When Plato describes the sphere as the most perfect of all figures at *Timaeus* 33 b-c he is echoing a notion which pervades the whole of Greek literature: namely, that the circle and the sphere represent what is complete, perfect, and all-encompassing. Hesiod’s completed universe, for example, is spherical in shape; the “sphere of the heavens” and the “cycle of time” are often referred to in drama and history. Among the Presocratics, Anaximander’s map of the world indicated a circular surface, and the circular motion of a vortex may have been part of his cosmological scheme; Empedocles’ rounded sphere enjoys a circular solitude; for the Pythagoreans, contemplation of the circular motion of the heavenly spheres and of the harmony produced thereby imparts harmony to the soul of the contemplator; in Alcmaeon’s philosophy the soul imitates the circular motion of the stars and heavens; and Anaxagoras’ Nous operates as a cosmological principle which causes the circular motion that orders the universe. Orderliness both in human thought and in the universe is interpreted as circular perfection; as Guthrie remarks, “the analogy between the regularity of motion in a circle and psychic functions, especially reason, must be accepted as natural to Greek thought.”

For both Parmenides and Plato true thought pertains to “Being”, and opinion and sensation pertain to “appearance.” In the present discussion I shall attempt to show generally that (1) in Parmenides’ poem and in the *Timaeus*, both cosmology and epistemology are dealt with schematically, i.e. in terms of *shapes* – that the notions of straight and circular are applied both to the universe and to men’s thought about it; and that (2) both philosophers make extensive use of the principle that “like knows like.” More specifically I intend to suggest, through an analysis of the language and imagery of the texts in question, that the following points hold good for both works:

1 E.g. *Hom. hymn* 8.6, Eur. *Ion* 1147, Ar. *Aves* 1715, Hdt. 1.131, 1.207.
2 *HGP* I, 356.
3 For Parmenides opinion and sensation are eventually identified (in Fr. 8) with the way of not-being, and appearances, the things that seem, are shown simply “not to be.”
(1) Being, which is "spherical," is apprehended by mind whose motion is circular. (For Parmenides, Being is stationary; "well-circled Truth" is its circumference, along which which thinks truly proceeds. In the *Timaeus*, the universe as a whole rotates upon its axis, and the mind which thinks truly not only moves forward in a circular path but also revolves upon itself in imitation of the universal motion.)

(2) Appearances, which shoot about in straight lines, are perceived by processes of opinion and sense perception which themselves consist of motion along straight paths.

Cornford has mentioned, though without elucidation,\(^3\) that the circular reasoning of Parmenides is similar to the rotation of the rational soul in the *Timaeus*, and has pointed out that this mode of thought "makes no real progress but can start from any point in the coherent structure and come round to it again." Ironically, it is Aristotle — whose unmoved mover, as the most perfect being, causes the divine circular motion of the universe and the heavenly bodies — who is largely responsible for the demise of the ideal of human circular thought. Although it is unclear who are the "upholders of circular reasoning" whom he attacks in *Pos. An.* 72 b 17 and *Pr. An.* 57 b 18, it is clear that he believed such reasoning could not lead to scientific knowledge, precisely because it could make no progress but merely returned to its starting point.\(^4\) Aristotle's theory of demonstration — his attempt to say something new by means of linear deduction, to lead away from a basic premise toward a novel conclusion — was ultimately to direct the subsequent course of philosophical inquiry. Parmenides and the Plato of the *Timaeus*, then, will be shown in this discussion to represent the culmination of the Greek tendency to consider the truest human thought as a reflection of divine order, and not as having a peculiarly human dynamic of its own.

I. Parmenides

Everyone agrees that for Parmenides there is a way of truth and a way of opinion, and that the first pertains to "Being" and the second

---

\(^3\) "Parmenides' Two Ways," CQ 1933, 102.  
\(^4\) See *De anima* 407 a ff. for Aristotle's attack on Plato's conception of soul, and Cherniss' discussion of this passage in *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, I (Baltimore, 1944), Appendix IX, 571 ff.