Christoph Helmig

PLATO’S ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONCEPTUALISM. PARMENIDES 132 B 3-C 11 RECONSIDERED*

Plato’s Parmenides confronts us with a curious, unusual situation: The Socrates that we know only all too well as the white bearded sagacious old man appears as a young student. Indeed, a student defending his innovative theory of the Forms against the severe, though not eristic criticism of the old Eleatic Parmenides. In the course of pleading his case before the old man, he advances the thesis that Forms could only be thoughts that originate nowhere else but in souls or minds†. This is commonly identified with a conceptualist interpretation of the Forms, namely that Forms or universals exist only within the mind and have no external or substantial reality‡.

* Two earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Centre for the Study of the Platonic Tradition (Dublin) and at the conference “Plato Transformed. An International Workshop on Plato’s Ancient Commentators” (Leuven, 18-19 May 2005). I am especially indebted to Carlos Steel (Leuven) for his remarks and criticism, which led me to rethink and improve many points that are suggested in what follows. Moreover, I would like to thank John Dillon (Dublin) and Russell Friedman (Leuven) whose incisive observations helped to clarify several important issues. Prof. Friedman was so kind to also provide help with the English. The final version profited also from comments offered by David Sedley (Cambridge).
† Parm. 132 B 3-5.
From the viewpoint of the later dialogues, one might ask what has led Socrates to this rather surprising suggestion? To understand the origin of Socrates’ claim, it is first of all necessary to turn to Parmenides’ criticism of Socrates’ theory of Forms. This criticism can be summarised in six arguments or difficulties (ἀπορίων), of which the third is the primary concern here\(^3\). The first addresses the question whether participation is in the whole or in a part of the Form (Parm. 131 A 4–E 7). The second shows that the “abstraction” of a Form from a manifold of large things (μεγάλα) leads to an infinite regress (131 E 8–132 B 2). It is also known as the first Third-Man argument. The third difficulty is introduced by the suggestion that Forms should be thoughts in human minds (132 B 3–C 11). The fourth demonstrates that, given that Forms are paradigms in/within nature, participation would entail an infinite regress (132 C 12–133 A 10). This argument is better known as the second Third-Man argument. The last two ἀπορίων are complementary in that the first points out that if the Forms are separate entities, we cannot have knowledge of them (133 A 11–134 C 3), while the second claims that if the Forms are separate and only the gods know them, the gods cannot, at the same time, know human affairs. These two last ἀπορίων together are also known as the so-called worst difficulty (μέγιστον δὲ τὸδε, 133 B), because they virtually annihilate divine providence (cfr. 134 C: δεινότερον τὸδε). Each of


these six steps (or ἀπορία) in the first part of the dialogue depend on those that precede it and they unfold in sequence. Each new suggestion about the nature of the Forms or participation should be seen as a reaction to a difficulty raised in the previous step.

With the suggestion that Forms are thoughts, young Socrates introduces ἀπορία three, and the text makes it clear that he is addressing problems raised in ἀπορία one and two. If the Forms are thoughts, Socrates maintains, they no longer face the difficulties mentioned in the first two ἀπορίαι, because as thoughts each of them is one. Hence, we have to keep in mind that with his conceptualist thesis Socrates wants primarily to safeguard the unity of the Forms. In his twofold reply, Parmenides will not question this unity, but demonstrates that a Form is rather an object of thought (νοούμενον) and not a thought (νόημα), that is, a thought-process. The argument is based on the assumption that every thought has an object, is a thought of something. As we shall see, the main problem with Socrates’ suggestion lies in the fact that he does not specify how a νόημα comes to be (ἐγγίγνεσθαι) in the soul, that is, from where or how it originates and what its object is. But before we enter into a discussion about the argument itself, let us say some words about Socrates’ proposal as such.

Can Forms be Thoughts/Concepts?

The thesis that with Plato Forms are thoughts is rather problematic both because of systematic considerations and also because no warrant for such an interpretation can be found in the dialogues themselves. If Forms are thoughts, their objectivity or shareability could no longer be guaranteed. They would no longer be the standards against which values and norms could be measured. Moreover, how could the fact that Forms are human thoughts accord with

---

4 Parm. 132 B 5-6: οὐπό γὰρ ὃν ἐν γε ἔσκασσεν εἰς καί οἷς ὃν ἐπὶ πάσχει ἔνυσθή ἐλέγετο.
the *Timaeus*, in which the demiurge orders the all so as to become a cosmos by looking at the paradigm (the sum of Forms)? Hence, strong evidence points to the fact that for Plato, Forms are rather the objective correlates of thought; they are not concepts, that is, mental entities that are confined to souls\(^5\).

One might answer that Socrates’ suggestion could also be read as saying that Forms are *divine* thoughts. What we would get, then, is the well known Middle Platonic doctrine of the Forms as thoughts of God\(^6\). Forms would be divine concepts, and accordingly divine standards\(^7\). However, it seems questionable whether the character of the dialogue provides a context for such an interpretation. Moreover, the fact that Plato uses the plural “souls” (*Parm.* 132 B 5) clearly points, I think, to human souls.

There has been a lively discussion as to whose position Plato is targeting with the refutation of the suggestion that Forms are thoughts. For it is obvious that making the young Socrates the mouthpiece of such a position is a dramatic device. The view that Forms are thoughts or concepts in the human mind has been as-

---


\(^6\) According to J. DILLON, *The Middle Platonists (80 B.C. to A.D. 220)*, London-Ithaca (NY) 1977 (cfr. also the reprint with a new comprehensive afterword, Ithaca (NY) 1993), p. 95, this doctrine can already be found in Antiochus of Ascalon, but it may go back to the Old Academy.

\(^7\) It is interesting to note, however, that in the later Neoplatonic discussion of the relationship between intellect and Forms, we frequently find the assertion that these divine Forms do not have a conceptual character, that is, they do not originate in thought and are not, strictly speaking, thought-dependent. They are rather prior to thought. Regarding Plotinus and Proclus this was pointed out by P. HADOT, *La conception platonicienne de l’identité entre l’intellect et son objet. Platon et le ‘De anima’ d’Aristote*, in *Plotin, Porphyre. Études néoplatoniciennes* ("L’âne d’or"), Paris 1999 (first published 1990), pp. 267-78, and R. SORABJI, *Why the Neoplatonists did not have Intentional Objects of Intention*, in D. PERLER, *Ancient and Medieval Theories of Intentionality* (*Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters*, LXXVI), Leiden-Boston-Köln 2001, pp. 105-14.
cried to Plato’s nephew Speusippus. However, the evidence for this is not very persuasive. Another candidate for such a conceptu- alist position is Antisthenes, but, here again, the evidence remains doubtful. As has already been remarked, many scholars have tried to locate the view that Forms are thoughts with a particular phi- losopher, but instead Plato may not be directing his criticism ad bonum, as it were, but rather against the proposition itself. Let us, for a moment consider the possibility that the Parmenides is the first dialogue according to the dramatic chronology. We could say, then, that in the Parmenides Plato right from the start wanted to point out possible misunderstandings or difficulties in his theory of Forms.

8 For instance, by J. Szenzel, s.v. Speusippus (a. 2), in RE II 6 (1929) col. 1665; J. HALFWASSEN, Geist und Selbstbehauptung. Studien zu Platon und Nemesius (”Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz, Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse”, x), Stuttgart 1994, p. 62 note 177; A. METRY, Speusippus. Zahl – Erkenntnis – Sein, Bern-Stuttgart-Wien 2002, and A. GRAEBER, Platon ‘Par- menides’, cit., p. 21. It should be said that Szenzel is the only one of these scholars who does not use the word conceptualist or conceptu- alistic in this respect. He merely paraphrases the doctrine attributed by Ps.-Alexander to Speusippus, namely that for the latter Forms are not different. This paraphrase, however, entails that he basically trusts the report by Ps.-Alexander. For the discussion, see the following note.

