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Not-being's potential

How to determine the indeterminate?

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Abstract

In continuation of Parmenides' and Plato's writings, the emphasis in studies on not-being seems to lie in the *relation* of not-being to being. This relation in which not-being stands to being is broadly demonstrated in two classes of negative concepts: (1) those that signify the metaphysical and ontological distinctions or differences between being and not-being and (2) those that are used in the linguistic and logical function of negation. Not-being therefore would seem to depend on its function as to how it is to be defined. In the first case, not-being seems to be mostly connected to nonexistence, not being *there* or the realness of the necessary negative opponent for being (Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Strawson). In the second case, not-being often refers to the predicative role of the negation sign, \neg , which opposes its positive counterpart and may or may not bear a veridical meaning (Frege, Geach and Ayer). In this essay, it is argued that we should merge those two classes of not-being, and stated that the correct way of connecting them is if (2) forms the underlying, metaphysical (and logical) structure of the ontological differences presented in (1). This can only be the case if both (1) and (2) share the same meaning of not-being *as such*. For the aim of merging (1) and (2), I revive the Greek conceptualizations of not-being and negation in Parmenides' and Plato's writings, where these are also discussed as standing in opposition with being (2) and as being different to being (1). By means of the Aristotelean vocabulary of *capacity*, *potentiality* and *actuality*, the conclusion that is argued towards is that a merging of (1) and (2) is possible on the basis of characterizing not-being as *potentiality for being*. As it turns out, not-being *as such* stands in a metaphysical opposition to being in the way potentiality for being would and every negation therefore forms a difference to its specific counterpart in being, since it refers to every particular potentiality for being. Not-being therefore corresponds to the undetermined part of reality that is *not* being, yet is *potentially being*.

Contents

Introduction	1
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PART I	8
---------------------	---

The metaphysical impossibility and necessity of not-being's relation to being

1. Why not-being is not to be spoken of	9
1.1 Parmenides' poem, <i>Περὶ Φύσεως</i>	10
1.2 What did Parmenides mean with the impossibility of not-being?	14
1.3 Not-being and the impossibility of change, diversity and plurality.	17
1.4 The impossibility of not-being's relation to being in contemporary philosophy.	19
1.5 Not-being without the possibility of becoming being.	20
2. Why we need the not-being's relation to being	22
2.1 Not-being as otherness in Plato's <i>Sophist</i>	23
2.2 The task for future philosophers to develop a conception of not-being.	27
2.3 Aristotle's specification of not-being's relation to being.	29
2.4 The necessity of not-being in relation to being.	32

PART II	34
----------------------	----

Not-being as the potentiality for being

3. From not-being as relation to not-being <i>as such</i>	35
3.1 Parmenides' opposition of not-being and being.	36
3.2 Plato's difference between not-being and being.	39

3.3	Not-being <i>as such</i> is potentiality for being	41
3.4	Not-being as a negative part of capacity in concrete instances.....	44
4.	A conceptual framework for not-being <i>as such</i>	46
4.1	Not-being and Rödl's unity of thinking and being.....	47
4.2	Not-being and Kimhi's syncategorematic unity of thinking, being and not-being.....	50
4.3	Not-being and Kern's fallibility of knowledge.....	54
4.4	A conceptual framework supporting not-being as potentiality for being.....	56
	Conclusion	58
	Bibliography	60

Introduction

1. *The relations of not-being to being and their origination.*

It can be said that being is the prime object of metaphysical enterprises, but its counterpart, *not-being*, may be of equal or unequal importance. That is, after Parmenides and Plato have written on the dichotomy between being and not-being, it is said that philosophers have “waged a war” between the argument that not-being stands in an asymmetrical relation to being or that not-being has the same but negative value as being – indicating that it stands in opposition to being.¹ In correspondence with the positions in this discussion, not-being is often described as possessing a kind of ‘otherness’ as to being (Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Strawson) *or* standing in (logical) opposition to being (Frege, Geach and Ayer).² The ‘first camp’ can be said to refer to the metaphysical and ontological positions that adopt a form of not-being which is somehow different as to being, since these try to describe the necessary relation of not-being to being. The ‘second camp’, on the other hand, represents the logical and linguistic positions which assume a relation between being and not-being that is explicated in the opposition between p and $\text{not-}p$. The discussion thus indicates that the relation in which not-being stands to being is broadly demonstrated in two classes of negative concepts: (1) those that signify the metaphysical and ontological distinctions or differences between being and not-being and (2) those that use linguistic and logical ways of negation.³ The importance of not-being might hence be directly tied to the relationship it has to being and the function it has in the philosophical system at hand. In the first case, not-being is for instance mostly connected to being as nonexistence, not being *there* or the necessity of a negative counterpart for being. In the second case, not-being often refers to the predicative role of the negation sign, \neg , which opposes its positive counterpart and may or may not bear a veridical meaning. Yet, beyond the relation it has to being, the true metaphysical roots of not-being seem to remain obscure.

The historical basis of the disagreement concerning the relation in which not-being stands to being may lie in the writings of Parmenides, and Plato. When Parmenides implicitly asked the question: *how can we think*

¹ Horn (1989) p. 3.

² *Ibid.*

³ Horn (1989) p. 1-6.

or know anything that is not? He himself replied: ... οὔτε γὰρ ἄν γνοίης τό γε μὴ εἶν - οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν - οὔτε φράσαις... “you cannot know what is not (for it cannot be accomplished) nor can you declare it”.⁴ Parmenides thus pointed out that not-being in any form is unknowable, although he simultaneously declared it to be the opposite of being and that *it is not*. As is emphasized in Plato’s *Sophist*, this inconsistency in his writings gave way to future conceptions in which not-being *as such* cannot be conceptualized, but that the relation it has to being can be described. Parmenides’ own reason for describing this relation, in spite of the denial of not-being, was that he wanted to warn us against our own tendency to believe we are able to develop an understanding of not-being.⁵ That is, any attempt at trying to conceptualize not-being *as such* would fail as Parmenides believes that the way to the is-not is “unheard of” and “incomprehensible” or “unthinkable”.⁶ Yet, as he muses, human beings have “wandering minds” that keep mixing being and not-being with one another.⁷ They keep assuming that not-being *is* and are hence incapable of real discrimination (ἄκριτα). According to Parmenides, human beings should therefore learn to travel on the only road leading to truth or reality (ἀληθείη), i.e. through knowing being.⁸ However, even if we would agree with Parmenides, it should be realized that Parmenides’ account of not-being as an untenable relation to being still is an unclear one. His account of not-being includes everything which is human and part of the sensible world (motion, divisibility, incompleteness and finitude) and, at the same time, does not differentiate between instances in which not-being is spoken of, for instance negative predication and nonexistence.^{9,10} It is therefore unspecific and has resulted in confusion for next generations of philosophers. Thus, even though Parmenides prescribes leaving not-being aside, it is not clear when we talk about not-being. And, by calling not-being *as such* “incomprehensible”, Parmenides leaves no room for specifying it, making not-being problematic whether we would want to use this concept or not.

Plato responds to Parmenides’ writings in the *Sophist* and argues that Parmenides’ opposition to being thus failed to account for the combination of the negative concepts he attached to it. Plato does not deny Parmenides’ purely negative conceptualization of not-being, but maintains that we require another

⁴ DK fragment B2: “οὔτε γὰρ ἄν γνοίης τό γε μὴ εἶν - οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν - οὔτε φράσαις”. Robbiano’s translation (2016).

⁵ In specific, human beings have “gone wrong” in naming two forms instead of accepting the ubiquitous nature of being. DK fragment B8: “Μορφάς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν · τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἐστίν - ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσίν -”. Robbiano’s translation (2016): “For they decided to name two forms [being *and* not-being], of which it is not possible (or right) to name [only] one —in this men have gone wrong”.

⁶ Kahn (2012) p. 180.

⁷ DK fragment B6: “ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλακτὸν ὄν νόον· οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηλότες, ἄκριτα φῦλα, οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται”. Robbiano’s translation (2016): “for the impotence in their breasts leads their wandering mind: they are carried along both deaf and blind, astonished, races incapable of discrimination [ákrítá] by whom to be and not to be are regarded as the same”.

⁸ DK fragment B2: “ἀίπερ ὁδοὶ μόναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοῆσαι · ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι”. Robbiano’s translation (2016): “what routes of the quest are the only ones to know: the one that ‘is’ and that it is not possible not to be”.

⁹ Kahn (2012) p. 180.

¹⁰ Jowett (2010) p. 454.

understanding of not-being in philosophy to differentiate between negative concepts: yet, again, *only as it stands in relation to being*. In the *Sophist*, Plato questions the Parmenidian beliefs concerning the impossibility of conceptualizing not-being and develops a more nuanced view in which some of the leading presumptions are challenged. Plato specifically engages with Parmenides' claim that not-being is unspeakable and unthinkable. Plato thinks that we should go against the "Parmenidian ban against mixing being and not-being with one another" in practice and that a certain form of not-being actually *is*, exactly *because* we need to discriminate between negative concepts that are related to not-being such as falsehood and negation. For these purposes, he cross-examines the Parmenidian beliefs:

In order to defend ourselves we're going to need to cross-examine what our father Parmenides says and force the claim through both that what is not in a certain way *is*, and conversely that what is also in a way is not.¹¹

Plato proposes that not-being can also possess a kind of 'otherness' in relation to being that presents itself as negation, whereby he can justify the reality of those things that cannot be accounted for by being itself. Concepts such as change, difference and diversity are only possible if not only being is, but everything that was and that will be has a kind of reality as well. We therefore need the relation of not-being, as being something different, to be able to acknowledge the reality of everything that does not have a positive definition or that is not directly, presently, *there*.

Yet, even Plato only describes not-being's relation to being and does not truly provide a conceptualization of not-being as a negative concept *in general* – apart from saying that it forms a part of difference. He, therefore, remains unspecific in his conceptualization of not-being as otherness and cannot answer the question: how can not-being as "partaking in a part of otherness" function in a broader philosophical system? What he does achieve in the *Sophist* is setting course for those philosophers that ask the fundamental question after him. As Horn adequately describes:

For the Eleatic philosophers [such as Parmenides] (...), the first explorations of negative concepts were associated with the status of nonbeing in metaphysics and ontology. The study of linguistic negation proper can be said to begin with Plato's *Sophist*: the Stranger in this dialogue seeks to identify negation (the not-*p*) with otherness (that which is distinct from *p*). Through the Stranger, Plato introduces two of the recurring themes of our history [of negative concepts]: the view that negation can be eliminated by defining it away in terms of the (putatively) positive concept of otherness or difference, and the observation that negative statements are in some sense less valuable than affirmative ones, in being less specific or less informative.¹²

Plato hence made way for the conception that not-being can represent positive truths in negating being,

¹¹ *Sophist* (2015) 241d5.

¹² Horn (1989) p. 1.

but that it at the same time conveys less knowledge about reality than a positive statement would – as is the case in asymmetrical positions concerning the role of not-being. Parmenides, on the other hand, initiated the metaphysical idea that not-being can stand in opposition to being – which roughly related to the symmetrical positions. In any case, they have both made way for the idea that not-being is not a concept standing on its own, but one which always stands in relation to being. Hence, the link between the viewpoints of Parmenides and Plato to those contemporary philosophers that describe not-being as possessing a kind of ‘otherness’ as to being (Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Strawson) *or* standing in (logical) opposition to being (Frege, Geach and Ayer) can be directly made.¹³

2. *The shift to not-being as such.*

In response to the disagreement on its relation to being, this essay tries to shed light on the way in which not-being *as such* could be conceptualized as standing in *both* relations to being: in opposition to being and in presenting a difference as to being. By doing so, I do not aim to give a conclusive answer to the question whether a symmetrical or asymmetrical relation between being and not-being should be maintained. Rather, I hope to redirect this question on the importance of not-being towards the concept of not-being itself, and the part it may play in reality. For this purpose, it is argued to merge the two classes of negative concepts: (1) those that signify the metaphysical and ontological distinctions between being and not-being and (2) those that use linguistic and logical ways of negation as opposing the *things that are*. Through the shift in focus to not-being *as such*, it can be stated that the correct way of connecting them requires (2) to form the underlying, metaphysical (and logical) structure of the ontological differences being presented in (1). This can only be the case if both (1) and (2) share the same meaning of not-being *as such*. To disclose this shared meaning, the research question of the essay is formulated as follows: *what are the presumptions underlying the philosophical treatment of not-being (and its basic form: not-p) in its relation to being, and is it possible to develop an adequate understanding of this notion in itself?*

In trying to answer this question, I go back to the place in which the philosophical ‘war’ on the relation of not-being to being seems to have started: Parmenides’ and Plato’s writings.¹⁴ They initiated certain presumptions concerning the conceptualization of not-being and, in describing those presumptions, it may be possible to develop an understanding of not-being focused on its own nature. In this essay, I thus first investigate the historical premises of not-being in philosophical discourses and question the presumptions underlying the relevant views on not-being. Then, I critically evaluate these presumptions and argue that Parmenides has only focused on the relation to being in (2) and Plato only in the case of (1). In order to unite the Parmenidian and Platonic views, I use Aristotle’s vocabulary, such as *capacity*,

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Horn (1989) p. 1-2.

actuality and *potentiality*, and investigate the ways in which he uses them in relation to other negative concepts such as *prima materia*. On the basis of this investigation, I propose to conceptualize not-being as a *potentiality for being*. On the one hand, this conceptualization of not-being unites the relations in which not-being stands to being and, on the other hand, it accounts for the indeterminate part of reality that is connected to not-being.

