Plato's *Parmenides* as Serious Game: Contarini and the Renaissance Reception of Proclus*

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1 Play is Uncertain. "Doubt Must Remain until the End."¹ Ancient Interpretations of Plato's 'Parmenides'

From ancient times thru to today, the *Parmenides* has been considered the most baffling and puzzling of Plato's writings. Accordingly, it has stimulated and still stimulates a countless variety of interpretations.² At the beginning of his unfinished commentary on the *Parmenides*, Proclus offers an overview of the polarized opinions of his predecessors and contemporary authors on the subject matter of Plato's dialogue, especially of the second part. Some unnamed authors, presumably Albinus and, perhaps, Alexander of Aphrodisias, "referred the purpose of this dialogue to logical exercise," whilst others, Proclus tells us, considered the *Parmenides* as a mere eristic work.³ Some elaborated an ontological reading of the dialogue, claiming that it dealt with Being.⁴ The other major hermeneutic trend was metaphysical, or even better, theological, and it was the trademark of Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus, Proclus's master Syrianus and indeed Proclus himself. Apart from the peculiarities of each author, Neoplatonic metaphysical, or theological, interpretations shared the conviction that in the *Parmenides* Plato had exposed his metaphysical doctrine, in particular his Henology:

* I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Andrea A. Robiglio for encouraging me to work on this subject, and to the anonymous reviewer for the insightful and constructive comments. I would like to point out that the aim of the present article is not to offer an exhaustive picture of the fortune of Plato's *Parmenides* from the Late Ancient period to the Renaissance, but to present only those aspects of the reception of the Platonic dialogue that contribute to the understanding of Contarini's position.

1 Caillois 1958, p. 7.

2 Barbanti and Romano 2002; Turner and Corrigan 2010.

3 Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, Book I, 630.34–635.25. The extant Proclus' commentary consists of seven books which cover Plato's dialogue up to the end of the First Hypothesis (141e7).

4 Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, Book I, 635.26–640.15.

Τοιοῦτον [*scil.* Συριανόν] δ' οὖν οἰόμενος [*scil.* διάλογος] εἶναι τὸν σκοπόν, οὔτε περὶ τοῦ ὄντος οὔτε περὶ τῶν ὄντων αὐτὸν εἶναι μόνων διετείνετο· συγχωρῶν δὲ εἶναι περὶ τῶν πάντων, ἡξίου προστιθέναι καθ' ὅσον ἐνὸς πάντα ἐστὶν ἔκγονα καὶ εἰς ἓν ἀνήρτηται πάντων αἴτιον, καί, ἵνα τὸ δοκοῦν εἴπωμεν, καθ' ὅσον πάντα τεθέωται· [...] τὸν Παρμενίδην τὸν τρόπον, κἂν περὶ τῶν ὄντων πραγματεύηται, καθ' ὅσον πάντα ἐκ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἐστὶν αὐτὸν πραγματεύεσθαι.⁵

Through an allegorical exegesis of the hypotheses discussed in the second part of the dialogue, Neoplatonists elaborated on their theories of the three divine hypostases and of the offspring of the universe from the One transcending the Being. This metaphysical-theological interpretation, however, gives rise to some pressing questions. Firstly, does the character of Plato's eponymous dialogue depict the historical figure of Parmenides of Elea faithfully? In other words, did the person Parmenides really deal with Henology? Secondly, if this dialogue discloses Platonic metaphysics, why and how could Plato qualify the elucidation of it as a "game"?⁶

Proclus deems the dialogue a homage accorded by Plato to his predecessor Parmenides. For Proclus, Parmenides had grasped both the One which is superior to Being, as well as the One which is present together with all beings. Proclus also claims that by grasping the One that transcends all beings, and by displaying this One in his work, Plato had completed the ascent began by Parmenides. Now notwithstanding the highest importance of the subject matter of the dialogue, Proclus believes that Plato discussed it in a playful mode. Not however, as a childish pastime; on the contrary, as a "laborious game", a serious activity whose mode is from within outwards:

