What is Parmenides’ Being?
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Summary

Nobody could know what ἐόν meant before listening to the Poem: even native speakers of Ancient Greek needed to acquire new mental categories and form this new concept, ἐόν, which is usually translated as “Being.” Throughout his Poem, Parmenides teaches his audience to form this concept. One of the means he uses are the signs (σήματα) given by the goddess to the traveler in fr. B8. I focus here on the fourth σήμα, where Parmenides gives hints about the special relation between Being and those who understand Being. I will show that Being is the fundamental unity of what-is (what is stable, without differences, development, needs) and what-understands. This perfect unity is what the audience is encouraged to understand. This unity is also the condition of the possibility of human understanding. Human beings can, in fact, understand this unity, directly, with an act of νοεῖν, since νοεῖν and Being are not separate but are one.

1. The starting point and the sketch of the project

There are questions that have become traditional in the history of Parmenides scholarship and that continue to be asked. One of them is “What is Parmenides’ Being?” Many different suggestions have been made in order to shed light on this issue:1 e.g., Being is the result of a law of thought;2 it is the world regarded as

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1 See also Robbiano, Becoming Being, chapter 3, section 3.4.
2 Cf. e.g., Owen, “Eleatic Questions”; Tarán, Parmenides.
its totality and unity;\textsuperscript{3} it is one;\textsuperscript{4} it is many;\textsuperscript{5} it is the being of the world without the world;\textsuperscript{6} the nature of Being can be discovered by looking at the value of the verb “to be,” which is predicative;\textsuperscript{7} existential;\textsuperscript{8} veridical.\textsuperscript{9}

My starting point, in order to give a new answer to the old question about Parmenides’ Being, is the following. Parmenides’ audience, when listening to the Poem for the first time, could not possibly have guessed to what Parmenides was referring when he used the words ἔόν and εἶναι in the Poem. They could not possibly have guessed it just by reflecting on the meaning of the verb εἶναι: the fact that they were native speakers of Greek was not enough. They could only understand what Parmenides meant by ἔόν and ἔόν after having successfully taken the perspective on reality that is encouraged by the Poem. The Poem makes, in fact, a call on its audience and tries to persuade them to accept its guidance, which will lead them to a new understanding of reality. In order to achieve this understanding, the audience needs to acquire new mental categories so that they can look at reality in a new way. They will need to form a new concept, which, in the course of the Poem, will often be referred to as ἔόν, which is usually translated “Being.” Being is what can be understood by the ones who, after listening to the words of the goddess, have acquired a specific perspective. The audience will acquire such a perspective if they follow the guidance of the goddess, made up of encouragements, warnings, alternatives, and, as we shall see below, signs (σήματα).

\textsuperscript{3} Cf. e.g., Casertano, \textit{Parmenide}.

\textsuperscript{4} Cf. e.g., Mackenzie, “Parmenides Dilemma”; Sedley’s “Parmenides” and “Parmenides and Melissus.”

\textsuperscript{5} Cf. e.g., Curd, \textit{Legacy}.

\textsuperscript{6} Cf. Reale, \textit{Storia Delle Filosofia Antica}, p. 126: “. . . è chiaro che l’essere parmenideo è l’essere del cosmo, immobilizzato e in parte purificato, ma ancora chiaramente riconoscibile: è, per quanto possa suonare paradossale, l’essere del cosmo senza il cosmo . . .”

\textsuperscript{7} E.g., Calogero’s \textit{Studi Sull’eleatismo} and \textit{Storia Della Logica Antica}; Mourelatos, \textit{Route}; Austin, \textit{Parmenides}.


It is important to realize that my claim that Being can be understood only if one looks in a certain way, i.e., from a certain perspective, does not imply that such a perspective (or the minds of the audience who look from that perspective) originates (is the source of) Being. I do not attribute any idealism or postmodernism to Parmenides: I rather claim that Being is both real and that it is what one can see if one looks at reality in a certain way. “To look at reality in a certain way,” implies focusing on what does not change, what is always and everywhere the same, does not have differences and does not lack anything.