9 In particular, see H.J. KRAMER, Aristoteles und die akademische Eisdynhron. Zur Geschichte des Universalproblems im Platonismus, »Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie«, LV (1973) p. 163 note 173, who argues that the testimony for this (Ps.-ALEX. [MICHAEL OF EPHESUS] in metaph. 782,31 ff. [fr. 42f Lang, fr. 78 Isnardi Parente]) should not be trusted. It is not entirely clear what M. ISNARDI PARENTE, Speusippo. Frammenti, Edizione, traduzione e commento (”La scuola di Platone”, 1), Napoli 1980, p. 312, makes of the text, but there are elements in her interpretation of the fragment that suggest that she doubts its authenticity. Also J. DILLON, The Heirs of Plato. A Study of the Old Academy (347–274 BC), Oxford 2003, pp. 48-9, judges that for Speusippus Platonic Forms are not (human) concepts. He would rather locate them in the world soul.


11 A. GRAEBER, Platon ‘Parmenide’, cit., p. 20, for instance, argues against the Antisthenes hypothesis, while A. BRANCACCIsi, Antisthène cit., pp. 165-8, still maintains that Plato is attacking Antisthenes.

12 A. GRAEBER, Platon ‘Parmenide’, cit., even claims that the whole first part of the dialogue is directed against Speusippus.
Hence with the argument against conceptualism, he probably intended to show that Forms are not (human) thought dependent entities.

Before we turn to analyse Parmenides’ reply to Socrates’ suggestion, it should be said (as was observed by many commentators) that with Socrates’ suggestion that Forms are thoughts, Plato may have intended to allude to Parmenides’ doctrine of the identity of being and thought. It is, however, not so clear what Plato was exactly aiming at with this reference. He, most probably wanted to illustrate that the identity thesis of being and thought is not valid, or, at least, needs to be qualified. With Plato, only entities that really exist, that is, the transcendent Forms, are true objects of thought.

13 F.M. CORNFORD, Plato and Parmenides. Parmenides’ Way of Truth and Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, Translated with an Introduction and a running Commentary, London 1939, p. 92, asserts that Plato, through the character Parmenides in the dialogue, repudiates the doctrine that “to think is the same thing as to be”. This seems to be also the opinion of R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., p. 169, cfr. also note 30 below. On the other hand, K. DORTER, Form and Good in Plato's Elatic Dialogues, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1994, pp. 35-6, upholds that the argument agrees with the doctrine of the historical Parmenides. This is also the thesis of L. BRISON, S’il (= le monde) est un. La seconde partie du ‘Parménide’ de Platon considérée du point de vue de Parménide et de Zénon, in M. BARBANTI-F. ROMANO (a cura di), Il ‘Parmenide’ di Platone e la sua tradizione, Atti del III Colloquio Internazionale del Centro di Ricerca sul Neoplatonismo (Catania, 31 maggio-2 giugno 2001), Catania 2002, p. 53. A.H. COXON, The Philosopy of Forms. An Analytical and Historical Commentary on Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, with a new English translation, Assen 1999, p. 108, even claims that Parmenides in his refutation of Socrates’ suggestion is «applying to it the argument of his poem». J.A. PALMER, Plato’s Reception of Parmenides, Oxford 1999, does not discuss the issue in connection with Parm. 132 B 3-c 11. Finally, S. SOULNICOV, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, Translated with Introduction and Commentary, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2003, pp. 1-6, maintains that Plato’s whole dialogue is directed against Parmenides. Already the dialogue between Zeno and the young Socrates, at the outset of the work, points to the fact that Socrates, with his theory of Forms, wanted to solve problems that were posed by Parmenides’ doctrine of being. Therefore it is safer to maintain that Plato tried to qualify Parmenides’ doctrine of the identity of being and thought.
Parmenides’ Argument Reconsidered

At first sight, it might be surprising that in Parmenides’ reply we do not find any of the arguments a modern reader of Plato might advance against the thesis that Forms are thoughts. I mean first of all the arguments from shareability and objectivity\(^\text{14}\), that is, the fact that thoughts are not necessarily the same for every individual and that they therefore are not necessarily objective standards. Parmenides builds his refutation on other grounds, as will become clear from the following summary.

(A) Parmenides’ First Argument

(a1) Forms are thoughts\(^\text{15}\).


\(^\text{15}\) Note that at Parm. 132 B 3-4, the subjunctive with μι expresses a doubtful assertion, cfr. H.W. Smyth, Greek Grammar, revised by G.M. Messing, Harvard 1956 (2002)\(^\text{16}\); first published 1920, § 1801. This stresses the character of Socrates’ suggestion as rather tentative. In the same passage, some scholars have been tempted not to take τοῦτων together with τῶν εἶδων, but to interpret it as an objective genitive going with νόμων. This is, for instance, the view of R.E. Allen, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., p. 173, and S. Scolnicov, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., p. 63. M.L. Gill-P. Ryan, Plato. Parmenides, Indianapolis-Cambridge 1996, p. 39, have even assumed that Socrates was deliberately unclear. To my mind, τοῦτων should certainly belong to τῶν εἶδων, because otherwise Socrates would, with his own suggestion, already anticipate the argument to follow. For only after Socrates has suggested that the Forms are thoughts, does Parmenides show that every thought must have an object. If Socrates in Parm. 132 B 3-5 had already said that Forms are thoughts of ‘these things’ (τοῦτων), Parmenides could skip the first step of his argument. Moreover, there are no suitable candidates to figure as the point of reference for ‘these things’. Finally, Proclus in his commentary ad loc. does not mention any ancient commentator who would not have taken τοῦτων together with τῶν εἶδων. To avoid the difficulty F. Ferrari, Platone. Parmenide, cit., p. 217 note 51, proposes to read, with the codex T, τοῦτων ἦ. However, from a palaeographical point of view it is not very likely that this is what Plato wrote, since Proclus in his commentary ad loc. and the majority of the mss. confirm the reading ἦ τοῦτων. Admittedly, the word order is rather unusual, but it seems not impossible to understand the sense correctly. This is also confirmed by most of the older translators who kept the word order, but nevertheless took τοῦτων together with τῶν εἶδων.
(a2) Thoughts are always thoughts of something that is.
(a3) This something is over/on "all these things" (ἐπὶ πάσιν), it is a unity, one Form (ιδεῖα), always the same.
(a3') It is a unity, because it is thought to be one (τὸ νοοῦμενον ἐν ἑν ἑν).  

(Ac) Forms are not thoughts (i.e. thought processes), but rather objects of thought (νοοῦμενά).

(B) PARMENIDES’ SECOND ARGUMENT
(b1) Forms are thoughts (i.e. thought processes).
(b2) All participants become like the Forms (Parm. 129 a 3-6)\(^\text{16}\).

(Bc) Either everything, since it consists of thoughts (ἐκ νοηθῆν ἐλθεῖν), thinks or everything (i.e. all the participants), although it consists of thoughts, does not think (ἀνόητος)\(^\text{17}\).

\(^{16}\) It has been objected that this premiss may not be universally valid since the passage in question (129 A 3-6) talks only about forms of Likeness and Unlikeness and not about forms in general. However, the argument is clearly based on the assumption that participants become like the forms they are participating in (cfr. also 130 E-131 A). There is no indication in the whole of the Parmenides or in other Platonic dialogues that this assumption is problematic. What is discussed, however, is how exactly the participants can become like the Forms. Or, in other words, how participation works. What is troublesome in the argument is the phrase ἐκ νοηθῆν ἐκσπευδόν ἐλθεῖν – everything consists of thoughts (132 C 10-1), since already in difficulty one (131 A 4-5 E 7; esp. 131 E 3-5) it was stated that a Form cannot be present in the participant either as a whole or in part. However, it is perhaps more advisable not make too much of the expression ἐκ νοηθῆν ἐκσπευδόν ἐλθεῖν, since it is found in a *reductio* argument. Consider also that thoughts may be considered incorporeal (cfr. also S.C. RICKLESS, Plato’s Forms in Transition. A Reading of the ‘Parmenides’, Cambridge 2007, p. 80: «we may safely presume that thoughts do not have parts» – Rickless, however, favours the reading that the whole thought is in the participant; an option which is certainly excluded in difficulty one) so that the problems of difficulty one where forms were apparently considered corporeal entities do not arise. However that may be, it is clear how Parmenides’ argument is supposed to work in the given context.