Καὶ [οὐ] ταῦτα μόνον ἀπὸ τούτων λάβοις ἄν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅτι θεοειδὴς καὶ ὁ τρόπος ταύτης ἐστὶ τῆς ἐνεργεῖν, τὸ μὲν συνεκτικόν, ἑαυτὸ πρῶτον συνέχον, τὸ δὲ ἀναγωγόν, τὸ δὲ γεννητικόν ἑαυτὸ γεννῶν, καὶ ἐπὶ πάντων ὁμοιος· ὥστε καὶ τοῦτο μόνον, ἀλλὰ κάκεινο τὸ πραγματεῖωδι παιδιὰν παίζειν· θεῖον γάρ {οὖν} δὴ καὶ τοῦτο, τὰς ἐμφανεῖς καὶ πολυμερίστους ἐνεργείας παιδιὰς καλεῖν· παίγνιον γάρ θεῶν⁷ καὶ ἀνθρώπων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἐκάστων, ὅποσα κατὰ τὰς ἔξω προοιούσας αὐτῶν ἐνεργείας ὑφέστηκε· παιδιὰ μὲν οὖν διὰ ταῦτα πᾶς ὁ ἐξῆς λόγος πρὸς

5 Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, Book I, 640.16–645.8, here 641.1–14.

6 Plato, *Parmenides*, 137A–B (emphasis added): (Παρμενίδης): ὁμῶς δὲ δεῖ γὰρ χαρίζεσθαι, ἐπειδὴ καὶ, ὁ Ζήνων λέγει, αὐτοὶ ἐσμεν. πόθεν οὖν δὴ ἀρξόμεθα καὶ τί πρῶτον ὑποθήσόμεθα; ἢ βούλεσθε, ἐπειδὴ περ δοκεῖ πραγματεῖωδι παιδιὰν παίζειν, ἀπ' ἑμαυτοῦ ἀρξώμεν καὶ τῆς ἑμαυτοῦ ὑποθέσεως, περὶ τοῦ ἐνὸς αὐτοῦ ὑποθέμενος, εἴτε ἓν ἐστὶν εἴτε μὴ ἓν, τίχρη συμβαίνειν.

7 Cf. Plato, *Laws* 7, 803c.

τὴν ἡρεμον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἡνωμένην τοῦ ὄντος νόησιν, πραγματειώδης δὲ ὅμως, ὅτι τῆς τῶν ὄντων ἄπτεται θεωρίας καὶ ανελίττει τὸ ἀπλὸν τῆς ἔνδον νοήσεως, καὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἢ νοήσεων οἶον ἐξάπλωσις καὶ τῆς ἀμεροῦς γνώσεως σπαραμγός.⁸

The metaphysical interpretations of Plotinus and primarily Proclus are legitimized by their conceptions of the progressive unveiling of truth in the history of philosophy, in which the figures of Parmenides and Plato were seen as interlocking rings in the linear chain of wisdom in which Plato had perfected that which his predecessor Parmenides had begun. In this unifying historical perspective, Parmenides was thus an appropriate spokesman for revealing the unique truth concerning the One.

2 Reading the *Parmenides* in the Renaissance

In the Middle Ages, the *Parmenides* was indirectly known through the quotations present in the Latin translation of Proclus' unfinished commentary, made by William of Moerbeke. Accordingly, the small number of Medievals who leafed through the folia of William's translation used the Proclian commentary for understanding the Platonic dialogue. Thus, they indirectly read it in the light of Proclus' theological interpretation.⁹ Three of the six manuscripts preserving Proclus' text were owned by Nicholas of Cusa, whose strong interest in the *Parmenides* occasioned the first complete Latin translation of the hitherto partially known Platonic dialogue. At the request of Nicholas, indeed, George of Trebizond accomplished the translation in September 1459.¹⁰ Initially, Nicholas mentioned only Proclus' theological interpretation of the dialogue, as emerges from some hints of *The Defense of Learned Ignorance* (1449) and then, when he

8 Proclus, *In Parmenidem*, Book V, 1032.7–1036.25, here 1035.27–1036.12.

9 Moerbeke's Latin translation dates to 1280–1286. According to Steel, it did not enjoy a wide circulation ("Quant à la traduction du commentaire sur le *Parménide*, nous croyons que ce texte n'a été accessible qu'à très peu de gens", in Steel 1982, p. 34*), as proposed instead by Klibanski 1943, p. 284–285. On William of Moerbeke's translation see Steel 1982 and Steel 1985.