In order to carry out these aims, the essay is divided into two parts, one historical and one systematic. In Part I, I will discuss the Parmenidian impossibility of not-being's opposition to being and the Platonic necessity of the difference demonstrated in not-being's relation to being in negation, while, in Part II, I argue that, through questioning their presumptions underlying the relations of not-being to being, the following discovery can be made: an understanding of not-being *as such* can be developed through its characterization of not-being as *potentiality for being*. Both Part I and Part II are, in turn, divided into two chapters; so four in total. The first chapter of Part I will concentrate on the Parmenidian ban against mixing being and not-being, which tells us that not-being *qua not-being* cannot be thought of or described. Parmenides argues for a dichotomy between being and not-being, while he rejects the possibility of not-being at the same time: not-being stands in opposition to being and therefore cannot be, because only being *is*. I will mention both existential readings of his poem, the *Περὶ Φύσεως* (On Nature), such as Robbiano's, and veridical-predicative approaches such as Kahn's in order to decipher what part of not-being would be impermissible and why. In the second chapter of Part I, I shed light on the necessity of not-being's relation to being and, hence, why philosophers kept talking about not-being after Parmenides rejected this possibility. This chapter begins with a discussion on Plato's *Sophist*, where not-being as a relation to being was first sought after, after Parmenides' poem. Then, it moves to Aristotle's specification of not-being's metaphysical relation to being in terms of *capacity*, *actuality* and *potentiality*. In the last part of chapter 2, it is argued that the necessity of not-being's relation to being can be found in not-being's role in change, difference, diversity and plurality.

At the beginning of part II, the joint efforts of Parmenides and Plato are analyzed and it is concluded that underlying their conceptions of not-being's relation to being are the presumptions that (1) not-being is the counterpart of being, (2) not-being as purely negative notion cannot be known, (3) as otherness it stands in relation to being, (4) it forms part of difference, (5) the necessity of not-being lies in the fact that it accounts for diversity in reality. And, although they did not move into the intricacies of not-being's reality *as such*, it can be deduced from their writings that not-being *as such* could be the name describing a certain indeterminate part of reality. That is, it can be said that Parmenides sees the dichotomy of the determined and undetermined reality as the division between being and not-being, since he believes that all those undetermined parts of reality are not and also cannot be.¹⁵ In its opposition to being, it is then coherent

¹⁵ As can be seen in Parmenides' argument against change in DK fragment B2: "εἰ γὰρ ἔγενετ', οὐκ ἔστι, οὐδ' εἴ ποτε μέλλει ἔσεσθαι". Robbiano's translation (2016): "If it came into being, it is not, nor is it, if it is ever going to be".

to connect not-being with the indeterminate. This is further exposed by Plato's argument that maintaining an indeterministic part of reality asks for acknowledging that the world changes and is filled with motion and difference, since there would otherwise only be determined parts of reality. In identifying indeterminacy with not-being, we may already be able to formulate the dichotomy between being and not-being in a clearer form, namely: some parts of reality are already determined, i.e. *they are part of being*, while other parts of reality are undetermined or part of possible realities, i.e. *they form part of the realm of not-being*. With the help of Aristotle's vocabulary and his ideas on the dual nature of negative concepts such as *prima materia*, i.e., theoretical and practical, I reformulate the relations of not-being to being and connect them to not-being's part in the indeterminacy of reality. In this way, I argue that not-being's nature can be conceptualized as *potentiality for being*. This conceptualization implies that not-being *as such* can indeed not be grasped in its purely negative form, but that its nature and its influence on reality can be described: not-being contains potentiality for the determinate and, as such, stands in relation to being.

Thereafter, in the fourth chapter, it is discussed how the potentiality for being can function in a broader philosophical framework. In this last chapter, I engage with Rödl's book *Categories of the Temporal*, Kimhi's book *Being and Thinking* and Kern's book *Sources of Knowledge* in which possibilities for understanding not-being as potentiality for being are made available. Rödl focusses on the unity of time in relation to the finite intellect of human beings. This sense of unity enables human beings to think in the categories of the temporal, which make them for instance aware of persistent substance and changeable state.¹⁶ As Plato already states, the concept of not-being is both necessary for and needs a conceptual framework in which change and finitude is possible, as its potentiality would otherwise be meaningless. Rödl can hence clarify how potentiality for being can function in a temporal frame and, at the same time, how human beings have the possibility to grasp not-being within a temporal frame. Kimhi, on the other hand, offers an analysis of how and why human beings can both think what-is and what-is-not in the same instance. He argues that there exists a metaphysical, syncategorematic unity of being (ontological principle) and thinking (psychological principle) and that these are two parts of the same capacity, whereby not-being forms being's necessary counterpart.¹⁷ Furthermore, Kimhi portrays how the logical formulation of (p or $\text{not-}p$), while p and $\text{not-}p$ are not the same, forms a metaphysical unity underlying categorematic being. Kern, on the other hand, formulates an argument by which knowledge does not have to be infallible: the capacity for knowledge has an intrinsic fallibility.¹⁸ Knowing not-being is therefore not impossible, but part of every attempt at attaining knowledge (just as being is). All three authors have developed their arguments concerning epistemology, logic and metaphysics on the basis of Aristotle's writings and, when combined, create a framework in which not-being can both have its negative nature (in opposition to being) and function in a reality containing finitude, change and motion (as different to being). The project of the thesis can therefore also be characterized as an 'Aristotelean project', but only insofar as I build on

¹⁶ Rödl (2012) p. 10.

¹⁷ Kimhi (2018).

¹⁸ Kern (2017).

his terminology and his elaboration on Parmenides' and Plato's treatments of not-being in terms of *capacity*, *actuality* and *potentiality*. From this Aristotelean framework, it follows that not-being has a potentiality for being and can be seen as an overarching concept that captures those things (objects/entities) that cannot be directly intuited, but do let us speak and think about them in negative form and contain the theoretical potential to be intuited. Not-being in this sense can be seen as overlapping with the Parmenidian and Platonic conceptions of not-being as standing in relation to being.

PART I

The metaphysical impossibility and necessity
of not-being's relation to being

Chapter

1. *Why not-being is not to be spoken of*

The question of not-being is one after the reality of this concept, i.e., can there be something *other* than being?, and, hence, the possibility of developing knowledge concerning the things that are not. Other questions that have therefore been connected to the reality of not-being are: What is it that we think the word *not-being* signifies and can we know anything that is not? How can we even ask this question? There are philosophers who argue that these are exactly the right questions to ask, since not-being as the counterpart of being is in fact *not* and it is impossible to know anything about not-being exactly because it is not. We cannot refer to anything with the term and it is a futile quest to even try to grasp it anyway.

Parmenides of Elea is well-known for his adoption of such a viewpoint. In his poem, the *Περὶ Φύσεως* (On Nature), he develops a new metaphysical way of understanding being, while, at the same time, creating a dichotomy between being and not-being. As there was only a pretechnical and no metaphysical meaning of being, he had to innovate the understanding of the word *is* (ἔστι) and, hence, the philosophical landscape changed drastically through the poem. Within it, he talks about not-being as an opposite of being: “either it is or it is not” (B815-16). Remarkably, after creating the dichotomy between being and not-being, he quickly rejects every possibility of knowing not-being. Parmenides calls the is-not “unheard of” (παναπευθής) and “incomprehensible” or “unthinkable” (ἀνόητος).¹⁹ This paradoxical step, rejecting an understanding of not-being and describing it simultaneously, implies that Parmenides does acknowledge that not-being possesses the theoretical, or perhaps even merely apparent, possibility of reality or understanding (ἀληθείη), but that this does not lead anywhere.²⁰ In contrast, a more rigorous example of a full denial of not-being’s reality can be found in the famous sentence of Wittgenstein: “was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen”.²¹ While silence may have been the preferred option for Parmenides as well, he wants to establish what are possible and what impossible ways to reach reality or understanding (ἀληθείη) and, hence, feels that he should mention not-being in its opposition to being as an impassable road.

And, although Parmenides rejects the possibility of grasping not-being in any way, he argues that human

¹⁹ Kahn (2012), p. 180.

²⁰ Coxon (2009) p. 20-21.

²¹ Wittgenstein (2016). Free translation of the quote: “about which we are able to speak, we are able to speak clearly; and of which we cannot speak, we have to remain silent”.

beings cannot discriminate between being and not-being and therefore have the tendency to speak about not-being as if it is a real thing:

“[human beings] are carried along both deaf and blind, astonished, races incapable of discrimination (ákrita) by whom to be and not to be are regarded as the same and not the same and this is the turning-back path of all.”²²

The problematic ignorance of human beings should be corrected and they should cultivate a more accurate understanding of reality. Moreover, Parmenides believes that this ignorance created a distinction between “not-being in and by itself” (μη ἐδὸν) and not-being that human beings make up as they go along.²³ The first is unheard of and even unthinkable, and the second is a human creation making not-being into something real.

In this chapter, I aim to explain what it means for not-being to stand in opposition to being and why it *in and by itself* would be an impassable road to reality or understanding (ἀληθειῆ) according to Parmenides. Moreover, I look into the specific way in which he argues that human beings are unable to discriminate between being and not-being. In order to do this, I start with a broad discussion of the poem itself and then move to discuss prominent interpretations, whereby I try to explicate what Parmenides meant with the impossibility of not-being and human beings’ tendency to talk about it anyway. Afterwards, I briefly discuss other philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Russell who were influenced by Parmenides and argued for a kind of impossibility of not-being in their own terms. At the end, I argue that the impossibility of grasping not-being lies in its presumed incapability of becoming being.

1.1 Parmenides’ poem, *Περὶ Φύσεως*

Before I go into the poem itself, it is useful to highlight the impact that it had on Western philosophy, particularly through the attention it received from Plato and Aristotle, among others. Gallop and Schofield for instance write about the enormous impact of the poem and its content:

The development of western philosophy was once said by A.N. Whitehead to have consisted in a series of footnotes to Plato. In a similar vein, and with hardly more exaggeration, Plato’s own writings might be said to have consisted in footnotes to Parmenides of Elea. In his philosophical poem Parmenides bequeathed an enormous legacy, not only to his immediate successors, Zeno and Melissus, but to all subsequent Greek philosophers, and beyond them to later western intellectual tradition.²⁴

Parmenides dominates the whole terrain of Presocratic philosophy like a colossus. Although Aristotle

²² DK fragment B6: “οἱ δὲ φοροῦνται κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φῦλα, οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται καὶ ταῦτόν, πάντων δὲ παλιντροπὸς ἐστὶ κέλευθος”. Translated by Robbiano (2016).

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Gallop (2013) p. 3.

told the story differently, modern accounts of the development of early Greek thought find it hard to avoid presenting Parmenides' poem as the turning-point decisive for understanding [of] the overall trajectory of the entire enterprise. Consequently, monographs and scholarly articles devoted to the poem continue to appear thick and fast. The sheer difficulty and frequent obscurity of the verse are one standing provocation to new attempts at interpretation. But so too are Parmenides' extraordinary combination of abstract logic and metaphysics (in the central philosophical part of the poem) and dense allusiveness to an inherited stock of poetic phraseology and religious imagery (in the proem), with seeming echoes of both in the relatively poorly preserved cosmological speculations which constituted the final section.²⁵

Gallop and Schofield describe adequately how great the accomplishments of Parmenides within the poem are and how far reaching the consequences of the poem were for Greek, and therefore contemporary, thought. Especially Aristotle, Plato and the Neoplatonists such as Simplicius depended heavily on Parmenides' heritage and used it to found their own doctrines.²⁶ Their metaphysical and ontological systems all include citations to some parts of the poem and these fragments can therefore be argued to have influenced them to a certain extent. One of the main consistencies that can be traced back to Parmenides is that all these philosophers adopt a dichotomy between being and not-being in their systems. Yet, his monism, i.e. the argument that only being in its unity exhibits a form of reality or understanding (ἀληθείη), is not univocally adopted. As we will see, some of these, most prominently Plato and Aristotle, have made objections to Parmenides' monism.²⁷

Of the poem itself, it is estimated that we perhaps have less than a quarter of the original, which comes down to around 150 verses.²⁸ The *Περὶ Φύσεως* (On Nature) - that is the name that the poem is said to have possessed - is divided into broadly four parts: (1) a proem or preface that depicts the arrival of a chariot at the seat of the Goddess Alētheia, who promises him truth and insight into the beliefs of mortal men, (2) then, she depicts some of the principles that govern the truth and the beliefs which have later been called 'the Way of Truth' (or ἀληθείη), (3) next there are a set of deductions made by which Parmenides concludes that being or reality is single, continuous, changeless and motionless and, (4) finally, the 'Way of Seeming' (or δόξα) is presented whereby beliefs and morals are laid bare.²⁹ The poem is thus dominated by Parmenides' argument that human beings can attain knowledge on reality or understanding.³⁰ Nevertheless, he argues that human beings do not have trust in their knowledge on being. In B1, he therefore states through the words of the Goddess:

And you should find out everything, on the one hand, the unshaken heart of the trustworthy reality

²⁵ Coxon (2009).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Coxon (2009) p. 32.

²⁸ Coxon (2009) p. 9.

²⁹ Gallop (2013) p. 5.

³⁰ Coxon (2009) p. 20.