One may well choose to look, on the contrary, on what does change and on the differences one sees around: this enterprise, even if it can be useful, will never bring one to the truth, as the goddess explains in the second part of the Poem about the opinions of the mortals. Parmenides is a realist and according to him there is just one reality\(^\text{10}\) that can be looked at in two ways, which are different in that they focus on different aspects of reality.\(^\text{11}\)

Even less postmodern is Parmenides when it comes to epistemology. Parmenides is not only a realist, but also a full-blood epistemological optimist who wants to help his audience, by means of the Poem, to look at reality in such a way as to understand it, i.e., so as to grasp nothing less than the truth about it.

In the first place, we shall turn to some instruments that Parmenides has in order to guide his audience toward understanding. These instruments are σήματα, signs. I will first make it clear that σήματα are always instruments of communication that require an interpretative effort on the part of the addressee. I will argue that three layers of interpretation can be given to what I regard as the 4 σήματα of B8: the σήματα that say in the first place that ἐόν is 1. without birth and death, 2. homogeneous, 3. immobile and unchangeable, and 4. without development. Then I will focus on the fourth σήμα, where we

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10 For the explanation of the fact that Parmenides is not Plato and does not postulate two “worlds” but only one reality, looked at in different ways, see Cordero, By Being, p. 155: “... the genuine philosopher ... and the mortals who know nothing ... share the same object of study ... But the same object of study can be looked at in a deeper or shallower away.”

11 For my interpretation of the Δόξαι, see my book, Becoming Being, chapter 7.
shall find Parmenides’ suggestion about the relation between Being and those who understand Being. In this suggestion lies the founding stone of Western philosophy: the conviction that there is homogeneity between human mind and truth. Western philosophers have cherished this Parmenidean gift for millennia.

Thus, what is Being? I will argue that Being is the fundamental unity of what-is (what is stable, without differences, development, needs) and what-understands. This perfect unity is what the apprentice philosophers, who have trained to disregard every kind of what-is-not (or not-being), are encouraged to understand. This unity is also the condition of the possibility of human understanding. The apprentice philosophers can, in fact, understand it, directly, with an act of νοεῖν, which can understand Being since νοεῖν and Being are not separate but are one.

2. The σήματα

At the beginning of B8 the goddess uses the word σήματα to introduce what follows.

B8.1–3: Μόνος δ’ ἔτι μύθος ὁδοῖο
λείπεται ὡς ἔστιν· ταύτῃ δ’ ἐπὶ σήματι ἦσαι
πολλὰ μάλ’, ὡς . . .

Only one story still remains of the way that-is: on that way there are very many signs that . . .

On using the word σήματα she suggests a lot to the audience about the status of what she will say and about how the audience should deal with what has been referred to as σήματα. As van Ophuijzen12 has shown, the presence of an addressee belongs to the very core of the verb σημαίνειν which has more to do with communication than with description:

. . . σημαίνειν is best understood in the strict sense of providing a σῆμα (σῆμα), a mark or signpost pointing

12 Ophuijzen, “Parts,” p. 84.
the recipient addressed to the thing, fact or state of
affairs envisaged; in other words, that it applies not so
much to expression pure and simple as, more specifi-
cally, to communication. It is not just that vox significat
rem, but rather that ego voce tibi, or vobis, significo rem.

Moreover, we can assume that the word σήματα in the
mouth of the goddess at B8.2 evokes the frame of reference of
a god or a goddess giving or showing signs (think of e.g., birds,
lightnings, dreams or oracles) to mortals in order to let them
know things usually out of their reach, i.e., gods offer mortals
a glance upon reality from the divine point of view. This frame
suggests what kind of behavior the words of the goddess require
from the ones who hear them: σήματα are such things that must
be interpreted.