10 George's translation of the *Parmenides vel de ideis* is preserved in a single copy at Volterra, Biblioteca Guarnacci, ms. 6201, fol. 61^r–86^v. "Con una certa semplicità", George tried to harmonize the logical and theological interpretations of the dialogue, by stating that "il vero argomento del dialogo è l'idea", therefore it is a logical work, "dell'Uno," thus it has a theological subject matter. He offered a rather superficial explanation of the dialectic game, as pointed out by Ruocco 2003, here p. 21–22.

became acquainted with Plato's actual text, he expressed his appreciation for the high logical value of the treatise.¹¹

In 1464 Marsilio Ficino completed his own translation of the *Parmenides*, which was eventually printed in the 1484 edition of Plato's *Opera Omnia*. Then, between 1492 and 1494, Ficino composed a commentary on the *Parmenides*, published in the 1496 edition of his *Commentaries on Plato*. Some parts of Ficino's commentary on the *Parmenides* were indebted, albeit not slavishly, to Proclus, whose interpretation of the dialogue, however, was considered by Marsilio to be over literal. Whilst other chapters of Ficino's commentary showed the sign of his *querelle* with Pico della Mirandola on the possibility to harmonize the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, which seemed incompatible on fundamental philosophical tenets such as the doctrine of transcendentals, the priority or the convertibility of One and Being.¹² Pico was firmly convinced of the concord between Plato—the real Plato freed by Neoplatonic encrustations—and Aristotle, on these fundamental philosophical issues. And in his metaphysical work *On Being and the One*, composed between October 1490 and March 1491, Pico endeavoured to demonstrate that Plato, like Aristotle, had identified the first Being with the One. In taking this approach, Pico refused the Neoplatonists' views that Plato had accepted, mainly in the *Parmenides*, an absolutely transcendent One above the Being. And, more generally, Pico refused the *arbitrarie et violentae* theological interpretations of the Platonic dialogue in favour of the dialectical exegesis.¹³ The *Parmenides*, according to him, is a didactic "dialectical exercise" (*dialectica exercitatio*) which points to the highest entities, without however asserting anything positively about them:

11 On Cusano, Plato's *Parmenides* and Proclus' commentary on it see Steel 1982, p. 37*; Ruocco 2003, p. 10–12; Monaco 2012.

12 On Ficino and Plato's *Parmenides*, the secondary literature is vast. See at least Allen 1982; Allen 1986; Maimsheimer 2001; Lazzarin 2004 and Lazzarin 2005.

13 Pico allowed dialectic to play a propaedeutic role in achieving truth: *Quotusquisque noverit tractationem huiusmodi [scil. dialecticam] et evagationem ad veritatem adipiscendam esse necessariam*. (Pico, *Dell'ente*, ch. 2 *In quo quaerit ubi Plato de ente et uno sit locutus ostenditque illius verba favere potius sententiae dicenti unum et ens aequalia, quam his qui volunt unum esse ente superius*, p. 210, 23–25). These words recall to mind Aristotle's claim that the *Topics*, which is considered the Aristotelian treatise on dialectic *par excellence*, are useful not only for "intellectual training", but also for "the study of philosophical sciences [...] because the ability to puzzle on both sides of a subject will make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise" (Aristotle, *Topica*, I, 2, 101a34–35, p. 3–4). On Pico's *On Being and the One* see Boulnois 1995; Toussaint 1995.

Contendunt Academici utrobique a Platone unum supra ens poni. Ego vero hoc de *Parmenide* primum dixero: neque toto illo dialogo quicquam asseverari nec, si maxime asseveretur quicquam, tamen ad liquidum inveniri unde Platoni dogma istius modi ascribamus. Certe liber inter dogmaticos non est censendus, quippe qui totus nihil aliud est quam dialectica quaedam exercitatio. [...] Quod enim Parmenides tractaturus est, tale est, si credimus Zenoni, ut non sit palam in multorum consensu a sene tractandum. At si, ut illi volunt, de divinis ordinibus, de primo rerum omnium principio agit, quae tractatio seni congruentior aut erubescenda minus? Sed citra omnem est controversiam, nisi nos Ipsos velimus fallere, id circa quod versaturus erat Parmenides dialecticum esse negotium.¹⁴

Ficino was among the Platonists who considered the *Parmenides* a *liber inter dogmaticos* [*libros*] in which Plato had covertly exposed his “dogma” concerning the superiority of the One above the Being. In fact Ficino held the opposite view to that of Pico, and claimed that in the *Parmenides*, Plato embraced the theology of all things. This clearly emerges since the very first pages of Ficino’s *Argumentum* on the *Parmenides* where “Plato is envisioned as the prophet-philosopher-priest, the Moses speaking Attic Greek—in Numenius’ famous phrase, who descends from philosophy’s mount Sinai with the tablets of the *Parmenides* in his hands”.¹⁵

In Parmenidem vel de Uno rerum omnium principio vel de Idaeis argumentum. Cum Plato per omnes eius dialogos totius sapientiae semina sparserit [...] universam in Parmenide complexus est theologiam, cumque in aliis longo intervallo caeteros philosophos antecesserit, in hoc tandem seipsum superasse videtur, et ex divinae mentis adytis intimoque Philosophiae sacrario celeste hoc opus divinitus deprompsisse. Ad cuius sacram lectionem quisquis accedet, prius sobrietate animi mentisque libertate se praeparet, quam attrectare mysteria coelestis operis audeat.