(alêtheia), on the other hand, the opinions of mortals, where there is no true trust and yet you will apprehend also what follows: how the beliefs, passing through all things from end to end, should be in an acceptable manner.³¹

The trust in being should be re-instated and this is explicated in the ‘Way of Truth’ in the next part of the poem. Parmenides describes in B2 that this way consists in epistemological routes that do not include not-being, since we cannot know the ‘route’ that leads to not-being:

Come now, I will tell you — and you once you have heard my story pass it on — 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 — 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; for not-being you can neither recognize, since it is impossible to accomplish [such a journey] nor can you ever point out [not-being]³²

There are thus two conceivable or theoretical ways of accessing reality or truth (ἀληθείη), “the one that ‘is’ and that it is not possible not to be”, which are mutually exclusive and exhaustive.³³ Hence, nothing is conceivable if it does not fall under the one or the other category. Nevertheless, this is directly followed by the statement that one of those ways is not actually possible: “the other that ‘is not’ and that should not be”. Here, Parmenides thus states that the route of the is-not is “unheard of” (παναπευθής) and “incomprehensible” or “unthinkable” (ἀνόητος).³⁴

Parmenides continues with a discussion on the lack of trust human beings have in being and their tendency to choose the route to not-being, even though this route is inconceivable. More specifically, those who are ignorant of the separation between being and not-being, keep speaking and thinking in terms of not-being, thereby mixing being and not-being with one another. He calls this an ‘inability to discriminate’ in B6:

the [path] on which people not knowing anything, stray, double-headed: for the impotence in their breasts leads their wandering mind: they are carried along both deaf and blind, astonished, races incapable of discrimination [ákrita] by whom to be and not to be are regarded as the same and not the same and this is the turning-back path of all.³⁵

³¹ DK fragment B1: “Χρεῶν δὲ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι ἢ μὲν ἀληθείης ληθείης εὐπειθέος ἀτρεμέδς ἦτορ ἢ δὲ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἐν πίστις ἀληθῆς. Ἄλλ’ ἐμπης καὶ ταῦτα μαθήσῃ, ὡς τὰ δοκοῦντα χρῆν δοκιμῶς εἶναι διὰ παντὸς πάντα περ ὄντα.” Translated by Robbiano (2016).

³² DK fragment B2: “Εἰ δ’ ἄγ’ ἐγὼν ἐρέω, κόμισαι δὲ σὺ μῦθον ἀκούσας, ἀίπερ ὁδοὶ μοῦναι διζήσιός εἰσι νοῆσαι · ἢ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι Πειθοῦς ἔστι κέλευθος - Ἀληθείη γὰρ ὁ πηδεῖ -, ἢ δ’ ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς χρεῶν ἔστι μὴ εἶναι, τὴν δὴ τοι φράζω παναπευθέα ἔμμεν ἀταρπὸν · οὔτε γὰρ ἄν γνώης τό γε μὴ ἔδον - οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν - οὔτε φράσαις.” Translated by Robbiano (2016).

³³ Coxon (2009) p. 20.

³⁴ Kahn (2012) p. 180.

³⁵ DK fragment B6: “ἦν δὴ βροτοὶ εἰδότες οὐδὲν πλάττονται, δίκρανοι ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλακτὸν ὄν νόον· οἱ δὲ φροσῶνται κωφοὶ ὁμῶς τυφλοὶ τε, τεθηπότες, ἄκριτα φῦλα, οἷς τὸ πέλειν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶναι ταῦτόν νενόμισται.” Translation by Robbiano (2016).

Parmenides believes that these ‘uncomprehending’ human beings should be ‘persuaded’ of the fact that they cannot acquire knowledge about reality through not-being.³⁶ They should realize that there is not anything *other* than being, which Parmenides also explicitly states in fragment B8 “for nothing else is or will be apart from being”, which indicates, he argues, that being is single, continuous, changeless and motionless.³⁷ For him, it is illogical that human beings do not readily make the choice to follow this sure route into being, as it is the only route and, if they have insight and do not listen to the deceitful, they clearly see the rightness of this route. The choice is therefore not really a choice, but more a realization as Parmenides tells us in B8:

the discrimination [choice, crisis] about those things lies in the following: either is or is not. And the decision [choice] has been made, as it is necessary, to leave the one unknown and without fame (for it is not the real route), and that the other is and is genuine. How could being be later? How could it come into being?³⁸

For Parmenides, only being in its unity is true. However, when they are uncomprehending, human beings think that reality also consists of things like change, plurality and motion. Yet, these things are not actually genuine parts of reality and can never be known by human beings.

By making these arguments, Parmenides adopts a standpoint from which he criticizes earlier philosophers. He even radically argues against all philosophers, but especially Anaximenes and Heraclitus, who believe that sensible matter both is and is not in transformation.³⁹ Furthermore, he makes a more specific criticism to Anaximander: Parmenides believes that being is not unlimited, although this is maintained by Anaximander. By contrast, Parmenides claims that the unity of being is “unmoving in the limits of huge bonds” and the unlimited would therefore be other than being.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Parmenides is probably influenced by Pythagoras in the belief that the real is determinate in the first place.⁴¹ In this way, Parmenides seems to have established a poem that both challenges earlier philosophies, but also forms a new metaphysical scheme by means of the arguments of his predecessors. By achieving this, his poem was able to inspire many philosophers after him to respond to or use it in their own doctrines. One of the reasons for the enormous response to the poem is that Parmenides developed a philosophical conception of being (τὸ ἐόν) and the corresponding *ἴς* (ἔστι) for the first time.⁴² It can therefore be seen as a ‘metaphysical innovation’, as Kahn calls it, since it cannot be equated with the verb *to be* in Homer or Herodotus. That Parmenides, at the same time, rejects the possibility of there being anything else, i.e. not-

³⁶ Coxon (2009) p. 288.

³⁷ Coxon (2009) p. 325.

³⁸ DK fragment B8: “ἢ δὲ κρίσις περὶ τούτων ἐν τῷ δ' ἔστιν· ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν· κέκριται δ' οὖν, ὥσπερ ἀνάγκη, τὴν μὲν εἶν ἀνόητον ἀνώνυμον (οὐ γὰρ ἀληθὴς ἔστιν ὁδός), τὴν δ' ὥστε πέλειν καὶ ἐτήτυμον εἶναι. Πῶς δ' ἂν ἐπειτα πέλοιτ' ὃ ἐόν; πῶς δ' ἂν κε γένοιτο;”. Translation by Robbiano (2016).

³⁹ Coxon (2009) p. 19.

⁴⁰ DK fragment B8: “ἀκίνητον μεγάλων ἐν πείρασι δεσμών”. Translation by Robbiano (2016).

⁴¹ Coxon (2009) p. 20.

⁴² Kahn (2012) p. 169.

being, makes it all the more interesting.

1.2 What did Parmenides mean with the impossibility of not-being?

From an intuitive and commonsense point of view, these Parmenidian conclusions might seem obscure and perhaps flatly wrong: how can change and motion and plurality be excluded from reality? What did Parmenides mean with the argument that not-being functions in change, motion and plurality? There have been many analyses of this question and attempted answers to it, and understanding his answer seems to come down to interpreting the innovative use of the verb *to be*, since it demonstrates how Parmenides interprets the metaphysical meaning of being (and not-being). However, it is a challenge to capture what this innovation consisted in, as we only have our modern language with a different meaning for *to be* and the ordinary, non-Parmenidean uses of the Greek *to be* as our toolkit. Nevertheless, Kahn says we should be after the following question, if we want to understand the poem of Parmenides: “Which set (or sets) of ancient uses, described by which set of modern terms, provides the best conceptual net for capturing the thought of Parmenides and the logic of his argument, within the context of his own age?”⁴³

The discussion on this question and the meaning of the word *is*, and its opposite *is not*, is dominated by two positions: (1) those philosophers that argue that the meaning is existential and (2) those philosophers who argue that the meaning is (veridical-)predicative. The first position is argued for by, for instance, Owen, Gallop and Robbiano, while the second position is taken on by, for example, Kahn and Coxon. The first, existential interpretation is called “the natural reading” of the poem by Robbiano. This, for instance, means that, in translating Parmenides’ sentence “it is in fact the same to know and to be”, it is supposed that knowing and being are identical as they both are understood through existence: to exist is the same as knowing one exists. According to the existential reading, Owen hence argues that Parmenides would have stated “that any denial of existence is nonsense: the nonexistent cannot be thought or spoken of (2. 7-8)”.⁴⁴ This thesis resonates with the current problems of modern logicians to account for puzzles such as how it is possible to think about non-existent entities. Moreover, it is argued that many of Parmenides’ quotes could be soundly translated in this way.

The existential reading or natural reading is perhaps more dominant in contemporary interpretations of the poem, but the (veridical-) predicative reading can certainly not be ignored. This ‘other’ approach is called the ‘rationalistic reading’ by Robbiano, which indicates that this reading supposes that Parmenides meant by “it is in fact the same to know and to be” that the same thing can be thought and can be.⁴⁵ This implies that everything that *is*, can be known. Those philosophers that believe in the predicative interpretation of *to be* such as Kahn and Coxon do not necessarily argue that it cannot take on an

⁴³ Kahn (2012) p. 169.

⁴⁴ Owen (1986) p. 30.

⁴⁵ Robbiano (2016) p. 268.

existential meaning, but that *is* predominantly assumes a predicative function. They, therefore, reject the possibility that *is* translated as *exists* functions adequately in every part of Parmenides' writing, since they would have to stretch the text in order to argue that it does. Kahn criticized the existential interpretation accordingly:

although the reading of $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$ as 'exists' provides Parmenides with an argument that is philosophically interesting from a contemporary perspective, since it resonates with some influential twentieth-century puzzles about existence [see e.g. Owen], this sense of $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$ is linguistically implausible for Parmenides' time and unsatisfactory both for the interpretation of the poem and for the understanding of Parmenides' impact on Plato.⁴⁶

Coxon agrees with this argumentation, since he recognizes that Parmenides did not want to restrict the determination of *is* and *is not* by administering a definitive meaning to it - except by combining it with a predicate or veridical sign. Coxon states that Parmenides wanted to adopt a purely formal or dialectical approach towards the verb *to be* and that it is therefore determined by what is attached to it.⁴⁷ *To be* would be a verb which Parmenides wants to connect to asserting and thinking in general and, by not always connecting the verb to a subject, Parmenides offers no restrictions to what can be asserted or thought. This interpretation would hence correspond to Parmenides' fragments on the nature of being, as being is complete and does not lack anything. Moreover, the proponents of the rationalistic reading believe that *to be* can also bear a veridical function in thought and can refer to the fact that something 'is so' or 'is the case'.⁴⁸ According to this reading, both in the examples of Kahn and Coxon, not-being is therefore also a (theoretical) part of thought. His assumption that "you cannot know what-is-not" is then an expression of the thesis that you cannot know what is not *the case*, since knowledge is factive; as it is put in contemporary epistemological contexts: one can only know truths, not falsehoods. Parmenides could hence argue that the only route into being is the route into truthful thought – and predication.

There are two convincing reasons for following the (veridical-)predicative interpretation of *to be* as opposed to a narrow reading of the existential interpretation, i.e. that *is* means *exists* throughout the whole poem. Firstly, Kahn argues that the existential approach implies that we cannot intuit not-being's role in existence and that we therefore cannot think or speak about not-being. As Kahn points out, this assertion would simply be false and it is not logical that Parmenides would argue for it.⁴⁹ That is, he does not think that Parmenides would have denied our perceiving and experiencing change, motion and plurality, he would rather argue that these are not part of true reality and knowledge. Secondly, the linguistic analyses state that an absolute use of a verb, i.e. 'to exist' or just 'to be', is not often used in ancient Greek.⁵⁰ More often it is implied that something is *this or that* or, in this case, to consider the intrinsic sense of the verb

⁴⁶ Kahn (2012) p. 169.

⁴⁷ Coxon (2009) p. 21.

⁴⁸ Kahn (2012) p. 199.

⁴⁹ Kahn (2012) p. 172.

⁵⁰ Kahn (2012) p. 173.

with any kind of subject or qualification attached to it.⁵¹ Even though Parmenides innovated the meaning of the verb, the shift to the existential reading would have been a large linguistic step that is likely to go beyond the scope of Parmenides' innovation.

The (veridical-)predicative approach towards the meaning of *to be* in Parmenides is hence more likely in sight of the reasons mentioned above, yet it should be considered whether Robbiano's interpretation (as an extension of the natural reading) would 'rescue' the possibility of translating the text differently. When Parmenides for instance states in B3 "it is in fact the same to know and to be", Robbiano interprets this part of the text according to an existential reading. She argues that this line makes sense with a translation of *to be* as *to experience*, as it could mean that Parmenides says that it is the same to know and to experience being. She explains this equation by saying that it is likely that Parmenides meant to depict reality as a route or journey, which is a metaphor for both knowing and being.⁵² So, knowing the route is the same as being on the route: this constitutes reality for Parmenides. Along these lines, she also complements Owen's existential account to make sense of Parmenides' argument that not-being is impossible. Namely, as Robbiano points out:

it is possible to make sense of the impossibility of knowing not-being without appealing either to any special Parmenidean prohibition, or to any controversial impossibility or to some unsuccessful kind of predication. The point made is that journeying along 'is not', i.e., a kind of knowing that is not the same as being, is an impossible *experience*.⁵³

This reading is supported by the fact that Parmenides then would have argued that we should trust our experience and do not follow anything that is impossible to be experienced, i.e., not-being, which would form a logical conclusion. However, the problematic part of her interpretation is that it is based on an inconsistency. As we have seen, Parmenides does not always mention the subject of the verb *to be*. This is problematic for the translation of *is* in *experience*: how can anything be experienced if there is no one in particular to do the experiencing? Robbiano argues that it does not matter whether a subject is mentioned, as we superimpose words and opinions to *is* but existing itself or the experience is part of reality - that is not expressed in or the same as language. Robbiano herself states the following on this point:

my interpretation does not regard Parmenides as someone involved in looking for true propositions but rather for what 'is', i.e., the fact of being, which is what is real, as contrasted to how reality appears to us, once it is 'filtered' through our words and opinions, which we superimpose on 'is'.⁵⁴

So, boundaries including subjects are superimposed by us to make sense of reality, but this does not mean that they are included within it when we talk about existence or experience. Her position can hence be

⁵¹ Coxon (2009) p. 291.

