The Way of Truth

Parmenides’ Seminal Reflection on Logic, Semantics and Methodology of Science

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In the Festschrift for Peter Hartmann, a long time ago, Arnim von Stechow has shown that Plato reads one-place predicates like “x is big” as predicates with implicit parameters or implicit standards of comparison. The paper is a paradigm for how linguistics and philosophy can co-operate in a reconstruction of the cultural heritage that lies at the bottom of our own scientific investigations. It is Arnim the philosopher to whom I dedicate the following attempt to dig a little deeper, to find a common beginning of logical semantics, scientific thinking and rudimentary linguistic reflections on basic forms of sentences. Perhaps, we understand the formal ontologies of real and possible worlds better if we know about their archaic roots.

1. Reflection on the Concept of Meaning, Truth, and Proof

1.1 Main Thesis

In the following, I try to present a new perspective on Parmenides, the father of Plato’s logical semantics, or rather, on his famous and difficult poem. I do so without presenting sufficient philological arguments for the proposed reading. I just claim that the poem is a most influential text in the history of logic, semantics and methodology of science. Usually, some kind of metaphysical ontology stands in the focus of attention. I believe, instead, that later shifts of interest and understanding lost the original context and project out of sight.

Parmenides asks what truth and reliable knowledge is. He seems to be the first philosopher who did not just tell allegedly true stories about the structure of the world as, for example, the Ionians did. Parmenides begins with a metalevel reflection on method, on the right road (hodos) to knowledge and truth. He presents an ideal explanation of what absolute truth and knowledge is. Only after this does he give a presentation of best possible knowledge. This main part of the poem is almost totally lost. It consisted of a collections of claims about the real causes of some phenomena. Therefore, the book had the title On Nature in antiquity.
The poem begins with an allegorical prologue: A man tries to follow the right method of investigation. He is about to leave the house of ignorance according to some inner force or divine daimon. On his journey, he is stopped by a goddess, who might just be the personalized daimon herself. She declares that the road taken so far was the right one. She then starts to explain the true method of investigation, the way of truth.

The following first part of the poem contains a protagonistic attempt of a metalevel, formal and ideal, analysis of the very concept of truth and knowledge, of logically correct thinking and problematic procedures. The leading questions, as I take them, are these: What does really exist? And what does it mean to say that something is really true? What is a possible object of real cognition or real knowledge?

The goddess describes an ideal path to truth. This does not mean that only immortals can follow it. The goddess presents, rather, a “mathematical picture of knowledge”. The analogy is this. In mathematical geometry, we can judge how close a real, imperfect, spatial figure represents an ideal, perfect, form. We do this by comparing the figures with the absolute forms. We do so by adjusting the ideal criteria for a straight line, a circle or a square in ideal geometry to good enough representations for given purposes. We need experience and good judgement in such projections. Plato makes this projective relation clear when he later talks about methexis or “participation” or “application” of ideas or forms. When we say that some real thing has the form F, we do not say that it is a full representation of the form F, but that enough properties are shared with respect to the relevant point of view. In fact, Plato’s reading of Parmenides supports mine, or rather, my reading of Plato’s dialogue does, but this is another story.

The formal principles in Parmenides’s “geometry of real knowledge” seems to be these: It is impossible to know anything that is false. There even is no meaningful way to talk about or refer to things that do not exist. Any knowledge claim is of the following form: It says that some thing or some state of affairs exists. The insight behind the corresponding formulas of the poem is this: Any utterance of a name-like expression presupposes that there is something that is named by it. Therefore, we must avoid to say what is not true and we must not use names without reference – or rather, without making sure that they have reference.

One of the most important consequences of these principles is that we should not use words that do not have a prefixed meaning. Any meaningful claim presupposes that the words being used have meaning, or, as Plato later puts it, that they name pre-existing ideas or forms or concepts. Even philosophers who indulge in being sceptics about meanings should be able to answer the question what concept of being or real existence and truth they presuppose – or else their claims about the limits of our knowledge are not sufficiently clear, neither to them nor to us. But what do we presuppose as pre-existing if we presuppose unique meanings or distinct ideas? This was the question of the great Platonic dialogues Parmenides, Theaetetus and Sophist.
1.2 Objects and Facts, Names, Sentences, and Predicates

For Parmenides, a possible object of cognition can be an (existing) state of affairs or an (existing) object. Both are thought to be named by a meaningful name. Parmenides does not distinguish yet, as we do and as Plato in his *Sophist* and Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* later do, between different meanings or uses of words like “to exist” versus “existing” or “to be” versus “being”. Sometimes the infinitives, i.e., the Greek words *einaí*, *emmenai*, or *pelein*, stand for ‘to be true’, sometimes for ‘to exist’ sometimes even for predication, the application of a predicate, expressed by a copula. A related ambiguity – if we allow ourselves to talk from a standpoint of later and finer distinctions – holds for the words *on* and *eon* i.e., ‘ens’ and ‘being’. Sometimes they stand for ‘what is true’, sometimes for ‘what exists’. Things get even more complicated when Plato says that forms or concepts exist: He treats nominalized predicates and relations on a par with names. They are said to name concepts or properties or forms or ideas. This does not mean that there is no need of differentiation between subject and predicate, as Plato himself finds out in his later dialogues. It just means, as in the poem of Parmenides, that the corresponding words must have a common and well determined meaning.¹ This meaning is understood, at first, as the referent of a name.

In such an all too general use of *eon* or *einaí*, Parmenides treats sentences as if they named states of affairs, or rather: facts. Therefore, he seems to think that only true sentences are meaningful. Only true sentences “name” an “existing” state of affairs. This problematic proposition is discussed in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. It may sound erroneous from the start. But it is a consequence of a deep insight. The insight is that there always are existential presuppositions when we use a meaningful name.

I put this into a short thesis: If we talk about something, we presuppose the existence of what we talk about in some sense or other. If we assume that sentences or utterances say something about something, they must refer to true facts. It was not before Plato’s *Sophist* that the two claims got clearly separated: We have to distinguish between objects as the meanings of meaningful names, properties or classifications that correspond to the use of predicates, possible states of affairs expressed by possible statements, and facts expressed by true statements. Only then we arrive at a more or less satisfactory account of predication which shows how error, falsity, and negation is possible.