14 Pico, *Dell'ente*, ch. 2, p. 208,10–16; 210,26–212,5. This view was endorsed, almost a century later, by Jacques Charpentier, who considered the *Parmenides* a dialectical exercise under the guise of Socratic irony: *Dialogus hic [scil. Parmenides], sicut Io. Picus Mirandula observavit, non tam ad docendum quid Plato sentiat, institutus est, quam ad aliorum opiniones notandas, sub ea ironia quae Socrati valde familiaris* (Carpentarius, *Comparatio*, p. 198). On Pico see Allen 1986.

15 Allen 1986, p. 434.

Hic enim divinus Plato de seipso subtilissime disputant quemadmodum ipsum unum rerum omnium principium est, super omnia, omniaque ab illo.¹⁶

According to Ficino, in the first part of the dialogue, Plato showed the existence of the supreme Ideas. Whilst in the second part, he irregularly disseminated his metaphysical and theological dogmas about the intelligible world of the gods, and about the Ultimate One above them. However, Ficino's theological exegesis seems to clash with Parmenide's claim that the second part of the dialogue is a *ludus serius*. Ficino solves this apparent inconsistency by attributing Parmenides' words "serious game" not to the content, but rather to the dialectic or logical form of the dialogue:

Ex verbis Socratis et Parmenidis atque Zenonis [Zenones *ed.*] senquentem disputationem colligimus fore opus grande et arduum pelagusque profundum, non tam propter ipsam dialecticam sive logicam dialogi formam quam propter subiectam huic materiam plurimum theologicam, alioquin minime decuisse tam magnificis verbis totiens hic praefari neque rursus deceret Pythagoricum senem nudam logicam pertractare [...] Quicquid hactenus disputatum est, longum est ad sequentia Theologicumque prooemium, ut merito et quod sequitur futurum sit profecto divinum. Non logica quaedam simplex absque ullo Philosophico sensu, ut quidam dubitaverunt ante Proclum [...] Ipse [*scil.* Proclus] Syrianum secutus in singulis verbis, singular putat latere mysteria, et quot sunt clausulae, ferme totidem esse numina. Ego vero mediam secutus viam, arbitror tantum saltem Theologiae subesse quantum admittit artificium, ut communiter dicitur, dialecticum, ideoque non ubique omnino continuatas, sed quandoque divulsas de divinis inesse sententias [...] Confirmemus tandem alio quodam Platonis ipsius testimonio, librum hunc non esse contentiosum, sed certe dogmaticum.¹⁷

In the *Parmenides*, under the guise of a dialectical, and, as it were, logical game (*sub ludo quodam dialectico et quasi logico*) aimed at training the intelligence, Plato points towards divine teachings and many aspects of theology. And, for Ficino, it is the dialectician's job to engage in this serious game, namely to exercise the *ingenium* in order to unveil the highest theological teachings. Thus,

¹⁶ Ficino, *In Parmenidem*, p. 1336–1337.

¹⁷ Ficino, *In Parmenidem*, ch. 37, p. 1153–1154.

the game, in the overall philosophical enterprise, is the facet of philosophical practice that is properly actualised in the understanding of those difficult truths which are grasped thru great difficulty, not only because of their paradoxical nature, but also, because “it was the custom of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato to cover the divine mysteries with figures and veils in all their works; to modestly cloak their wisdom (*dissimulare*); to jest seriously and to play most zealously (*iocari serio et studiosissime lùdere*).”¹⁸

The Ficinian conception of philosophical game is developed within Ficino’s theory of the *prisca theologia*, which is best exemplified by Plato and, indirectly, by Parmenides, whom Ficino considered one of Plato’s teachers. Even though Ficino was acquainted with Parmenides’s poem, in Marsilio’s hermeneutic the historical Parmenides leaves room for the Pythagorean Parmenides, who grasped “the reason underlying the Ideas”, namely the One. Consequently, the Eleatic thinker and his interlocutors Zeno and Socrates were metaphorically interpreted by Ficino as the steps of Plato’s gradual ascent to the One:

Hoc in dialogo Zeno Eleates primo Parmenidis Pythagorici discipulus unum esse in sensibilibus probat, ostendens quod si haec multa essent, nullo modo unius natura participantia, errores plurimi sequerentur. Deinde Socrates Zenoni non repugnans quidem, sed cum Altius elevans ad considerationem unius et unitatum, quae in rebus intelligibilibus insunt, perducit ne in hoc uno quod sensibilibus inest, moretur. Ex hoc igitur ad Ideas investigandas perveniunt, in quibus rerum unitates consistunt. Postremo Parmenides ipse senior haudquaquam Socrati contradicens, sed inchoatam contemplationem eius absolvens, integram idearum explicat rationem.¹⁹

By placing Parmenides the person in the continuous line of the ancient-wisdom tradition, Ficino is allowed to merge into one coherent picture the historical figure of Parmenides of Elea with the character of the actual dialogue the *Parmenides*.