⁵² Robbiano (2016) p. 292.

⁵³ Robbiano (2016) p. 293.

⁵⁴ Robbiano (2016) p. 267.

described by the idea that there is a kind of primordial experience that is not experienced by anyone in particular, but just *is* there.⁵⁵ Human beings become aware of this ultimate experience and thereby can develop a sense of being. The inconsistency in this approach can be found in the fact that, in becoming aware of the primordial experience, human beings still develop their own awareness of it, which Robbiano admits as being Parmenides' argument.⁵⁶ This indicates that there must be a kind of subject that is aware of the experience. When Parmenides writes down his subjectless sentences because the ultimate experience would not have a subject, it makes no sense that he presents a 'Way of Truth' and a 'Way of Seeming' that guide human beings to the knowledge of the Goddess. If human beings superimpose boundaries such as subjects on being and should, therefore, rather develop awareness of the ultimate experience: why would Parmenides then argue for the attainment of knowledge via a path that presupposes the experiences of the subject? This paradoxical situation illustrates that this interpretation of the poem does not seem to form a logical whole with Parmenides' writings and that it would be more consistent to maintain that both the existential meaning and the predicative function are used by him. Not-being would then usually refer to 'it is not the case' and can, depending on the context, also indicate nonexistence. This indicates that Parmenides' denial of not-being is unspecific: all those things that oppose and can be said to oppose the unity of being through falsehood and negation fall under not-being.

1.3 Not-being and the impossibility of change, diversity and plurality.

Starting from the (veridical-)predicative interpretation of not-being in Parmenides, we can see that there are several implications of his rejection of not-being. According to this interpretation, Parmenides argues that the impossibility of not-being consists in the fact that we cannot truly grasp anything apart from the truth and, hence, cannot assert or cognize anything that is not.⁵⁷ Together with Parmenides' creation of the dichotomy between being and not-being, which are mutually exclusive, it means that everything that is other than being cannot be asserted or cognized. Being itself is always complete and in its completion single, continuous, changeless and motionless. Thus, by rejecting not-being, Parmenides rejects the possibility of asserting and cognizing anything that is not completely and continuously there. Parmenides has therefore created "a formally valid argument against all change, diversity and plurality of any kind, including temporal differences such as was or will be. If what was is different from what is, it must be what is not. More generally, for any X, if X is different from what is, X is not".⁵⁸ That this is indeed the gist of Parmenides' poem can be seen from the fact that many philosophers after him, such as Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Theophrastus and Eudemos, adopted one form or the other of the claim that nothing changes.⁵⁹ Parmenides has thus formulated a form of the Law of Contradiction combined with the exclusion of *not-p*, i.e. a law stating that nothing can both be *p* and not-*p* and there is no real *not-p*,

⁵⁵ Robbiano (2016) p. 285-286.

⁵⁶ Robbiano (2016) p. 296.

⁵⁷ A similar argument can be found in Kahn (2012) p. 176-177.

⁵⁸ Kahn (2012) p. 177.

⁵⁹ Coxon (2009) p.33 and Kahn (2012) p. 177.

which implies that there can be no otherness or difference at all apart from *p*.⁶⁰

According to Parmenides, human beings should therefore refrain from trying to assert or think about anything that is other than being. Concepts such as change, diversity and plurality are made up by the human “wandering mind” and should not be trusted. The trouble is that habit and ignorance have let the human mind stray from reality and mix being and not-being with one another. It is therefore all the more difficult to stay on the ‘right path’. Being cannot “come later” and human beings should realize that it cannot come to be or pass away.⁶¹ Parmenides implies with these sentences that human beings should be careful with the way they use language and what they assert or think about. If it is already a habit to mix being and not-being in thought, then it is also already assumed that not-being in the form of change, diversity and plurality has a kind of being. By creating his metaphysical meaning of being, Parmenides expects that human beings change the way they assert and think about being. Perhaps rightly, he believes that changing the language will change the way people think about it. In the poem, he describes in the words of the Goddess how they went wrong before him:

Therefore all those things [apart from being] will be a name that mortals have laid down, trusting that they are real: to be born and to die; to be and not to be, to change place and change bright complexion But since the limit is ultimate, [being] is complete from every point, (...) 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... For, similar to itself from every direction, it reaches its boundaries in the same way. With this I stop for you the persuasive reasoning and knowing about reality. And after this, learn the opinions of the mortals listening to the deceitful order of my words. For they decided to name two forms, of which it is not possible (or right) to name [only] one in these men have gone wrong. And they chose as opposites in form —and assigned signs apart from one another. (...) Thus, according to opinion those things were born and now are and afterwards from now on, having grown, will come to an end: on these, humans set down a distinguishing name to each.⁶²

Human beings made up names for those things that are other than being, things involving birth, death and change. Yet, reality or being does not include these transitions: something is completely or not at all. The ‘human opinions’ should hence be adjusted to the true metaphysical understanding of being, for we can

⁶⁰ Coxon (2009) p. 29.

⁶¹ DK fragment B2: “εἰ γὰρ ἔγενετ', οὐκ ἔστι, οὐδ' εἴ ποτε μέλλει ἔσεσθαι”. Robbiano’s translation (2016): “If it came into being, it is not, nor is it, if it is ever going to be”.

⁶² DK fragment B8: “τῷ πάντ' ὄνομ(α) ἔσται, ὅσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ, γίγνεσθαι τε καὶ ὀλλυσθαι, εἶναι τε καὶ οὐχί, καὶ τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διὰ τε χροῶν φανὸν ἀμείβειν. Αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πεῖρας πύματον, τετελεσμένον ἐστὶ πάντοθεν (...) Οὔτε γὰρ οὐκ ἐὼν ἔστι, τό κεν παῦοι μιν ἰκνεῖσθαι εἰς ὄμόν, οὔτ' ἐὼν ἔστιν ὅπως εἴη κεν ἐόντος τῆ μᾶλλον τῆ δ' ἦσσαν, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστὶν ἄσυλον · οἷ γὰρ πάντοθεν ἴσον, ὁμῶς ἐν πείρασι κύρει. Ἐν τῷ σοὶ παύω πιστὸν λόγον ἢ δὲ νόημα ἀμφὶς ἀληθείης· δόξας δ' ἀπὸ τοῦδε βροτείας μάθανε κόσμον ἐμῶν ἐπέων ἀπατηλὸν ἀκούων. Μορφὰς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν · τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἐστὶν - ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσὶν - τάντια δ' ἐκρίναντο δέμας καὶ σήματ' ἔθεντο χωρὶς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων” and DK fragment B19: “Οὔτω τοι κατὰ δόξαν ἔφρυ τάδε καὶ νυν ἔασσι καὶ μετέπειτ' ἀπὸ τοῦδε τελευτήσουσι τραφέντα· τοῖς δ' ὄνομα' ἀνθρωποὶ κατέθεντ' ἐπίσημον ἐκάστω”.

only think and assert what is the case: being.

1.4 The impossibility of not-being's relation to being in contemporary philosophy.

One of the clearest examples in contemporary philosophy where a Parmenidian opposition of not-being to being is used, is in the survival of the law of contradiction and the law of excluded middle. Throughout the history of philosophy, these laws seem to have survived as these were recognized by Aristotle in Parmenides' poem.⁶³ And these formulate a similar premise: a thing cannot be (x) and not be (not-x) – and only x or its negation not-x can be true. In language and in thought, these laws describe how we correctly speak and think about the dichotomy between being and not-being. Parmenides hence initiated the linguistic, ontological and logical considerations of other philosophers on the way we can think and speak about things that are not and how we should use not-being in our language. This is further demonstrated in an even more strongly prescriptive approach towards the expression of not-being, and perhaps even closer to Parmenides' original argument, in Wittgenstein's writings. When Wittgenstein for instance famously writes "was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muss man schweigen" he wants to emphasize that there are borders to our thinking and one of those borders is that we cannot speak about that *what is not*.⁶⁴ Livingston for example argues that Wittgenstein's thesis is in this sense highly similar to Parmenides' writings:

[Parmenides and Wittgenstein] do indeed both articulate substantial prohibitions, saying that there is an *area* of things or matters – that, as we may say, of "non-being" – about *which* it is impossible to say anything, since these things or matters fail to exist.⁶⁵

Insofar as Parmenides and Wittgenstein both see the opposition to being as an opposition to existing, their views align around the idea that this kind of not-being is not approachable through language.

Yet, in a less prescriptive way, Parmenides' poem has also survived in the fact that some philosophers are perplexed at the possibility of a theoretical opposition to being in the first place. In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Russell for instance airs his concerns about negative existential statements, which was later on further developed in Owen's analysis of existential puzzles.⁶⁶ In his analysis of the philosophical value of Parmenides' poem, he says that the poem was the first example in philosophy that presents an argument from thought and language to the world at large.⁶⁷ By this, he means that Parmenides was the first to form a critical analysis but also an argument for the representative and meaningful function of language. Russell emphasizes the importance of this step and argues that it made us aware of the meaning of words, as

⁶³ Coxon (2009) p. 178.

⁶⁴ Wittgenstein (2016).

⁶⁵ Livingston (2009) p. 3.

⁶⁶ Owen (1986) and Palmer (2016).

⁶⁷ Russell (1946) p. 49.

opposed to the empty use of words.⁶⁸ He describes Parmenides' view as follows:

When you think, you think *of* something; when you use a name, it must be the name *of* something. Therefore both thought and language require objects outside themselves. And since you can think of a thing or speak of it at one time as well as another, whatever can be thought of or spoken of must exist at all times. Consequently, there can be no change, since change consists in things coming into being or ceasing to be.⁶⁹

Russell agrees that Parmenides has touched upon a most intriguing and essential problem, but also a paradox: it seems that one cannot speak meaningfully about non-existent objects such as unicorns or Hamlet. This makes Russell state that “if a word can be used significantly it must mean *something*, not nothing, and therefore what the word means must in some sense exist”.⁷⁰ The argument that we cannot speak meaningfully about nothing has had far reaching impact on other philosophers that, as Carter states, Russell's interpretation has become the standard and it is “not uncommon for the problem of negative existential statements to be referred to as “Parmenides' paradox.””.⁷¹

1.5 Not-being without the possibility of becoming being.

Hence, Parmenides' argument for the impossibility of not-being, in standing in opposition to being, both lives on in the prescriptions disallowing us to think and talk about *things that are not* or which is not the case and in the meaninglessness of doing this anyway. The poem could convince (some) philosophers of the impossibility of not-being and hence of something standing in opposition to being. As Russell also makes clear, the force of Parmenides' argument lies partly in the fact that we do not seem to be able to grasp the meaning of not-being. We imagine certain things, such as Hamlet or unicorns, and we assume other things, such as time and change, but if we want to meaningfully describe those things, it seems that we can only do this in reference to the world as it is and that those things cannot be found in it. The past is only a description in the present, and unicorns only *exist* because we have imagined a different kind of horse. Another part of the force of Parmenides' poem lies in the sheer impossibility of not-being as *not-p* to become being. It does not have any characteristics, qualities or functions. When it is used in a (veridical-)predicative function, *not-p* can only be an empty counterpart of being: it is not the case. In the same way that the void was seen in its early conceptions, *not-p* does not contain *anything* and by negating something we are only confirming that we can think beyond the reality of this moment. Not-being without the possibility of being can therefore not be true beyond the fact that maintaining *p* is false, i.e. it cannot have truth of its own as it does not stand for anything besides the falsity of *p*. Parmenides has, in this way,

⁶⁸ Russell (1946) p. 50.

⁶⁹ Russell (1946) p. 49.

⁷⁰ Russell (1946) p. 50.

⁷¹ Palmer (2016).

spoken to the intuition of human beings saying that we are unable to describe the nature of the negative, opposing the positive, and hence to grasp that which is not the case.

Chapter

2. *Why we need the not-being's relation to being*

After Parmenides instated a “ban on mixing being and not-being”, Plato was the first philosopher to critically assess in depth Parmenides’ argument that not-being is impossible to speak or think about.⁷² In the *Sophist*, Plato discusses the arguments that Parmenides made on account of not-being and cross-examines them with what we can know about reality. In this way, he wants to establish that Parmenides was partly wrong in stating “not-being is not”. Plato believes that a certain kind of not-being possesses a kind of being and that this works both ways, i.e., being also has a kind of not-being:

In order to defend ourselves we’re going to need to cross-examine what our father Parmenides says and force the claim through both that what is not in a certain way *is*, and conversely that what is also in a way is not.⁷³

He calls Parmenides “father Parmenides” for a reason, as he probably wants to emphasize the debt of philosophy to Parmenides. Yet, on the other hand, he wants to respectfully disagree with his view that any kind of not-being is not.

At that point in history, the necessity of Plato’s pursuit to argue that not-being in a way *is*, was quite high. The Sophists, mostly known as well-opinionated teachers, were to his opinion adding water to the wine of truth. Yet, because Parmenides had made any kind of speech about not-being worthless, these Sophists could argue that there is no such thing as false opinion since falsehood would be part of not-being.⁷⁴ They could hence hide themselves in the shadows of not-being, a thing that Plato dreaded.⁷⁵ Jowett therefore says the following about Plato’s frustration at the state of affairs: “the sophisms of the day were undermining philosophy; the denial of the existence of not-being, and of the connection of ideas, was making truth and falsehood equally impossible”.⁷⁶ The *Sophist* therefore unites two inquiries for Plato by arguing that not-being *is*: (1) to investigate what the Sophists do speak about, and (2) to search for not-being’s nature. In the end, he differentiates between forms of negative speech and concludes that not-

⁷² Kimhi (2017) p. 2 (part III).

⁷³ *Sophist* (2015) 241d5.