But the insight of Parmenides survives in the following form. For namelike expressions N we still assume this: If N does not name an existing object it would be wrong to attribute any property-word to N, – or else the basic principle of formal logic, the principle of the excluded middle, would not hold. This principle says that any semanti-

¹ In fact, *einaí* or “to be” or the Latin *esse* should be read as a kind of nominalization of “is”, referring vaguely to the most general use of the word “is”, including its use as a copula, its use for expressing existence or even identity or equality. This holds not only for Parmenides but for the whole occidental tradition of philosophy or “ontology” through the Middle Ages up to Hegel or Heidegger. Only today we avoid the umbrella word “to be” (or “being”) and prefer to talk either about truths, states of affairs, concepts or properties, concrete or abstract objects or ‘entities’ and so on.
A well-formed sentence is true or false. That is, the possibility that the sentence is ("at the same time") to be judged as "true" and as "false" and the possibility that there is no truth value fixed are both ruled out.

Moreover, a sentence S with fixed and unique meaning should not change truth values if uttered by different persons in different situations. Such a sentence is a standing sentence. Paradigms for standing sentences are the mathematical sentences of arithmetics and geometry, but also the time- and space-invariant general laws of physical or natural science. As such, standing sentences are categorically different from occasion sentences. The latter express, as we might say in a first move, different propositions p, depending on the situation and circumstance of their utterance. Occasion sentences express predicates that can be applied to situations. In other words, occasion sentences have the syntactic form of a sentence, but express, from a semantical point of view, predicates. There is a hidden situation-variable. Indexicals like "I" or "you" or "here" make the reference to the situation of utterance and some of its features like speaker and hearer, time and space explicit. But occasion sentences like "it is raining" without explicit indexicals refer also to a certain situation of utterance.

True, i.e., absolute Knowledge with capital K, or Episteme, is standing knowledge. It can be expressed only by standing or eternal or situation-independent sentences. The truth value of such sentences should be independent of the situation of utterance, of the particular author and her mere opinion or doxa. The reason is this: We can ask for the truth of a sentence only if its truth condition does not depend just on the contingent situation of the speaker, her feelings of satisfaction, for example, or her mere assent. At least in relevant aspects its truth must be independent from the peculiar situation of utterance. But there is a great problem here, as Plato obviously has realized – as Arnim von Stechow in the paper mentioned above has realized in turn. It is the problem of distinguishing relativism from relational statements with hidden parameters. Relativism is the (meta-logical) claim (attributed, sometimes, to Protagoras in a corresponding reading of his homo-mensura formula) that a statement is true if I accept it as true or if in the situation here and now it seems to me true enough. Relational statements like "Simmias is large" (because he is larger than Socrates) or "Theaetetus sits" (because he sits now, whereas Socrates may walk now and Theaetetus later, too) should not mislead us into relativism, says Plato, and he is right, no doubt.

The basic idea of episteme or standing knowledge is this. We have to characterize the situation of reference as explicit as needed for a non-relativist concept of truth. If we say that "in principle" any meaningful proposition, even if at first expressed by occasion sentences, could be expressed by a suitable standing sentence S, we take part in this project. It is this idea of situation invariant knowledge which guides Parmenides’s way of truth and Western Science altogether. The daimon of Parmenides shows us the way.
1.3 On Denoting and Asserting

If a name or an expression N like “the present king of France” or “Pegasus” does not refer to an existing object, then, in a rather straightforward sense which was extensively discussed after Russell’s “On denoting”, a sentence of the form “The present king of France is bald” is just as false as the sentence “The present king of France is not-bald”. In a similar way we can say that the sentence “Pegasus is a horse” is just as false as it is true: It depends on the context and circumstance of utterance and the way we read or understand it. In order to express the dependency of “existence” from the class of relevant properties, I propose to say that a name N is not meaningful with respect to a set Σ of predicates P exactly if neither P(N) nor non-P(N) is true for some of the predicates; i.e., if for some relevant Σ-predicates the principle of the excluded middle does not apply. A name N is meaningful with respect to a set Σ of predicates P, if for any P of the relevant sort the statement “N is P” or the statement “N is non-P” is true – but, of course, not both. If this is the case, we say that in the relevant realm of discourse the (possibly “abstract”) object o(N) exists. It is named by N. The number 2 “exists”, for example, with respect to arithmetical properties. It does not exist with respect to “physical” properties, because it is, for example, as well false to say that 2 is smaller than the moon, as it is to say that 2 is not smaller than the moon. It is rather difficult to grasp all the details of this formal idea of “existence” in a realm of discourse, but we have to stay content with these hints.

Parmenides seems to have noticed at least the basic aspect of these rather deep formal rules of language use with respect to names. He saw that the principle of the excluded middle is unreliable if name-like expressions occur in sentences that are not meaningful in the sense explained above. If a name-like expression N does not refer to an object in the relevant realm of abstract or concrete objects, there is a relevant predicate P such that neither P nor non-P applies to N. We may express this logical fact by the following norm: “Never say that what is not” or “Never use a name that does not refer to an object that exists.” In other words, for any meaningful name N, an object (or at least a formal referent) o(N) must exist to which N refers. If we do not follow the advice, formal rules of logical deduction that are at least intuitive valid will lead us astray.

If we apply the principle to sentences S, or rather, to “designative” expressions of the form “the state of affairs expressed by S”, it seems as if any meaningful sentence must already refer to an existing state of affairs, to the fact, that S. But then it seems as if the corresponding sentence S already must be true. This, however, is a misleading claim, as Plato will show in the dialogues *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. Its consequence would be this: An assertion is either true or meaningless. But we should prefer to say that only meaningful assertions are true or false. Some of them are false, some are true. Hence, we cannot treat sentences semantically in the same way as names. Therefore, we should not say that standing sentences (or rather, the utterances expressing concrete, but hopefully sufficiently invariant statements) refer to existing states of affairs.

The traditional proposal to solve this problem is this: We enlarge the ontology and talk about possible states of affairs that can be named. Then, real or actual states of
affairs appear as a certain subclass of possible (hence possibly non-real) states of affairs. The famous expression “really existing being”, the Aristotelian ontos on, is a result of such a consideration.

The framework of possible worlds proceeds, in a sense, on this line. But what does it mean to say that a sentence or proposition is true in some set of possible worlds, false in another – or that it even names the set of possible words in which it is true? It now seems as if we would have to talk about irreal or even impossible states of affairs as well. To see this, just replace “existing” by “possible”: If we talk about an irreal or even impossible state of affair, the state of affair is assumed as existing or possible at least in the sense that we can talk about it. The presumption is that this talk is already meaningful. So we seem to arrive at a larger realm of possibilities in which the “real real” possibilities must be distinguished somehow from the “irreal” or perhaps even “impossible” but still somehow “existing” possibilities. Hence, there is a tension between the idea that we can talk about anything we wish and Parmenides’s claim that any name-like expression formally presupposes an object named by it – whatever this means in detail.

