

Self or being without boundaries: on Śaṅkara and Parmenides

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There can be no difference anywhere that doesn't make a difference elsewhere . . . The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.

William James, 'What Pragmatism Means'¹

This chapter focuses on a similar argument made by Parmenides² and Śaṅkara³ involving the claim that *boundaries* between everyday entities are superimposed and not real. I hereby continue my exploration of the similarity of the *arguments* of the two philosophers, who, so far, have been compared only either as adherents of monism, or in order to show historical dependence, mostly of Greek thought on the Veda.⁴ I will show how Parmenides and Śaṅkara argue that any boundary that we believe to be real and capable of separating the many individuals and things can be proven to be superimposed by humans on *being* rather than being real.

As a foil, I will mention an alternative metaphysical framework – which has

¹ McDermott 1978: 379.

² Parmenides was a Greek philosopher of the early fifth century BCE, i.e. before Socrates and Plato. He wrote a poem in which he describes a journey that takes him first beyond the Gates of Night and Day and then beyond what can be seen as all opposites and dualities, the duality of knowing and *being* or subject and object included. Of this poem only quotations by other authors survive.

³ Śaṅkara was an Indian philosopher of the eighth century CE; his school was called Vedānta, meaning the last part of the Veda. He wrote commentaries on the Vedānta or *Upaniṣads* and on other important texts like the *Brahmā Sūtra*. He is an exponent of *Advaita* Vedānta, i.e. *non-dual* Vedānta, which signals that he interprets literally the Upaniṣadic claim that *ātman*, or our Self, is the same as *brahman*, i.e. the essence of reality.

⁴ For a comparison between Śaṅkara's and Parmenides' arguments based on separation or discrimination, see Robbiano (2016). In this paper I also offer an extensive review of the existing comparisons between these two philosophers.

been adopted for instance by Descartes, and which might be regarded as part of the default everyday Western metaphysical framework – according to which reality is fundamentally fragmented in separate things and individuals.⁵

Parmenides and Śaṅkara acknowledge the existence of a fundamental reality: undivided *being* or Self. The other side of the coin of an undivided *being* is the lack of reality of the boundaries superimposed on *being*.⁶ The question is: what makes them regard anything that differentiates one thing from the next as a superimposition, which is less real than undivided *being*? I will show that the argument involves the 'epistemological weakness' of what is superimposed on undivided *being*. This argument points at the impossibility of 'knowing' – in a special sense that is radically different from having opinions – anything other than *being*, which involves the impossibility of knowing any boundary. The step from the impossibility of knowing anything other than *being* to the lack of reality of any second *being* might sound like a fallacy, since it takes an unwarranted step from epistemology to ontology. However, for a certain conception of knowing and *being* that entails their identity, there is no fallacy. I argue that this identity makes sense on both Parmenides' and Śaṅkara's terms. I will show this by suggesting how to interpret what they refer to as 'knowing' or 'higher knowledge', and by trying to shed light on the assumption on which the undividedness of *being* is based.

Finally I will look at hints in their writings which suggest that understanding the identity of knowing and undivided *being* might facilitate *experiencing* the lack of boundaries, which in turn might result in experiencing invulnerability, 'unshakeness', liberation and compassion.

The common starting point – the certainty

Both Śaṅkara and Parmenides, like many other philosophers, were prepared to submit any accepted opinion to a rational test. In different traditions there have

⁵ In Robbiano (forthcoming) I sketch this contrast between Śaṅkara, on the one hand, and Avicenna and Descartes, on the other, in order to show that many interpreters of Parmenides who look for the implicit subject of the subjectless 'is' in DK B2 embrace the Aristotelian assumption that predicates and attributes must be owned by a substance, as Avicenna and Descartes had done. In that paper I argue that scholars, rather than taking an assumption for granted, should argue to support it. I try to make scholars aware of the assumption they perhaps unconsciously superimpose on Parmenides' fragment, by making them aware of an alternative assumption, which has been chosen by Śaṅkara (a thinker similar to Parmenides) and which leads him to regard any substance as an illusory superimposition on trustworthy *being*.

