

**Gaetano Chiurazzi**

## IDEALISM AS AN ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP: A RECONSIDERATION OF PLATO'S DOCTRINE OF IDEAS

Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione  
Università di Torino (Italia)  
Via S. Ottavio, 20  
10124 Torino  
Tel.: +390116708231  
Email: [gaetano.chiurazzi@unito.it](mailto:gaetano.chiurazzi@unito.it)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3332-6931>

**ABSTRACT.** Through an analysis of Parmenides' objections to the doctrine of ideas, and in light of recent reconsiderations of this problem by Verity Harte and Franco Ferrari, I will argue that the true meaning of the concept of idea for Plato is to represent an asymmetrical relationship within reality: the idea is incommensurable compared to the things that partake in it. This asymmetrical relationship is the essence of idealism, which affirms the irreducibility and non-immanence of the idea to reality, that is to nature, since nature is characterized by principles of symmetry or conservation. The idea is indeed related to the principle of passage to the other (*dynamis*) and, more specifically, is understood as that which enables the passage from the first to the second nature.

**KEYWORDS:** idealism, asymmetry, monism, dualism, Plato, Parmenides.

### IDEALIZMAS KAIP ASIMETRINIS SANTYKIS: PLATONO IDĖJŲ TEORIJOS PERSVARSTYMAS

**SANTRAUKA.** Analizuodamas Parmenido prieštaravimus idėjų teorijai ir atsižvelgdamas į šios problemos persvarstymą Verity Harte ir Franco Ferrari darbuose, straipsnio autorius argumentuoja, kad tikroji idėjos sąvokos prasmė Platonui – reprezentuoti asimetrinį santykį realybės viduje, mat idėja yra nebendramatė daiktams, kurie joje dalyvauja. Šis asimetrinis santykis sudaro esmę idealizmo, patvirtinančio idėjos neredukuojamumą ir neimanentiškumą realybei, tai yra gamtai, kuri apibūdinama simetrijos ir tvėrmės principais. Iš tiesų idėja susijusi su perėjimo į kitą (*dynamis*) principu, o konkrečiau, suprantama kaip tai, kas leidžia pereiti nuo pirmosios prie antrosios gamtos.

**RAKTAŽODŽIAI:** idealizmas, asimetrija, monizmas, dualizmas, Platonas, Parmenidas.

## Idealism: Monism or Dualism?

In the history of philosophy, idealism has often been the subject of contradictory evaluations. On the one hand, it is regarded as a philosophy that creates a gap between the ideal, the intelligible element, and reality, that is, the sensible, or between subject and object; this is how Platonism, and certain of its derivative forms such as Kantian transcendentalism, are normally understood. Idealism, on the other hand, is seen as a form of equating the subjective and the objective, to the point that, it is argued, the object exists only as a function of the subject, which completely absorbs it. From this point of view, idealism would be a form of radical immanentism, the most significant examples of which are perhaps Cartesianism and Husserlian phenomenology: reality is immanent to consciousness, and nothing exists outside of thought, independently. Realism would thus be the historical opponent of idealism. So what is idealism, philosophically speaking? A form of transcendent dualism, which introduces a deep chasm between the intelligible and the sensible, the subjective and the objective, or a form of immanent monism, which, on the contrary returns the objective back to the subjective, the material to the ideal, and thus dissolves the whole of reality into the content of consciousness?

The problematic nature of these considerations suggests that there must be something wrong in the use of these categories regarding idealism: transcendentalism, immanentism, dualism, monism, primacy of the intelligible, devaluation of the sensible, are perhaps categories that do not fully capture the specificity of idealism. What is attempted in these pages, then, is to propose an alternative view that focuses on other categories, particularly those of symmetry and asymmetry. The reasons for this choice cannot be discussed within this essay, nor can the resulting theoretical consequences be fully explored. Rather, I will limit myself to giving a very brief justification of this approach in the form of a thesis: what I intend to argue is that idealism represents a philosophical position that affirms the existence of an asymmetrical relation within reality, while positions opposed to it (such as monism, immanentism, etc.) affirm the existence of a symmetrical relation (between the subject and the object, or between different entities). In particular, the doctrine of ideas, in Plato's case, represents the rejection of the reduction of any internal relation of reality to a symmetrical relation (we might also say, to a relation of identity), which would make impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood.