In its general form, Parmenides’s thesis remains untouched by Russell’s contextual account for the use of designators. Moreover, any knowledge claim and any possible criticism of such a claim already presupposes a concept of truth. This presupposition in its general form is not only not affected by the fact that human convictions are always fallible opinions. It is a conceptual basis of any statement about human fallibility. In fact, scepticism makes sense only in view of a supposed understanding of what knowledge or truth is. Hence, the question arises: What do we talk about if we talk about truth or knowledge? And what does it mean to criticize human knowledge as fallible or imperfect by reference to some divine knowledge or absolute truth?

1.4 Knowledge and Logic

The core thesis of Parmenides’s poem consists, I take it, of five propositions:

1. Truth and knowledge are interdefinable.

2. There is a concept of absolute, non-relative truth presupposed in any relativistic criticisms of human convictions.

3. The concept of truth and the corresponding concept of ideal knowledge “goes beyond” mere subjective feelings of certainty, beyond mere opinion and belief.²

² We might add today: Absolute truth and ideal knowledge are results of idealizations. They are limiting points in our improvements of real knowledge, in making knowledge as situation-invariant as possible. Parmenides, of course, does not talk about idealization. He talks immediately about its results, just as ancient mathematicians do in geometry.
4. Truth and knowledge are defined with respect to standing sentences and standing names. I.e., they must be situation-invariant.

5. There is a tension between the goal of situation invariance and the need to represent change in the framework of scientific knowledge.

Of course, Parmenides was not able to articulate our distinction between standing names and standing sentences, on one side, occasion sentences and deictical names, on another. He could not even articulate the different grammatical roles played by names, predicates and sentences. He could not refer to an expression as such. He could not distinguish between use and mention. He could not talk about the expression and its use. Nevertheless, Parmenides stresses at least in a seminal way the importance of the use of representations in or to the mind (fragment 4,1) for a sufficient understanding of existence or truth which surpasses the realm of what can be directly demonstrated or perceived (fr. 2,7, fr. 8,3). We bring distant objects firmly into the realm of our imme-
diate and situation-dependent awareness. We do not arbitrarily say that only things around us exist. If we did, we would cut them off from other things that are possibly perceived or directly known by other persons. Hence, it is not by chance that for Par-
menides some kind of language or rather, some linguistic explanation (logos) of what it means that an entity exists (fr. 6,1) is a necessary prerequisite of any sufficiently invariant knowledge which surpasses mere sensation or mere subjective opinion. It is a means to express the spatial and chronological transformation of perspective by which we can turn occasion sentences into standing sentences by describing the situation of utterance.

2. The Prologue (fr. 1)

2.1 The Poem as an Ornament

A closer look shows how the poem proceeds in detail. Its prologue is more or less the only part of any poetic value. For many readers, it is just a kind of ornament in the tradition of the grand poems of Homer or Hesiod. The Odyssey begins something like this: “Name me, oh goddess, the manyfaced man who had to endure many adventures after he managed to destroy holy Troy. Many cities (astea) he saw and many countries he travelled.” To Parmenides, the major insights are told by a goddess after he had travelled to her on a divine road “that leads to all cities (astea)” i.e., to all important (fortified) places. By the allusion to the great patterns, Parmenides claims at least that the content of his poem is important.
2.2 The Way out of Ignorance

1. The proem describes a journey (fr. 1,2) in a chariot drawn by horses (fr. 1,1,4,21,25) and directed by maidens (fr. 1,5,9f.15,21,24). These maidens unveil their eyes at the start when they try to leave the house(s) of night. It seems to be clear that the maidens represent sense-perception and experience. There are some signs that the horses stand for pregiven forms of logical deductions: The movement of the chariot is accompanied by some increasing noise, produced by the turning of the wheels in the holes of the axles (fr. 1,5ff.), as if this noise corresponded to the utterances of the conclusions of logical or conceptual deductions – whatever they are and however we judge them as valid or incorrect.

2. In the attempt to leave the place of night or ignorance, the traveller encounters a locked gate. Good Judgement (Dike) is said to have the key. Arguments, in fact: the arguments of the maidens, of experience, convince Good Judgement to open the door, i.e., to prove a statement which can be used in a further proceeding as a true premise (fr. 1,11ff.). The locked door would represent, then, any wrong statement which can never be used as a premise in a reliable logical proceeding. It does not lead us out of the house or realm of ignorance at all. If we only know that something is wrong with a sentence or proposition, we are not in a position yet to assume the truth of the negated sentence or proposition. If I am right, Parmenides does not believe in the unconditional reliability of the use the formal principle of reductio ad absurdum or indirect proof. Mere refutation of an assumption S does not suffice to prove the negated statement non-S. By saying this, I contradict interpreters of Parmenides who say that Parmenides just defends the principle of tertium non datur unconditionally – from which the principle of reductio ad absurdum would follow.

In Plato’s dialogue Parmenides (135e–136a), the problem of refutations is addressed explicitly. When Aristotle takes great pains to show that in his system of syllogisms any indirect proof can be turned into a direct deduction under certain conditions, namely, that the terms are non-empty, he also seems to be influenced by Parmenides’s critique of proofs by refutations.

3. After leaving the place of ignorance, our travellers get stopped, so to speak, by a goddess. She praises them, namely the maidens (experience), horses (logical deductions), and the person who decided to use this joint method (fr. 1,1,25) which is said to be a new road (fr. 1,27) of any right, orderly, and necessary investigation (Dike, Themis) (fr. 1,28). Then the goddess begins to teach the difference to alternative procedures.

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3 The condition was realized by Aristotle himself, such that later criticism like that of Lukasiewicz miss the point. Aristotle himself shows, by the way, in what sense the use of syllogisms for empty predicates are not reliable. A female unicorn is a unicorn, but it does not follow from this that there exist unicorns that are female.
4. The goddess addresses two topics. The first concerns the concept of ideal truth. The second is a reflection on fallible human doxa or pistis, on real knowledge. There are two concepts of knowledge, namely divine and absolutely reliable knowledge on the one side, real human knowledge on the other. There are at least some signs that show awareness of the difficult relation between the ideal “geometry of knowledge” presented by the goddess and real knowledge. The last (somehow garbled) sentence in line 32 of fragment 1, for example, seems to say this: With respect to human convictions we also must assume that what is claimed or what appears to be the case must exist in some way or other. In fact, we cannot even talk about anything that seems to be such and such if we do not talk about something. Even if we say that something seems to be the case according to the opinions of mortals, we already must assume that we understand the difference between what there really is and what just seems to be the case.