⁶ I write '*being*' for the trustworthy reality in Parmenides' philosophy and '*being*' for any other less marked occurrence of this word.

been philosophers who were prepared to regard everything they had believed so far as mere opinion and illusion; they wanted to doubt everything and to start from scratch. Think, for instance, of the process of Cartesian doubt, which stops only at the realisation that the activity of thinking, notwithstanding any incorrectness of the thoughts, cannot be doubted. At this point, Descartes' assumption kicks in: if the attribute of thinking is indubitably there, there must be a substance supporting it, more specifically a thinking substance: a mind or a soul.

Śāṅkara and others asked themselves a similar question in their quest for the foundation of the knowledge of reality: does anything exist beyond doubt? The first step in answering this is similar both in Descartes and Śāṅkara: they called it either 'being self-aware', or 'thinking', or 'being' or 'am' or 'is'. I appreciate the difference between 'being self-aware', 'thinking' and 'being'; however, at this point of their argument, which I am calling the first step, they seem to play the same role: they are used by different philosophers to refer to their recognition of an immediate certainty whose content or description they offer in what I call the second step. None of them doubted that there is a fundamental certainty. In *Meditation 2* Descartes writes:

in that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.⁷

Likewise, Śāṅkara says: 'everyone is conscious of the existence of (his) Self and never thinks "I am not"' (BSB I.1.1: 200). Both Descartes and Śāṅkara take a similar first step in the common journey or quest for what is real and what we really are: nobody would or could deny being self-aware or thinking. I submit that the following lines from Parmenides' poem refer to this same first step:

Come now, I will tell you, and once you have heard my story take it with you, what routes of the quest are the only ones to know:
the one that 'is' and that it is not possible not to be
— it is the course of trust, for reality follows — (28 DK B2.1-4)⁸

I interpret these lines of Parmenides' poem as communicating that the indubitable starting point about which nobody can have doubts is 'is'. Parmenides expresses the trustworthiness of the subjectless 'is' and that it is impossible that 'is not'. Many different interpretations have been given of these lines and

⁷ Adam and Tannery 1964–76: VII, 25, translation in Cottingham 1985: II, 16–17.

⁸ Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Parmenides are mine. I have attempted to stay as close as possible to Parmenides' Greek.

of the lack of a subject of the phrase 'that is' — and the vast majority of them concentrated on supplying a subject.⁹ On the contrary, I maintain that the lack of a subject is crucial to Parmenides' message that contrasts the trustworthiness of the mere fact of being with the opinions that we might have about what subject(s) might be said to display the property of being.

Descartes, Parmenides and Śāṅkara and their different second step

It seems that philosophers who agree that there is a certainty, which might be referred to as 'being self-aware' (or 'thinking', 'knowing', 'being') to start with, can take two different steps. The disagreement seems to be between those who, like Descartes — after agreeing on the trustworthiness of being self-aware — regard the addition of a subject to this being self-aware as a *necessary* and *equally trustworthy* step as the initial certainty, and those who, like Parmenides and Śāṅkara, regard the addition of a subject as an untrustworthy next step.

For Descartes, when the need for characterising this indubitable starting point emerges, the characterisation is not presented as a second step, but as obvious, natural and necessary. In Descartes' metaphysics the certainty is characterised as belonging to the thinking-thing that is doing and owning the thinking. Descartes takes for granted the Aristotelian assumption that predicates must be owned by substances and adapts it to his new kind of dualism.¹⁰ He regards this assumption, not as something one might choose or not, but as 'something very well known by the natural light': 'we should notice something very well known by the natural light . . . wherever we find some attributes or qualities there is necessarily some thing or substance to be found for them to belong to'.¹¹ Descartes adapts Aristotle's assumption that predicates must be owned by substances, and does not ascribe the attribute of thinking to the Aristotelian individual, consisting of matter and form, but to a disembodied individual thinking substance, to start with.

However, the inference from 'there is some thinking' to 'there is a "me"' — be it an embodied individual or a disembodied mind (thinking thing) — who owns the thinking does not go without saying. This is just one of the possible assumptions that have been chosen by those who wanted to articulate this certainty. A different assumption has led other philosophers to a different metaphysics, with possibly different existential and ethical implications.

⁹ See Robbiano (forthcoming) for a detailed analysis of the problems involved in regarding 'estin' as having an implied subject.

¹⁰ This innovation costs him some quite precarious steps before he can rescue the existence of the body from the flames, but this is another story and a quite well-known one.

¹¹ Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part 1.11, in Adam and Tannery 1964–76: VIII, A 8, translation in Cottingham 1985: I, 196.