¹⁸ Ficino, *In Parmenidem*, p. 1337.

¹⁹ Ficino, *In Parmenidem*, p. 1137.

3 Gasparo Contarini's New Approach to *Parmenides* and the *Parmenides*

A thinker who holds that the *divinus Plato* is playing a game is Gasparo Contarini, who, however, in the *Compendium* only tells us that *Plato ludit* when he develops the antinomies in the second part of the *Parmenides*.²⁰ Since Contarini does not tell us much more, let us try to decide for what he might have meant.

In the seven books of the *Compendium* Contarini sketches the basic principles of the *prima philosophia sive sapientia sive theologia*. This contemplative discipline concerns the first Being or God, the supreme causes and principles of beings, as Contarini states in the first pages of the *Compendium*. In Book One, indeed, the Venetian Ambassador offers some preliminary remarks on the subject-matter and the epistemological status of first philosophy, which seem to echo the first two chapters of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The *prima philosophia*, says Contarini, is the noblest science since it has the most noble object of study, namely the first Being or God. And, moreover, it is the most certain science, even more certain than mathematics, since its subject matter is known by the intellect alone through the purest cognitive process, which does not involve sensible faculty and imagination. But the first Being, the supreme causes and principles of beings can be fully known only by God's unlimited intellect and not by men, whose essential epistemic limitations cannot be totally cancelled nor overcome, but only pushed forward by a purified intellect. Instead an impurified intellect, specifies Contarini, is more inclined to err and this happens mainly in two ways. Firstly, since the intellect depends upon the imagination and phantasms in performing its acts, the intellect can easily be led to consider time and place not as proper features of the media of knowledge or phantasms, as they indeed are, but rather as general features of all beings. And this objectification of the subject's conditions of knowledge carries with it the risk of regarding as not eternal and corporeal also eternal and incorporeal beings.²¹

20 Among his many writings collected in the 1571 *Opera* we find the *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, whose final redaction dates from 1526ca and which was printed posthumously in Paris in 1556. In quoting the *Compendium* I will refer to the 1571 edition. On Contarini see Giacon 1960; Fragnito 1983; Fragnito 1988; Cavazzana Romanelli 1988; Gleason 1993; Rossi 2011 and Rossi 2013.

21 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 1, p. 100: *Primum quidem cum intellectus noster in quacumque actione intelligendi indigeat phantasia, ac in phantasmatibus sensibilibus rerum, cuiusque etiam altissimae causae, veritatem contempletur; saepenumero id evenire consuevit, ut ea, quae sensibilibus ac phantasmatum sunt, mixta putemus intelligibilibus entibus; eorūque naturam more sensibilibus perscrutemur. Inde fit, ut plurimi intel-*

But the intellect can fall into the opposite error of objectifying the forms of things, which the intellect itself abstracts from sensible matter. This second error, adds Contarini, is at the origin of the theory of Ideas.²²

The internal structure of the other six books of the *Compendium* seems centred around two foci: the transcendentals, and the hierarchy of beings. Books Two and Three offer a concise doctrine of transcendentals, namely the trans-scategorical notions whose number Contarini fixed at four: Being and One are dealt with in book Two, whilst the following book takes into account Truth and Good.²³ Book Four treats the first Being insofar it is the principle of all things. And Books Five to Seven present the hierarchy of created beings.

In his treatment the transcendental Being at the beginning of the second book of the *Compendium*, Contarini approaches the issue concerning the way Being relates to beings by preliminarily surveying the answers offered by his predecessors. It is in this framework that, for the first time, Contarini refers to Plato's *Parmenides*, along with the *Sophist*, for introducing the Monistic views held by ancient philosophers. The ancient Monists fell in the same error as the upholders of the doctrine of Ideas since they presented men's way of knowing the reality as the structure of things in themselves and of the objective

ligere non queant aliqua entia esse, quae nusquam sunt; neque in aliquo temporis intervallo aut momento. Nam cum phantasmatis immixtum sit tempus, ac locus semper adiunctus, at in illis veluti in speculis intueamur intelligibilia abstractaque entia, aegre disiungere valemus quod phantasmatum est, a rebus, quas in eis speculamur: ac si quis in speculo viridi seu rubeo homines, aedium aedificia, animantes brutas, caeteraque id genus intueretur, facile decipi posset, ac colorem speculi attribueret hisce rebus, quas in speculo intueretur. Adnitatur ergo philosophus purae veritatis contemplator ea, quae phantasmatum ac sensibilibus sunt, discernere a natura rerum, quam in eis contemplatur.