2.3 An Idea of Encyclopaedic Knowledge? (fr. 5)

Some readers put fragment 5 right after fragment 1. Then the goddess probably would say that the order of her proceeding does not matter much. Actually, she begins with an account of the ideal concept of truth. She continues, then, with an account of real human knowledge. She could have begun with a presentations of some real knowledge and later come back to the concept of absolute knowledge and truth. But it might well be that she talks in fragment 5 about the idea of an encyclopaedic system of knowledge: Already in fr. 1,11 we hear something about a well rounded truth. True knowledge must be represented in an encyclopaedic system of true sentences. In such a system we can start further proofs and deductions wherever we want. We always can come back to the place of departure. There is no danger of a petitio principii. If a sentence is true (and proven), we may use it premises as we wish. It does not matter if we come back to it in conclusions. There is no danger of vicious circle here. This picture of encyclopaedic knowledge makes especially good sense in the context of fr. 4. There, Parmenides says that we have to bring present and absent things into connections. The mind is the agency of establishing this connection – or, alternatively, the connection is one for the mind. Fr. 4 would say, then: In encyclopaedic systems of knowledge, expressed by true sentences and invariantly referring names, we can “move around freely”.

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4 This reading was suggested to me by Catherine Osborne.
3. The Method of Inquiry, of Drawing Conclusions

3.1 Direct Proof vs. (Mere) Refutation (fr. 2)

1. In fr. 2, the goddess reminds Parmenides (if he is the addressee) not only to listen carefully, but also to take care for the content by his own efforts of rethinking and reflections. Then she starts to distinguish the following methods of inquiry. The first way says (transl. McKirahan): “that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be”. (This is) “the path of Persuasion (for it attends upon Truth), the other, that is not and that it is necessary for it not to be, this I point out to you be a path completely un-learnable, for neither may you know that which is not (for it is not to be accomplished) nor may you declare it.”

I would replace the word “persuasion” not only by “conviction” but even by “proof”. The word “unlearnable” is rather misleading. The text rather says that the road is impassable. The proposed method or procedure would get stuck.

2. But what does the right method consist in? And which are the impassable, misleading pseudo-methods that should be avoided? What method is described by a sentence translated as “it is and being is necessary” (fr. 2,3) and by a sentence like: “it is not and non-being is necessary” (fr. 2,5). What on earth does this “it” refer to?

3. I understand the method thus: We should produce statements that affirmatively say that something is the case or that some object exists or that some predicate applies and that or how or why this is so. This does not mean that we should not use negated sentences or predicates. It means that we should always proceed in an affirmative way. One should show directly the truth of any claim that says what is the case. “Showing” means that we know why it is the case, i.e., why the claim “must” be true.

If we want to compare the idea with modern logic, then we may notice that Frege uses one and only one performative sign for assertion. Frege’s negation is an operation defined for sentences. It turns a “positive” sentence into a “positive” sentence. In antiquity, negation is an operation on predicates. It turns a “positive” predicate into another “positive” predicate.

In fact, we should distinguish the performative act of negation – in the sense of cancelling a possible statement – from negation in sentences. Negation as mere cancelling only says that something – we do not know what – is wrong with the cancelled sentence or statement. From this, we cannot proceed to a negated sentence or a corresponding “positive” claim. Showing that something is wrong just stops any further possibility of using the sentence in a deductive or argumentative procedure. It only
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shows that the road is impassable, that the method of deductions has lead us to an aporia.

The advice of the goddess is, accordingly: Prove your claim directly and do not present arguments that lead to aporetic blind alleys with no way out. Provide true results, as much as you can – and leave the process of mere investigation and mere refutations, especially all misleading roads and paradoxes, behind. This does not mean that aporetic and paradoxical arguments are not important. But they show only that we do not know enough yet. Hence, the dialectical method of Zeno and the elenchus of Socrates are not good enough. No wonder, now, that Parmenides, the father (Sophist), who was nearer to the gods (Philebos), is the hero of Plato’s later dialogues.

The bad road or method says of some thing x that it does not exist and that it (even) is necessary that it does not exist. There are two reasons why this method can mislead us, if we do not take into account what was already said about mere refutation or “can- cancelling”. The first problem is this: If x is an object we talk about, the statement that says that x does not exist (and that this is true with necessity) contradicts the presupposition that it was possible to talk about x. Such a method of proof leaves us in ignorance about what we were talking at all. The second problem is this: Let us assume that x is a possible state of affairs. Some proposition says that x does not hold. This claim is proved by some necessity. Then we only know that something is not the case. By a mere refutation we do not advance knowledge, at least as long as we are not allowed to turn the refutation into a proof of a negated statement.

I do not think, I repeat, that Parmenides tells us to avoid refutations or negated sentences or negated predicates altogether, even if line 5 of fragment 2 seems to say so. He rather argues against a method that turns disproved statements or refutations automatically into positive claims or proofs of the corresponding negated sentences.

To say that an object x does not exist is to say that there was no object x to talk about in the first place. A “proof” which shows that something does not exist or that a proposition is somehow wrong could be “true” because meaningless words occur in the sentence S. Only if we have a proof that the negated sentence non-S or the corresponding proposition non-p is true, we can say that S or p was false in a more precise sense. This excludes that it is just meaningless. Only after we know that a name N does not name an object in a certain realm of objects, but in another one, we can say that the name is meaningful but has another reference than we might have thought in the first place. If we take this into account, we see why refutation alone will never help us to leave the house of darkness or ignorance.

5. Hence, we should not just start with arbitrary assumptions and try to refute them. More often than not the assumption is not only wrong, but meaningless, and the refutation does not enlarge episteme or knowledge because we cannot add a true sentence to its system. It is important to keep metalevel statements out of consideration. By such a statement we can say that a certain expression is meaningless. Antinomies, paradoxes, or dilemmas, on the other hand, just show that there is a problem with respect to the meaning of the sentence. The art of negative dialectics taught by Parmenides and Zeno is the art of showing bounds of sense. In the second part of
Plato’s dialog *Parmenides* it is shown, for example, that it is not clear what it means to say that the concept of unique meaning has a unique meaning. Another famous example is this: The utterance of “I am lying” is not just false, but meaningless: What is said does not refer to any proposition.

6. Parmenides continues (in fr. 2,7,8): You cannot “make out” or “realize” what is not. Nor can you “demonstrate” or “show” it (the word is *phrazein*). For this cannot be accomplished.

Does this mean that if it is not raining now, I cannot demonstrate that it is not raining? I certainly can. Hence, I do not think that negations of sentences or predicates are the topic. *Phrazein* most probably does not mean ‘say’ here: I certainly can say or claim, even though erroneously, that it is raining, even if it is not. But I cannot show that it is true. The claim would be meaningful, but false. Parmenides seems to remind us of the truism that we cannot realize and notice (here and now) what is not there. He does so in order to show what it means that nothing can be represented (by thinking or speaking) if it were not possible to present or to show it. Parmenides is by no means a “transcendent” opponent of empiricism at all, despite the picture Sextus Empiricus has handed down to us.