Śaṅkara – just like Descartes – observes himself thinking and, reflecting on what must be real and trustworthy, finds that one cannot doubt being self-aware. But, differently from Descartes, he claims that if he is certain of being self-aware, then his certainty is of undivided existence, which he expresses as certainty of the existence of *brahman*, which is the same as *ātman*, the Self:

the existence of brahman is known on the ground of its being the Self of every one. For every one is conscious of the existence of (his) Self, and never thinks 'I am not'. (BSB I.1.1: 200)

The superimposition of our psychophysical make up on the undivided *being* or Self – which might be described as a witness¹² – which we recognise immediately by being self-aware, is a mistake made by ignorant people, according to Śaṅkara.¹³ Śaṅkara would accuse Descartes of exactly this mistake: the one of ascribing existence or self-awareness (regarding it as a predicate in need of a subject) to a separate substance, e.g. an individual, a body or a soul.¹⁴ Their mistake is a fruit of the human mind superimposing what is not Self, e.g. separated individuals, on the Self.¹⁵ The question is: do they have an argument for concluding that Self or *being* is undivided? If they do, on what assumption is their argument based?

The argument of epistemological weakness of boundaries

In order to find out how Parmenides and Śaṅkara come to conclude that being is undivided, we will have to look at why there is nothing that they recognise to

¹² Śaṅkara: 'Attributes of the body are superimposed on the Self, if the man thinks of himself (his Self) as stout, lean, fair, as standing, walking, or jumping. Attributes of the sense-organs, if he thinks "I am mute, or deaf, or one-eyed, or blind." Attributes of the internal organ when he considers himself subject to desire, intention, doubt, determination, and so on. Thus the producer of the notion of the Ego (i.e. the internal organ) is superimposed on the interior Self which, in reality . . . is the witness of everything' (BSB I.1.1: 198).

¹³ Śaṅkara: 'That the Self, although in reality the only existence, imparts the quality of Selfhood to bodies and the like which are Not-Self is a matter of observation, and is due to mere wrong conception' (BSB I.1.5: 205).

¹⁴ In Sideritis, Thompson and Zabavi's words, Descartes is a substantialist, i.e. someone who 'thinks of the self as a substance, with consciousness as its essential nature – hence belonging to a distinct ontological category from that of consciousness'. Śaṅkara and – I suggest – Parmenides belong to what they call non-substantialist self-theorists: those who 'hold that the self is not a substance or property-bearer standing in relation to consciousness that is in some sense distinct from it'. They see 'the self as just consciousness itself' (2010: 4).

¹⁵ Śaṅkara: 'As the passages "I am Brahman", "That art thou", and others, prove, there is in reality no such thing as an individual soul absolutely different from Brahman, but Brahman, in so far as it differentiates itself though the mind (*buddhi*) and other limiting conditions, is called individual soul, agent, enjoyer' (BSB I.1.31: 209).

be as trustworthy as the initial, indubitable certainty – referred to as 'is', *being*, *brahman*, Self.

The first certainty has a phenomenological hue. It is the reflection on an indubitable experience: there is *being* or thinking; self-awareness guarantees the trustworthiness and reality of this first given. A second certainty – a certainty of something different – would be the only way to secure the trustworthy existence of something else next to the first certainty. A second certainty would also be the only way to secure the existence of the first boundary between two equally certain existents. However there is no such 'second certainty'. There is no 'knowledge' of a second *being*, no 'knowledge' of a boundary.

The scare quotes around knowledge signal that both Parmenides and Śaṅkara agree on there being two kinds of knowledge available to human beings: one that consists of untrustworthy opinions that focus on individuals and on change; the other, trustworthy, that realises undivided *being*, which is at the same time the only reality and the only real 'knowing'.¹⁶ *Being* is therefore regarded as undivided and more fundamental than its alleged fragmentation along the boundaries that separate things and individuals, by appealing to the impossibility of 'knowing' anything other than *being*.