## Against Parmenides: *Metexis* as an Asymmetrical Relation<sup>1</sup>

The place where the meaning of this statement can best be grasped is Plato's *Parmenides*. In fact, this dialogue of Plato can be seen as a discussion around the question, implied by Parmenides' philosophy, whether reality is symmetrical (being and thought are identical) or not. The very model of the Parmenidean universe, the sphere, which is the most symmetrical geometric object there is (it is invariant for any transformation), leads us to argue precisely that Parmenides' problem concerns in general the symmetrical or non-symmetrical character of reality. Moreover, from the mathematical and physical point of view, asymmetry is an indication (indeed, a necessary condition) of variation: where there is asymmetry, there is an event. As Pierre Curie clearly points out: "Some elements of symmetry may coexist with certain phenomena, but they are not necessary. What is necessary is that certain elements of symmetry do not exist. It is the asymmetry that creates the phenomenon" (Curie 1984: 127). In a perfectly symmetrical universe, such as conceived by Parmenides, nothing in fact happens, there is no movement or transformation.<sup>2</sup>

The title of the dialogue, *Parmenides*, thus makes it clear that its theoretical background is Eleatism, or rather, as has been argued, that philosophy, derived from it, Megarism (Marsico 2022), whose proponents reduced everything to the One and its tautological condition. The subtitle, *Peri tōn ideōn*, tells us that the confrontation focuses on Plato's fundamental doctrine, the theory of ideas, defended by the young Socrates who appears intimidated and inexperienced before the Eleatic giants, Parmenides and Zeno. Indeed, the theoretical difficulty of the doctrine of ideas is a typically Eleatic theme, namely, the problem of the relationship between the One and the Many: how to reconcile the unity of the idea with the plurality of entities that refer to it?

What is at stake is how to think about this relationship<sup>3</sup>: is it, in fact, a relationship of identity, that is, of equation? If so, the Many would have to *fully return* the One, which means that their relationship must be *symmetrical*: "One = Many." All of the objections that the Eleatics raise to the doctrine of ideas, and to the concept of "participation," with which Socrates attempts to conceptualize this relation, only lead it back to a symmetrical relation, which is at the same time a *mereological*, i.e., arithmetical condition, necessary for this equivalence. *Homoiōsis* expresses the mereological equalization between the One and its parts, without

<sup>1</sup> This and the following paragraph are a revised version of some pages of my book Chiurazzi 2021b: 52–63.

<sup>2</sup> On the concept of symmetry cf. Castellani 2000; Barone 2013.

<sup>3</sup> A reconstruction of the dilemma of participation in the *Parmenides* is made by Sablier 2019.

remainder or surplus. The whole (*pān*), the One that is and that is divided into parts, is perfectly identical with the *sum of its parts*, because, as is said in the context of what appears to be a very specific generation of numbers, what is divided must necessarily be quantitatively equal to the sum of its parts. “Furthermore, a divided thing certainly must be as numerous as its parts. [...] It is not distributed into more parts than oneness, but, as it seems, into parts equal (*isa*) to oneness, since neither is being absent from oneness, nor is oneness absent from being” (*Par.* 144d). *To on* and *to hen* are thus coextensive, but they are also coextensive with the number. Mathematically, this means that the internal divisions of the One must be understood as its *parts*, that is, as fractions: this is the only way to make being, one and number (*arithmos*) coincide. According to definition V, 1 of Euclid’s *Elements*, a quantity is in fact part of another quantity when it measures it exactly, that is, when they are in the ratio of the multiple and the submultiple, thus forming a complete whole.

We catch the meaning of this mereological equalization between the One and the Many in the famous example that Parmenides contrasts with that of Socrates in the first part of the dialogue. When asked whether each reality participates in the whole form or in a part of it, or whether there is another form of participation besides these, Socrates replies that there is no difficulty in thinking of participation as that of the day, “that is in many places at the same time and is none the less not separate (*chōris*) from itself. If it’s like that, each of the forms might be, at the same time (*hama*), one and the same (*autē*) in all” (*Par.* 131b). To this image of Socrates, which emphasizes the *intensional* presence (expressed by the adverb *hama*) of the idea in its participants (the day is the whole “day” in many different places), Parmenides opposes an image that reduces participation to an *extensional*, that is, spatial relationship, translating the example of the day into that of the veil, which is one in its entirety and is stretched out over many persons:

“Socrates,” he said, “how neatly you make one and the same thing be in many places at the same time! It’s as if you were to cover many people with a veil, and then say that one thing as a whole is over many. Or isn’t that the sort of thing you mean to say?” “Perhaps,” he replied. “In that case would the veil be, as a whole, over each person, or would a part (*meros*) of it be over one person and another part over another?” “A part.” “So the forms themselves are divisible (*merista*), Socrates,” he said, “and things that partake of them would partake of a part; no longer would a whole (*holon*) form, but only a part (*meros*) of it, be in each thing” (*Par.* 131c, modified).