⁷⁴ Jowett (2010) p. 445.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Jowett (2010) p. 445.

being's nature *is* relation.⁷⁷

The *Sophist* has been influential in the history of philosophy with its discussion on not-being and, as a counterpart of Parmenides, its views have been adopted in many philosopher's own doctrines. He was hence not the only philosopher who has argued explicitly against Parmenides' monism. Aristotle, Hegel and Husserl have, for instance, criticized Parmenides' claims from their own respective vantage points, and recognized a form of not-being within them that can be traced back to Plato's arguments. Hegel, for instance, views the *Sophist* as the "crown and summit of the Platonic philosophy", where he found the reflection of his own Hegelian concepts of being and non-being.⁷⁸

In this chapter, I intend to describe Plato's criticism of Parmenides' claim that not-being is not and his conclusion that a certain *relation* of not-being to being would be necessary for philosophical pursuits. The chapter is hence divided in the following way. In section 2.1, I describe how not-being is approached in Plato's *Sophist*. Here I analyze Plato's description of not-being as otherness in respect to being. Then, in section 2.2, I attempt to shed light on the ways in which Plato's arguments add clarity to Parmenides' confused notion of not-being in practice. Afterwards, in section 2.3, I examine Aristotle's specification of Plato's relation of not-being to being and, in section 2.4, I investigate the necessity for not-being that these forms of critique have in common. At the end, I conclude the chapter with the thesis that the necessity for not-being's relation to being in philosophy lies in its possibility for describing the part of reality that is, in contrast to concrete and determinate being, different, unknown or *potential*.

2.1 Not-being as otherness in Plato's *Sophist*.

The *Sophist* has been analyzed in many ways and forms throughout the subsequent history of Western philosophy, such as interpretations, elaborations, original manuscripts and modern writings. This implies that I have to restrict myself in the discussion of this dialogue in accordance with the topic of this chapter. Here, the aim is to inquire after Plato's argument concerning not-being as a response to Parmenides and as a necessary concept in philosophy. For this purpose, I draw from the original dialogue, i.e. the *Sophist*, from historical analyses such as those of Jowett and Kahn and from direct systematic responses such as that of Kimhi. Now, it may still seem as if this does not add focus to the analysis, but this can be seen in a different light when it is related to Jowett's identification of the points of interest in the *Sophist*. He identifies five aspects of the dialogue that are selected by interpreters as the main points of interest:

The chief points of interest in the *Sophist* are: (1) the character attributed to the Sophist: (2) the

⁷⁷ Jowett (2010) p. 471.

⁷⁸ Jowett (2010) p. 445.

dialectical method: (3) the nature of the puzzle about not-being: (4) the battle of the philosophers: (5) the relation of the Sophist to other dialogues.⁷⁹

These points signify the five classes in which the literature on the *Sophist* can be divided, although they can of course show overlap with one another. Thus, they go into (1) Plato's description of the Sophists' deceiving nature, (2) Plato's dialogical method, (3) Plato's way of solving the Parmenidian ban on mixing being and not-being with one another, (4) the hostile philosophical landscape in which Plato wrote the *Sophist* and (5) the coherence with the rest of his dialogues. With the use of those sources that I mentioned above and minimal cross-reference to other aspects of the dialogue, we can restrict ourselves here to point (3) in an acceptable manner.

Plato's *Sophist* starts with the introduction of the Eleatic Stranger or Visitor (ξένος), who will lead a conversation with Theaetatus. The Stranger is presented by Theodorus as "a visitor from his native Elea, where he's a friend of the followers of Parmenides and Zeno".⁸⁰ By this replacement of Socrates as the main speaker in the dialogues, Plato probably meant to indicate that he entered different philosophical waters, namely those of Elea and Megara.⁸¹ Those schools could be said to be fathered by Parmenides and this is the position that Plato here wants to emphasize. So, on the one hand, Plato is following Parmenides in discussing the nature of not-being, but, on the other hand, he wants to nuance and broaden it. When the Stranger begins to discuss the nature of not-being, he therefore states the following:

In order to defend ourselves we're going to need to cross-examine what our father Parmenides says and force the claim through both that what is not in a certain way *is*, and conversely that what is also in a way is not.⁸²

The Stranger acknowledges his debt to Parmenides and treats him with respect when he calls him "father", yet simultaneously he wants to 'force through' that not-being possesses being. This powerful use of language underlines Plato's feeling of the necessity, and perhaps the controversial nature, of the argument that not-being *is*. In any case, the paradoxical relation of the Stranger with Parmenides, where he both praises and criticizes him, remains throughout the dialogue. Later on, he for instance calls him "the great Parmenides", while at the same time "[daring] to assume that what is not *is* [while] the great Parmenides never stopped testifying against it".⁸³ Kimhi has an adequate explanation for this paradox:

The stranger honors Parmenides with [the] title "father Parmenides", presumably for being the founder of philosophy as the 'logical' study of being and thinking. In order to prove themselves as the true descendants of Parmenides, viz., as philosophers, and distinguish themselves from Sophists, who

⁷⁹ Jowett (2010) p. 448.

⁸⁰ *Sophist* (2015) 216a.

⁸¹ Jowett (2010) p. 446.

⁸² *Sophist* (2015) 241d5.

⁸³ *Sophist* (2015) 237a-a15.

arguably, are themselves the bastard offspring of Parmenides, the sophist-hunters need to free themselves from Parmenides' paternal authority (ironically, they need to show that his arguments are somehow sophistic).⁸⁴

So, in order to be able to say anything about not-being, Plato first has to establish that he is a descendant of Parmenides and secondly that he does not fall under his jurisdiction.

In order to 'force through' that it is not impossible to know anything about not-being, Plato further has to show that the language that is used in connection to not-being's relation to being actually represents something real, or true. This would be the only way to nuance Parmenides' arguments, since he had argued that the way human beings speak and think about not-being is meaningless and cannot possibly capture anything real. For Plato, this means that he should maintain that expressions of not-being in language such as negation and falsehood correspond to a part of reality.^{85,86} In an effort to understand this way of thinking, we can start to see language in the way that Parmenides hoped that it would work: logically and metaphysically correct by only expressing being. This would indicate that all our experience of change, diversity and plurality are part of not-being and hence not real. Language and predication would be something real, while our direct experience of the sensible world is part of not-being. As Jowett describes, the Greeks thought that in "the passage from the world of sense and imagination and common language to that of opinion and reflection the human mind was exposed to many dangers, and often 'found no end in wandering mazes lost.'"⁸⁷ Their words would try to capture being, but within the passage from the common world to reflection, falsehood and negation would lure in human minds. Falsehood would therefore be seen by the Greeks as those predicative sentences containing unreal things that we for instance understand as change, diversity and plurality. As a further point of difficulty, for the Greeks, falsehood, negation and nonentity were regarded as similar, if not the same.⁸⁸ This was not intentional in the sense that they had chosen to merge these linguistic forms with one another: rather, they were not yet clearly distinguished.

Plato's task in the *Sophist* was therefore to prove that falsehood and negation could contain a certain form of being while remaining part of not-being, and show that negation, falsehood and nonentity are different from one another. Within this quest, Plato did not mean to throw the baby away with the bathwater: not-being *in and by itself* (μη ἑὸν) was still to remain inaccessible terrain and Plato therefore does not presume to capture it.⁸⁹ Yet, he discloses another way of looking at not-being, namely as a relation that does not stand in opposition to being: not-being as *difference* or *otherness*. Kahn argues that Plato, in this way, creates the "necessary distinction between 'not being X', in the sense of being different from X, and 'not-being'

⁸⁴ Kimhi (2017) p. 1-2 (part III).

⁸⁵ Jowett (2010) p. 454.

⁸⁶ Kahn (2018) p. 161.

⁸⁷ Jowett (2010) p. 455.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ O'Brien (1996) p. 172.

tout court – to distinguish negation as difference from negation as nonentity”.⁹⁰ The Stranger presents the argument that not-being has being by having a part of difference and that, as such, it is possible to talk and think about it:

What is not, then, must necessarily be, both in the case of change and with all the kinds, because with all of them, the nature of the different, by rendering each a different thing from being, makes it something that is not; and in fact in accordance with this same reasoning we’ll be correct in talking about all of them too as things that are not – and then again, since they share in being, in saying that they are, and talking of them as things that are.⁹¹

By rendering not-being as a kind of being in the form of difference, Plato assimilates his theory of the Forms with Parmenides’ ontology.⁹² Not-being can thus be known if it is not the same as being but fits within his theory of the Forms: it then has a part in reality, yet it is not part of Being itself. This is why Plato identifies not-being with one of the five greatest kinds that are selected from the Forms, i.e. movement (*κίνησις*), rest (*στάσις*), being (*τὸ ὄν*), sameness (*τὸ ταὐτὸν*), and difference or otherness (*τὸ ἕτερον*).⁹³ Not-being as a part of difference possesses its own character apart from being, yet is part of true reality.

Lee argues that Plato, in this way, has developed not-being as a “doctrine of the Parts of Otherness”. Within this doctrine, “Otherness” takes on a rather specific meaning, i.e. the otherness involved *is* specific.⁹⁴ That is to say, every time someone speaks or thinks about not-being, a certain *part* of otherness is meant which stands in direct relation to another *part* of being and not to being as a whole. Plato argues that this can be seen in negation, such as ‘not X’, which he equates with: ‘different from X’. Plato mentions the cases of “the not big and the big itself” and the beautiful in relation to the not-beautiful.⁹⁵ Not-beautiful stands in direct relation to being beautiful and not to being *as such*. Being and not-being are therefore in direct relation with one another, but only in the specific cases at hand. This also indicates that falsehood, negation and nonentity each express their own specific relation to being, while also possessing not-being as an otherness to being. In this way, not-being is not just a “segmentation of being”: it is truly not-being-*that-specific-x* and hence has its own real kind of relation to being.⁹⁶ Lee describes this real kind of not-being in Plato along the following lines:

With the doctrine of the Parts of Otherness, [Plato] introduces a distinct and stronger notion of not-Being. Although non-Being here must still be analyzed in terms of otherness, that otherness now plays a different role. It no longer presupposes two separately given, separately distinct determinacies as *relata* (...) Instead,

⁹⁰ Kahn (2012) p. 161.

⁹¹ *Sophist* (2015) 256d10-e1.

⁹² Coxon (2009) p. 30.

⁹³ Gerson (2012) p. 101.

⁹⁴ Lee (1972) p. 267.

⁹⁵ *Sophist* (2015) 257d10-258a.

⁹⁶ Lee (1972) p. 285.

it plays what I shall dub a constitutive role: Otherness itself, in conjunction with some *one* other term, now serves (...) to constitute the being of a novel nature, the nature of a "Part of Otherness." (...) It will therefore be something whose "nature" (thus, whose being) consists in its not-being-something else. (...) And that fact, I submit, explains at last (...) the fact that Plato twice remarks that it is the Part of Otherness, not Otherness just in itself, that answers his quest for an account of the real nature of nonbeing. Only in its constitutive role does Otherness define a notion which is, as Plato puts it (at 258e2-3): something which really and fully is not; a not-being that really does consist specifically and entirely in its NOT-being.⁹⁷

The doctrine of otherness signifies to the fact that Plato identifies not-being's nature with *relation*, since difference always stands in a relation with what it is different to – in this case, being. Thus, the intrinsicality of *relation* to not-being's nature indicates that not-being is different as to being in its *not-being* and that, as such, it discloses itself through negative thoughts and language. Plato's conception of not-being's nature as *relation* therefore does not entail that its negative character disappears. Rather, it means that not-being's relation to being exists because of its negative character, which stands in relation to the positive. Nevertheless, Plato also acknowledges that not-being has a kind of being or reality, exactly because it is truly being different from being. By finding not-being in the five greatest kinds, i.e. movement (*κίνησις*), rest (*στάσις*), being (*τὸ ὄν*), sameness (*τὸ ταὐτόν*), and difference or otherness (*τὸ ἄτερον*), and mixing them with one another, Plato can thus argue for the reality of the expression of those kinds in the form of change, diversity and plurality. Moreover, those expressions can be captured in thought and language, most prominently in the form of negation. So, in this way the Platonic circle is round. Starting from a not-being that is unknowable, Plato went on to argue that, although its character is negative, a certain form of not-being *is* and that the reality of not-being can be described as a kind of otherness as to being. Not-being therefore forms a part of reality, including the linguistic ways that correspond to it.

2.2 The task for future philosophers to develop a conception of not-being.

Plato's quest to argue for the reality of not-being's relation to being managed to form distinctions between not-being as falsehood, negation and nonentity, since each of them has its own specific relation to being. Moreover, Plato's analysis of not-being gave way for the conception that being consists of several 'kinds of being' and is not always one and the same.⁹⁸ However, although Plato provided us with these useful contributions to philosophy, his account of not-being remains also an unspecific one: he established that there is something *other* than being, not-being, and that this otherness can be expressed in several linguistic forms, but he does not specify what kind of knowledge we attain by talking about not-being.⁹⁹ More

⁹⁷ Lee (1972) p. 286-287.

⁹⁸ Coxon (2009) p. 33.

⁹⁹ A modern criticism of Plato can be found in the claim that Plato's *Sophist* did not provide us with an account of not-being as a necessary condition for being: an account where not-being as otherness indicates a significant relation with being. Namely, it is stated that the otherness that Plato describes, is not that of a universal quantifier (i.e. otherness that truly opposes being), but just an indication of a certain 'incompatibility' with being (Eck 2014: p. 275). Hence, the discussion on the question whether or not Plato has provided us with an adequate description and

specifically, Plato discusses how not-being can be used in daily language, which is exemplified by the speech of the Sophists, yet he fails to portray the ways in which the linguistic expressions containing not-being amount to otherness, or the Form of the Different. Taylor for instance states that Plato has formulated a system of classification, but that this “cannot by itself be enough to provide knowledge of reality but should be supplemented by means of fixing the application of the classificatory terms”.¹⁰⁰ This would indicate that Plato should not only have created the distinctions between not-being as falsehood, negation and nonentity, but also described when they are and how they should be used in order to truly grasp the reality of not-being.