In more detail, Parmenides' argument of epistemological weakness goes along these lines: 'is' is the indubitable starting point, since we are certain that 'is' is the case ('it is the course of trust' [B2.4]). Whereas 'is' is an immediate certainty, there can never be a second certainty as strong as this one. The alleged second certainty would be certainty of something next to *being*, and different from *being*. B2 explains that one cannot trust both 'is' and anything next to it. In fact, there is no knowing of anything else next to 'is', i.e. of what is not 'is', of what is other than 'is'.

the other that 'is not' and that should not be

I point out to you that this route is a journey we have no experience of,¹⁷

for not-being can you neither recognise, since it is impossible to accomplish [such a journey] nor can you ever point out [not-being]. (B2.5–8)

Knowing something different from 'is' would postulate the possibility of being aware of two 'beings': one which we might call '*being*', the other which we

¹⁶ Parmenides: 'And you are required to find out everything, / on the one hand, the unshaken heart of the trustworthy reality, / on the other hand, the opinions of mortals, where there is no true trust . . .' (28 DK B1.28–30). Śaṅkara: 'Brahman is apprehended under two forms; in the first place as qualified by limiting conditions owing to the multifariousness of the evolutions of name and form (i.e. the multifariousness of the created world); in the second place as being the opposite of this, i.e. free from all limiting conditions whatever' (BSB I.1.1: 206).

¹⁷ Or 'that cannot be inquired into'. But see Robbiano (forthcoming) for the justification of this translation.

might call not-being, since it is not the same as what we called '*being*'. An example of the alleged second certainty would be the alleged certainty that there is an owner of this certainty, which is different from this certainty. Śaṅkara makes this point very clearly: one cannot have two selves.

the Self within is one only; two internal Selves are not possible. But owing to its limiting adjunct the one Self is practically treated as if it were two; just as we make distinction between the ether of the jar and the universal ether . . . (BSB I.2.20: 210)

In parallel with the distinction between Parmenides' 'is', which is trustworthy and cannot not be, and the 'is not' of which we have no knowledge, Śaṅkara stipulates the importance of the distinction between what is real and eternal (*brahman*) and what is not eternal (any superimposition). A justification of this discrimination is epistemological: it is impossible to have any proof of the existence of what is not eternal, next to what is eternal:

there can exist nothing different from brahman, since we are unable to observe a proof for such existence . . . 'Being only this was in the beginning, one, without a second.' (BSB III.2.32: 253)

The epistemological weakness of the assumption of plurality consists of showing that we are never acquainted with anything with the same – complete – degree of certainty that accompanies our knowing the first fundamental fact.

Therefore *being* is undivided and more fundamental than its alleged fragmentation along the boundaries that separate things and individuals. Is this a fallacy since it jumps from not knowing to not being? To find out if this is a fallacy we must look at what kind of knowing is assumed to count as real, trustworthy knowledge.

The assumption is that 'knowing' is self-awareness. The fundamental certainty is phenomenological: it is the only indubitable experience, referred to as 'is', 'being', 'thinking', 'knowing', 'being conscious'. If *being* is the same as knowing, there is no fallacy.

One way to make sense of this undivided 'Self', '*being*' or '*is*' is that it is what is fundamentally there in each of our experiences; different experiences might be distinguished by means of words, but what can be said with certainty of all of them is just '*is*'. In other words, there cannot be any experience of anything separated from this '*is*'; that is, we have different words and descriptions for our different experiences, but they are all experience of '*is*', they are never experience of '*is not*'. There is no experiencing of not experiencing: no awareness of not being aware. Whatever we are doing we could never qualify it as '*not-being*': always as '*being*'. There are not two separate domains in our experience, which we can access in the same way as we access the immediate certainty of being (or being self-aware).

In conclusion, according to our philosophers, we need to epistemologically discriminate between what is real and trustworthy accessible, and what is superimposition, which is not trustworthy: what we superimpose is not a second being, but some kind of illusion or opinion 'projected' onto the only real *being*.¹⁸

As a consequence of the impossibility of knowing anything other than *being*, we cannot know any boundary with certainty. We cannot claim trustworthy knowledge of any boundary, since there is no not-being – the alleged second being might be called not-being – which would imply the existence of the boundary between *being* and not-being. With no first trustworthy boundary, no other boundary can be regarded as trustworthy, thus no knowledge can be claimed of the many things, separated by unreliable boundaries.

Parmenides' and Śaṅkara's reasoning contrasted to Descartes'

Both Parmenides and Śaṅkara argue along these lines: everybody agrees that 'is' is the case, rather than 'is not'. They both shared this step with Descartes: there is something indubitable, which I have paraphrased above as 'there is self-awareness'.