The example of the veil divides, fractionates the One, and reduces the whole (*holon*) to the sum of its parts. Verity Harte, in her book devoted to the mereological problem in Plato, *Plato on Parts and Wholes*, discusses this kind of

equating relationship between the whole and the parts, calling it the “principle of composition as identity,” and seeing in it – rightly – the fundamental thesis of the Eleatic school. The Eleatic thesis is at the heart of the disputes about the One and the Many that Plato engages from the *Parmenides* until at least the *Sophist*, a thesis that Plato opposes (Harte 2002: 50). Obviously, the theoretical presupposition of this identification is the conception of number as an enumerable collection of entities, linked by relations of commensuration, that is, of multiple and submultiple; in this way, the sum of the parts turns out to be identical to the whole. As a result, we are led to conclude that there *is no difference between enumerating the entities of the world and the world itself*: the world (or any set) is its elements. This is a kind of relation that Plato explicitly conceptualizes in the *Theaetetus*, where he discusses the various meanings of *logos* (*Theaet.* 206c ff.),<sup>4</sup> and which he links to the term *pān*. This is the case with numbers: when applied to a set of entities, numbers *coincide* with the sum of such entities: “And the number of an army is the same as the army? And so always with things of this sort; their total number (*arithmos pās*) is the sum that each of them is” (*Theaet.* 204d, modified). In this case, it can be said not only that the considered system (here, the army) is *closed* with respect to the sum, i.e., that it always results from an operation of addition, but also that its totality completely coincides with the enumeration of its elements. This corresponds to what Parmenides states at one point:

“Each of the parts is surely in the whole, and none outside the whole.” – “Just so.” – “And are all the parts contained by the whole?” – “Yes.” – “Furthermore, the one is all the parts of itself, and not any more or less than all.” – “No, it isn’t.” – “The one is also the whole, is it not?” – “Doubtless” (*Par.* 145b–c).

What is “neither more nor less than all of its parts” is the kind of summative totality indicated by the term *pān*, which corresponds to what Verity Harte calls the “principle of composition as identity.” We also call this principle “the principle of cardinality.”

Harte says that this principle attests to a sort of “ontological innocence” that she attributes in particular to David Lewis (Lewis 1986), whose modal realism is essentially mereological and appears to be a contemporary version of such theses of Parmenides in the Platonic dialogue. It is an extensional principle (Harte 2002: 14 and 85), involving the identification of the monistic thesis “if the One is” with the naturalistic thesis “if the whole (*pān*) is one”:<sup>5</sup> “You say in your poem,” Socrates

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from Plato’s dialogues are taken from Plato 1977.

<sup>5</sup> The thesis that Parmenides’ poem is not an ontology, but a cosmology is argued in particular by Luc Brisson. See Introduction to Plato 1994. Cf. also Lafrance 1999.

says to Parmenides, “that the all is one, and you give splendid and excellent proofs for that” (*Par.* 128a–b).<sup>6</sup> Harte wants to show that Plato opposes to this principle of composition as identity (highly symmetrical) an alternative conception, according to which every composition supposes a structure, that is, a particular order, as stated in the second definition of *logos* in the *Theaetetus*. The whole here is not simply a composition, but a composition endowed with an order. For example, when one writes a word, composed of elements, one does so by knowing “the way through its letters; that must be so whenever he writes them out one after another in their order” (*Theaet.* 208b): that is, one must know *how* they are to be composed. The consideration of this *processual* moment, which likewise implies an order, that is, a sense, a definite orientation, is thus crucial: it introduces a structural or formal principle within the mereological, set-theoretical thesis of ontological innocence. In the *Theaetetus* Plato calls this different way of understanding the whole *holon*: “Then the whole (*holon*) does not consist of parts. For if it did, it would be all the parts and so would be a sum (*pān*)” (*Theaet.* 204e).