\(^{17}\) This reconstruction, especially the correct translation of ἀνόητος, is argued for below. It is immediately clear why the conclusion presents an absurdity, since inanimate beings like sticks and stones certainly do not think. Moreover, a thought (thought process) that does not think is likewise an impossibility.
Although the reconstruction of the argument as a whole is a matter of considerable disagreement among modern commentators, it seems clear that the first part is based on the distinction between, on the one hand, thought or thought process (vôımē) and, on the other, the object of thought (vooǐμενον). At this point, we cannot but notice a certain ambiguity. Speaking about “objects of thought” (vooǐμενον), we might mean that these objects are the contents of thought, that is, they are mind dependent entities and hence confined to minds. However, “objects of thought” could also be entities that exist independently of a mind, but are nevertheless thought by this mind. In other words, objects of thought would be trees, dogs, etc. (really existing entities) that constitute the contents of thought. In short, whenever we speak about objects of thought, we might mean either (γ1) an inner-mental content or (γ2) objects outside the mind that constitute or figure as such a content. It is clear that for non-conceptualists (γ1) in many cases presupposes (γ2). On the other hand, fictitious entities such as goat-stags or golden mountains can only be objects of thought in the sense (γ1). Since my interpretation aims to show that Parmenides’ arguments are designed to refute conceptualism, I want to argue in what follows that vooǐμενον refers to both (γ1) and (γ2) or, in other words, that the object of thought refers to something that is mind independent/outside the mind. It has, as it were, a fundamentum in re.

Furthermore, in my reading, I have tacitly taken for granted that Parmenides’ reply is, in fact, twofold. This was already suggested by Cornford18. However, as we shall see, Allen was to cast doubt on this interpretation.

---

The Meaning of νόημα and ἄνοιξις

At this point, a short digression is needed on the meaning of νόημα and ἄνοιξις in the argument. In the reconstruction, I have assumed that νόημα means “thought process” or “act of thought”, following such respectable commentators and scholars as Proclus, F. Ast, and F.M. Cornford. Modern interpreters, however, have been more reserved. Brisson, after remarking that νόημα can have two meanings, active and passive (that is, thought process and object of thought), states: «C’est ce second sens qu’il faut, semble-t-il, ici privilégié, et non le premier qui cependant ne peut être exclus». Yet, a passage in the Parmenides itself makes it plain that νόημα carries an active meaning. In Parm. 132 C 3, we find the expression νόημα νοεῖ. The syntax of the sentence compels us to take νόημα as

19 Proclus explained νόημα as νόησις (in Parm. IV 892.9-15 Cousin); F. Ast in his Lexicon Platonican likewise translated νόημα as cogitatio and ἄνοιξις as non cogitans. F.M. CORNFORD, Plato and Parmenides cit., p. 91, in his magisterial commentary, translated ἄνοιξις as not thinking and wrote «the word “thought” [νόημα] is ambiguous; but the context makes it plain that “thought” means an act of thinking». Also R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s Parmenides, cit., pp. 169-70, recognises the ambiguity of the word νόημα.

20 Sometimes commentators did not realise that νόημα can also have an active meaning. Even the grammarian A.N. JANNAIRS, An Historical Greek Grammar, London-New York 1897 (repr. Hildesheim-Zürich-New York 1987), § 1024, gives a flawed characterisation of the words ending in -μα when he notes that only after 600 A.D. does -μα signify the action as well as the abstract notion, i.e. the result of action. P. HADOT, Porphyre et Victorinus, 1, Paris 1968, p. 362, has pointed out that this is not true as far as the Stoics are concerned: «Or, dans le stoïcisme, les formations en -μα sont utilisées très fréquemment pour désigner des activités (ἐνέργεια, κατάρθεια, ἄμυνησις, εὐφυστία, βάθμια, ὀψίλημα)». Hadot himself is indebted to O. RIETH, Grundbegriffe der stoischen Ethik, Berlin 1933, p. 109 ff.

the subject of "to say." Therefore, it only have an active meaning.

This confirms the older interpretations of Proclus, Aristotle, and Cornford. On the other hand, R. E. Allen offered a counterargument against an exclusively active interpretation of "to say." He argued that the word "say" here is in the second part of the argument, namely the argument against the interpretation of the subject of "to say." Allen interpreted "to say" as having a passive meaning in the second part of the argument. He also pointed out that the subject of "to say" is not the same in both parts of the argument.

As regards choosing a meaning for "to say," considerable difficulty arises. There are two main interpretations: (1) that "to say" means "to state" or "to declare" something; (2) that "to say" means "to utter." Both interpretations are possible, but Allen favored the former interpretation because it is more consistent with the context of the argument. In his view, the argument against an active interpretation of "to say" is more convincing because it provides a clearer understanding of the subject matter of the argument.
is used only half as often. It usually means “not understanding”, “unintelligent”, “senseless” or “silly” and it can be said, for example, of persons or of an opinion (δόξα). Thus, if I say of a person that he or she is ὀνόητος, it is implied that this person does not make sufficient use of his/her voice/intelligence. (3) R.W. Smyth observes that verbals that are formed from transitive verbs (in our case voeiv) usually are active27. (4) Given that νομή means “thought process” in the text in question (as was argued for above), we cannot possibly translate ὀνόητος by “not thought” or “unthinkable”28. Only if we agree with Allen that νομή in the final paradox (132 C 9-11) signifies «the content of the act(s) of thinking», would such a meaning seem to be admissible29. That Allen’s reading of the passage is, however, unsound will be shown below. Finally, it should be noted that ὀνόητος is used in our passage in opposition to voeiv (132 C 11). That quite naturally entails that it also means the opposite, namely “not thinking”, as Ast, Cornford, and others after them have pointed out.

Of Thoughts and their Objects. An Analysis of the First Argument (A)

Parmenides’ reasoning takes its start from the insight that every thought has an object that is (a2)30. This “is”, however needs

27 H.W. SMYTH, Greek Grammar, cit., § 472.
28 This is the translation of R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit. A parallel for ὀνόητος signifying “unthinkable” can be found in PARM. fr. 8, 17, where the word appears together with ὀνόημα.
29 See R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., p. 177, and the discussion of his interpretation below.
30 For structurally identical arguments in Plato, cfr. soph. 244 C-D, where we read that every name is a name of something, that is, every name signifies something that is. R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., p. 169, compares the two passages. According to him, the parallel in the Sophist «provides a further reason why the historical Parmenides cannot be identified with the Parmenides of the dialogue», since the parallel argument in the soph. (244 C-D) is directed against the historical Parmenides. In rep. V 476 E, we find the same statement as regards knowledge (γνώση). The whole argument (476 E 4 ff.) is most convincingly analysed by J.A. PALMER, Plato’s Reception
to be qualified, and two main readings seem admissible\textsuperscript{31}. The first claims that the object of thought simply refers to the Platonic Forms. The second reading tries to show that the objects of thought are not the transcendent Forms, but common elements on/over (ἐπὶ) individuals, which human thought unifies into one object of thought or one Form\textsuperscript{32}. The first interpretation was initially formulated by H. Rochol\textsuperscript{33}:

«[The argument] means that thought, exact scientific and philosophical thinking [...] must necessarily have an objectively existing object, the Ideas, the existent Ones\textsuperscript{34}».

Rochol’s interpretation has the advantage that it outrightly excludes the following objection\textsuperscript{35}. One could claim that Parmenides’ argument is not valid, since, for instance, goat-stags or griffins do not exist, although we can, admittedly, think of them. The answer to such an objection would be that, from a Platonic perspective,

of \textit{Parmenides}, cit., pp. 31-55. He points out that against the non-Platonists, who are called “lovers of sights and sounds”, the reasoning is not compelling, since it already presupposes the existence of Platonic Forms. And again, in the \textit{Theaetetus} 188 ff., a similar argument is employed with regard to δύο.

\textsuperscript{31} S. Scolnicov, \textit{Parmenides}, cit., p. 64, calling the contents of thought “real” does not commit himself to either of the two readings. For his “real” would likewise have to be qualified further.

\textsuperscript{32} From Proclus’ commentary we can infer that in Antiquity also a third possibility was discussed, namely that τιμός refers to an agent who thinks the thought, cf. \textit{Procl. in Parm.} IV 899.11-7 Cousin. This interpretation of the passage was championed, as Proclus tells us, by philosophers who put forth a conceptualist interpretation of Platonic Forms (ὅσοι μὲν τὰς ιδέας νοησις ἐλεύθερα ἐπικλήσαν, \textit{in Parm.} v 899.11-2). Hence, with this somewhat peculiar reading, they wanted to defend themselves against Parmenides’ criticism.


griffins and goat-stags are not the objects of a vómpa, they are rather the objects of imagination (αἰσθητική)\(^{36}\). Moreover, the examples of virtues, like justice or piety, would also not undermine Parmenides’ argument, since for a Platonist these really exist. There are Forms of justice and piety\(^{37}\).

