantitative result, particularly its visual appearance in a bar plot, that is provided by the method (which I describe below) of tracking the occurrences of several concepts throughout the sections of Parmenides' exercise. These results may provide more or less distinct regularities and more or less meaningful peculiarities with regard to the distribution of different concepts. Obviously, the decision whether this is actually the case or not is not always clear-cut and binary, but implies varying degrees of markedness. It is thus quite difficult to determine when