This distinction is not yet clear in the *Parmenides*, as evidenced by the synonymous use of the terms *holon* and *pān* in this context. What Plato thus wants to highlight is the fact that both forms of whole, the totality (*holon*) and the sum (*pān*), are complete entities: they *lack nothing*, they are therefore “the same thing,” and yet they are different, just as the syllable “SO” is different (*heteron*) from the mere sum of its component letters, “S+O.” “SO” is not the same as “S+O,” and we should rather say, if we want to express it in quantitative terms, that “SO” > “S+O.” This principle of nonequivalence thus expresses an asymmetry, which is what the doctrine of ideas, as we shall see, seeks to introduce into Parmenides’ monistic and equiparationalist ontology. The syllable is not a mere *summation* of the individual letters, their numerical sum, but neither is it something simple and undivided, for that would make it similar to the individual letters. Rather, it is *constitutively* defined by a *logos*, namely by a certain link, which makes it something *more and different* from the other two models (the summative and the atomistic models), which are correlative with each other. It is, however, as noted above, a distinction that does not yet appear explicitly in the *Parmenides*, but that Plato articulates precisely in order to provide an answer to Parmenides’ objections to the doctrine of ideas. Again, as Verity Harte writes, these objections arise from the principle of composition as identity, which is the constitutive theoretical core of Eleatism and the reason

<sup>6</sup> That “the whole is one” is a statement found in DK28 B8, 6 of the Parmenides’ Poem, which, by the way, is the only place where it occurs. Brisson understood this “all” as the cosmos, thus interpreting the statement of the first hypothesis “if the One is” as “if the whole, that is, the universe, is one.” See Plato 1994: 20–21.

for the paradoxes it claims to find in the Platonic doctrine of participation. With the disentanglement from this principle, according to Harte, a new ontology, no longer Parmenidean, begins to emerge, an ontology implying a higher structural principle, quite different from the summative and mereological one (Harte 2002: 123–130).<sup>7</sup> This new ontology implies a formal principle, an order: we therefore call this principle “thesis of ordinality.”

That the mereological interpretation of the One–Many relationship is at the heart of the dispute with Parmenides is also argued by Franco Ferrari whose contribution adds an important new consideration to Harte’s thesis. He has shown very convincingly that the relationship between idea and what partakes in it, which Socrates tries to defend against Parmenides, should not be understood as a *symmetrical relationship*, as a sort of equalization, but as an *asymmetrical relationship*, in the sense that there is no perfect identity between them. According to Ferrari, Parmenides’ objections to Plato are not so much the sign of a self-criticism of Plato with regard to the doctrine of ideas, as has often been argued, but “the assumption of a point of view that is completely foreign to Platonic philosophy” (Ferrari 2015: 221), an equating point of view, which ignores the “ontological difference’ between ideas and spatiotemporal phenomena, that is, the circumstance that they are two different and incommensurable ‘modes of being’” (Ferrari 2015: 222). Parmenides’ ontology is a *single-world* ontology, that is, “a homogeneous and tendentially reductivist ontology” (*ibidem*). The cause of this equating reductionism, again according to Ferrari, is the “assumption of a strictly symmetrical (and to some extent bi-directional and convertible) notion of separation” (*ibidem*).

At this point, we are interested in highlighting the clear difference between Parmenidean and Platonic ontology. The former is a reductionist and equating ontology that systematically reduces the Many to the One, insofar as it collapses them onto the One, precisely because it establishes a symmetrical, bidirectional and convertible relationship between them. “Symmetrical” is to be understood here in its literal Greek meaning, namely, as *commensurable*: commensurability presupposes a relationship between the whole and its parts as a relationship of multiples and submultiples. This commensurability is the condition of the mereological equivalence to which Verity Harte refers, namely, the principle of composition as identity, the essence of the “ontological innocence” of Eleatism. Conversely, Platonic ontology is a non-reductionist, *non-flat* ontology, in that it establishes an asymmetrical relationship between the One (the idea) and the Many (the sensible things), a relationship that impedes any equalization or reversibility. “Asymmetrical,” in turn,

<sup>7</sup> Harte makes no secret of her sympathies for the modal structuralism of James Ladyman, Don Ross and John Collier (2007), which is explicitly formulated in opposition to the modal realism of David Lewis.

is to be taken in its literal sense, namely, as *incommensurability*, a term that Ferrari explicitly mentions,<sup>8</sup> and that signifies an irreducible difference.<sup>9</sup>