In spite of this shortcoming in the *Sophist*, it should be remembered that Plato was one of the first to argue that speech and thought are not always truthful without thereby being entirely meaningless or worthless. Moreover, Plato is a revolutionary when he goes on and states that falsehood, negation and nonentity are all ways in which human beings express something that is not the same as being, but which do *contain* a real relation to being. Those two steps made way for the reality of not-being itself. Furthermore, by calling not-being ‘other’ or ‘different’ than being, Plato also implies that in attaining knowledge about not-being, we may exactly not know or understand what it is that we know, while we recognize it as telling us something about reality. For instance, by knowing that a given object is not-red, I don’t know what color it *is*, yet I do know something about its reality – namely, that it’s not red. He therefore implicitly signifies to not-being’s relation to the indeterminate part of reality: although I cannot determine the color, the undetermined part (it is not red) also contains truth.

Moreover, Plato accomplished in the *Sophist* to tell philosophers what their task is in the future. Taylor describes this as follows:

The *Sophist* gives some intriguing hints in this direction [on the attainment of knowledge on reality] in the suggestion that one of the principal tasks of philosophy is working out the conceptual interrelations of what is called the ‘Greatest Kinds’ – that is to say, some of the most general and abstract concepts: namely, Being, Sameness, Difference, Change and Stability (251c-261b). It may have been Plato’s view that a full specification of these interrelations will amount to an account of what each of these kinds is and thus to identifications of these highest genera, which will then be divisible via the method of division.¹⁰¹

differentiation of not-being (and falsehood) is currently focused on what otherness signifies. When not-being would only signify a certain kind of incompatibility, it still possesses true and real being, but it does not provide us with knowledge that is meaningful. The interpretation that argues for the fact that otherness is a universal quantifier is called the oxford interpretation and the other the incompatibility range interpretation (Eck 2014). This discussion is left behind in the thesis, as it is not particularly relevant for the purposes of the thesis whether Plato’s otherness would be a ‘mere incompatibility’ with being. I focus mainly on the fact that Plato developed an analysis of not-being in terms of relation in the first place.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor (2008) p. 187.

¹⁰¹ Taylor (2008) p. 187.

By means of investigating the interrelations between the Greatest Kinds, it could be possible to discern the knowledge of not-being, as part of difference. And it is likely that Plato indeed argued for this methodology, or at least a similar approach, as he both maintained that the Forms function as the ultimate expressions of reality and that these Forms form the building bricks of everything else, including language. If we could hence untangle the Forms from the mixtures in which they are present themselves in daily life, it may be feasible to develop a conception of the Form itself. Plato describes the way a philosopher would untangle the Forms in a question:

must (...) [a philosopher] not have some sort of expertise to progress in his arguments if he is going to show correctly which sorts of kinds [of the Forms] are in harmony with which and which are not receptive to each other, and further, whether there are some that hold them together, running through them in such a way as to make them capable of mixing; and again, in cases where they divide off, whether there are others similarly running through them all that cause the division?¹⁰²

So, Plato can claim that he guided the way for future philosophers to embark on the quest to correctly discern the Forms from one another and to attain knowledge on them simultaneously. Language would have a particular role in this endeavor, since discourse is both possible by means of the Forms and, because the Forms are necessarily involved, can capture reality.¹⁰³

2.3 Aristotle's specification of not-being's relation to being.

After Plato, there have been philosophers who maintain a similar stance towards not-being. Especially in what we currently call *Neoplatonism*, such an approach toward not-being was adopted. Plotinus for instance argues for an application of not-being as the absence of being, in which case not-being also possesses a kind of otherness towards being.¹⁰⁴ As such, not-being can be found in those things that lack being, in Plotinus' case: matter and evil. However, as a more direct continuation of Plato's argument for not-being's relation to being, it proves useful to consider Aristotle's criticism to Parmenides' monism. Especially because he gave valuable additions for understanding not-being's relation to being. That is, in his writings, he provided an elaboration on Plato's original criticism and was more extensive in the description how not-being could fit into a broader philosophical system.

In the *Physics*, Aristotle expresses his criticism of Parmenides' monism by giving an answer to the question whether or not the principles underlying all physical inquiries are one or more than one.¹⁰⁵ For Aristotle, the principal error of Parmenides is that he assumes that everything is one and the same in being, an argument that Aristotle finds impossible to maintain in this book.¹⁰⁶ The many different substances, such

¹⁰² *Sophist* (2015) 253b10-c1.

¹⁰³ As can be seen in *Sophist* (2015) 259e1.

¹⁰⁴ The relation between Plato's account of not-being and Plotinus' is further elaborated on in Drogt (2018).

¹⁰⁵ *Sophist* (2015) 184b15.

¹⁰⁶ *Physics* (1992) 185a26. Later in the metaphysics Aristotle seems to take on a more favorable view towards Parmenides' argument that being is one, although he remains convinced that *is* has several meanings.

as “one man, one horse and one soul”, and qualities cannot be one and the same.¹⁰⁷ Aristotle therefore fervently argues against such a monistic view and says that *is* cannot refer to one being, but can vary in meaning in different predicative structures. In chapter 3, he formulates this criticism:

[Parmenides’] assumption that ‘is’ is used in a single way only is false, because it is used in several. His conclusion does not follow, because if we take only white things, and if ‘white’ has a single meaning, none the less what is white will be many and not one.¹⁰⁸

Thus, even though there are general attributes such as whiteness, there are many things containing whiteness. This means that the one cannot be one in practice: it is seen in many different forms. The same principle would apply to the general form of being, as being is also used in many different ways according to Aristotle – which is not acknowledged by Parmenides. Aristotle continues:

[However, for Parmenides, when] an attribute is predicated of some subject, so that the subject to which ‘is’ is attributed will not be, as it is something different from being. Something, therefore, which is not will be.¹⁰⁹

Because Parmenides does not accept the differences in which the one attribute is seen in the many different forms, Aristotle maintains that he wrongly connects not-being to things that are. Parmenides therefore does not recognize being in practical instances:

For the subject cannot be a *being*, unless ‘is’ means several things, in such a way that each *is* something. (...) It is (...) clearly impossible for what is to be one in this [Parmenidian] sense.¹¹⁰

Aristotle hence implicitly argues in favor of a Platonic treatment of not-being’s relation to being as enabling difference, since it would otherwise be impossible to recognize being in every proper form. If a subject for example has a certain separable attribute that is different from the one being, so not always attributed to the same subject, then the attribute would not be real. Aristotle believes that the reason that the ‘ancients’ maintained the belief that all becoming, and hence change and plurality, is not real comes from the fact that they were actually inexperienced in thinking about not-being.¹¹¹ That is, they made the mistake of exaggerating the consequences of the statement that something cannot originate from either being or not-being and falsely maintained that all plurality would hence belong to not-being.

Aristotle then proposes that the difference that is exhibited in the *is not* can be interpreted as expressing

¹⁰⁷ *Physics* (1992) 185a27-185a28.

¹⁰⁸ *Physics* (1992) 186a33-186b3.

¹⁰⁹ *Physics* (1992) 185a33-186b3 and 187a12.

¹¹⁰ *Physics* (1992) 185a33-186b3 and 187a12.

¹¹¹ *Physics* (1992) 191a35-191b9.

becoming or ceasing to be, as is the case in Plato, but also as expressing potentiality and actuality.¹¹² The second form of difference between being and not-being is explained by Aristotle in Book Θ (Theta) of the *Metaphysics*:

it is possible that a thing may be capable of being and not *be*, and capable of not being and yet *be*, and similarly with the other kinds of predicate; it may be capable of walking and yet not walk, or capable of not walking and yet walk. And a thing is capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity. I mean for instance, if a thing is capable of sitting and it is open to it to sit, there will be nothing impossible in its actually sitting; and similarly, if it is capable of being moved or moving or of standing or making to stand or of being or coming to be, or of not being or not coming to be.¹¹³

Aristotle has hence pointed out that, although something is or is not, a capacity for both underlies reality. In this sense, the potentiality for being or not-being is always related to the corresponding actuality of something. However, since not-being may conform to the truth but is never itself actual, the formulation of the relation between being and not-being in terms of potentiality and actuality signifies that not-being should always be understood as pertaining to capacity or potentiality within the substance.¹¹⁴ In this way, Aristotle is able to argue that negative linguistic forms, such as negation, can explicate the *possibilities* of a substance, besides referring to the ceasing and becoming to be of substances – as was the case in Plato.

The constitutive role of not-being, as part of otherness, thus seems to become specified as belonging to capacity or potentiality in Aristotle's writings. As belonging to capacity, it fits in his broader philosophical system. That is to say, *capacity* or *potentiality* plays an important part in Aristotle's writings and he describes the function of capacities as follows in the *Metaphysics*: "a thing is capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity".^{115,116} In this sense, not-being can be seen as the negative counterpart of a genuine possibility, i.e. which can be actualized in being. Despite the fact that Aristotle did not write so explicitly, he may be said to have hinted at the possibility that not-being could be interpreted to fulfill both a definitional and a teleological function: in a definitional way, not-being can indicate that a something which is expressed in negation has the capacity to be "changed by another thing or by oneself *qua* other (1046a9–18)" into something that is and, in a teleological sense, not-being would be a negative part of a capacity for being, which is not actualized (yet).¹¹⁷ In this way, he produced a promising start into further specifying the relation of not-

¹¹² *Physics* (1992) 191b30.

¹¹³ *Metaphysics* (1992) 1047a30-1047b2.

¹¹⁴ An idea on which I elaborate in Chapter 3.

¹¹⁵ *Metaphysics* (1992) 1047a30-1047b2.

¹¹⁶ As far as I am aware, this is one of the two definitions of *capacity* in Aristotle's writings. The other definition of capacity would be "the power to bring about or undergo change" and functions mainly in Aristotle's ideas on the natural world (Johansen 2012). As Johansen also argues, those two definitions would not be necessarily separated from one another, which I would argue is also exactly the case in light of not-being's role in capacity. However, in this instance, I focus on the general or constitutive role for capacity in Aristotle's system and it is therefore more suitable to highlight this definition of capacity.

¹¹⁷ Johansen (2012).

being to being and for using it in philosophical systems in general, and metaphysics in particular.

2.4 The necessity of not-being in relation to being.

For Plato, the reasons for the necessity of re-introducing not-being were thus twofold, as he wrote it with the following purposes in mind: (1) formulation not-being's nature as *relation* to being, whereby enabling the possibility for change, diversity and plurality, and (2) making way for the separation of negative concepts. Both are actually parts of the same coin, since (1) signifies the metaphysical basis of not-being and (2) refers to the ways in which not-being is used in language and thought. By beginning to sketch both (1) and (2), Plato made way for the Parmenidian conception that not-being as a purely negative concept without viable relation to the positive is untenable, but that, in relation to being and through possessing otherness, not-being has a necessary function in philosophy. It is necessary, since this function formulates the reality of all those instances in which *something* is not the same as in stable, motionless being, but still *is* – for instance when it is in transition. If philosophers want to make distinctions between what is the same and what is different from the same, not-being is needed to account for the gap between them: when something is not, it is in another state than when it is, but this does not mean that it cannot *be* what it is not. For Plato, not-being in itself is thus part of the different and symbolizes the possibilities of the thing at hand. Aristotle, on the other hand, seems to have recognized that not-being is not only *at hand* or at work in specific cases, but also in the actuality/potentiality divide and as a negative part of capacity it could perhaps fulfill a more general role in philosophical systems.

In this criticism of Parmenides' monism, Plato, moreover, made way for the thesis that we cannot separate not-being from its linguistic form as negation, but we can do so in the case of falsehood. As we have seen, he has separated negation as difference from negation *tout court*.¹¹⁸ Negation as difference thus becomes the direct expression of the difference pertained in not-being, while negation *tout court* or as truly *not* symbolizes the Parmenidian concept of purely negative not-being. Falsehood (and truth for that matter), on the other hand, came to refer to the value that can be attached to the predication or to the negative predication. Thus, both positive and negative sentences can truly or falsely describe the (current) state of affairs, be it in reference to the world or the Forms. Because of this clever distinction, Plato is able to counter the Sophists and say that they can speak falsely, although they make positive statements. Yet, its metaphysical implications are even stronger than this happy victory. If not-being is the metaphysical name for what is most clearly expressed in negation and both are not necessarily false, then the necessity of change, diversity and plurality could also be truly expressed in negation. The meaninglessness of negation *tout court* is hence transformed into the meaningfulness (with regard to reality) of negation as difference and expression of not-being.

It can be concluded that Plato was able to create a (version of) not-being that can be clearly spoken and

¹¹⁸ See p. 26.

thought about. Moreover, he changed not-being from an impossible road to truth and reality into a necessary one, when being is not seen as a finished, unchangeable whole in which there are no differences between things. If we for example would want to differentiate between substances, such as men, horses and souls, we should be able to say “a man is not a horse” indicating that men and horses are different substances while still being the same i.e. part of reality in the form of substances. Plato has in this way opened the possibility to fit not-being in a broader philosophical system, while not committing patricide on his philosophical father Parmenides.