Furthermore, in resp. V 467 D we find a similar use of “to be” (εἶναι) in the sense of “really existing” and an argument that comes rather close to Rochol’s reading. Socrates argues there that knowledge (γνώση) must necessarily have an object that is. He goes on to identify this object with the transcendent Forms, which are the only entities (with the probable exception of the gods) that really are\(^{38}\). The parallel reasoning seems to confirm the strong or ontological reading of εἶναι in the passage of the *Parmenides*\(^ {39}\). On the other hand, such a strong reading also presents certain difficulties. For instance, by no means does Plato always use vómpa in its technical sense. Moreover, such a reading would make Parmenides the mouthpiece of Plato’s doctrine of the Forms, since by claiming that a thought must be of something that really is, he would be an orthodox Platonist\(^ {40}\).

It depends on how we interpret Parmenides’ criticism. Do his arguments reveal something about the true nature of the Forms\(^ {41}\)?
This is not improbable, since in the end of his criticism Parmenides states that one should not abandon the theory of Forms, for then all dialectical discourse (διαλέγεσθαι) would be impossible⁴².

Yet, other objections can be raised against Rochol’s interpretation. Firstly, although he claims that Parmenides’ argument concludes from the existence of thinking to the existence of an objectively existing object of thinking, that is, the Forms⁴³, nowhere in the text is this explicitly stated. Secondly, if it really were Parmenides’ aim to show that a thought «must necessarily have an objectively existing object, the Ideas», as Rochol claims, why did he not say so? Of course, one could assume that he is just sowing clues, so that Socrates might eventually reach an understanding of the Forms. Such an interpretation is, for instance, defended by the Neoplatonist Proclus⁴⁴.

However, let us again remember what it is that Parmenides wants to show. He wants to show that a Form cannot be a thought, but must be an object of thought, a νοούμενον (Ac). In order to do so, he argues that a thought is a thought of something that is (a2). In the final step (a3), he identifies this object of thought with a unity that is over “all things/entities/participants/cases” (ἐπὶ πάσην)⁴⁵. In the event that he really intended to show that this unity ought to be identified with an “objectively existing Idea”, he would, I think, have phrased his words differently. Most importantly, consider that the unity spoken of here, is not a characteristic of the Form itself, which in the strong reading it should be, but that it is thought that brings this unity about (τὸ νοούμενον ἐν εἴναι, Parm. 132 c 6; a3¢)⁴⁶. If Parmenides wanted to imply that the Platonic Forms are

⁴² Parm. 135 b-c.
⁴³ H. ROCHOL, The Dialogue ‘Parmenides’ cit., pp. 506-7: «[T]his theory, concluding from the existence of thinking to the existence of an objectively existing object, is at the same time the gist and the basic theory of Platonism». This sentence is quoted, with approval, by K. DORTER, Form and Good cit., p. 35 note 21, and F. FERRARI, Plato: Parmenide, cit., p. 81 note 1-19.
⁴⁴ Cfr. note 47. I intentionally leave the meaning of the Greek phrase open here.
⁴⁵ Against this reading of the text, it has been objected that the Greek here does
the objects of thought (νοούμενα), he would certainly not have said that their unity is brought about by thought (α3'). Platonic Forms are by definition unitary and their unity surely does not depend on human minds. In the passage in question, however, they are not unitary by themselves, they are only unitary qua being an object of thought. Generally speaking, one can say that in the first three ἀποτίμη the Forms are not really separate from their participants. Only in ἀποτίμ four, where the Forms are said to be paradigms in nature, does this radically change. From that point on, they, as it were, transcend their participants.

For these reasons, it seems more plausible to turn to the second reading, that does not claim that the object of thoughts are the transcendent Platonic Forms, but that they are identified with common elements on/over (ἐπί) individuals. This entails that Parmenides is merely aiming to refute Socrates’ suggestion by a reductio ad absurdum (see especially the final part of the argument, Parm. 132 C 9-11 and 132 C 12: ἀλλ’ ὀδ्दέ τοῖς, φάνοι, ἐγεί λόγον). There is ample evidence that the first argument (A) not only distinguishes between thought and the object of thought, but further aims to show that this object points in fact to something outside the soul (γ2). This clearly emerges from the expression that the thought

not necessarily imply that the unity in question is brought about by thought. However, it is significant, I think, that Plato uses the phrase τὸ νοούμενον ἐν εἶναι; and we have to ask ourselves why he does so. I agree that the Greek might be understood in a different way (i.e. “which is assumed / taken to be one”), but my reading of the text is certainly possible as well and the whole argument suggests to understand νοούμενον in the same lines as νόμαν before.

Although this was strongly disputed by R.E. Allen, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., pp. 170-2 and 174-5, his attempt to demonstrate that in the phrase “a thought of something” (νόμαν πνος), “of something” should be taken as a genitive of definition or content and should point to the intentional object of thought was not successful. Cf. the discussion of Allen’s interpretation below. That Parmenides’ argument concludes, in fact, from thought to an object outside the mind was pointed out, for instance, by F.M. Cornford, Plato and Parmenides cit., p. 91, M.F. Burnyeat, Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed, «The Philosophical Review», 91 (1982) p. 21, and G. Fine, On Ideas. Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Theory of Forms, Oxford 1993, pp. 132-3. In principle, I agree with these scholars, but at the same time propose to qualify their statement. With his argument, Parmenides does
PLATO’S ARGUMENTS AGAINST CONCEPTUALISM

319

thinks a unity that is on/over all these instances (ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἐπόν), where πᾶσιν should be understood as all the participants (πᾶσιν τοῖς μετέχουσιν)\(^{49}\). This realist reading of the argument can be paralleled by two similar expressions in ἀπορία one and two. In the first passage, it is said that, given that a Form can be compared with a sail, this sail spread over many people is a ἐν ἐπὶ πολλοίς, and it is taken for granted that the people in question represent the participants. In the second ἀπορία, the participants are likewise termed πάντα; moreover, it is said there that a Form like “largeness” originates/appears in the human soul if we look over the many large things, that is the things that participate in “largeness” (ἐπὶ πάντα ἰδεῖν). This reading is warranted by other Platonic passages. ἐπείναι, for instance, can be used in a concrete sense, that is of a colour being on a surface (Lys. 217 C). In ἗πι. ma. 300 A-B, the verb

not conclude strato sensu that the object of thought is outside the mind, but points out that it refers to something that is outside the mind (i.e. to something on/over [ἐπὶ] the participants). Both Socrates and Parmenides can be taken to agree, however, that these participants exist outside the mind.

\(^{49}\) This is also the interpretation of K.M. Sayre, Parmenides’ Lesson. Translation and Explication of Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, Notre Dame (Indiana) 1996, pp. 83-4. Note, however, that Proclus supplies not τῶν μετέχουσιν, but τῶν εἰδένων. The reasons for this lie in his complex interpretation of the different ἀπορία as finally leading to a true insight into the nature of the Forms; cfr. C. Steel, L’ Analogia cit. A discussion of Proclus’ interpretation would, however, go far beyond the scope of this paper. Yet another interpretation of ἐπὶ πᾶσιν is provided by G. Fine, On Idas cit., p. 133: «Plato makes it plain that forms are ‘over all these cases’, i.e. they are general or shared». From the context of her reconstruction of the argument, however, it emerges that she understands it along the same lines as Sayre, since she explicitly speaks about shared properties or shared forms in things, that is in participants.

\(^{40}\) It is rewarding to quote Waddell’s observation ad loc., see ΠΑΛΑΙΩΝΟΣ ΠΑΡΜΕΝΙΔΗΣ. The ‘Parmenides’ of Plato, ed. by W.W. Waddell, Glasgow 1894 (reprint Frankfurt a.M. 1975): «ἐπὶ πᾶσιν with ἰδεῖν does not seem to be a common phrase with Plato; [Waddell] and [scot] quote Iliad XXIII, 143 ἰδεῖν ἐπὶ ὢν οἶνος πάντων. It seems that ἐπὶ here has the force of an “over-view” or a generalisation. It is not a detailed observation but rather a generalisation through sight. The same force of ἐπὶ- can, I think, be found in words like ἐπιλογίσθη, for which cfr. Epicur. 1 72-3, ant. 20 and 22 (with M. Schofield), Epilogisms: An Appraisal, in M. Frede-G. Striker (eds), Rationality in Greek Thought, Oxford 1996, pp. 221-37) and Plot.: 1 3 [20] 6, 10 ff.
is said of a common element (κοινόν) that makes both a sound and a sight (ὅψις) beautiful.