If Ferrari's analysis of the comparison between Plato and Parmenides has its own plausibility, as we have tried to show, the real meaning of the doctrine of ideas is to take a step beyond Parmenides, that is, beyond monism and univocity. Indeed, the doctrine of ideas has the general meaning of introducing an asymmetry into the monolithic and symmetrical being of Parmenides: first of all, that between the idea itself and its participants, refuting the principle of compositionality as identity, and thus establishing a difference between the former and the latter; but secondly, also an asymmetry between the idea and the one, that is, between the idea and nature: if the idea represents a principle of unity, then, it cannot do so in the way that the One-All does. The idea cannot be conceived as a "generality" that contains everything, like nature, the universe, of which Plato says that it "contains everything" (*Tim.* 31a); rather, the idea is an "organizing principle," a principle in the sense of "that from which or on the basis of which" an order is produced, a *telos* is manifested. The question of whether the meaning of the idea is descriptive or normative has to do with this alternative. But to say that the idea represents a principle of order is also to make it a principle of the dynamization of reality, which does not statically reproduce the idea, as a mere copy, but is attracted to it, tends toward it, as toward a limit, that is, as toward a final cause.

### Breaking the Symmetry: the *exaiphnēs*

There is a place in the *Parmenides* where Plato seems to address the way in which asymmetry intrudes into the series of commensurable numerical entities. These entities are the object of the second deduction. This is also the point where an aspect of surplus emerges in relation to the radical immanence of Parmenidean monism. This *excursus* is one of the strangest and most famous in the dialogue. The passage itself is somewhat off-topic as it is introduced in a rather unexpected and cryptic way when the problem of transformation as "passage into something else" (*metaballein*) is raised. This is the famous excerpt devoted to the concept of *exaiphnēs* in the section of the Second Deduction that begins with the words

<sup>8</sup> Ferrari returns to this issue in the truly illuminating Introduction to his Italian translation of Plato 2016: 60, 87, 93, 94, 98, 99, 161. See also F. Ferrari 2010 and 2022.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, incommensurability generates a difference that does not cancel out, as is proven by the operation of *antanaireisis*, i.e., the method of successive subtractions by which one tries to find the common factor between the side and the diagonal of the square. Cf. Aristotle, *Top.* 158b 31–35.



“Let’s speak of it yet a third time” (*Par.* 155e).<sup>10</sup> This section introduces undeniably significant, and in some ways innovative, elements into the discussions of the second deduction, which, moreover, do not seem to find further development in the course of the dialogue. The uniqueness of this part lies in the fact that it attempts to give an answer in dynamic terms, that is, in terms of becoming, to the previous aporias leading to the conclusion that the One should have opposite predicates (being at the same time large and small, young and old, one and many, etc.). Now these opposite predicates are explained as the possibility of participating or not participating, of taking part in being or abandoning it, that is, as *becoming* and *ceasing to be* (*gignesthai* and *apollysthai*, *Par.* 156a), exactly those features that Parmenides excluded from being (Diels-Kranz 2001: DK 28, B8 40–41). The opposite predicates thus do not coexist simultaneously in the one, but are to be understood as “passages of state” (*metaballein*, 156c).

It has been rightly observed that here Plato anticipates Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction: since two opposite predicates cannot coexist in the same subject at the same time (*hama*), they must necessarily be present there at two distinct moments of time. There must therefore be a “moment,” so to speak, which is not a moment of time, in which the transition from one to the other takes place, that is, in which the transformation of this subject takes place. This already makes it clear that *exaiphnēs*, of which we are speaking here, is not the *hama*, precisely because *hama* implies simultaneity, and thus has a static and spatial meaning, whereas *exaiphnēs* indicates transition, and thus has a dynamic meaning. In fact, *exaiphnēs* is amazing, unlocalizable (*átopon*, *Par.* 156d), because it does not belong to chronological time, that is, to numerable time, which, according to Aristotle’s statement, consists of “nows” (*nūn*) that are parts of time. The main characteristic of *exaiphnēs* is thus not to allow the simultaneous presence of contradictory predicates, but to ensure the passage between them, the *metaballein*, the *change*. This is, however, not a static but a dynamic way of understanding synthesis, that is, not in the form of substantial subject, but in processual terms. What appears particularly interesting for our discussion are two fundamental features of *exaiphnēs*:

1. *exaiphnēs* is the non-place of the passage into otherness and of transformation. This makes its translation, which has become canonical, with the term “instant,” really misleading, since this word, of Latin origin, carries with it the meaning of “being in” (*in-stare*), that is, of permanence, and thus of non-change. On the contrary, the Greek word alludes in its literalness to a movement, a coming from:

<sup>10</sup> Especially in the Neoplatonic tradition, this part has been understood as a deduction in its own right, the third, causing the number of all deductions to amount to nine; other scholars, however, regard it as a simple corollary of the second deduction, with a summarizing function.

in fact, the preposition *ek* indicates a motion from a place, a “coming forth,” and thus also a “heading toward.” Indeed, Plato writes, it seems that “[t]he instant seems to signify something such that changing occurs from it (*ex ekeinou*) to each of two states” (*Par.* 156d).