PART II

Not-being as the potentiality for being

Chapter

3. *From not-being as relation to not-being as such*

The joint efforts of Parmenides and Plato in the Greek framework of Part I can be said to amount to the presumptions that (1) not-being is the contradictory counterpart of being, (2) not-being as a purely negative notion cannot be known, (3) as otherness it stands in relation to being, (4) its nature forms part of difference, (5) the necessity of not-being lies in the fact that it accounts for diversity in reality. And, although they did not move into the intricacies of not-being's reality *as such*, these assumptions imply that not-being *as such* is connected to a certain indeterminate part of reality. That is, it can be said that Parmenides sees the dichotomy of the determined and undetermined reality as the division between being and not-being, since he believes that all those undetermined parts of reality are not and also cannot be.¹¹⁹ From his point of view, an unchanging block-universe where reality is unchanging and being is motionless is argued for.¹²⁰ It is then coherent to connect not-being with the indeterminate. This connection is further exposed by Plato's argument that maintaining an indeterminate part of reality asks for the acknowledgement that the world is changing and filled with motion and difference, which is only possible on the basis of not-being's relation to being. In identifying indeterminacy with not-being, we may already be able to formulate the dichotomy between being and not-being in a clearer form, namely: some parts of reality are already determined, i.e. *they are part of being*, while other parts of reality are undetermined or part of possible realities, i.e. *they form part of the realm of not-being*.

Furthermore, there seem to have developed two versions of not-being on the basis of Parmenides' and Plato's arguments: (1) not-being that stands in relation to being as difference and which plays a metaphysical and ontological role (Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Strawson) and (2) not-being that stands in opposition to being which is expressed in language and logic (Frege, Geach and Ayer).¹²¹ This separation is exemplified in the distinction between negation as difference and negation *tout court*, as we have seen in chapter 2. In this systematic part of the essay, I argue that those two versions of not-being, and the distinctions in those forms of negations, were unjustifiably separated from one another. That is, the opposition and the difference not-being forms to or has with being are both part of the same conceptualization of not-being *as such*. Thus, saying that not-being stands in opposition or amounts to

¹¹⁹ See DK fragment B8.

¹²⁰ Popper (2012) p. 89.

¹²¹ Horn (1989) p. 3.

difference in relation to being is secondary to its primary roots: not-being's own nature. In view of Aristotle's connection of not-being to the potentiality / actuality divide, I will argue that this nature of not-being lies in its *potentiality for being*, signifying the indeterminacy of not-being and referring to the innateness of *relation* to not-being's nature.

In arguing for this viewpoint, I first engage with Parmenides' opposition between being and not-being. Here, in 3.1, I state that Parmenides was justified in conceptualizing not-being's relation to being in this way, but only when it comes to *theory*. In a theoretical and metaphysical framework, not-being does stand in opposition to being, since it is exactly what being is not. Not-being in this underlying state forms an opposition with being *as such*, since they are both what the other is not. Not-being can therefore indeed be said to be ungraspable and nothing at all. However, in practice, when something is actualized and positive it is not so forever. Not-being in its functioning, or as a force in nature, can be described. As a natural force, not-being's functioning is relatable to Aristotle's and Kimhi's description of the negative role it plays in capacity: underlying any actual, positive form of being lies the two-way capacity of both the positive form of being *and* the negative form of not-being. Time makes it possible for mix-forms to be created between the positive and negative, whereby they no longer stand in opposition with one another but are different from one another. In 3.2, I then confer that Plato was right in connecting not-being to change, difference, plurality and diversity, yet only when it comes to the physical, actualized world. In the physical world, both being and not-being are concepts that function in practice and are therefore not marked off units. Not-being then refers to that which is not directly there or intuited.

In 3.3, I then move again to Aristotle's contribution in terms of *capacity*, *potentiality* and *actuality* and argue that he has provided us with the toolkit by which the dichotomy between the theoretical and the practical conceptualizations of not-being can be described. By using those terms, it is possible to capture the indeterminate nature of not-being. I conclude that the most suitable way to summarize both conceptualizations is by saying that not-being *as such* is *potentiality for being*. Not-being as potentiality for being *itself* can never become being *as such*, but, in practice, particular potentialities for being can be actualized and change from not-being to being or from being to not-being. In 3.4, I shed light on how the relations of not-being to being, as highlighted by Parmenides and Plato, would be expressions of being as potentiality for being.

3.1 Parmenides' opposition of not-being and being.

In Chapter 1, it became clear that Parmenides makes a strong distinction between being and not-being: "either it is or it is not" (B815-16). For him, these therefore stand in an opposition with one another in the sense that everything that *is* cannot not-be (or perish) and everything that *is not* cannot be (or become). As this distinction goes for the whole of reality, there would therefore only be two plausible roads to know reality or truth: through being and not-being – although Parmenides denies the second. In general terms,

as opposed to particular terms, not-being thus stands in direct opposition with being, because it is exactly what being is not. Because being and not-being stand in this strong opposition to one another in theory, not-being *in itself* may indeed be considered nothing at all and unthinkable. As is the case in Parmenides, it would not be possible to approach this notion of not-being *in and by itself* (μη ἐόν): a not-being that is not and hence purely negative. In fact, I agree with his thesis that it is not feasible to give a positive description of this notion. That is: how can human beings have knowledge on the is-not which is only negative? And how can there be words, that are meant to describe reality, for representing nothing at all? I therefore concur with Parmenides (and later philosophers such as Plato and Russell) that one cannot speak meaningfully about this ultimate or absolute kind of is-not, *when* it is considered by itself.

Yet, in his argumentation, I argue that Parmenides commits two systematic mistakes: (1) because the inability to grasp not-being as purely negative concept, he denies the metaphysical functioning of not-being in reality and (2) he makes the false assumption that not-being *as such* cannot be conceptualized. In the end, both ‘mistakes’ are based on Parmenides’ belief that the relation of not-being to being in opposition cannot be combined with the mixing of being and not-being in practice. That is to say, according to him there can exist nothing apart from being and those mixes are hence made up by human beings, i.e. they are not truly part of reality. This would indicate that not-being *as such* should not be talked or thought about. Nevertheless, if it is acknowledged that the opposition between being and not-being does not exclude the functioning of not-being in reality, this belief can be refuted.

Those misjudgments thus start with the fact that Parmenides cannot find a meaning of not-being *as such*, apart from the purely negative metaphysical characterization. More specifically, he believes that the metaphysical reality of not-being is based on the idea that not-being stands in opposition to being and he therefore believes that not-being can only be the purely negative counterpart of being *in any circumstance*. Since being is single, continuous, changeless and motionless, Parmenides believes there cannot be such a thing as not-being *as a force* or *in particular instances*. He has to deny these possibilities, as he seems to feel there are no attributes left to give to not-being: not-being can be found in all those instances in which being is not thought of as single, continuous, changeless and motionless, but what is not-being *in itself*? Parmenides has to answer: “nothing”, because there is nothing *other*. His confusion is emphasized in the book *Essays on Being*, where Kahn describes the way Parmenides provided us with an intrinsically tangled account of the uses and meanings of not-being, while at the same time wanting to capture them under the same name. More specifically, Kahn argues that Parmenides’ innovation of the term *being* or *to be* resulted in a rich, positive account of the “entire range of uses and meanings” that the term can take on, which has had a profound impact on later philosophies.¹²² Yet, he says that Parmenides’ corresponding functions of negation in the term *not-being* or *not to be* may be claimed to be a “conceptual nightmare” for the philosophers who followed Parmenides. Kahn hence states:

¹²² Kahn (2012) p. 206.

Depending on which function of [*to be*] (...) is being denied, [not-being] (...) can represent either negative predication, falsehood, nonidentity, nonexistence or nonentity – that is to say, nothing at all. The fallacy of Parmenides’ argument lies not in the cumulation of positive attributes for Being but in the confused union of these various modes of negation in the single conception of ‘what-is-not’.¹²³

Parmenides does not realize that by creating the distinction between being and not-being, there has to correspond something to not-being *in particular instances*. In denying being, not-being has to take on a function, but Parmenides has no real corresponding functions left to attribute to not-being.

Parmenides’ approach of denying not-being altogether was thus not a functional one, since not-being has to refer to *something* as long as it stands apart from being. This does, on the other hand, not mean that the opposition between being and not-being was wrongly created. The opposition is valid as long as it would be maintained theoretically. Yet, as Aristotle also states, Parmenides goes too far when he argues that not-being is purely not on the basis that nothing can become or perish, and thus change or be different. He articulates this in the following way:

for nothing else is or will be apart from being, since Moira bound it to be all unmoving. Therefore, all those things will be a name that mortals have laid down, trusting that they are real: to be born and to die; to be and not to be, to change place and change bright complexion. But since the limit is ultimate, [being] is complete from every point, resembling the mass of a well-rounded sphere from its centre equal everywhere: in fact, 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...¹²⁴

He argues that not-being cannot be, as being is a whole and, in reality, human beings must have imagined those things that stand apart from being. However, in reality, there may be room for a natural force that is negatively expressed, but still governs or influences the expressions of reality in its positive form.

Hence, Parmenides does not consider that the mixes between being and not-being described by human beings could imply that not-being may also be a ‘force’ in nature and, in this sense, the relation to being changes.¹²⁵ Not-being *as such* may thus both be ungraspable in itself (in its pure opposition to being), but describable in negative nature and its functioning. In Kimhi’s writings, who is influenced by Aristotle,

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ DK fragment B8: “οὐδὲν γὰρ <ἦ> ἔστιν ἢ ἔσται ἄλλο πάρεξ τοῦ ἐόντος, ἐπεὶ τό γε Μοῖρα ἐπέδησεν οὐλον ἀκίνητόν τ’ ἔμμεναι· τῷ πάντ’ ὄνομ (α) ἔσται, ὅσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο πεποιθότες εἶναι ἀληθῆ, γίνεσθαι τε καὶ ὄλλυσθαι, εἶναι τε καὶ οὐχί, καὶ τόπον ἀλλάσσειν διὰ τε χρόα φανὸν ἀμείβειν. Αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πείρας πύματον, τετελεσμένον ἐστὶ πάντοθεν, εὐκύκλου σφαιρῆς ἐναλίγκιον ὄγκω, μεσσόθεν ἰσοπαλὲς πάντη· τὸ γὰρ οὔτε τι μείζον οὔτε τι βαιότερον πελέναι χρεόν ἐστὶ τῆ ἢ τῆ. Οὔτε γὰρ οὐκ ἐὼν ἔστι, τό κεν παῖοι μιν ἰκνεῖσθαι εἰς ὁμόν, οὔτ’ ἐὼν ἔστιν ὅπως εἶη κεν ἐόντος τῆ μᾶλλον τῆδ’ ἥσσον, ἐπεὶ πᾶν ἐστὶν ἄσυλον.” Translated by Robbiano (2016).

¹²⁵ With a ‘force’, I refer to a concept that functions metaphysically and, as such, influences the sensible world.

such a functioning of not-being is also described in terms of capacity: he describes being and not-being as forming a logical unity with one another in capacity – formulated as the form (p or $not-p$).¹²⁶ As a force, not-being's functioning lies thus in negating the possibility and actualization of change, plurality and difference, as behind any actual, positive form of being lies the two-way capacity of both the positive form of being *and* the negative form of not-being. For example, a man has the capacity both for walking and not-walking and those possibilities can either be performed. This Aristotelean characterization will be elaborated on in 3.3, but it should be realized that this kind of negation is the same as the Platonic negation as difference. Therefore, before we move to Aristotle, I consider Plato's contribution to the debate on not-being's functioning.

3.2 Plato's difference between not-being and being.

In Chapter 2, Plato's arguments concerning not-being in the *Sophist* were analyzed. Here, he concluded that it is a difference to being that we are after in the search for not-being's relation to being in reality. This difference would be expressed in several forms of negation and the is-not is hence embedded in those negative forms, where difference i.e. change, diversity, plurality and possibility are implied. He therefore wanted to change not-being's relation to being from being its opposite to something that is different from being. Plato thus contends:

When we say not-being, we speak, I think, not of something that is the opposite of being, but only of something different. (...) When we are told the negative signifies the opposite, we shall not admit it; we shall admit only that the particle 'not' (...) indicates something different from the words to which it is prefixed, or rather from the things denoted by the words that follow the negative.¹²⁷

Plato did hence insinuate that, in the same way that being plays a role in language in general, not-being can therefore also be found in a broad spectrum of linguistic constructs, and most prominently in negation. In negation and especially *logical negation*, a direct reference to not-being as part of the different is made. In this way, it resembles the Greek uses of the term *to be* - which are also vestigially present in English. As Owen points out, the Greeks used it in a *complete, substantive* and an *incomplete* way.¹²⁸ The *complete*, metaphysical form of being and not-being is expressed in the linguistic use X is or X is not (referring to a one-place predicate), while it is formulated as X is p or X is not- p in the *incomplete* and specific form (signaling a two-place predicate).¹²⁹ *Not-p* thus identifies those *incomplete* things that are changed, diverse and plural: they are *incomplete* parts of reality that are influenced by not-being. *Not-p* thus contains not-being and is used in speech and thought in reference to this link.

Plato rightly remarks that a conception of not-being, and its corresponding negational expression, is needed in philosophical enterprises, if we were to accept the reality of change, difference, plurality and

¹²⁶ Kimhi's argument in relation to the conceptualization of not-being in this essay is further explicated in Chapter 4.

¹²⁷ 257b-c (*Sophist*) in Horn (1989) p. 5.

¹²⁸ Owen (1986) p. 104.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

diversity. He is able to argue that all those concepts function only when being and not-being can be mixed with one another: when things can go from being to not-being and from not-being to being. He does therefore indeed 'testify against Parmenides' and specify the relation of language and practice to not-being's functioning. Plato thus comes closer to the way in which not-being's metaphysical opposition to being, or distinction from being, would function in a real sense. Specifically, Plato does not deny that not-being *in and by itself* stands in opposition to being and is thus ungraspable, but rather that not-being in its functioning is different from being and can be mixed with being. As we have seen in chapter 2, Plato has in this way opened the opportunity to fit not-being in a broader philosophical system, while not committing patricide on his philosophical father Parmenides. Furthermore, Plato enabled the view that not-being can have a function in the workings of positive reality, although it in itself remained obscure.