The awareness of the need to interpret signs in order to grasp
the truth at which they point can be found in other fragments
of the Presocratics, e.g., in Heraclitus (DK22 B93). Heraclitus
reminds his readers that the oracle does not conceal or say, but
gives signs (σημαίνει). One of the most important implications
of this is that an oracle requires an interpretation. By saying this
Heraclitus stresses a property that belongs not only to oracles
but also to the language of his own book. The truth does not
lie on the surface of the words; and yet words—if they are fully
interpreted—can show the way to the truth.

Parmenides and Heraclitus’ audiences are, at the beginning of
the fifth century, already familiar with texts about gods who give
signs to mortals (dreams, oracles, birds . . . ) that can be interpreted
in different ways. They are familiar with the fact that the poets, the
fundamental source of education, need to be interpreted and can
be interpreted in different ways. At the beginning of the fifth
century, the audience might well know that literal and allegorical

13 Diels-Kranz, Fragmente.
14 Kahn, Art, p. 123. See also Morgan, Myth, pp. 55ff.
15 About the awareness of the need of interpretation in Ancient Greece and the
practice of interpreting oracles and of explaining what poets meant, by means
interpretations of Homer on the one hand differed very much and on the other hand could live next to each other.\textsuperscript{16}

Whereas scholars\textsuperscript{17} usually identify the σήματα announced at B8.2 with the predicates of Being enumerated at B8.2–6, I agree with Cerri (214) in identifying the σήματα rather with the arguments that follow (B8.6–B8.49). These arguments—just as every sign given by a god—must be interpreted.

In the first place, the goddess herself anticipates one “interpretation” of her own signs, by suggesting that they point at the fact that Being is: 1. not generated and imperishable; 2. homogeneous; 3. immobile; 4. complete. This is what I call “the first layer of interpretation.”

B8.1–6: Μόνος δ’ ἐτι μῦθος ὧδοιο
λείπεται ὡς ἔστιν· ταῦτη δ’ ἐπὶ σήματ’ ἔασι
πολλὰ μάλι, ὡς ἀγένητον ἐὸν καὶ ἀνώλεθρόν ἔστιν,
οὐδὲν μοθνογενές τε καὶ ἀτρεμὲς ἢδ’ ἀτέλεστον
οὔτ’ ἢν οὔδ’ ἔσται, ἐπει νῦν ἔστιν ὅμοι τὰν,
ἐν, συνεχές . . .

Only one story still remains of the way that-is: on that way there are very many signs that Being [1.] is not generated and imperishable [2.] entire, unique and [3.] immobile; and [4.] incomplete [it]
ever was nor will be, since [it] is now all together, one, continuous . . .

\textsuperscript{16} Theagenes of Rhegium, at the end of the sixth century, had already tried, by means of allegory, to find a kind of truth in Homer that was different from the one about what happened in front of the rock of Troy in a far past. Theagenes interprets, for instance, a pair of warriors fighting as the conflict between opposite principles in nature. About the practice of allegoric interpretation of Homer from the sixth century, see Most, “Poetics.”

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. e.g., Coxon, Fragments, p. 193 [2009: p. 312]: “On this [way], she proceeds, there are many monuments or landmarks (σήματα), which (or some of which) she at once enumerates; they appear as predicates of ‘Being,’ the applicability of which is then established deductively.”
As we have seen, the context of a god giving σήματα—e.g., oracles—suggests that the interpretation is sometimes not as transparent and one-sided as it may seem. To realize this can enhance our understanding of Parmenides’ B8 and Parmenides’ ideas about the achievement of knowledge. What the goddess says in B8 is not the whole story: even if one hears all the words of B8 and understands what one hears, one still has not walked the way of truth—just like the one who has read the travel guide to a faraway land but has not made the journey. The journey will be the real experience, whereas the travel guide is just the preparation.

I submit that the σήματα of B8 can tell us much more than that Being, on the way ὡς ἕστι, is without birth and death, homogeneous, immobile, and without development.