3.2 A Core Statement about Existence (fr. 3)

The word *noein* has at least sometimes in our text a medial or passive meaning like: ‘to be such that it can be known’ instead of the active: ‘to know something’. If this is so, then the following most famous fragmentary sentence:

-.- *to gar auto noein estein te kai einai*.

translates almost word by word thus:

‘The same, namely, is being able to be known and to be.’

This fits nicely in the context of discussion. It just develops what was said in fr. 2,7,8, where Parmenides had said that you cannot know (or rather: perceive) that which is not. Parmenides would have changed the topic entirely if he had said something like: “Knowing something and being is the same”, as if it were some essential feature of human beings always to know something or always to think about something, as a Cartesian might believe later.

It does not matter much how we reconstruct the sentence in all grammatical detail if the “big” decision is made to read *noein* as ‘to be possibly noticed or perceived’. In this case it always says something like this: That what can be known must exist and what exists must be such that it possibly could be known.

Before we use words (names or sentences) for saying something we should make sure that it is possible to know what they refer to. In the end it should be possible to
demonstrate what they refer to. And this means that we should not use words (names) for which it cannot be shown that they refer to something. Moreover, we have to know already something positive about this reference.

4. Representation and Explanation (fr. 4, fr. 6)

4.1 Being is Not Just Being Here (fr. 4)

There is a possible misunderstanding of what was said above, namely, that it refers only to what is here. Therefore Parmenides feels the need to continue like this (fr. 4,1):
But look, how things that are not present can be (re)presented to the mind in a safe or firm way [sc. even if they cannot be directly known, i.e., perceived, because they are not here now]. We (or our minds, our thinking) do not cut off the cohesion of things arbitrarily, just depending on how they, by chance, are standing together right now or how they are scattered around in the world.

4.2 Explaining What It Is That Is

The following passages of fr. 6 (Chre to legein te noein t' eon emmenai) belong to the most discussed in the whole poem. There are almost more translations and interpretations than readers, at least more than anyone would expect for a series of 8 (or 15) words. One is this: “what is there to be said and thought must needs be” (Kirk/Raven/Schofield). Another is this: There is need to explain and know that (or how) (any) being is.

If we assume again that noein means something like: ‘to let itself be known’, and that legein does not just mean ‘to say’, but rather ‘to unfold’, ‘to lay out’, ‘to explain’, we could read the sentence thus: ‘It is necessary for everything that exists (eon) to unfold it [to verbally explain it] and to let it be known as what it is [‘in its essential properties’]. For [such a] being [i.e., the characteristic property of that which is] exists [then]; whereas ‘nothing’ does not exist. I ask you to notice this (important truth), for I bar you, first, from this method of inquiry.” The wrong method is, I presume, the method of “sophistical” proofs by refutation without checking the presuppositions of existence (for names) and of truth and proof (for premises).

5 Barnes (1979:611) declares that the grammar of the first half line of B is horrid and translates: “What is for saying and for thinking of must be”.
6 This is a quote from Homer.
7 I do not think that translations like the following are right, nor do they make sense: “Necessarily the verbal explaining and knowing is something real.” “There is need that the saying and knowing exists as something real”.

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I do not think that translations like the following are right, nor do they make sense: “Necessarily the verbal explaining and knowing is something real.” “There is need that the saying and knowing exists as something real”.
Parmenides knows, of course, that the word “nothing” does not name a thing, just as “nobody” does not name a person, as the story of Ulysses and Polyphemus shows. Therefore, he does not say that an entity called “nothing” has the property of being nonexistent. He rather says something like this: That, which does not exist (= nothing, ‘meden’), does not exist. It is not far-fetched to add the following consequence: Therefore there is no being or property of it to be unfolded or investigated.

4.3 Two Wrong Ways (fr. 6,4–9, fr. 7)

Then, the goddess warns us not to follow the more conventional ways normal people proceed. They do not know anything. They walk back and forth. They proceed, so to speak, in two directions at once. They contradict themselves and do not even realize this. Helpless confusion in their minds (literally: “hearts”, today: “heads”) (mis)guides their wavering judgement (reason). Therefore, they are even in deeper error than those people which shall be called sophists. The sophists start with an arbitrary hypothesis S, assume that it is true or false and use indirect proofs or an unchecked law of the excluded middle in order to prove non-S. By this, they prove some other positive claims. Their method is bad, because by it they can, in the end, prove anything they want. The problem of unchecked presuppositions gets clear in a forensic practice of questioning persons and allowing only the answers yes or no. Just think of questions like: “Have you stoped beating your wife”? In fr. 7 the goddess repeats her advice: “Do not follow mere conventional schemes”. We should not follow mere conventional and traditional forms of “inference” without checking the full truth of the premises and the full reliability of the argument.

So we see that there are two wrong methods to be avoided. The first is the method of all too clever arguments which use formal refutations in pseudo-proofs, starting from arbitrary hypotheses. The advice is: Do not forget to check the presuppositions. At least, we have to make sure that the used words are meaningful, that they have reference. Only then can a proof be reliable. Moreover, all premises in a proof must be true. The second wrong method is the method of mere common sense. By following the superficial forms of ordinary usage, we often loose our orientation due to a lack of critical reflection and analysis. The problem of any relativist is that his truths do not survive the moments they are uttered, the situation, in which they seem to be true.

5. A Theory of Substance and Invariant Truth (fr. 8,1–49)

The longest, and central, piece of the first part of Parmenides’s poem is difficult to understand. At first sight, the text of fragment 8 (1–49) seems to be an explanation of the unity of an unmoved kosmos and a highly sophisticated argument against the existence of any change and movement. But what is presented in fr. 8 is rather a continua-
tion of the reflection on the right method of science. Parmenides defends a notion of objective knowledge. He defends intersubjective, invariant, criteria of truth. He is against mere subjective opinions of “ordinary people” and also against sophists who support subjectivist or empiricist versions of relativism. For Parmenides, a relativistic epistemology is, so to speak, much too populist. This even applies to Heraclitus, despite the fact that he would be the last who wanted to be seen as a populist.

5.1 On the Right Method (fr. 8,1–21)

Parmenides reminds us, where the arguments had led us until now: After we have said what methods should not be used because they are unreliable (or rather, because they lead to nowhere), there is only one way left, namely the investigation of what is, i.e., of truth and reality. The Goddess of Truth tells us that we can find sufficiently many signs or arguments which show that we are on the right track (fr. 8,2).