22 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 1, p. 100–101: *Non minus impedimentum mens sibi praestare solet in veritate perspicienda, quam phantasia [...]* Hinc de Ideis sententia ortum duxit. Nam cum intellectus apprehendat formam rei, quae a materia contracta est, ac propterea sensibilis absque affectibus materiae, quam facultatem habet tum ex vi interni luminis, intelligibilis inquam, tum ex natura sui, est nanque separatus a materia. Nonnulli existimavere talem quoque formam esse qualem eam intellectus intelligit. Necnon etiam asserverunt revera abstractas esse a materia sensibili, quia eo modo intellectus eas concipit. Videndum ergo atque diligenter in hisce sensibilibus rebus est perspicendum rem, quae intelligitur, extra mentem existere, modum tamen intellectionis pendere a natura intellectus, in quo res intellecta recipitur, qui supra materiam est suaeque vi ea, quae re coniuncta sunt, discernit, ac separat. Nec tamen propterea disiuncta sunt re quia intellectus separatim ac ut disiuncta percipit.

23 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 108: *Id [...]* quod secundum rem simplicissimum atque idem est [...] concipimus ipsum ut unum, modo ut ens, nonnumquam ut perfectum seu bonum, modo ut verum. Si qui stamen contulerit conceptionis hosce modos invicem, proculdubio intueri poterit conceptum entis, indivisionis rationem. On the doctrine of transcendentals in the Middle Ages and, partly, in the Renaissance, see Aertsen 2012.

world. Ancient Monists not only accorded an extramental existence to universal notions formed by the intellect, among which are also the transcendentals such as Being and One. They also postulated the exact correspondence between the mode of being and existing of universals on the one hand, and their mode of being understood by the intellect on the other hand. An unpleasant outcome of this correspondist view was that the univocal predication of the term being with respect to all beings entailed the existence of a unique Being. But such an existence did not find any support in empiric knowledge since sensual perceptions testified instead to the existence of a multiplicity of beings.²⁴ Parmenides, who was highly esteemed by his contemporary *ut ex Platonis monumentis colligitur*, perfectly exemplifies this flawed approach to the transcendental Being. Since he only acknowledged the substantial predication of being, Parmenides assumed that of whatever being is predicated, that thing is an essence and is one, since essence is one and the same for everything. We would do well to note that, in presenting Parmenides' own opinion, Contarini silently abandoned Plato to quote instead a conventional metaphysical argument derived from Aristotle's exposition of the Parmenidean doctrine in the *Physics*:

Addebat praeterea rationem Parmenides eiusmodi: quicquid praeter id, quod vere ens esset, poneretur esse, proculdubio non esse; atque non ens nihil esse. Ex quibus adsumptionibus effici putabat, ens tantum unum esse. Nam si plura entia essent, iam aliquid haberet esse, quod diversum esset atque alienum ab ente. Quapropter efficacissime comprobatum esse dicebat Parmenides huiusmodi argumento, entia non esse multa; sed unum tantum ens esse.²⁵

24 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 102: *Quidam, ut licet intueri apud Platonem in Parmenide, ac itidem in Sophiste, cum sibi persuasissent eo modo res esse atque existere quo ab intellectu concipiuntur, putaverunt universalia, praesertim species ipsas rerum, sub quibus multa quin potius innumera individua continentur, per se existere in rerum universitate, earumque participatione individua in eis contineri atque harum appellationem nancisci. Quo effectum est ut cum Ens de omnibus praedicetur, pari modo etiam de ente enunciaverint: Ens scilicet unum esse, quod de omnibus entibus dicitur, a cuius participatione entia sunt et appellationem entis habent. Inde palam asseruerunt quamvis entia sensui plura ac infinita ferè videantur, unum tamen tantum modo Ens esse ab intellectu probe intelligi.*

25 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 102. Cf. Aristotle, *Physica*, I, 3, 186a22–b3, and, among Medieval authors who referred to it, see Thomas Aquinas, *In Physicam*, lectio 6.