3. The fourth σήμα. 1st layer of interpretation: Being is complete; 2nd layer of interpretation: theories of development do not lead to understanding

Elsewhere I have shown in detail that every one of the σήματα can also be interpreted as part of an ἔλεγχος that dissuades the audience from engaging in the traditional ways of explaining reality: 1. cosmogony, 2. theory of differentiation, 3. theory of change, and 4. theory of development. For instance, the first sign, the one about the impossibility of an origin for Being, must (also) be interpreted as offering this advice: “do not go and look for an origin: do not engage in cosmogonies! If you do so you exit this way and take another way: the one ‘that-is-not.’”

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18 I have another reason for supposing a plurality of levels of meaning in the words of the goddess in what we know as B8. Mourelatos describes the language of the goddess in the second part of the Poem (the Δόξα) in terms of ambiguity (of amphilogia). Mourelatos regards this as a very powerful and effective instrument in communicating various levels of meaning to the ones in the audience who could understand them. Parmenides had, thus, a very powerful instrument at his disposal: it would have been strange if he had not used it in the first part of the Poem, but only in the second one. See Mourelatos, “Deceptive Words.”

19 Robbiano, Becoming Being, chapter 4 and, more recently, “Duas Fases Parmenídeas.”
According to this second, elenctic, interpretation, the fourth σῆμα (on which I concentrate in this paper) warns the audience that no theory about the development of the universe can be trustworthy, since it would involve not-being. Theories including development were popular among Parmenides’ contemporaries and predecessors, some of whom saw the universe in continuous motion or development towards a next state or condition (think of both Anaximander and Heraclitus). Such models of the universe cannot lead one to understanding, according to Parmenides.

According to the first layer of interpretation of this fourth σῆμα, Being is not incomplete, as the goddess had claimed at B8.4–6: “incomplete [it] never was nor will be, since [it] is now all together, one, continuous.” Being is not on its way to become something different, it is not at a certain stage in its development. The goddess explains throughout B8.32–44 that Being is complete, not in development and not lacking anything (B8.32–37); that it is not split in any of the oppositions suggested by the words of mortals (B8.38–41), but safely guarded in its unity by Μοῖρα (B8.38–39); that, whereas the boundaries that mortals draw between opposites are not true, the only boundary is the extreme one that encloses Being as a perfect sphere (B8.42–44). Then (B8.44–49), the argumentation proceeds in order to show that only the presence of not-being inside Being would produce internal differences; which would have to be overcome at a later stage, e.g., by developing in such a way as to become smaller here and bigger there. Within Being there is no room for development, since there is no not-being that could prevent it from being perfect. Indeed, development presupposes, for instance, a “not being yet”: a child develops since it is not yet an adult; in a child there is room for development: he or she will become bigger, whereas Being does not behave like that. Being does not lack anything and always remains the same.

4. The fourth σῆμα. 3rd layer of interpretation: the complete Being does not lack νοεῖν; mortals understand Being

A third layer of interpretation will reveal to the audience that the σῆματα do not only point at characteristics of Being
and do not only contain methodological advice about approaches that one should avoid if one is looking for understanding. The σήματα also point (for the one who is capable of interpreting them) at those human beings who understand Being, i.e., at their relation (at the relation of their minds) with Being, i.e., the object that they (try to) understand, and at the right approach in order to understand it.

By discussing this layer of interpretation of the σήματα, especially of the fourth σήμα, I will discuss what I have called the Parmenidean gift to Western Philosophy, which can also be described as an antidote against the impossibility for mortals to know the truth. This impossibility was held as unbridgeable for normal mortals, both by the tradition—who attributed either no mind, νόος, to mortals or a νόος completely dependent on the gods— and, more recently, by Xenophanes. Parmenides roots his gift in the perspective of the one who, after abandoning the way that involves not-being, becomes committed to the way that-is. One of the signs of the goddess on the way that-is—the fourth sign—points in the direction of “no lack” (B8.32–33).