The basic idea of true knowledge implies that what is or can be known has to fulfill certain conditions of “invariance”. It cannot be just something that only seems to me or to you so and so. It cannot be totally subjective. Nor can it be totally situation-dependent. It cannot be true only here and now. If it is true here and now, it cannot be false there and then – at least if we articulate the referent and topic and the content of the knowledge in such a way that the situations to which it applies is characterized in a sufficiently objective way.

Parmenides’s goddess presupposes that the topic or object we talk about is made sufficiently explicit. It must be defined independently of the particular perspective and situation of the speaker. She assumes that a sufficient characterization or explication of what we talk about, of the object of the purported knowledge, (hopefully) provides us with the invariance needed.

But absolutely true knowledge will turn out to be always ideal knowledge. That is, if we talk about Truth with a capital T, we usually overlook all remaining situation-dependencies of its articulation. We talk as if we could remove these relativities in principle – if we were able to take a perspective of a god, i.e., if we could look at the truth-claim sub specie aeternitatis and from a view of nowhere or everywhere.

In the following I shall call the referent of an ideal name a “substance” or a “substantial object” and I claim that this is what eon means – at least in the context that follows. Remember that such a substance can be as well a “state of affairs” or an “event”, at least as long as we do not rule this out. We do not just have to think of something like “material substances”.

In order to explain what ideal or absolute knowledge is, it is not a bad idea to use the (fictitious or metaphorical) perspective of a god. By this, the ideal point of view of analysis and the logical peculiarity of being an object of absolute knowledge being True with capital T is expressed from the beginning.

Ideally, all names in “standing sentences” should name objects that are defined independently of the time or place of the speaker or hearer. Only “ideal standing sentences” are true (if they are true) independently of the situation of utterance. The latter state-
The Way of Truth

The presumption is, in a sense, a definition of what we mean when we talk about a “standing sentence”. From standing sentences we distinguish “occasion- or situation-sentences”. Special “situation-sentences” are “observation sentences”. They are true (if they are true) in case we can add the relevant features of the situation and thus turn the sentence into a true standing sentence. If, for example, Socrates points to a person and says: “this young man sits”, then this sentence is true if and only if the sentence “Theaetetus sits” is true in the situation in which, as we assume, Socrates points to Theaetetus. In other words, the presumption is that situation-dependent observation sentences are meaningful (true or false) and true (if they are true) only via the meaningfulness and truth of corresponding standing sentences. The same applies, as the example shows, for deictical names whose referent depends on the situation of utterance. They name an entity if and only if they can or could be replaced by more situation-independent names, and, in principle (as we say) by totally situation-independent names. In other words, ideal names would have to have absolutely stable references if they were meaningful at all. They must name substances in exactly the way Parmenides explains. Their reference must be (at least in some respects) invariant to the time and place of utterance. They must refer to one and only one object. This condition reappears in the discussion of Plato’s Parmenides. The referent of a name and the truth-value of a standing sentence must be (sufficiently) independent of the time and place of utterance; if they were not, there were no intersubjective or objective or “absolute” (non-relative) truths to be discussed.

For common sense, however, the condition that the referent of an ideal name never can come into being and never can stop to be – if the name is meaningful at all – seems to be utter nonsense. But from the “radical” point of view of the goddess it is not. She looks, so to speak, on knowledge-claims, meaning, and truth from an ideal and formal perspective. It is true, her perspective always has to be adjusted in any “real use” by us “mortals”. But talking about it can nevertheless lead us the way. In any case, I prefer a “logical” rather than an “ontological” or “cosmological” reading of the first part of the poem. Then, Parmenides does not talk about the eternity of a physical kosmos. He rather talks about the right order (kosmos!) of science, the invariance of the objects named by ideal standing names and of the truth values of standing sentences. He defends this invariance and timelessness as an ideal goal of any reasonable scientific enterprise or method, despite the fact that we never shall reach the ideal goal as such.

5.2 Substances and Change in Time

What I call “substance” here is a possible referent of an ideal name. As such it must exist “in all eternity” or rather “in a timeless way”. It must be independent from the time and place of utterance, or else we could not speak about it. Hence, if something is the case now, it is, in a sense, always the case. If something objectively exists now, it does so, in a sense, in a timeless way.

The reason why we are not permitted to say or to think that there might have been a time when a substance did not exist is this: The question if the corresponding name has
meaning (or not) would depend too much on the time and situation of utterance. The
same holds for the truth (value) of the sentences containing the name. But this was
exactly what Parmenides did not allow for ideal sentences or propositions as the “car-
riers” or “bearers” of timeless and absolute existence or truth.

When Parmenides asks what necessity could have brought the substance(s) into be-
ing (fr. 8,6f.), the implicit argument sounds cosmological or ontological rather than
logical. He seems to say that if we assume that substances evolved and came into being
we need necessary causes that bring them into being. But what “causes” could be so
powerful as to produce something out of nothing?

I do not say that this reading is wrong. I rather prefer to see it as a part of a logical
argument and, hence, as one of the many signs that speak in favour of Parmenides’s
theory of substances. This sign or argument rests on our (everyday) concept of causal
explanation. We always assume that moving things produce another movement of
things. But we never assume that nothing can move any thing or that any thing can
come into being from nothing. That no thing can evolve from nothing is a corollary
and, at the same time, a supporting lemma to the statement that all substances in the
world exist eternally.

If we look at the universe as if it were a set or system of substances, then it is as
such eternal, not created. No element in it has evolved or will decay. We shall see in
what sense there still can be development and movement. But at first we have to see
why the concept of change is most problematic if we look at the world from a god’s
perspective or, what amounts to the same, if we use a framework of absolute knowl-
edge or totally situation-invariant truth.

Parmenides claims that everybody will agree that it is impossible for anything to be
a result of nothing. Nothing can evolve from nothing. Hence, “true judgement does not
allow that any real entity or substance can emerge in its being or that it can vanish or
disappear”. The “final decision and decisive argument” consists, as Parmenides explic-
itly says, in the principle of the excluded middle for any well formed standing sentence
S. This principle tells us first: If S is semantically well formed, then S is either true or
not. It tells us, moreover, that S is true, if and only it is true now and forever.

In fragment 8, line 16, Parmenides obviously uses the method of refutation, or
rather, of reductio ad absurdum himself. Indeed, I never have claimed that this princi-
ple is wrong or that Parmenides did not trust it. Rather, I have said that it is unreliable
without further assumptions. I read a statement of the form “it is or it is not” (line 16)
as a logical truth. I do so because the presupposition that “it” refers to something is
assumed as fulfilled. If it is, we can continue and show why “it” must already exist.
This is the way Parmenides seems to proceed here.