The Venetian Ambassador shows the erroneousess of the Parmenidean strict Monism by proposing a series of absurdities deriving from it, e.g. *si omnia essent unum ens, omnium ergo eadem esset operatio*. Then, Contarini refuses Parmenides' view by introducing two key notions into his ontology. Firstly, claims Contarini, Parmenides confuses the epistemological and ontological levels by illegitimately according extramental existence to the forms or Ideas, when in reality they result from the intellectual process of abstraction. According to Contarini, universal notions and transcendentals do not exist independently of the mind, and differ with each other only conceptually. Therefore, Being and One are the same in reality and are not essentially convertible. Secondly, claims Contarini, having not acknowledged the analogy of being, Parmenides predicated being univocally and in doing so, he was in good company with some most recent unnamed authors, probably John Duns Scotus and his followers. For Contarini though being is predicated of all things by analogy of attribution: *Ens de entibus haud aliter quam analogice praedicari posse*.²⁶ Meaning, it is said secondarily of beings, whilst it is predicated in a primary sense of the first Being:²⁷

Rationes vero Parmenidis solvere non admodum difficile est. Nam neque universalialia, aut ideae per se subsistunt à singularibus abstracta, quamvis eo modo a mente concipiantur. Haec nanque decipula ex eo est fonte erroris, quem plerumque intellectus nobis adfert, ut in priori libro iam exposuimus. Rationem etiam alteram diluere parvum negotium est. Nam et aliquod esse potest, quod tamen est praeter aliquod; quod vere est propter diversas rationes entis. Ac etiam si ens uno modo diceretur de entibus; illud quod esset praeter aliquod singulare ens, posset ipsum quoque sub ente contineri, ac de eo vere dici quod sit ens, sicut in homine

26 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 105.

27 Since this first Being does not fall under any of the categories, it cannot be defined, conceptualized, nor even named. This epistemological impossibility leads Contarini to endorse the Pseudo-Dionysian apophatic approach, and to affirm that the first, incomprehensible Being can only be contemplated through the divine silence of reason: Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 106: *Primum ens, quod vere est et in quo est plenitudo essendi [...] huiusmodi vero primum ens, quamvis inferius de ipso nonnulla dicere ac effari tentabimus, attamen, ut inquit Plato et caeteri omnes, qui elati viribus mentis alisque animi divinorum periti habiti sunt, a nobis minime intelligi, nedum dici potest quid, quale, quantumve in se sit, verum eo modo neque nomen neque conceptus ullus illius est, sed sacro silentio tantummodo venerandum est, atque excolendum. Eius nanque sedes ob splendorem nimium nobis inaccessa est. Ideo non amplius de eo nunc agatur: at posterius pauca quaedam.*

et caeteris individuīs, quae sunt eiusdem speciei, intueri licet [...] Ex quo liquet facile solvi posse argumenta, quibus posteriores quidam decepti a maioribus descivere posueruntque Ens univoce dici de entibus. Neque videntur revera distinxisse inter modum, quo ens dicitur de entibus, et eum quo genus dicitur de speciebus, quae sub eo continentur. Nam manifestum est illius, quod non univoce praedicatur, sed analogice.²⁸

The *Parmenides* repeatedly featured in Contarini's *Compendium* is distinct from the eponymous character of the dialogue onto which Plato has foisted his own doctrines. Indeed, unlike many of his predecessors, especially ancient and Renaissance Platonists, when Contarini mentions *Parmenides*, he places the Eleatic thinker in the naturalist pre-Socratic tradition, rather than the Neoplatonic. And, with historical precision, he refers to *Parmenides* as representative of the metaphysical strict Monism, which he distinguishes from Melissus' physical strict Monism. But the Venetian Ambassador also repeatedly couples *Parmenides* and Platonists. He does not, however, consider them as exponents of any ancient-wisdom tradition, but rather as examples of the errors in which the human intellect tends to fall: *natura intellectus, in quo intellecta recipiuntur, plerumque nobis occasionem erroris adfert*. When Contarini addresses the transcendental One, he blames *Parmenides* and the Platonists for their erroneous univocal predication of being. Unlike the Eleatic, however, Platonists allowed the existence of non-being. It happens with the One which, from the Neoplatonists' doctrinal viewpoint, was non-being insofar as it was the simplest principle and, therefore, it was above Being, which they did not understand as simple but rather as compounded:

Platonici vero, cum non dissentirent a *Parmenide* hac in parte, posuerunt ipsi quoque ens dici secundum unam rationem de entibus. Quamobrem ea, quae illius rationis expertia sunt, asseruerunt esse non entia, quibus tamen competat esse unum.²⁹

And in addition to this error, Contarini held the Platonists culpable for not having recognised the analogical predication of One. Thus, they confused the transcendental One and the mathematical one, which falls under the category of quantity. Consequently, they rendered the One the principle of all beings:

28 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 103 and 105–106.