At this point Descartes went for the following assumption: thinking and being must belong to a substance, i.e. an independent portion of reality. This assumption led him to the next step: When I say 'there is thinking', then thinking and being must belong to a substance; this substance is 'me': therefore I am.

Descartes concluded: 'I' is an independent substance: an individual mind. In other words: 'thinking' or 'is' or 'am' belong to me: a mind separate from the rest of reality. I will not go into the well-known arguments by means of which Descartes 'proved' the existence of bodies; at the end of the story, according to him, reality is full of separate individuals and separate things, some of which are endowed with a mind.

Parmenides and Śaṅkara went for a completely different assumption: 'is' or *being* is the only trustworthy reality: nothing other than '*is*' is knowable in

¹⁸ Śaṅkara: 'This superimposition thus defined [of the Non-Self superimposed on the interior Self] learned men consider to be Nescience (*aviśyā*), and the ascertainment of the true nature of that which is (the Self) by means of the discrimination of that (which is superimposed on the Self), they call knowledge (*viśyā*) . . . The mutual superimposition of the Self and the Non-Self, which is termed Nescience, is the presupposition on which they base all the practical distinctions . . .' (BSB Introduction: 197). Discrimination or division (*kṛisis, viveka*) is a crucial methodological tool, which does not separate two domains of being, but two aspects: it draws a distinction, an epistemological division, i.e. a discrimination between lower and higher knowledge, or two ways of 'looking' at the same. About the method of discrimination for these two philosophers, and other similarities in their methods, see Robbiano (2016).

a reliable way. In other words: I cannot know 'is not' or not-being. Part of this assumption is their conception of knowing, which is the same as *being* (B3), and which can be made sense of by dubbing both knowing and *being* as being self-aware. Our experience, which is all we have or are, can be described in terms of being, but also in terms of knowing. They are *not* two separate items. It is a kind of 'knowing' in which there is no fundamental division between the subject that knows and the object that is known, since there are not two fundamentally separated realities that we can experience next to each other. Therefore knowing, or being-aware, is *being*.

Parmenides and Śaṅkara concluded: *being* – that is the same as 'knowing', or *brahman* that is the same as the Self (*ātman*) – is fundamentally undivided. In fact, the first alleged boundary is not knowable, not possible to experience; it is not part of the indubitable 'is'. Therefore the boundary between knower and known and any other boundary or distinction we superimpose on *being*, in order to make sense of it, are the fruit of our custom, our language or our theories.

Existential consequences of boundaries are superimposed and not real

The choice of the assumption that knowing is being self-aware – which leads to the conclusion that the fundamental reality is undivided, that is, not admitting of any division, not even the subject-object division – is quite a strong choice.

On the one hand, the exclusive trust accorded to undivided *being*, leads our philosophers to dismiss any specific knowledge. In fact, both scientific knowledge (cf. Parmenides' opinions about astronomy [B10, 11, 12, 14, 15] or embryology [B17]) and moral knowledge (e.g. on what rituals and actions to perform) are regarded as untrustworthy: as non-reliable opinions or Nescience.¹⁹ Śaṅkara tells us that all practical distinctions are based on ignorant superimposition. Parmenides claims that postulation of *two* entities, which is needed for any scientific inquiry, creates a deceitful cosmos or order.²⁰

Does the tenet that boundaries, being epistemologically untrustworthy, are therefore superimposed rather than real have any *existential* relevance? What difference might it make to take a step in the direction of such a metaphysics,

¹⁹ Śaṅkara: 'The mutual superimposition of the Self and the Non-self, which is termed Nescience, is the presupposition on which they base all practical distinctions – those made in ordinary life as well as those laid down by the Veda – between means of knowledge, objects of knowledge (and knowing persons), and all scriptural texts . . . For such texts as the following, "A Brāhmana is to sacrifice", are operative only on the supposition that on the Self are superimposed particular conditions such as caste, state of life, age, outward circumstances, and so on' (BSB, Introduction, 197–8).

²⁰ 28 DK B8.51–3: 'And after this, learn the opinions of the mortals / listening to the deceitful order of my words. / For they decided to name two forms . . .'

which rejects the reality of individuals and, by doing so, might sound much less palatable than the step taken by Descartes, who assumed that the immediate certainty of existing (or of being conscious or of thinking) must be owned by an individual? After all, it might seem more 'natural' to identify with and be sure of this individual that carries our name, rather than being certain of and identifying with undivided *being*.