«Thus both [οἰκ. a sound and a sight] possess something, which is the same, that makes that they are both beautiful, namely this common element (τὸ κοινὸν τοῦτο) which is likewise on both of them commonly (ἐπεστὶ κοινῇ) and on every single one separately. For otherwise, I think, both together and each one on its own would not be beautiful».

Consider, finally, the following parallel from the Symposium (from the famous ascent to the Form of the beautiful).

«A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there; then he should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other (τὸ κάλλος τὸ ἐπὶ ὑποῦν σώματι τὸ ἐπὶ ἑτέρῳ σώματι ὑδελθὸν ἐστὶ) and that if he is to pursue beauty of form (τὸ ἐπὶ εἶδει καλὸν) he’d be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same (ἐν τε καὶ ταύτῳ ἤγεισθαι τὸ ἐπὶ πάσιν τοῖς σώμασι κάλλος).»

The parallel is rather striking. First, we note the already familiar expression ἐπὶ + dat. referring to an attribute or common element on sensible individuals. Moreover, the idea that these common elements are unified in thought is present too (ἐν τε καὶ ταύτῳ ἤγεισθαι τὸ ἐπὶ πάσιν τοῖς σώμασι κάλλος). If we look at a manifold of beautiful individuals we have to realise that their beauty

50 ἔχουσιν ὀρᾶ το τὸ αὐτὸ ὅ ποιεῖ αὐτὸς καλὸς εἶναι, τὸ κοινὸν τοῦτο, ὅ καὶ ἁμφότερας αὐτῶν ἔπεστι κοινῇ καὶ ἐκατέρω ἵδις· οὐ γὰρ ἐν που ἄλλας ἁμφότεραι γε καλῶς ἦσαν καὶ ἐκατέρω (300 Α-Β).
51 Συμπ. 210 Α 4-Β 3: δεῖ γὰρ, ἂν, τὸν ὀρθὸν ὑπάρξαν ἐπὶ τοῦτο τὸ πρότυπο ἄρχεσθαι μὲν νέον ὁτα ἐνεντό ἐπὶ τὸ καλὰ σώματα, καὶ πρῶτον μὲν, ἐὰν ὀρθῶς ἤγεῖσθαι ὁ ἐνομίμησις, ἐνὸς αὐτὸν σώματος ἡρέν καὶ ἐκατέρω γενὸς λόγους καλῶς, ἐπειτὸ ἐν αὐτῶν κατανοήσασθαι ὅ τὸ κάλλος ἐπὶ ὑποῦν σώματι τῇ ἐπὶ ἑτέρῳ σώματι ὑδελθὸν ἐστι, καὶ εἰ δὲ διάκειν τὸ ἐπὶ εἶδει καλῶς, πολλὴ ἄνοιξι μὴ ὁρᾷ ἐν τε καὶ ταύτῳ ἤγεισθαι τὸ ἐπὶ πάσιν τοῖς σώμασι κάλλος· (translated by A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff). For this use of ἐπὶ see also Μεν. 75 Α 4 and Α 8.
is “akin”. This is so, because it has a common source, the Form of beauty. This is why “the beauty of all bodies is one and the same”, that is, there is only one Form of beauty. Note, once again, that it is thought that recognises this unity.

However, against this interpretation of ἐν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς or ἐν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν a strong argument can be adduced. It could be claimed that since Aristotle and Alexander refer to the Platonic Forms as a ἐν ἐπὶ πολλῶν, the phrase ἐν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς or ἐν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν «must have seemed to be not an inappropriate expression to use of the separate ideas but an intentional reference to them» 52. This argument provides a most interesting objection and it seems to overturn the preceding reasoning. However, three points can be put forth in order to seriously question its validity. First, the phrase ἐν ἐπὶ πολλῶν, used by Aristotle and Alexander to refer to the transcendent Platonic Forms, is in fact different from the formulation employed in the Parmenides (ἐν ἐπὶ πολλοῖς) in that it should be understood as ἐν ἐπὶ πολλῶν κατηγορούμενον (a unity that is predicated of many individuals). Thus, the phrase rather expresses a logical relation. What Aristotle and Alexander are critising is, of course, that Plato has separated these predicates/standards. Second, we should not forget that the dramatic purpose of the Parmenides consists in pointing to a stage of the theory of Forms in which the theory itself is still the subject of considerable discussion and modification. Against this background, the parallel usage of ἐπὶ that can be found in the first two ὑποθέτα (referred to above) is certainly of more importance than later references to the theory of Forms that consider it a fully developed doctrine. We can add to this that up to the present day it remains an open question whether Aristotle’s and Alexander’s repre-

52 Cfr. H. Cherniss, Léafrance on Doxa, «Dialogue», XXII (1985) pp. 146-7. It should be said that Cherniss is commenting here on an interpretation of the Theaetetus (184 b 5-186 e 12). The argument could, however, also be applied to the passage in Plato’s Parmenides that constitutes the focus of our investigation. The remarks of Cherniss on the usage of ἐπὶ in the context of the Platonic theory of Forms remain fundamental.
sentation of the Plato’s theory of Forms is in all or most respects adequate.\textsuperscript{53}

Note, finally and most importantly, that Cherniss’ claim that ἕν ἐπὶ πολλοίς or ἕν ἐπὶ πάσιν can be seen as an “intentional reference” to Platonic Forms is not convincing. The passage in the Theaetetus which he appealed to is situated in the section on common elements (κούνα) which are said to be perceived by the soul all by itself. Now, Cherniss’ claim presupposes that we identify the κούνα in the Theaetetus passage with transcendent Forms. This, however, seems rather unlikely given that in the examples of κούνα also “non-being” figures. In his recent commentary on the dialogue, D. Sedley calls the κούνα “the commons”, “common predicates”, “a priori predicates”, “predicable of sensible properties”\textsuperscript{54}

At this point, let us come back to our text. It can be said that we do not learn in our passage how or why the human soul is able

\textsuperscript{53} On this point, cf. the comprehensive study of G. Fine, On Ideas cit. D.T. Devereux,\textit{ Separation and Immanence in Plato’s Theory of Forms}, «Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy», XII (1994) pp. 85-8, argues that the use of ἐπὶ in the first part of the Parmenides would point to the fact that the Forms are separate from their participants. He is, however, confusing two different issues. First, we can state that in the first ὅμοιος it is shown that Forms cannot be in their participants. This entails, quite naturally, that from ὅμοιοι two onwards, Forms are no longer said to be in the participants, but rather on/over (ἐπὶ) them (like the sail is on/over the individuals covered by it). Second, this does not mean, however, that the Forms would already be truly separated, since such an interpretation cannot be extracted from the text. That this is, however, what Devereux meant is already indicated in the title of his article. Only from ὅμοιοι four onwards are the Forms really separated from their participants, because they are said to exist as paradigms in nature. My impression is that Plato uses ἐπὶ in the Parmenides and elsewhere, because it does not imply a commitment as to how the Forms are related to their participants. That they are, however, not entirely separate from them is clearly shown by ὅμοιοι three, given that our interpretation is correct. In this context, it is most remarkable that also Aristotle uses similar language when referring to the (Aristotelian) Forms in matter, see \textit{metaf.} Z 11. 1036 a 31 (ἐπιγραφθήναι ἐπὶ) and the parallel passages collected by M. Frede-G. Patzig, \textit{Aristotelis Metaphysik Z}, Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar, München 1988, \textit{ad loc}. This clearly shows that also for Aristotle the use of ἐπὶ did not necessarily refer to separate or transcendent Forms.