Rather than an *in-stare*, *exaiphnēs* thus indicates an *ex-stare*: it is the point of coming and going out of being, of *ex-sistere* and *de-sistere*. Moreover, the second part of the word does not indicate at all what the verb “stare” conveys, from which the term “instant” is still formed. According to a certain etymology, this second part would be derived from the adjective *aipus*, which means “high, elevated, steep, precipitous”: *exaiphnēs* would thus indicate something that comes from somewhere on high, something looming and overhanging that *suddenly* breaks in, descending obliquely and bringing about a change and transformation in the course of becoming. It thus alludes to a *vertical* or *oblique*, I would say *diagonal* dimension, completely different from the horizontal and immanent state of *in-stare*.

In its adverbial sense, *exaiphnēs* is also translated as “suddenly.” If one were to find an example of its meaning, one might find it, if at all (but it is not the only possible one), in the condition of death in Heidegger’s existential analytic, which overwhelms the *Dasein* and happens suddenly. It is to such a sudden transformation, coming from a non-place, that Plato alludes when, in the myth of the cave, he uses this same word to denote the change that suddenly happens to the prisoner and leads him to free himself from his chains (*Resp.* 515c–d).<sup>11</sup> To understand the *exaiphnēs* as “*in-stare*,” as is done by translating it as “instant,” is therefore quite wrong, since in this way it would allude to a permanence and not to a sudden transformation;

2. *exaiphnēs* does not belong to time, does not belong in general to a dimension of immanence: it is of another place, and of another order. In it a *metaballein* is produced, that is, a passage into other, a change. There is thus a connection that binds *exaiphnēs* to *dynamis* (which Aristotle defines as the principle of change, *archē tēs metabolēs*): both are about *metaballein*, the passage into other, or change. Thus, *exaiphnēs* indicates that point in reality where an asymmetry is generated, and which cannot belong to the horizontal (symmetrical) plane of numerable entities. By defining, in the preceding lines, as “diagonal” the dimension or place of the *exaiphnēs*, I wish to emphasize the connection, emerging in *Theaetetus*, between the principle of change (*dynamis*) and the incommensurable quantities, such as the diagonal of the square, which *Theaetetus* calls *dynameis* (*Theaet.* 248a–b).<sup>12</sup> This definition is important because it allows the concept of *dynamis* to be illuminated

<sup>11</sup> On the topic see Lavecchia 2012.

<sup>12</sup> For a more extensive discussion I refer to Chiurazzi 2021a.

through that of the incommensurable and vice versa. Like the incommensurable, *dynamis* represents indeed an excess, something irreducible to the actual; like *dynamis*, the incommensurable expresses not a quantity but a movement, a point of transition (a limit), where a transformation into something else takes place. In Greek, the incommensurable is *asymmetron*: we can therefore say that *dynamis* is, literally, a *principle of asymmetry*. Therefore, *exaiphnēs*, the point of time where this asymmetry happens, represents a limit: “Rather, this queer creature, the instant, lurks between (*metaxy*) motion and rest – being in no time at all – and to it and from it the moving thing changes to resting and the resting thing changes to moving” (*Par.* 156d–e).

It is not clear – and this is perhaps one of the fundamental conundrums of the concept of limit – whether *exaiphnēs* represents a moment of rupture or a moment of continuity: as a “passage into other” it is, after all, both, and this makes the concept of continuity something completely different from the concept of substance. The principles of conservation and symmetry refer to a substantial identity, which has, however, only a quantitative meaning, and it would be incorrect to use the word “continuity” in their case. For continuity, as emerges from Aristotle’s definition (*Phyis.* VI 1, 231b 5–6), involves internal differentiation of a qualitative character as well, and is therefore characterized not as equivalence (*Gleichheit*), but rather as heterogeneity (*Selbigkeit*). Every point in the continuum, insofar as this characterizes, not that which is motionless, but the entity in motion and subject to change, is in fact a point of heterogenesis, that is, it represents a “break in symmetry,” a moment of transition into something else, and thus of transformation.