29 Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 108.

Unum nihil aliud significet quam ens indivisum ac ita videtur unum licet secundum rem nihil addat ad ens ipsum, addere tamen secundum rationem intellectuum seu conceptum indivisionis [...] dicimus unum eandem cum ente naturam significare, verum addere secundum rationem conceptum indivisionis, neque secundum rem aliud est esse et aliud esse indivisum, sed id, quod re est, idem non assequimur totum, neque perfecte unico conceptu mentis, verum pluribus nitamur conceptibus opus [...] De primo vero rerum omnium principio dicimus, quod quemadmodum est unum, non tanquam habens unitatem (sic enim sua ipsorum ratione in eo esset compositio) sed sicuti simplicissima unitas longe superexcellens unitates, quas nos intelligimus est.³⁰

Despite the blameworthy doctrinal mistakes of the Platonists, Contarini gives Plato the merit for having attempted at understanding the metaphysical ground of reality by identifying the first principles and causes, although not in the correct way. Without these principles and causes, indeed, innumerable absurdities follow, as shown by Plato in the second part of the *Parmenides*. In reading the *Parmenides* and in referring to Parmenides, Contarini takes a different direction from that of the traditional logical and theological approaches. For him, a Plato *ludens*, via the narrative figure of Parmenides, had raised some deep metaphysical problems in the second part of the dialogue by developing the unsolved antinomies:

In hisce [*scil.* rationibus] insanitas materiae apparet. Huius generis sunt omnes formae materiales, quae ea de causa sunt fatigabiles ac finitae, tandemque corruptibiles. A quarum ordine Aristoteles in octavo Physicorum vult eximere primum motorem eiusque argumentationis vim, qua hoc adstruit, si quis haec quae diximus, non animadverterit, proculdubio non attinget. Necnon etiam ea, quae in Parmenide Plato ludit, cum contraria elicere videatur ac sequi ostendat, si unum sit; si haec oscitans quispiam legerit, minime explicare poterit.³¹

³⁰ Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 108–109.

³¹ Contarini, *Primae Philosophiae Compendium*, Book 2, p. 113.

4 Conclusions

Ancient and Renaissance interpreters of the *Parmenides*, engaged themselves in the very laborious and serious game of philosophizing. The Ancient and Renaissance Neoplatonic conceptions of the progressive unveiling of truth in the history of philosophy made perfectly legitimate the theological interpretation of the *Parmenides*. In this unifying historical perspective, Parmenides and Plato were representative of a linear chain of wisdom and Plato was credited to have perfected that which his predecessor Parmenides had begun. Accordingly, Plotinus, Proclus and Ficino were allowed to merge into one coherent picture the historical figure of Parmenides of Elea with the character of the actual dialogue the *Parmenides*.

In his essay *Man, Play and Game*, Roger Caillois defines the domain of the game as “a restricted, closed, and protected universe: a pure space,” and he claims that “the confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game.”³² For Ancient and Renaissance authors who considered Plato's dialogue as a logical or dialectical exercise, in the circle of game of the *Parmenides*, the rules of ordinary life, including logical laws, stepped aside for the rule of the game proposed by Parmenides and accepted by Zeno, Socrates and Aristotle, which consisted in considering “the implications of both assertion and denial of the hypothesis that the One is.” The Plato-Parmenides of the dialogue never transgresses this rule—otherwise the game would be over—, whilst he often violates the rules of correct reasoning both by arguing fallaciously and by drawing contradictory conclusionis from the same premises.

Unlike his predecessors, Contarini, in his *Compendium*, did not commit himself to any specific philosophical school, but to the ‘ratio naturalis’ alone, which is the only philosophical authority he acknowledged. Thus we can say that Contarini dealt wisely, not tendentiously with the various philosophical traditions he encountered.³³ Not surprisingly, therefore, he did not endorse any of the traditional interpretation of that “laborious game” that is the *Parmenides*. Accordingly, under Contarini's pen Parmenides acquired a historical and philosophical autonomy. For Contarini, Parmenides and the *Parmenides*, as well as other ancient authors and their writers, were useful for introducing his fundamental metaphysical notions and, more generally, for exposing his original metaphysical system.

³² Caillois 1958, p. 7.

³³ See Rossi 2013.

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