\textsuperscript{54} See D. Sedley,\textit{ The Midwife of Platonism, Text and Subject in Plato’s Theaetetus}, Oxford 2004, pp. 106-7, 112, 115-6, 159. Sedley agrees that the “commons” are not yet Platonic Forms (p. 115), and once (p. 107) refers to them as concepts.
to unify these objects in thought or even to think them. Later, different models were suggested as to how this may work, the most prominent of them are abstraction and collection\(^{55}\). We should abstain, of course, from reading all of this into the *Parmenides* passage, but it has become clear, I hope, that there is something going on which would need further clarification either on Plato’s or Parmenides’ part, namely how thoughts or concepts can come into being in the human mind (ἐγγένεσθαι, *Parm.* 132 B 4-5). If we look at other dialogues in Plato’s œuvre, it becomes plain that he does not endorse any kind of abstractionism\(^{56}\). With Plato, as Cherniss put it, «[Forms] were the objective correlates of the mental concepts and it is their objective existence that makes all abstraction possible»\(^{57}\).

To sum up, Parmenides demonstrates that a Form cannot be a thought process, but must be an object of thought (Αχ\(^{58}\)). At this point, one should recall that Socrates wanted to safeguard the unity of a Form with his suggestion. Reading the first part of Parmenides’ refutation, it becomes clear that unity plays an eminent role as the argument proceeds. It is not the case, however, that Parmenides ar-

---


58 Recently, S.C. RICKLESS, *Plato’s Forms in Transition* cit., pp. 75-80, has proposed a different reading of the argument. Assuming that the argument has two parts, he claims that the result of the first argument is an infinite regress. In this way, he wants to connect it to the previous argument (first Third Man argument). Rickless writes «the result that every form is a thought of a form generates an infinite regress of forms» (p. 77). However, such a reading is not very likely, because (1) nowhere the text points to a regress (while in the two Third Man arguments the regress is always clearly marked), (2) nowhere it is said that a form is actually a thought of a form (this is merely an inference by Rickless), (3) rather, it seems that Parmenides shows by means of a reduction that a Form cannot be a thought (τὸ ποιμέν), but must be an object of thought (τὸ ποιμέν), (4) finally, it is not even clear why or how the argument could generate an infinite regress (πας Rickless).
gues that in identifying Forms and thoughts the unity of the Forms would be done away with. Quite the contrary is true. He rather points out that the unity in question is not the thought-process, but an object of thought (νοούμενον). This object of thought, which is identified with the Form, is a unity because it is unified by thought (τὸ νοούμενον ἐν ἐνία, α3’). It is characterised (α3) as being something on/over all these instances (ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἐκέν) and as always the same over these instances (ἀμφὸς ὑπὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν). As I have tried to argue above, this means that the object of thought in question is not a mere mental entity (γ1), but originates from or depends on a common element that is over/on (ἐπὶ) the many participants. It is an object of thought in the sense of (γ2). Hence, it has, as it were, a fundamentum in re.

*Forms as Causes. An Analysis of the Second Argument (B)*

The second argument (B) is considerably shorter than the first. It takes its start from Socrates’ initial suggestion that Forms are thoughts, that is, thought processes (b1)⁵⁹. If the Forms are thoughts the participants would all think, which in the case of, say, sticks and stones would be obvious nonsense. On the other hand, it is likewise absurd if everything participates in Forms (thoughts) and does not think (ἀνόητος). The argument presupposes what was said in *Parm.* 129 A 3-6, namely that the participants become like the Forms (b2). What makes this second argument slightly problematic is the phrase ἐκ νομάτων ἐκαστοῦ ἐλεύθ (132 C 10-1). It suggests that everything (all the participants) consist of thoughts. However, it was already stated in 131 E 3-7 that a Form cannot be in the participant. I think that we cannot fully account for this in-

---

⁵⁹ Note that R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s *Parmenides*, cit., would not agree at this point, since he interprets the refutation of Parmenides as being a continuous whole. According to him, the passage that corresponds to my second argument (B) starts off with the result reached, namely that a Form (as νοοúμενον) is a “content of an act of thinking”. See the detailed discussion of Allen’s reading below.
consistency, but it does certainly not affect the argument as such. For the implied meaning is that everything participates in thoughts and hence becomes “thought-like”\textsuperscript{60}. Against this background, its seems reasonable to term argument (B) the argument from participation or causation. After this analysis of the two arguments, let us now turn to Allen’s reading of the passage.

\textit{Allen’s Reading of Parm. 132 B 3-c 11}

In a rather influential article, which was later reproduced in his important commentary on Plato’s \textit{Parmenides}, Allen contested the classical interpretation of the \textit{Parmenides} passage\textsuperscript{61}. According to Allen one should not distinguish two arguments\textsuperscript{62}. The whole passage, he explains, ought to be read as forming one single continuous argument.\textsuperscript{63} Moreover, the classical interpretation, as summarized above, would imply an «act/object distinction of twentieth-century realistic epistemology»\textsuperscript{64}.

\textsuperscript{60} Cfr. above note 16.

\textsuperscript{61} A first version of his interpretation was published as an article: R.E. Allen, \textit{Idee as Thoughts: “Parmenides” 132b-3c}, “Ancient Philosophy”, 1 (1980-81) pp. 29-38. Later, he incorporated the revised article in his monograph, \textit{Plato’s “Parmenides”}, cit., pp. 167-79.


\textsuperscript{63} R.E. Allen, \textit{Plato’s “Parmenides”}, cit., p. 174: “Parmenides’ argument is presented as one and continuous, with its refutative conclusion offered at the end, not as two separate arguments, one of which shows that the object of thought exists independently of the act of thinking”.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. 178.
Allen does not say exactly what this means. He is certainly prepared to admit that the passage does provide a distinction between the act of thinking and the content of thought, but he does not want to grant that this content of thought exists independently of minds.

«The argument does indeed provide a distinction between the act of thinking and the content of thought, but in no way suggests or implies that the content of thought exists independently of minds.»

Thus, what Allen so firmly criticises is that the distinction between the act of thinking (νοημα) and the object of this thought (νοοεμενον) implies that the latter refers to something that exists outside a mind. I have classified such an understanding of the meaning of "object of thought" above as (γ2). Therefore, Allen is anxious to stress that the νοοεμενον is rather the content of thought and that in the phrase νοημα πτος (cfr. Parm. 132 B 11), the πτος should be understood as a genitive of definition. The content of thought is, according to Allen, still in a soul (γ1).

Allen’s long commentary on the passage is quite remarkable, since he is the only scholar who has tried to discuss the argument extensively and to point to its philosophical implications. As noted, it is characteristic of his reading of the passage that he sees it as one single continuous argument, in which νοημα first carries an active meaning (process of thinking), but is later used in the passive meaning («contents of an act of thinking»). This shift of meaning of

65 Ibid., p. 176.
66 Ibid., pp. 171-2: «To sum up. The genitive in "thought of something" must be definitory, and may be objective. If it is also objective, it need not be taken to imply that some thoughts are not thoughts of themselves, or that objects of thought do not depend on thinking for their existence». For the different interpretations of πτος that have been suggested, cfr. above p. 315 with note 32.
67 Although this is not made explicit by Allen himself, it clearly emerges from the following assertion: «Parmenides at this point [sic. Parm. 132 C 8, end of the first argument (A) according to the classical interpretation] has forced the distinction between the activity of thinking and the content of thought. The content of thought is an Idea, one over many. It follows that since sensibles partake of Ideas, and Ideas are thoughts, sensibles partake of thoughts, that is, the contents of acts of thinking» (ibid., p.
vö̂n̄t̄a necessarily follows from reading the passage as constituting
one single argument. Allen explicitly attacks an interpretation that
finds in the passage a refutation of conceptualism, for he does not
want to concede that the object of thinking (voôν̄με̄ν̄ο̂ν̄) is mind in-
dependent or refers to something that is mind independent (γ2)68.

As far as the first part of the passage is concerned (132 B 3-C
8), Allen’s reading is identical with the interpretation given above
(A). Given the conclusion (Ac) that Forms are not thoughts, but ob-
jects of thought (voôν̄με̄ν̄ο̂ν̄), Allen assumes that from now on also
vö̂n̄t̄a means «object of thought», i.e. «the content of an act of
thinking». In other words, whereas according to the classical inter-
pretation a new argument (B) begins at 132 C 9, Allen assumes that
the first argument continues. But since the result reached in (Ac) is
that the Forms are not thoughts, but objects of thought, Allen is
forced to take vö̂n̄t̄a in 132 C 10-1 to mean “object of thought” or
“the content of an act of thinking”. For otherwise the crucial dis-
tinction between vö̂n̄t̄a and voôν̄με̄ν̄ο̂ν̄ would not be employed in
the final part of the passage. The classical interpretation, on the
other hand, does not allow for such a shift of meaning. It rather
concludes that since a Form is said to be the object of thought
(voôν̄με̄ν̄ο̂ν̄) and not the thought/thought process itself ( vö̂n̄t̄a),
Socrates’ suggestion is shown to be pointless. Accordingly, the re-
mainder of the passage introduces a second argument (B), the ar-
gument “from participation/causation”.