The *exaiphnēs* is, we may say, the point of a differentiation “within” time, the point at which symmetry is broken. The overcoming of monism, and thus also Plato’s defence of the doctrine of ideas, cannot fail to pass through this moment of asymmetry, that inexplicable moment that, in narrative terms, leads the slave in the cave to free himself from his chains and allows him to begin his journey to the world of ideas. The possibility of an ideal world, in short, of the two, is not inscribed in the one *per se*. That is, the second nature implies a break from the merely conservative symmetry of the first nature.

## From First to Second Nature

In conclusion, we can say that the doctrine of ideas represents Plato’s way of showing the untenability of a radically monist and immanentist ontology such as that of Parmenides. The idea, in general, represents a dimension of asymmetry, that is, of non-coincidence, of differentiation within the real, which expresses an ulteriority

and the condition for something, which (as yet) does not exist, to exist and to continue to exist. Idealism expresses this impulse for the realization of something new, the impetus beyond what already exists. This impetus is not, unlike the Spinozian *conatus*, a principle of conservation (*conatus virtus sese conservandi*), that is, a homeostatic principle, but a principle of non-conservation, in the sense that it is a principle of creativity, innovation, or freedom. Preservation is what leads nature toward entropic degradation, that is, toward death, as is sanctioned on the physical level by the principles of symmetry. In contrast, idealism expresses the tendency toward the breaking of symmetry, which is a condition of every event. Related to the concept of the “incommensurable” (*asymmetron*) are several other concepts: first, as seen, that of *dynamis*, capacity, a concept that inherently implies asymmetry as potential difference (there is no power without potential difference);<sup>13</sup> then the concept of contingency, as shown by the association that Leibniz makes between truths of reason (corresponding to commensurable quantities, because they are analytic, i.e., reducible to identity relations) and truths of fact (corresponding to incommensurable quantities, because they are non-analytic; Leibniz 1992: 171); and, finally, freedom, since freedom implies a breaking of symmetry, the beginning of a new causal series. Above all, however, linked to the concept of idea are those of “meaning” and “truth.” Indeed, meaning and truth are not “coplanar” to the state of affairs they express: they involve a kind of semantic “ascent,” from reality to its meaning. To say that something has meaning, or that it is true, indeed, implies that there is an asymmetry, i.e. an irreducibility, between the meaning or truth and what they refer to: spoken words or written signs are materially physical phenomena, but they are not the meanings expressed, or at least they are not just the same state, but two states irreducible to each other, that is, not interchangeable.

In sum, my argument is: if nature represents a form of monism (after all, every naturalism is a monism, and vice versa), idealism does not so much represent a form of dualism but, as mentioned above, the introduction of an asymmetrical aspect within the general symmetry of naturalism. Thus, technically, idealism is not dualism, especially if by this word is meant a kind of metaphysical dualism (Manichaeism, Cartesianism). Rather, idealism expresses the condition for there to be a duality in nature: just as the diagonal of the square is the condition (the *dynamis*) of its duplication (expressed by the formula “ $1 : x = x : 2$ ”), similarly the ideal element expresses the condition (the  $x$ ) of a duplication of nature in

<sup>13</sup> “The capacity of an energy to be potential is closely linked to the presence of a relationship of heterogeneity, of dissymmetry [...]” (Simondon 2013: 67). It should be noted that the physical concept corresponding to that of *dynamis* is “energy”: this word in fact should not be understood as a translation of *energeia*, which corresponds rather to what is meant in physics by “work,” i.e. the actualization of an energy (*ergon* means after all precisely “work”).

what we call “second nature.” All productions that can be included under this designation (the productions of meaning, the products of technology, of art, all cultural products such as legal, economic, linguistic systems, etc.), are a form of “duplication” of nature, which is irreducible to the *purely* natural dimension. If there is dualism, the duality does not concern subject and object, but natural entities and their “duplication” into a second nature (into representations, symbols, images, laws, technical products, etc.), the subject being the condition of this duplication. No book, no work of art, as well as no social system is produced “naturally.” The explanation of their genesis implies the reference to something other than natural causality, precisely an element that we say to be “ideal.” Similarly, Kant explains the possibility of knowledge (i.e., experience) by tracing it back to an element that does not belong to the plane of experience, namely, the “I think”: the “I think” must indeed accompany every one of my representations (Kant 2000: §16), but it is none of my representations. It remains, so to speak, “asymmetrical,” that is, incommensurable with respect to them.