I hereby enter the terrain of the 'pragmatic consequences' of Parmenides' and Śaṅkara's metaphysics. In the last part of this chapter I will follow James' advice about the function of philosophy quoted as my epigraph. I would like to suggest that a metaphysics like that embraced by Śaṅkara and Parmenides might have an existential relevance that can be expressed in terms of invulnerability and unshakeness (Parmenides), and freedom and compassion (Śaṅkara).

The existential relevance for Parmenides: undivided *being*, on which boundaries are superimposed, is invulnerable and unshaken

According to Parmenides, *being* is undivided and homogeneous. There cannot be divisions or discontinuities in 'is', since only not-being could have drawn division into *being*. But not-being is not knowable (B2.5–8) and knowing is *being* (B3), therefore there is no not-being: not-being is just an opinion and not real.

neither should it be bigger at all
nor smaller at all whether on one side or another.

In fact, there is neither not-being which would stop it from coming towards the same, nor is *being* in such a way as to be more than *being* on one side or less on another, since it is all inviolable . . . (B8.44–8)

The absence of not-being, which has been ruled out since it is unknowable, is what allows 'is' to be safe, and homogeneous, with no interruption, discontinuity, separation:

Neither is it divisible, since it is all the same:
nor more anywhere in any respect, which would prevent it from being united, nor in any respect inferior, but all is full of *being*,
thus [it] is all continuous . . . (B8.22–5)

Reality 'is': after an 'is' there is another 'is' and then another 'is' with no discontinuity between them: 'for *being* draws near *being*' (B8.25).

As soon as we talk about an edge, a boundary, or about two different kinds of beings, or two beings, or being and not-being, we enter the territory of the opinions. The only limit or boundary that applies to *being* is the oxymoronic 'ultimate boundary' made invincible by *anangkē*: it is not a boundary that separates two

domains but a very unique one that has no outside. Such an 'ultimate boundary' suggests that *being* is protected, inviolable,²¹ since there is nothing on the outside that might endanger it. *Being* is invulnerable and can be trusted to always be there.

Remaining the same and in the same it lies by itself

And thus it remains where it is firmly; for mighty *anangkē*
holds [it] in the bonds of the limit, which bars its way all around . . . (B8.29–31)

But since the limit is ultimate, [*being*] is perfect
from every point of view . . . (B8.42–3)

The absence of not-being, i.e. anything trustworthy next to *being*, ensures that *being* is not only undivided but also undisturbed by any incursion: there can be no diminishing, dying, changing: it is safe and invulnerable. *Being* is called perfect or complete²² and full.²³

Might these characterisations of perfection and invulnerability hint at the quality of the *experience* of non-dually knowing *being*? Might Parmenides' *being* refer to the undivided inner self,²⁴ which, unthreatened by anything outside of it, is not only invulnerable but also unshaken? When the quest for *being* is announced, the goal of the search is pointed to as the unshaken heart of the trustworthy reality:

And you are required to find out everything,
on the one hand, unshaken heart (*atremes ētor*) of the trustworthy reality.
(B1.28–9)

Unshaken refers in Homer to the untroubled state of mind, e.g. of gods or heroes peacefully sleeping²⁵ or standing calm and untroubled on the battlefield.²⁶ Coxon observes that '*ētor* [heart] is never used in Greek except of a human or divine person, of whom it refers to the heart or inner self as the seat of emotion, virtue

²¹ 28 DK B8.48: 'all is inviolable' (πᾶν ἔστιν ἄσυλον).

²² 28 DK B8.42–3: 'But since the limit is ultimate, [*being*] is complete / from every point' (Ἀδράρ ἐκεῖ πείρας πύματον, τετελεσμένον ἔστι / πάντοθεν).

²³ 28 DK B8.24: 'but all is full of *being*' (πᾶν δ' ἐμπλῆσόν ἔστιν εὐόντος).

²⁴ Coxon 1986: 168.

²⁵ In Homer we do not find the adjective *atremēs*, but the adverb *atremas*. There are passages where Zeus (*Il.* 14, 352: *Thus in quiet slept the Father on topmost Gargarus*) and Odysseus (*Od.* 13, 92: *but now he slept in peace, forgetful of all that he had suffered*) sleep *atremas* (peacefully). Cf. Śāṅkara, BSB I.1.19 (*Essential Vedānta*: 206–7): 'But when he, by means of the cognition of absolute identity finds absolute rest in the Self consisting of bliss, then he is freed from fear of transmigratory existence.'