While arguing that Being is complete and not in need of anything else in order to become perfect, the goddess explains that “no need” and “no lack” also involve no lack of νοεῖν: νοεῖν is also “part” of Being, i.e., an undifferentiated part of it, which

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20 Mansfeld, Die Offenbarung, explores throughout in his first chapter the theme, very popular in lyric poetry and in other kinds of poetry before Parmenides, of the impotence (ἀμηκανία) and dependence of the human νόος on the gods: e.g., Semonides Fr. 1. D., vv. 3–5: νόος δ’ οὐκ ἐπ’ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀλλ’ ἐφήμεροι/ ἀ ἐ θ οτά γόμεν οὐδὲν εἰδότες/ ἰκνος ἔκαστον ἐκτελεύτησε θεός. There is no intelligence among men, but we live like grazing animals, subject to what the day brings with no knowledge of how the god will bring each day to pass, Gerber, Greek Iambic Poetry; Theognis 141–142: ἄνθρωποι δὲ μάται νομίζομεν εἰδότες οὐδέν·/ θεοὶ δὲ κατὰ σφέτερον πάντα τελοῦσι νόον. Palmer, “Indo-European.”

21 Bodnár’s essay, “Reason,” calls “archaic epistemology,” the “doctrine about the (im)possibility of human knowledge,” (p. 61) and shows how this doctrine has been integrated into the systems of the philosophers before Parmenides, especially Xenophanes and Alcmaeon, who accepted archaic epistemology “to limit the certainty of what they assert themselves” (p. 63). As Bodnár argues, the effects of implanting this anthropological paradigm into philosophy could have been devastating. About Parmenides’ rescue of philosophy’s pretensions to reaching the truth from this impasse, see also Hermann, To Think Like God, 132ff. and Robbiano, Becoming Being, chapter 2.
is to say that νοεῖν is Being, as the goddess already stated at B3; and that neither νοεῖν nor anything else can be something next to Being, as she will observe in B8.36–37:

B8.36–37: . . . οὐδὲν γὰρ <ἢ> ἔστιν ἢ ἔσται ἄλλο πάρεξ τοῦ ἔόντος . . . 
. . . for nothing else is or will be apart from Being . . .

But first the goddess says that to understand is one and the same with what causes the understanding—i.e., the object of understanding.

B8.34: ταῦτον δ ’ ἔστι νοεῖν τε καὶ οὕνεκεν ἔστι νόημα

To understand is the same as what causes the understanding

The identification seems to be between the understanding and what prompts, causes or fulfills understanding,22 which, in verse B8.35, turns out to be Being. The other possible way of interpreting this verse, that is, that νοεῖν is the same as the thought “that-is,” is not to be excluded;23 however I am not willing to accept that the only purpose of these lines is to explain something about the content of understanding, by saying that what one must understand is “that-is.” I assume that the goddess, in the context of the argumentation about the completeness of Being, also clarifies here something crucial about Parmenides’ monism, and about the one who adopts the perspective that leads to monism. Thus, what we

22 This verse has been interpreted as the identification of νοεῖν and the reason, (cf. Fritz, “Nous, Noeín,” 237–238; Vlastos, “Parmenides’ Theory,” p. 68) or the goal (Diels, p. 85: “Denken und des Gedankens Ziel ist eins,” in Tarán, Parmenides) of understanding. Cerri, Parmenide Di Elea, p. 235 observes about οὕνεκεν: “qui l’espressione non ha, come al v. 37 [32], valore di congiunzione, ma conserva in tutta la sua pienezza il significato originario di pronome neutro relativo al caso genitivo + preposizione; occorre anzi aggiungere che, sul piano semantico, il pronome relativo sottintende e ingloba in sé il pronome dimostrativo neutro al caso nominativo, al quale si riferisce: intendi τὸ οὗ ἐνεκέν, ‘ciò a causa del quale.’” Cf. also Cerri, Parmenide Di Elea, p. 232.