The argument sounds strange, however, if we do not distinguish between the objects
we talk about, referred to by the “it” or eon, and the predicates or attributes attached to
it. It sounds strange because being or existing is treated, in a sense, like a predicate. On
the other hand, Parmenides knows that it is no “ordinary” predicate: In the case of an

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8 Parmenides does not present any argument in full detail. There is always an implicit appeal to the
reader to fill in what he may feel as missing.
ordinary predicate like “it is red” it is impossible to infer the sentence “x is red” from the sentence “x is red or not red”. But in the case of “is” or “exists” this form of inference seems to be correct and is used by Parmenides. We can conclude for any name N: If it is true that N has some property P or that N does not have the property, then N exists. In short: if (it) is or (it) is not, then (it) is.

We have said that standing sentences S as such are true forever, if they are true at all. But humans use to say, from their perspective, that a sentence S was true, but is not true anymore, or it will be true, but is not true now. The problem can be seen as a possible confusion between standing sentences and situation-dependent sentences. This is, indeed, how Parmenides proceeds: All talk about “will be”, “was” and “is now” must be removed if we really want to have situation-independence.

This applies in an analogous way to standing names. All the sentences S in which standing names N or M may appear must be “timelessly” true or false. All equalities and inequalities between such names must be timelessly true (if they are true) and all existence claims must also be timelessly true (or false). This already has been decided by previous arguments in a way that is necessary to accept. Moreover, the possibility that a claim of existence is wrong, i.e., that a name does not name anything, is already excluded. We have to let this assumption or method or way “go as unthinkable and nameless”. According to this thesis, the alleged name is no (standing) name. It does not have an invariant meaning that can be understood by others in other situations. It does not name an object. In other words, Parmenides tells us that any meaningful use of a “real” i.e., ideal, name N carries the presupposition of an invariant, trans-subjective, trans-situational existence of a named object o(N) with it. In the case of standing names, this presupposition implies that the entity being named exists as an eternal substance. Precisely this says the next phrase: “The other assumption (‘way’) applies (‘is’) and truly so (‘is real’)”.

So we see that the arguments and necessities involved are altogether logico-semantical arguments and necessities, not cosmological or metaphysical or causal ones. But now the question arises again: How can anything come into being? How can things change and move? The obvious answer is that no substance ever can change. It cannot become what it is from nothing or from something else. The underlying argument for this (seemingly very strong) claim about the (ideal!) concept of substance is this:

If a substance o(N) exists now, at time t₁, and if it would have come into being, there must have been a time t₀ before t₁ when the sentence “it is not” or more precisely: “N does not exist” was true.

If a substance o(N) will come into being, then the sentence “N is not” or “N does not exist” is true now, at t₀, and there will be a time t₁ later in which the statement “N is” or “N does exist” will be true.

This, Parmenides seems to say, is obviously a contradiction, if we read the sentences in a formal way: If we understand invariance as invariance of time, then the sentence “N exists” seems to change its truth value. But if it does, then we cannot talk about the same substance o(N). For if the sentence “N exists” would be true at time t₁ and wrong
at time $t_0$, we would not have a standing sentence, and "N" or "it" would not replace a standing name with invariant reference.

Of course, we all would protest today. We would claim that the very argument used by Parmenides in his "proof" of the thesis that there is no becoming can be seen as a step to the solution of the problem. Already Aristotle points out that (many) contradictions between (observation-)sentences can be easily resolved if we take the time and situation of utterance of the sentences into account. The statement that there was no Eiffel Tower in the 18th century does not contradict the fact that there is now (exactly) one in Paris. The contested possibility of becoming is, as we take it, explained by the tenses of the verb-phrase. A fact that $S$ was not true does not contradict the fact that $S$ is true now or that $S$ will be true in the future. So, everything seems to be clear and the argument of Parmenides is mistaken. Or is it not so easy?

Parmenides wants to present a divine and absolute and ideal perspective. In this perspective he analyses the concept of invariant, eternal, truth and the related concept of invariant substances. In this perspective, the above solution is not applicable. It only works for situation-dependent observation sentences and for deictical expressions. But these are, in fact, no standing names.

To appreciate the problem, let us assume that Parmenides would agree that the truth of a sentence of the form "N is P" might change, depending on the time of utterance. But then the problem remains that the substance o(N) named by "N" is not allowed to change, to come into being or to disappear. How else could we talk about one and the same object with possibly changing properties?

The form in which we express any "becoming" and any "change" sounds strange, at least. Parmenides was the first to notice this fact. If I say that the Eiffel Tower came into being by the end of the 19th century, but before it did not exist, then the implied phrase "the Eiffel Tower did not exist in the 18th century" refers to an object, the Eiffel Tower, which must exist as an object of our talk. Of this object it is said, in the predicate, that it did not exist in the 18th century. If we take the view of the 18th century, the question is: What is it that does not exist yet?

The problem gets clearer if we talk about the future, i.e., about objects that do not exist today. Such objects might or even probably will come into existence. As an example let us consider a sentence like the following: "By the year 2050 the Federal State of Europe will have signed an economic cooperation treaty with the Federal State of Africa". If I utter the prognosis today, I talk as if the Federal States of Europe and Africa already existed in some way. In fact, I must presuppose some kind of their existence. Otherwise, nobody would understand what I am talking about. The goddess of Parmenides may see all these things from her absolute point of view. If it happens that there won't be a Federal State of Europe or Africa in the year 2050, then the sentence is meaningless. It is not possible to say anything about nothing. The usual way out is to give the expression a referent in a possible world.

There is another possible way for the sentence to be wrong, namely, if the states we talk about will exist in the said year but the predicate does not apply to them. Then the sentence is wrong in a more "normal" sense: The negated sentence: "By the year 2050
the Federal State of Europe will *not* (yet) have signed an economic cooperation treaty with the Federal State of Africa” will be true.

The result of the consideration is this: We do not only have to take the tenses of the verb-phrases into account. We have to read the noun-phrases as *tensed names*, too, if we want to make them situation-invariant. Moreover, tense is not enough, we have to introduce modality. From a perspective of Parmenides’s goddess, on the other side, eternal standing sentences, names resp. the corresponding states of affairs and substances are available only if we know what was, is and will be the case. The word “Eiffel Tower”, for instance, proves to be kind of *unsaturated, open*, term with some *deictical* part of its meaning.

5.3 On Spatial Division (fr. 8,22–33)

Until now, the concept of substance, i.e., of an invariant object of intersubjective and invariant knowledge and thought was investigated in relation to time. Now, a new topic or point of view or perhaps only a new example arises, namely the relation between the identity of an object and the difference of location in space.