²⁶ Cf. the passage at *Il.* 13, 278–87 with the comparison between the two kinds of warriors: the one who is afraid, changes colour and does not stand *atremas*, and the one who does.

and life'.²⁷ This might suggest that one who realises and holds on to the trustworthy 'is' has nothing to fear:

But *akinēton* (unmoving or unshaken) in the limits of huge bonds
[it] is without start and without stop, since birth and death have strayed very far
away, pushed away by true trust. (B8.26–8)

Coxon puts *akinēton* here in relation with the *atremes ētor* of B1, suggesting that it could refer to 'other than local stillness', and quoting a passage where *akinēton* means 'steadfast'.²⁸

Being is safe, and invulnerable, protected from any intrusion, since the existence of any intruder, i.e. anything next to *being*, has been ruled out as a consequence of the untrustworthiness of our knowledge about it. The suggestion might be that, if *being* is self-awareness, if undivided self-awareness is what we trustworthily are, then there is nothing we should fear.

The existential relevance for Śāṅkara: freedom and compassion

For Śāṅkara, the choice of the assumption that makes him interpret the first certainty as the undividedness prior to any form or division (rather than something belonging to an individual) is not only metaphysically and epistemologically significant, but also existentially relevant. Regarding separate individuals as superimpositions might pave the way towards *experiencing* the lack of divisions or boundaries, i.e. towards the non-dual experience of *brahman*.

When one identifies with the only existent, one can also experience fullness in the sense of perfection.²⁹ If nothing can get in one's way and limit one, not only perfection and lack of fear might result, but also freedom. Śāṅkara describes the experience of *brahman* in terms of liberation. This freedom can also be seen as freedom from identification with something changeable and vulnerable such

²⁷ Coxon 1986: 168. Cf. Seaford's chapter in this volume, who, from a different perspective, points to Parmenides' appeal to introspection in his search for *being*, to the subjective dimension suggested by the words *atremes and ētor*, and to the 'positive psychological effects of the merging of subject with object'.

²⁸ Coxon 1986: 206. 'The adjective *akinēton* is older than Parmenides (Hes. *Op.* 750), and is used in the fifth century by Pindar, Sophocles, Aristophanes and the historians. That it alludes in Parmenides, as often elsewhere, to other than merely local stillness is shown by the phrase *atremes ētor* (fr. 1.29) which foreshadows the argument of fr.8; cf. Soph. *Ant.* 1027, *akinētos pelei* ("is steadfast"); 1060, *takinētia* ("secrets").

²⁹ In the words of one of the most authoritative scholars of Advaita (Deutsch 1973: 9), realising *brahman* leads to the experience of the timeless plenitude of being: 'Brahman, the One, is a state of being. It is not a "He", a personal being; nor is it an "It", an impersonal concept. Brahman is that state which is when all subject/object distinctions are obliterated. Brahman is ultimately a name for the experience of the timeless plenitude of being.'

as an individual. Śāṅkara explicitly identifies the non-dual reality of *brahman* with liberation:

this [*mokṣa* / liberation] is eternal ... without undergoing any changes ... omnipresent as ether, free from all modifications, absolutely self-sufficient, not composed of parts, of self-luminous nature ... It [i.e. *mokṣa*] is, therefore, the same as *brahman* ... (BSB I.1.4: 202–3)

Moreover, the experience of the lack of divisions might well be an experience of continuity, of a shared common ground, of connection to others, seen as non-different from or continuous with us. A compassionate attitude might well result from seeing others as part of us, which might manifest itself as sharing suffering and joy, i.e. spontaneously attempting to remove their suffering and rejoicing at their happiness:

a Master ... continually established in the Absolute, calm like the flame when its fuel is consumed; a boundless ocean of spontaneous compassion for which there is no reason, a friend to all good people who surrender to him.³⁰

Śāṅkara's enlightened or liberated person – i.e. the one who has not only understood but also experienced his or her own identity with *brahman* (undivided *being* or absolute reality) – will be a boundless ocean of spontaneous compassion. Deutsch comments:

The quality then that ought to inform human action is non-egoism, which, positively expressed, is what the Advaitin understands to be 'love'. One must interrelate with 'others', one must conduct oneself, with the knowledge that the other is non-different from oneself. Love, the meeting of another in the depth of being, must be grounded in knowledge, and when it is so grounded, it expresses itself in every action that one performs.³¹

Compassion springs from the assumption that the *connection* between what I call 'me' and what I call 'the other' is stronger than our apparent separation. Our separation is secondary since it is result of superimpositions, for instance, of this body and these thoughts, on what I more fundamentally am, which is non-different from what the other is.