23 Cf. scholars who take οὕνεκεν to mean ὅτι, e.g., Tarán, Parmenides, pp. 121–122.
What is Parmenides’ Being?

learn from verse B8.34 may well be, both that the successful νοεῖν is the one that focuses on the thought or understanding “that-is”: the successful νοεῖν is the one of the person who chooses the right way towards truth i.e., the right perspective; and that νοεῖν is the same as τὸ οὐ ἔνεκεν (that which causes) that the understanding “is” (occurs). We should not try to define too strictly what οὐνεκεν, i.e., τὸ οὐ ἔνεκεν, suggests at this stage: it is the cause, the reason, the goal, the subject, the object of understanding: what can originate understanding, something without which there is no understanding. This vague οὐνεκεν ἔστι νόημα (34) is immediately specified as τὸ ἐόν: the “thing” without which (35) no understanding can be found:

B8.35–36: οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἐόντος ἐν ὁ πεφατισμένον ἐστὶν εὑρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν...

for without Being you will not find understanding in what has been said (by me, i.e., the goddess) . . .

According to my interpretation, ἐν ὁ refers24 to an implied antecedent such as “my words, the verses of the Poem”: “in what has been said,” i.e., “in the words that have been said by me.” I do not agree with the majority of scholars who take ἐν ὁ to refer anaphorically to τοῦ ἐόντος.25

24 Cf. Sedley who translates: “for in what has been said [i.e., the preceding arguments (sc. in the fragments)] you will not find thinking separate from Being” (Sedley, “Parmenides”). My doubts about the possibility of this grammatical construction (which had prevented me from adopting it in my book, Becoming Being) have been dispelled after David Sedley kindly drew my attention to the virtual exact grammatical parallel of it in Plato, Phaedo 69a3. As the majority of the scholars, the message that Sedley sees in the passage is monism. He interprets this one and a half verse as expressing this monistic thought: “thought and being are one single thing—as I have explained in the fragments.” It certainly makes sense to interpret these verses as repeating once more the idea that νοεῖν is not separated from Being. However, these verses seem to express more than only monism, namely something about the words and arguments of the goddess (see below).

25 Cf. e.g., DK vol. 1, 238: “denn nicht ohne das Seiende, in dem es als Ausgesprochenes ist, kannst du das Denken antreffen.” Cf. also e.g., Aubenque, Études Sur Parménide, 2 Volumes, p. 40: “Car tu ne trouveras pas le penser sans l’être, dans lequel <le penser> est exprimé [For you will not find thinking
In their interpretation it is difficult to reconcile the idea that \( \nuo \) is expressed in Being with what the Poem says about words. The majority of scholars focus on the—of course crucial—message that \( \nuo \) will not be found without Being—so far so good—but then they interpret \( \epsilonn \ \omega \ \pi \varphi \alpha \tau \iota \sigma \iota \mu \epsilon \nu \ \eta \ \sigma \tau \nu, \) as the claim that \( \nuo \) also belongs to Being, in the form of expression / argumentation. That means that they regard words and arguments that express \( \nuo \) as belonging to Being. What would be the point of suggesting the location of words in Being, while the passage closely following B8.35–36 states that words are something that mortals have instituted, that they are not true, since they draw oppositions that seem to split Being?

It is much more coherent with the rest of the Poem to see two complementary indications in the words of the goddess addressed to the one who wants to find \( \nuo. \) How to find \( \nuo? \ \epsilonn \ \omega \ \pi \varphi \alpha \tau \iota \sigma \iota \mu \epsilon \nu \ \eta \ \sigma \tau \nu \) and \( \omega \ \ldots \ \kappa \gamma \nu \ \tau \iota \omega \ \epsilon \ \phi \nu \ \theta \ \iota \ \omicron \ \tau \ \tau \) in her words that reveal or express\(^{26} \nuo, \) but not without Being. Thus, the goddess explains that one will not find \( \nuo \) in what expresses or reveals \( \nuo \) (= in all the words and arguments that help one achieve \( \nuo \)), if one lacks Being; in order to achieve understanding, it is not enough to listen to the words of the goddess, but one must find Being as well. One cannot achieve understanding just by listening to words that explain something without the being in which \(<\text{the thinking}>\) has been given expression].”; Cerri, Parmenide Di Elea, p. 153: “senza l’ “essere” mai, in cui diviene parola, puoi trovare l’intelletto,” and p. 58: “Non troverai mai il capire (…) al di fuori dell’ essere (…) nel quale il capire risulta espresso (…)”; Collobert, L’être De Parménide, p. 19: “Car sans l’étant, dans lequel il est exprimé, tu ne trouveras pas le penser.” For discussions of B8.34–35 see Mourelatos, Route, pp. 170–172.