Idealism is thus an unavoidable theoretical position if one wants to account for those productions that cannot be explained by resorting to simple physical causality, namely, to a form of production based exclusively on efficient causality, which explains the effect by tracing it symmetrically – i.e., analytically – back to a cause that contains it. All physical formulas are, not accidentally, expressions of equivalence, because they have as their fundamental principle the symmetry, that is, conservation. But it is not possible to explain in this way the production of a work of art, or of an article, such as this one you are reading: if the causality that produced these objects were the same as the one that is operative in merely physical phenomena, it would not be possible to distinguish a natural object from a cultural object, a stone from the Nike of Samothrace, mineral efflorescence from prehistoric paintings. If such a distinction is made, if an internal difference within ontology, i.e. an ontic, symmetrical difference, is possible, it is because at its origin there is a deeper, asymmetrical difference. “Ontological difference” is a way to explain, in Heideggerian words, this same concept. Idealism is then the affirmation of this asymmetrical relationship: the idea – as we attempted to show –, whose highest expression, for Plato, is the idea of good, which is a *dynamis* beyond being, that is, beyond the physical entity (*Resp.* VI, 508b) – is the principle of this asymmetry.

*Received 2023 08 19*

*Accepted 2023 09 22*

## References

- Barone, V. 2013. *L'ordine del mondo. Le simmetrie in fisica da Aristotele a Higgs*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Castellani, E. 2000. *Simmetria e natura. Dalle armonie delle figure alle invarianze delle leggi*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Chiurazzi, G. 2021a. *Dynamis. Ontology of the Incommensurable*. Eng. trans. by R. Valgenti. Berlin et al.: Springer.
- Chiurazzi, G. 2021b. *Seconda Natura: Da Lascaux al digitale*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Curie, P. 1984. *Sur la symétrie dans les phénomènes physiques*. In: Œuvres. Paris: Société française de physique.
- Diels, H. and Kranz, W. 2018. *Die Vorsokratiker*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferrari, F. 2010. "Equiparazionismo ontologico e deduttivismo: l'eredità di Parmenide nella *gymnasia* del *Parmenide*." In *Il quinto secolo. Studi di filosofia antica in onore di Livio Rossetti*, ed. by S. Giombini and F. Marcacci. Passignano: Aguaplano—Officina del libro, pp. 357–368.
- Ferrari, F. 2015. "Asimmetria e non reversibilità nella metafisica di Platone." In: *Seconda Navigazione. Omaggio a Giovanni Reale*. Ed. by R. Radice and G. Tiengo. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Ferrari, F. 2022. "La maschera di Parmenide: riduzionismo ed equiparazionismo nella prima parte del *Parmenide* di Platone." *Philologia Philosophica. Rivista internazionale*, 1: 63–89.
- Harte, V. 2002. *Plato on Parts and Wholes: The Metaphysics of Structures*. Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press.
- Kant, I. 2000. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Eng. trans. by P. Guyen and A.W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ladyman, J., Ross, D. & Collier, J. 2007. *Every Thing Must Go. Metaphysics Naturalized*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lafrance, Y. 1999. "Le sujet du poème de Parménide: l'être ou l'univers?," *Elenchos*, XX: 265–308.
- Lavecchia, S. (ed.). 2012. *Istante. L'esperienza dell'illocalizzabile nella filosofia di Platone*. Mimesis: Milano-Udine.
- Leibniz, G. W. 1992. *Scritti di logica*. Ed. Barone, F. Laterza: Bari.
- Lewis, D. 1986. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Marsico, C. 2022. "Intra-socratic Polemics. The *Parmenides* as an element for an anti-Megaric program." In: *Plato's Parmenides*. Ed. by L. Brisson, A. Mac, O. Renaut. Academia Verlag (International Plato Studies): Baden Baden.
- Plato. 1977. *Complete Works*. Ed. by J.-M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Plato. 1994. *Parmenides*. Fr. trans. by L. Brisson. Paris: Flammarion.
- Plato 2016. *Parmenide*. It. trans. by F. Ferrari. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Sablier, P. 2019. "Parts, Forms, and Participation in the *Parmenides* and Sophist: A Comparison." *Etudes platoniciennes*, 15 (OpenEdition Journals).
- Simondon, G. 2013. *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Million.