Conclusion

Both Parmenides and Śāṅkara agree with Descartes and others that there is a trustworthy, indubitable phenomenological starting point, which is both episte-

mological and metaphysical, and which might be hinted at as 'being', or 'being self-aware'.

Neither Parmenides nor Śāṅkara have Aristotle in their tradition to suggest that an activity must always be a characteristic, predicate or accident of a substance. They can both conceive of a predicate without a subject. They can both conceive of unowned being.

Both Parmenides and Śāṅkara show that the existence of anything singled out from *being* is a matter of opinion, since we cannot trust any of the boundaries we project on *being*. I have argued that the fundamental argument for drawing conclusions on the status of boundaries is the one based on their 'epistemological weakness'. It is the distinction between two kinds of knowledge, the one untrustworthy and the other trustworthy, that allows Parmenides and Śāṅkara to label the reality of boundaries and separate individuals and things as less fundamental than the reality of undivided *being*. Our knowledge of boundaries and separate entities is of a radically different kind than the higher, trustworthy 'knowing', which is *being* and which is assumed to be phenomenological knowledge or self-awareness.

We can trustworthily know undivided *being*, which is what we are: *being*, which is the same as knowing, interpreted as self-awareness. On the contrary, we cannot trustworthily know anything other than that; therefore we cannot trust any of the boundaries we project on *being*. The existence of any individual substance, like a mind or a body, is not something we can have trustworthy knowledge of: any second 'item' next to *being* is the fruit of untrustworthy opinions.

One who holds a metaphysics of the undividedness of reality and who sees boundaries between separate things and individuals as superimpositions might enjoy the *experience* of the lack of divisions: an experience of inviolability, freedom and connection to others. Parmenides' and Śāṅkara's arguments seem, in fact, to point to their existential consequences, which lead one from the impossibility of knowing not-being to the unreality of any boundary, and, possibly, to the experience of invulnerability, unshakability, liberation and compassion.

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³⁰ Śāṅkara, *Vivekaśūdhīkāra* 34–5, in Grimes 2004: 76.

³¹ Deutsch 1973: 102.

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10

Soul chariots in Indian and Greek thought: polygenesis or diffusion?

Paolo Magnone

Not only the classicist, but even the layman with a casual interest in Greek philosophy is familiar with the allegory which Plato employs in the *Phaedrus* to describe the nature of the soul in terms, as he says, that are 'within human power':

Let [the soul] be likened to the composite inborn power of a pair of winged horses and of a charioteer . . . (246a)

Both classical scholars and cultivated laymen alike, on the other hand, have seldom been aware of a strikingly similar allegory occurring in one of the most celebrated works of the final period of Vedic literature, the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*:

Know that the Self is the rider in a chariot, and the body is the chariot; and know that the intelligence is the charioteer, and the mind is the bridle. They say that the senses are the horses, and the sense objects are their lanes . . . (KaU 1.3.3)

For their part, indologists have taken due notice of the puzzling similarity from early on, albeit with differing assessments. Already a century ago, in connection with the *Kaṭha* passage, Keith observed that 'the contrast with the Platonic metaphor of the *Phaedros* is as obvious as the parallel', further on passing his judgement that in spite of the interesting parallelism 'the details of the two [metaphors] are perfectly distinct, for Plato uses the conception to illustrate the struggle between the rational and the irrational elements in the soul, and his distinction of $\theta\upsilon\mu\omicron\varsigma$ and $\epsilon\pi\iota\theta\upsilon\mu\iota\alpha$ has no real parallel in the *Upaniṣads*'.¹ On the other hand, Belvalkar and Ranade evidently did not share his caution, as they enthusiastically aver that 'the extraordinary resemblance of the two descriptions down to the smallest details staggers us, and we must confess we do not know how to account for it'.² Almost

¹ Keith 1989: 555, 613.

² Belvalkar and Ranade 1974: 263.