\(^{26}\) There are only 5 occurrences of \( \pi \varphi \alpha \tau \iota \sigma \iota \mu \epsilon \nu \) in the full corpus of Greek literature, besides the quotations of Parmenides B8.35 (3 by Simplicius, 1 by Proclus). Two are in the Scholia in Pindarum and three in Hesychius. \( \pi \varphi \alpha \tau \iota \sigma \iota \mu \epsilon \nu \) occurs in the Scholia: 1. \( \epsilonn \ \delta \ \Pi \theta \omega \ \chi \rho \sigma \theta \epsilon \nu / \tau \alpha \lambda \iota \varphi \iota \alpha \tau \sigma \nu (\text{Olympian 2, 39–40}) \) is explained as the oracle long ago “ordained, predestined” (\( \pi \varphi \alpha \tau \iota \sigma \iota \mu \epsilon \nu \)) by Apollo and told to Laius; 2. \( \tau \alpha \lambda \iota \varphi \iota \alpha \tau \sigma \nu \ \alpha \gamma \omicron \alpha (\text{Nemean 3, 14}) \) is explained as the agora with much tradition (\( \pi \varphi \alpha \tau \iota \sigma \iota \mu \epsilon \nu \)), hence the agora about which many positive things have been handed down and sung since long ago. It occurs in Hesychius always in relation with a god or an oracle; we might translate “ordained by a god” / “foretold by an oracle.” It seems, thus, appropriate for the goddess to refer to her speech with this word, which could possibly suggest once more that her speech that tells of \( \nuo, \) like the expressions of oracles, must be interpreted.
about understanding or give directions how to find it: one must go beyond those words and seek Being at which the words point. These words of the goddess encourage the audience to regard the given σήματα as signs pointing to something else and not as elements of a definitive, absolute, description of Being. After listening to her words, the audience must accept that her words alone will not bring them to understanding.

B8.34–36 are, thus, no diversion from the discussion about Being: these verses are embedded in the discussion of its fourth sign: its completeness, the fact that it does not lack anything. This characteristic excludes both the possibility of something next to Being and the possibility of its development. What has been regarded as an excursus is actually a part of the argument about the completeness of Being: Being also includes νοεῖν: thought / mind / understanding.

Moreover, as we have seen, the fourth sign can give information about the minds of apprentice philosophers (and their relations to Being) to the one who tries not to miss any layer of meaning in the signs of the goddess. In fact, what the goddess says about νοεῖν is something that can be applied to subjects that are endowed with the capacity of νοεῖν. Parmenides does not follow the tradition that denies νόος to mortals: mortals do have a νόος. Therefore this completeness of Being must be put in relation with an understanding in which human beings share. The audience who is willing to interpret the signs of the goddess will realize that the signs also say something about the knowing subject (the audience) and not only about the object (to be) known, i.e., the signs of the goddess reveal to the audience that they can understand Being with their νόος.

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28 For the elaboration of this conclusion see my book, *Becoming Being*, chapter 5, where I develop A. A. Long’s suggestion that: “when we are thinking Being with Parmenides we are (in) Being and at least momentarily lose our phenomenal identities as two-headed mortals (Long, “Parmenides,” p. 147). On this issue see also Crystal, “Scope.”
5. The treatment of words in the last σῆμα

Unfortunately habit, i.e., the normal way of looking at reality of which the words that they use are witnesses, lets their νός wander and prevents it from focusing on Being and understanding it.