Returning to Allen’s reading, we can state that he wants to de-
tect a shift of meaning of vö̂n̄t̄a in the argument. For him, the pas-
sage forms a continuous whole. In a first step, vö̂n̄t̄a is eventually
determined as the object of thought (voôν̄με̄ν̄ο̂ν̄). In a second step,
the absurd consequences of this are then pointed out. This reading
has the clear advantage that it can explain the phrase vö̂n̄t̄a vorî
(132 C 3), which for scholars who assume that vö̂n̄t̄a throughout
carries a passive meaning poses a real difficulty.

177, Italic s are mine).

68 In particular cfr. ibid., pp. 170-2 and 174-5.
Furthermore, against Cornford he objects that τι δὲ δὴ; (132 C 9) would not have the force of introducing a new argument. However, this is not very compelling, since the phrase τι δὲ δὴ; occurs rather frequently in Plato and it is clear from parallel passages that Plato does use it to introduce a new point in the discussion. Thus, just before our passage we find the sentence τι δὲ δὴ; πρὸς τὸ δὲ πῶς ἔχεις; (131 E 8) to introduce the second ἀπορία. The remainder of Allen’s reconstruction can be summarised as follows:

(I) 1. Everything participates in the Forms.
    2. The Forms are νοηματα, i.e. the contents/results of acts of thinking.

   
   Everything participates in the contents/results of acts of thinking.

(II) 1. The Form is in the participants either in whole or in part.
    2. A thought (contents/result of an act of thinking) can only exist in a soul.

   
   The participant itself must be a soul.

Hence, every participant, being soul, must think, but this is obviously impossible in the case of sticks or stones (or other inanimate entities), which also participate. Allen concedes that the final

60 Ibid., p. 174. This was justly criticised by M.H. Miller, Plato’s Parmenides’ cit., p. 216 note 37. The rest of Miller’s critique of Allen is, however, flawed by the fact that he is convinced that νοημα, or more generally the Greek nouns ending in -μα, refer to the result or product of an action. However, as was shown above, this is untenable. Secondly, Miller misrepresents Allen’s interpretation when he writes that Allen would interpret νοημα exclusively as the “act of thinking”. As far as I can see, apart from Miller’s response not much has been said about Allen’s reading of the passage. The only scholar who criticised Allen’s overall conclusion was Fronterotta (in G. Cambiano-F. Fronterotta, Platone. Parmenide, cit., p. 113 note 26), without, however, going into further details.


71 Parm. 131 A 4-6.
step of the argument allows two readings that are both equally ad-
missible, depending as to how one determines the sense of ἄνόητος
(132 C 11).

(III') Thus, if thoughts are only in souls and thoughts are in things
which do not think, then such things must be stupid or uncon-
scious (ἄνόητος in an active sense)72.

(III") Or thoughts in things which are not thinking are unthought
or not thinkable (ἄνόητος in a passive sense)73.

Finally, Allen affirms:

«This refutation would be impossible if Ideas had already been
proved to exist separately from minds; the argument so far from re-
quiring the act/object distinction of twentieth century realistic epis-
temology, precludes it. For Parmenides' refutation turns on the assump-
tion that Ideas are in their participants, and that therefore thoughts are in
their participants if Ideas are thoughts»74.

Allen’s interpretation, and this becomes clear at first sight, is
much more complicated than the classical reading of the text, de-
fended, for instance, by Cornford. The first part of his reconstruc-
tion is identical with that of his predecessors. From 132 C 6-7 on-
wards, however, Allen assumes that the conclusion reached, namely
that a νόημα is not a thought process, but rather a νοούμενον, will
be used also in the rest of the argument, and that νόημα from now
on means "the contents of an act of thought". The classical inter-
pretation, on the other hand, assumed (1) that νόημα, throughout the
passage, carries the meaning "thought-process", and that (2)
νοούμενον, as content of thought, would refer to something outside

72 R.E. ALLEN, Plato’s ‘Parmenides’, cit., p. 177: «ἄνόητος has an active meaning:
if thoughts are present only in minds, and thoughts are present in things that do not
think, those things must be stupid or unconscious».
73 Ibid., p. 178: «On the other hand, ἄνόητος also has a passive meaning:
thoughts in things that do not think are unthought or unthinkable – much too deep
for teãs».
74 Ibid. (Italics are mine).
the soul, namely to a common element on/over (ἐπὶ) the many participants (γ2). This ψυχὸν is a unity, because it is unified in thought (τὸ ψυχὸν ἐν εἴναι).

To integrate Parmenides’ final paradox within the framework of his reading, Allen has to introduce a series of additional premisses. In fact, the entire second syllogism (II) consists of premisses that cannot be derived from the text, namely that (II.1) the Form is in the participants either in whole or in part, and that (II.2) a thought can only exist in a soul. The first premiss Allen takes from ἀπὸ τὸν (131 A 4-6). The second premiss looks like an innocent common sense assumption, but in this particular context, it is not acceptable. By saying that a thought must be in a soul Allen outrightly excludes the classical reading of the last part of the passage (as will become clear shortly) and obscures the final paradox. For it is said at that point that if Forms were thoughts, everything would consist of thoughts (ἐκ νομίζων ἐκστον [scil. τῶν μετέχόντων] εἶναι). This entails that the participants participate in thoughts, but not that the participants are in a soul. Hence, the paradox is less complex than Allen wanted to make us believe, namely, given that Forms are thoughts, even, for instance, sticks and stones (or other inanimate beings) would be thought-like, although they admittedly do not think.

What is more, in saying that every thought must be in a soul (II.2), Allen by definition excludes a realist reading of the passage, for two reasons. First, he neglects the distinction made in the text between the object of thought and thought process. For although he is indeed correct that an object of thought in the sense of a contents of thought (γ1) presupposes some kind of mental agent, this by no means holds true for objects of thought in the sense (γ2), that is, objects outside the mind which constitute the content of thought. Second, the classical reading of the passage claims exactly this, namely that the objects of thought (γ2) are outside the mind/soul. Hence, by introducing the premiss that thoughts have to be in souls (a premiss, it should be repeated, that cannot be found in the passage in question), Allen right from the start excludes the position he attempts to refute. To sum up, this addi-
tional premiss represents the classical example of a *petitio principii* (begging the question), since his conclusion (the object of thought cannot be outside the soul) is already assumed by one of the premisses, namely by his claim that a thought must be in a soul.

Let us, however, come back to premiss II.1, namely that the form is in the participant either in whole or in part. Admittedly, Allen can claim support for this premiss from 131 A 4-6. A careful reading of what follows this passage, however, shows that it is later refuted (131 E 3-7)\(^75\). There, it is declared to be impossible that a Form, either in whole or in part, could be in the participant\(^76\). Moreover, Allen’s reading is also unconvincing for another reason. His explanation of III’ and III” is hardly intelligible and it does not really clarify the paradox. To sum up, everything seems to indicate that it is indeed wiser to return to the classical reading of the text.

*Parmenides’ Arguments Reconsidered*

In the last part of my contribution, I would like to return to Parmenides’ reasoning in (A) and (B) and see whether the two arguments can be considered valid. Most of the interpreters agree, *pace* Allen\(^77\), that the arguments are intended to refute a conceptualist position, namely that Forms are thoughts in the human mind. Until now, argument (B) has not received much attention. As far as (A) is concerned, most commentators maintain that the argument is not valid. For from the fact that we think of something, it does not follow by any means that this merely intentional object exists independently of thought. This goes without saying for objects such as goat-stags or golden mountains. As I have tried to show, however, Parmenides’ first argument (A) seems to imply that thought pre-

---

\(^75\) Cfr. K. Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato’s Elatic Dialogues*, cit., p. 31 note 17, who points to the same mistake in Allen’s interpretation of *Parm.* 132 A 1-B 1 (second *štopas*).