No substance, being the referent of an ideal standing name, can be divided (in space), since it always and as a whole equals itself at all times. No substance is at any place more substantial in any way than at other places (fr. 8,23/1). If it were, some parts of the substance, namely those, which are less substantial (fr. 8,24/1), would disintegrate sometimes. The result would be that the substance as a whole would not hold together (fr. 8,23/2). This would contradict the very concept of a substance. The claim that those parts which are *less* substantial will sometimes disintegrate just follows from the *meaning* of “being less (or more) substantial”. Therefore, any substance is “full of what is” (fr. 8,24/2), i.e., it is “as such” spatially and temporarily stable and it is in itself and as such all continuous or coherent (fr. 8,25/1). The “parts” of substances cling together in a stable way, i.e., they lie “next to each other” without any change.

The idea is this: If the real world is built up on the ground of stable substances, the substances themselves are the smallest elements that do not change. This idea is developed by Democritus on one side, Plato (in his *Timaeus*) on the other. Both Democritus and Plato call the atoms “ideas”. For Plato the substances or atoms are, so to speak, theoretical entities. ⁹ Plato is well aware what he owes to the “gods” and “giants”, to the Pythagoreans and Parmenideans or other “Presocratic” philosophers. In the dialogue *Philebus* he explicitly says so.

Perhaps we should be astonished that it is a mere logical and methodological consideration that leads us to the basic picture of a scientific world-view, to the idea of an *atomistic* reconstruction of the world. This idea develops from a pure logical analysis of an ideal subject of a standing sentence, i.e., of an ideal name and object – if we just apply it to *physical substance*. This picture is important for the whole design of scientific explanation.

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⁹ Cf. my “Plato and the method of science”.
The basic problem is, then, how to come to grips with change. A first answer to it is this: \textit{Change} has to be replaced by \textit{movement}. But how can we represent movements in a timeless way? This question stands in the centre of Zeno’s paradoxes. It is the question of mathematization of movements. It was addressed as the basic problem of \textit{kine-matics} in Plato’s \textit{Timeaues} as well.

5.4 Occidental Metaphysics

Parmenides’s poem is not only a basic text in the development of logic and scientific method of the Western World; it lies at the ground of the “metaphysical” or “ontological” concepts of absolute substance and absolute truth in distinction to mere appearances as well.

We know that any chair will eventually break into pieces. We know that a term like “this chair” is not really a standing name if we want to talk about everlasting physical objects. In this respect, chairs are not (ideal) physical substances. The same holds for the bodies of human beings or persons. Men are called mortals precisely for this reason. Their bodies cease to exist as bodies of persons and turn into corpses. Corpses disintegrate shortly after dying, at least if they are not preserved as mummies. The body of an animal is not an everlasting (physical) substance. So, if a person should be viewed as a substance, her identity cannot just be that of the body.

Occidental metaphysics and its idea of a person or soul or god or matter as a \textit{substance} begins with Parmenides’s reflection on the very notion of an invariant, non-relative, referent of a name and on the notion of objective, not merely subjective truth.\footnote{There is no wonder that we find “Christian” readings of Parmenides already in antiquity.} Therefore, there is a deeper connection of formal logical analysis and the occidental idea of invariant science with “metaphysics” than we use to think until today. It is not that formal logic was just “abused” by Plato or the Platonists in their “proof” of the existence of an “eternal soul”, or by the philosophers of the Middle Ages in their attempts to support a Christian belief in a transcendent “real” world “behind” the “untrue” world of appearances. “Metaphysical ideas” always have been “consequences” of a certain logical analysis of our concepts of invariant knowledge and truth, or rather, of some misunderstandings of such an analysis.

If we reconstruct these roots of ontology in an appropriate way, we can see that from the beginning ontology, metaphysics, the idea of invariant knowledge and hence the idea of science were intimately related. They were connected with a logical method of idealization that “transcends” the limits of situation-dependent relativities by talking about a \textit{divine} perspective, or rather, by talking from some \textit{timeless and spaceless} point of view.
5.5 Objective Truth and Ideal Knowledge (fr. 8,33–49)

We now must end our journey through the poem. Fragment 8, line 34 seems to say something like this: ‘To let itself be known and being the case amounts to the same’. Reality is what true sentences can express. Truth is not defined by what is independent of knowledge. It is defined by ideal knowledge. Hence, we have two concepts of truth and knowledge, reference and meaning, or rather, two levels of reflection on this concept: an ideal or divine one, in a formal (geometrical or mathematical) theory of truth and knowledge, and a real and human one, in the realm of real experience, applied knowledge, applied truth.

Any case of knowing is of the form of a statement or proposition saying that something is the case. Fragment 8, line 35f. seems to support this claim: Without articulation and representation there is no (explicit) knowing (noein) and no thought (noema). The last passages of fragment 8 present a kind of “proof” for the following thesis: Absolute being or reality is identical with the realm of objects and truths of absolute knowledge.

This identity is important. We know now what it means to say that human convictions and beliefs are fallible. They are never totally situation-independent. They never fulfil the ideal conditions of absolute knowledge. In a sense, this is a tautological, conceptually true statement.

To sum up, we can see now why Parmenides indeed is the first to reflect on the form of the great project of science. Its ideal goal is a system of true standing sentences. Their meaning or truth-conditions should be made explicit. Their truth should be shown as directly as possible. True knowledge should express timeless facts but must be grounded in real experience.

Meaningful standing names refer to timeless substances, to forms or ideas in the sense of Plato. Such substances do not come into being or disappear. At best, they change properties and places. But they must play a definite role in representing or explaining real phenomena. How this may be possible is most convincingly shown by the example Parmenides gives himself, the explanation of the light of the moon by reflection of the light of the sun. Eternal objects and truths refer to substantial “facts” behind the world of sensible phenomena. But experience remains the intended realm of real knowledge. Hence, Parmenides does not contradict but support the project of saving the phenomena. The task is to explain the phenomena by theories or systems of standing sentences that can be learned “by heart” just as we can learn to reproduce the theorems of mathematical theories. The problem of application consists in the question how the standing sentences in mathematical or formal theories relate to the real, empirical, world. The problem of fallibilism reduces to the question, which of the possible constructions of a theory or model is good enough or true to the real world under the relevant application or projection. If we counterfactually assume a divine perspective, it is a tautology that any real theory falls short of being true in an absolute sense. But this only means that the ideal perspective does not define more than the goals of a scientific development. There is no transcendent concept of real reality that could be used in effigie in order to prove the sceptical claim that there is no real knowledge. What is
shown is rather this: There always is a double reading in the concepts of knowledge and truth, just as we have to grasp the double reading of any talk about forms. In one reading, we refer to an ideal idea, in another we refer to sufficiently good representations of this idea or form in the real human world in which we join the experience of others by talking with each other, in which we make judgements about meaning and truth and, in the end, do real science by taking part in a great cultural project.

References