After dealing with νοεῖν, the so-called “excursus” deals with human names; however, it is now easy for us to see that also what the goddess says about human names can be integrated in the argument:

B8.38–41: ... τῷ πάντ’ ὄνομ(α) ἔσται,²⁹ οὗσα βροτοι κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ, γίγνεσθαι τε καὶ ἀλλυσθαι, εἶναι τε καὶ οὐχί, καὶ τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διὰ τε χρόα φανὸν ἀμείβειν.

Therefore all those things will be named that mortals have established, persuaded that they are true to be born and to die, to be and not to be to change place and bright complexion.

What human words point to are not things or processes that could challenge the completeness or the perfection of Being: they are just names. All names that mortals use—B8.40–41: 1. to be born and to die, 2. to be and not to be, 3. to change place and 4. change bright complexion—seem to refer to the characteristics that have been denied to Being throughout B8 and that might well be summed up here. The idea may be that, once one finally—when listening to the fourth σῆμα—accepts that Being is not in development and not incomplete, one will have successfully rejected both birth and death, as argued in the first σῆμα; and differentiation, as argued in the second; and movement and change, as argued in the third, and, indeed development, which the fourth σῆμα rejects. In fact, what is complete and not in development

²⁹ Coxon, Fragments, p. 211 [2009: p. 334] observes: “ὀνομ’ ἔσται. [“will be a name”] is preserved by the ms. F at p. 87 of Simplicius ...”; whereas Woodbury, “Parmenides on Names,” defends ὄνόμασται, instead of ὄνομ’ ἔσται. For the argument against Woodbury’s choice see Meijer, Parmenides, p. 176.
has no birth and no death (γίγνεσθαι τε καὶ ὀλλοκότα, first σήμα); what is not in development has no internal differences between something that is and something that is not (yet) (εἶναι τε καὶ ωφί, second σήμα); it will not change place, as opposed to, for instance, animals who are looking for something that they do not yet have (καὶ τότον ἀλλάσσειν, third σήμα); it will not change bright color or complexion, which can imply a sort of development (διὰ τε χρῶα φανόν ἄμειβειν, fourth σήμα), like the one of animals that grow up, mature and then grow old.30

It is important to notice that even to be and not to be are regarded as mere names: truth is one homogeneous unity, whereas even the most useful names always split this unity: even the word Being is just a name, since it suggests the reality of its opposite, not-being. Therefore also Being (and not-being) are just names, words: σήματα that one must interpret in order to find the truth.

6. Conclusion

Words like those of B8 offer guidance on the journey towards the truth. And the truth is to be found by interpreting the persuasive words of the goddess that lead to the understanding of a new concept: ἔόν, Being. To the one who is willing to interpret the signs of the goddess they will not only (1st layer of interpretation) point at characteristics of the trustworthy object of understanding, Being, and not only (2nd layer of interpretation) at the methods the apprentice philosophers should not adopt in order to reach the truth. Her signs, while pointing at Being, also (3rd layer of interpretation) give hints about the understanding (νοεῖν) that is directed towards Being. The signs of the goddess, especially the fourth one, point, in fact at the fundamental unity of νοεῖν and Being. Being is the unity of what is (stable, unchangeable, homogenous and perfect) and what understands.

This unity called Being assures to every mortal the possibility of grasping the truth. In fact this unity implies, on the one hand, that understanding (νοεῖν) is not possible without Being: therefore this guided journey toward the formation of

30 Coxon, Fragments, pp. 211–212 [2009: p. 335] observes: “the noun χρόνος is not used of inanimate things.”
the concept of Being is the only way left to the one who really seeks the truth and is not content with opinions.

On the other hand, Being would not be complete without understanding: therefore, when one realizes what this Being is, one will also realize that it includes the possibility of being understood directly by this “instrument,” νοεῖν, that mortals possess.

This complete Being which includes understanding is the founding stone of Western Philosophy.
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