\(^76\) *Pace* R.E. Allen, *Plato’s ‘Parmenides’*, cit., p. 133.

supposes an object/objects outside itself\textsuperscript{78}. Is it, therefore, hopelessly flawed? I shall provide a fresh way of looking at the argument in order to somewhat rehabilitate it.

I propose to suggest that the kernel of the argument is not the problematic conclusion from thought to an object outside itself, but rather the question how a thought comes about, how the mind «comes to be furnished» (John Locke), how we, in other words, form concepts. Looked at from this perspective, the argument becomes much more convincing. Every thought, as thought process, needs an object. No one would doubt this. The question is what the status of such an object may be. Does it have an existence outside the mind? In this context, let us come back to our distinction made at the outset between two senses of “object of thought” (\(\text{voorò}^{\text{\mu}e\text{v}}\)). If we say that Parmenides concludes from the thought to something existing outside the mind, we mean that he concludes from a thought or a content of thought (\(\gamma_1\)) to something that \textit{constitutes} this content (\(\gamma_2\)). In general, objects of thought as mental contents (\(\gamma_1\)) are characterized by an “intentional inexistence”\textsuperscript{79}. Therefore, we are not permitted to conclude that such a content exists outside the human mind. To conclude from a thought to an object outside the human mind seems, however, to lie at the basis of Parmenides’ reply to Socrates’ proposal that Forms may be thoughts. Even before Plato, the invalidity of such an inference had been pointed out by Gorgias of Leontini\textsuperscript{80}. He reminds us that the

\textsuperscript{78} This is in accordance with M.F. BURNYEAT, \textit{Idealism and Greek Philosophy} \textit{cit.}, p. 21, statement: «What is remarkable about this argument is its swiftness and the brutality of its \textit{realism}. Plato is certainly capable of more sophisticated treatment of the relation of thought to its objects. […] But the very fact that he allows his Eleatic spokesman to get away with it reveals, I think, that it simply did not occur to him that there might be a serious philosophical thesis to be developed out of Socrates’ suggestion that Forms are thoughts» (Italics are mine).


\textsuperscript{80} GORG. 82 b 3, 79 D.-K. (= fr. 3, 79 Buchheim). This text was the subject of an interesting article by V. CASTON, \textit{Gorgias on Thought and its Objects}, in V. CASTON- D.W. GRAHAM (eds), \textit{Protagorean Philosophy, Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos}, Aldershot 2002, pp. 205-32, a discussion of which would, however, go beyond
fact that we think of a chariot driving on the sea by no means implies that such a chariot really exists. Therefore, Parmenides’ inference does not seem to be valid.

But is Parmenides/Plato committed to such an error? First of all, the example of fictitious entities seems not appropriate to refute Parmenides’ reasoning, because according to Plato there are no Forms of them. Let us remember that the extension of the world of Forms was already discussed in 130 B-D\textsuperscript{31}. From the list given there, we can conclude with certainty that fictitious entities are excluded. The whole discussion between Socrates and Parmenides about the nature of Forms and participation presupposes the discussion on the extension of Forms.

Secondly, and most importantly, if we consider the argument as being about concept acquisition, as suggested above, we rather have to ask why can we think of something after all. For Plato, thought is constituted by means of, on the one hand, innate knowledge, and on the other, sense perception. The interplay of both makes recollection and universal thought possible\textsuperscript{32}. Against this background, saying that a thought necessarily has an object boils down to the problem of how a (universal) thought comes about/originates. Thought, somehow, has to start from sense perception. That is, the content of thought originates first of all because of sense perception. If Forms were mere thoughts, we could not relate our mental contents to the world we live in. One of the main problems of a conceptualist approach to reality lies in the fact that it is not easy to see how or from where the content of universal thoughts could possibly originate.

the scope of this paper.

\textsuperscript{31} On the question of what things are there Forms see the excellent overview in H. DORRIE-M. BALTES, Der Platonismus in der Antike, Band 5: Die philosophische Lehre des Platonismus. Platonische Physik (im antiken Verständnis), II: Bausteine 125-150, Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1998, pp. 336-50.

\textsuperscript{32} I do not want to address the problem here whether recollection is only concerned with higher learning, see D. SCOTT, Recollection and Experience: Plato’s Theory of Learning and its Successors, Cambridge 1995. Contrary to Scott, I suppose that we can only have universal thoughts/concepts because of our innate knowledge.
For Plato, who undoubtedly was a realist, it is obvious that common properties or common attributes are outside the mind. We have warrant for this both in *Phaedr.* 210 b-c, but also in *Phaedr.* 249 b-c. Both passages illustrate how universal thought originates. It has to take its start from common properties which are caused by a single Form. Because of this, it is reasonable to argue that if we think of some universal, we initially think of it as a common property that several individuals share. I take it that Plato holds that we can perform such a mental operation, that is, to go over from many individuals that share a common attribute to a single universal thought, because we possess innate knowledge.\(^{83}\)

Coming back to argument (A), we can state that saying a thought needs an object Parmenides suggests that in order to originate, a thought needs an object, a *fundamentum in re* (some common attribute or property). A thought as thought process is empty. Therefore, Forms cannot be human thoughts (empty thought processes). The contents of human thought results from a combination of sense perception and recollection. Universal thought takes its start from common properties of individuals.\(^{84}\)

Moreover, argument (B) is rather interesting. Nowadays, we might consider it less convincing because of its strong ontological implications. However, in Antiquity it found an interesting echo. Aristotle advances similar arguments against the existence of Forms and against participation.\(^{85}\) In short, the problem is that Forms qua

---

83 On *PLAT.* *Phaedr.* 249 b-c see *CH. HELMIG,* *What is the Systematic Place.* cit.

84 Cfr. *ARISTOT.* *an. post.* B 19, 100 a 7-8: τοῦ ἕνου παρὰ τὰ πολλά, ὥς ὅν ἐν ἄλλων ἐν ἕνῃ ἐξείλατο τὸ αὐτό. This characterisation of a universal concept in the human mind recalls the already familiar phrase from *PLAT.* *Parm.* 132 c 6-7: Εἶτα οὐκ εἶδος ἕστη τοῦτο τὸ νοοῦμενον ἐν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ ὅν τὸ αὐτὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν;

Forms have certain properties that the participants certainly do not share. For instance, Forms are by definition eternal or immobile. Then, however, the question arises why these properties are not shared by the participants. With the Neoplatonists, it was considered especially troublesome, since for them the Forms were held to be divine thoughts and as such causes of all things. The solution Proclus advances in his commentary interprets the Forms both as causes and caused, that is, as causes they only bestow a certain particular feature (διάφωτον) on their participants, while their being thoughts does not necessarily belong to their nature, but is only an acquired or caused property.\(^{86}\)

We are now in a position to say that Parmenides’ refutation of Socrates’ suggestion yields two results. First, Forms are not thought processes, they are rather objects of thought (in the sense of \(\gamma 2\)). Second, if Forms are thought processes, all the participants would either think or, although being a thought, not think.\(^{87}\) Argument one (A) has an epistemological character, while the second argument (B) can be termed “ontological” or “from participation”.

**Concluding Considerations**

I have criticised Allen’s argument and re-established the reading that the refutation of conceptualism in Plato’s *Parmenides* has a strong realist ring, so strong that Burney even spoke of the “brutality of its realism”. It uses a distinction between thoughts and objects of thought. These objects of thought refer to something outside the human mind, namely to a common element on/over (ἐπί) the many participants. Allen’s attempt to question this was not successful and his reconstruction should be rejected because it contains several flaws and inaccuracies. It became clear that his read-

---

\(^{86}\) Procl. *in Parm.*, IV 901.18-906.2 Cousin.

\(^{87}\) For the reconstruction of the second argument cfr. above pp. 324-5.
ing of the passage as one continuous argument is untenable. In particular, the fact that in order to make his case Allen introduced additional premisses, which cannot be found in the passage in question, proved to be incorrect. Both arguments advanced by Parmenides against Socrates' suggestion that Forms are thoughts (A, B) can be considered valid in a Platonic context. It was pointed out that the first argument (A) is not based on the questionable conclusion from a thought or content of thought to an object outside the mind. Rather, it tries to solve the question how a thought originates and argues that thoughts (as thoughts of Forms) need to have a fundamentum in re. That is, every act of recollection takes its start from sense perception and from the common properties of individuals.