However, Plato in a way realizes that he does need a conception of not-being *as such* by condoning the part not-being plays in specific instances and language, when he says that philosophers should investigate the Forms and their interrelations. He believes that it is enough to identify not-being with a part of difference for the purposes of the *Sophist*, yet this characterization is in the end too unspecific and it does not explain *how* not-being can function as a real force in nature in partaking in change, plurality and diversity. More specifically, not-being cannot be the less important counterpart of being functioning in specific, incomplete instances of reality, without it having a general role to play. Otherwise we would spiral back to Parmenides' thesis that we might have made up those instances in which we think about not-being and that not-being actually cannot be something real, since we cannot conceptualize not-being *as such*. There has to be *something* in not-being's nature that does not change itself but stands for the part of difference that not-being metaphysically represents, which is referred to by the complete linguistic structure of *X is not* - this may loosely be referred to as one of Plato's Forms.

By identifying not-being with a part of the Form of difference, Plato does hint at the idea that not-being's functioning belongs to a changing and temporal reality of which human beings are a part and, as such, not-being could portray an indeterminacy of reality. By expressing not-being in her speech or thought, the knower discloses her knowledge of the circumstances in which she finds herself and, at the same time, acknowledges that these circumstances may be different – which is demonstrated by the fact that in some cases it might already be different. Adopting not-being in speech and thought thus presupposes an indeterminacy of the world, in the sense that there can be real difference in stating what is not, and that this is a form of reality. In the same way that forces such as time and movement are names acknowledging the *unfixedness* of the current moment, not-being *as such* could be a name that we use for the reality that everything which at this moment is, is the expression of something which could be different in another time or place. Moreover, not-being in speech and thought recognizes those parts of reality that are not directly given to us in the world, but are real in their difference to those things that are. Human beings are hence able to think and speak about those things that are different from being in *not* being at this moment,

yet which are real in reference to the otherness and the possibility for change they express.

3.3 Not-being *as such* is potentiality for being.

In order to disclose the nature of not-being, it is first important to understand how not-being can both stand in a metaphysical opposition to being *as such* and refer to a practical difference on account of being's specific instances. I argue that this dichotomy becomes explainable in light of Mure's interpretation of Aristotle's writings. Mure's interpretation reveals that Aristotle (and Plato) recognized there is a "hierarchy of stages which together constitute an imperfect world of perceptible things which change, and are not real at any rate as the highest stage is real".¹³⁰ The highest stage would then be fully perfect, fully real, fully intelligible and without change – in Plato's case: the Forms. According to this interpretation, there could be fully perfect, real, intelligible, changeless concepts that determine the way in which the imperfect world functions. Presumably, Aristotle therefore maintained that this is demonstrated in concepts such as matter and form, where change only happens to the things in which matter and form are expressed and not in the concepts themselves. Mure describes this in the following way:

It is important to observe – though difficult to express – that in this process [i.e. the change of perceptible things] change is not predicable of either matter or form, but only of the concrete thing. It is the whole composite which comes to be, or comes to be different from what it was. Matter in general and form in general do not change, any more than change itself changes.¹³¹

Concepts in general are hence more perfect and intelligible than when they are functioning in the real world, where things are exposed to the practical consequences of those concepts. Concrete things can, on the one hand, have matter and form, while, on the other hand, can be changed and moved and are therefore expressions of a manifold of concepts that are tangled with one another. The relations not-being has with being demonstrate that not-being would work in a similar way as those concepts. The concept *as such*, i.e. not-being *as such*, is unchanging and can be understood in its opposition to not-being, since it is exactly *not* being. In practice, not-being is only different to being, since within concrete things the opposition between being and not-being is influenced by other concepts such as motion, change and time (which in their turn are influenced by being and not-being). However, because not-being is in its nature negative, the concept can only refer to the negative nature in general *and* not-being's force in concrete instances. The description of the concept *not-being* could thus be perfect, unchanging and capture its nature in its opposition to being and functioning, but will thus not make not-being in itself intelligible or real because it is in its nature unintelligible and unreal or not part of being.

If we search for the conceptualization of not-being *as such*, a hint in this direction can be found in Aristotle's, or at least Mure's and other 'traditional' interpretations of Aristotle's, treatment of the negative

¹³⁰ Mure (1940) p. 3.

¹³¹ Mure (1940) p. 5.

concept: *prima materia* (prime matter). I leave on the table how Aristotle has actually meant *prima materia* itself to be interpreted, since *prima materia* is said to be an ‘internally incoherent notion’ insofar as it is unsure whether it claims a role in elemental generation.¹³² Yet, what is of interest for the discussion at hand is that matter in general (and thus *prima materia*) and form in general are, according to Mure, the less distinct aspects of potentiality and actuality in Aristotle’s framework.¹³³ This means that matter is directly linked to potentiality and form to actuality. More specifically, potentiality is, in this view, directly linked to matter in the sense that so far as something is *undeveloped* it is only potentially.¹³⁴ Solmsen articulated this link accordingly:

Inevitably “matter,” of which Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* speaks as “that which in itself is neither a particular thing nor of a certain quantity nor assigned to any other of the categories by which Being (τὸ ὄν) is determined,” can have only potential existence.¹³⁵

Prime matter, in the sense of matter standing on its own, would then be *mere* potentiality: it is not perceptible and does not exist or subsist on its own, i.e. separate from any formal characteristic.¹³⁶ *Prima materia* is thus only a theoretical concept or purely a logical concept.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, Mure argues that Aristotle’s matter can lead to something positive in the moments that it is not separated from the influence of other concepts:

Aristotle holds that a thing also, though incidentally, comes to be out of its ‘privation’ (the determinate absence of its form) and out of its contrary. The substratum, the thing’s nature as the *determinable* of the process, has thus a negative as well as a positive moment: matter, i.e., is also the residue of mere potentiality which dwindles in the course of development, but never quite disappears in the world of change. As such, it is the negative addition to positive definition which we make by saying that the *definiendum* is not yet fully actualized. Since nothing in the world of change is fully real, definition even of the mature thing does in principle require this addition. In every thing of the perceptible world matter plays this ambiguous role: there is no perfect specimen (...) In short, matter is both a cause of a thing’s being and *the* cause of its not-being.¹³⁸

Matter, in its potential nature, can thus both be negative on its own and have a negative *and* positive role in its consequences for the sensible world. And, interestingly, matter as having a purely negative nature, in the case of the ‘mere potentiality’ of *prima materia*, is here said to be *the* cause of the thing’s not-being. That is, a part of a concrete thing is always unreal, because it is imperfect, and in this lies the influence of *prima materia*’s potentiality. This indicates, that if development and change take place, the thing’s potential for

¹³² Brunschwig (2004) p. 40.

¹³³ Mure (1940) p. 7

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Solmsen (1958) p. 244.

¹³⁶ Brunschwig (2004) p. 40

¹³⁷ Solmsen (1958) p. 244 and Brunschwig (2004) p. 40.

¹³⁸ Mure (1940) p. 12-13.

not-being in matter can be actualized in its form causing it to perish.¹³⁹

This interpretation of matter and *prima materia* sheds light on the importance of Aristotle's vocabulary such as *actuality*, *potentiality* and *capacity* for explaining the workings of concepts in the dichotomy between theoretical and concrete instances, especially in the case of negative concepts. Moreover, these words can be used to capture not-being's nature, when not-being can also be interpreted as standing in relation to actuality in the sense of *prima materia*. That is, the relations to being demonstrate that not-being functions in the exact same way, except for the fact that not-being does not cause a thing's not-being: not-being rather functions as a passive force in nature and needs to be moved by the circumstances in which it functions, i.e. other concepts or forces that play a role in those circumstances. It can therefore be said that the positive nature of matter exhibits itself as being a cause for things to be or not to be, while the positive nature of not-being lies in its role for the form of potentiality itself. Not-being in itself is not more than the negative part of potentiality at large and, as such, can be said to refer to the potentiality for being *as such*. In this sense, it stands in opposition to being and cannot be known. However, in concrete things, not-being discloses itself in particular potentialities for being and which, as Mure describes, contain the 'promise of actuality':

And potentiality, too, has its corresponding positive moment: the fuller characterization of matter *qua* positive substratum is 'capacity' or 'potency', the real, though unrealized, promise of actuality.¹⁴⁰

Thus, in not-being as well as in potentiality and matter, the indeterminate, the unreal and the negative have a nature and a positive influence on reality which is full of change.¹⁴¹ Still, not-being, matter and potentiality are not the same, although they are linked to one another. Matter is a building stone and a cause in reality, potentiality is a state relating to actuality and not-being is the state of potentiality relating to being. The difference between potentiality and not-being – or actuality and being – would then amount to the fact that potentiality is always unrealized and not-being is realized in its not-being, yet contains the realizable change into its counterpart being.

With regard to the discussion above, I hence argue that not-being's nature can be described as *potentiality for being*. This Aristotelean conceptualization of not-being can be seen as a continuation of the discourse initiated by Parmenides and Plato. The joint effort of these two philosophers resulted in the conclusion stating that not-being stands in a metaphysical opposition to being, while the relation can be described in terms of otherness or difference in concrete instances. With the help of Aristotle, those relations to being can be summarized as harboring possibility or potentiality for being, which forms the basis of not-being as a force of nature and its negative realization as not-being in itself. In this sense, not-being's conception *lies*

¹³⁹ Mure (1940) p. 13.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Mure (1940) p. 14.

in the fact that not-being as such depicts the indeterminate form of reality that is not – the potential for being – and stands for the potentialities for being in particular instances.

3.4 Not-being as a negative part of capacity in concrete instances.

As was pointed out by Mure, the ‘positive substratum’ of potentiality can be found in *capacity* or *potency*, “the real, though unrealized, promise of actuality”.¹⁴² For not-being, potentiality for being, the positive substratum would hence be *capacity for being* or *potency for being*. This capacity for being is, in contrast to capacity in relation to actuality, only realized in a concrete thing’s negativeness: the thing is not, lacks a certain quality or does not do something. A man may thus for instance have the capacity for walking (instead of the actuality) or the man may not walk (as opposed to walking and which is different than walking). If a man does not walk, not-walking is an expression of not-being in the sense that the man is able to not-walk and, at the same time, it indicates that not-walking is part of the two-way capacity of the man to walk or not-walk. The potentiality for walking is in this way always unrealized, yet, not-walking, in its negative realization, reflects not-being’s capacity for being different.

The concrete difference between having a capacity for something and not-being as capacity for being can be further explained through Wittgenstein’s formulation of the perplexing fact that we can think about things that are not and at the same time might be. Wittgenstein mentions such an incident in *The Blue Book*: “How can one think what is not the case? If I think that King’s College is on fire when it is not on fire, the fact of its being on fire does not exist. Then how can I think it?”.¹⁴³ Such a question should be related to our recognition and understanding of not-being as a potentiality for being. That is: we can think the fire, because we recognize the potential of there being a fire *in* negating the fire. In negating the positive fact, a difference to the current circumstances is meant. Yet, in a theoretical or metaphysical way, *not-p* (not on fire) forms a unity and opposition with *p* (on fire) in potentiality for being: in theory, the building can be on fire or not be on fire, which is the capacity in general. Hence, by referring to the capacity for a fire through negating the fire, both the fact that the building can not be on fire and the possibility to change it into being on fire are referred to. Capacity is thus always unrealized, because it is the unity of both being and not-being, while not-being refers to *not-* and the change into or mix with its opposite.

In concrete instances, not-being thus functions as the negative counterpart of a *positive* part of being and its own ‘positiveness’ lies in the dormant capacity it has for this counterpart. This functioning, which was also demonstrated by Parmenides and Plato, can be described in a manifold of negative linguistic ways: most prominently in negation, but also in cases such as negative predication, nonidentity, nonexistence or nonentity. Nevertheless, in all those cases, it should stand in a relation to real or true being, as it would

¹⁴² Mure (1940) p. 13.

¹⁴³ Wittgenstein (1958) p.31 in Kimhi (2017).

otherwise lose its 'positiveness' and return to its purely negative nature. In Russell's analysis concerning the meaning of words, this is highlighted by his argument that we cannot speak meaningfully about unicorns or Hamlet. In discussing unicorns or Hamlet, it is maintained that in reference to animals such as horses and persons that resemble Hamlet we can give meaning to nonexistent entities. However, this would be forcing through the claim that those cases which have an imagined relation to being would also contain a genuine potentiality for being. On the contrary, only in those concrete instances that not-being can form a real unity with being in capacity, a justified reference to not-being can be made – in the same way that being can only be said to function in true reality.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ The possible and impossible ways of using not-being are further investigated in Chapter 4.

Chapter

4. *A conceptual framework for not-being as such*

The characterization of not-being as potentiality for being resonates with the modern tendency of a number of philosophers, including Rödl, Kimhi and Kern, to merge the Greek philosophical tradition, especially Aristotle's writings, with current-day philosophical debates. These philosophers all argue for this combination on the basis of the belief that the close relationship between thinking and being is no longer recognized in those contemporary debates on metaphysics, logic and epistemology. Specifically, Rödl sees thinking and being as forming a unity, whereas Kimhi argues for the recognition of thinking and being (and not-being!) as a two-way capacity, while Kern, for her part, argues that knowing, as part of the finite mind, is in the essence of being human. In these three philosophers, new ways of conceiving philosophical themes are presented in which the finitude of human beings is no longer a limitation, but a prerequisite of reality and understanding it.

The way that not-being is conceived in this essay fits in a framework composed by these three philosophers, as not-being both is part of and presupposes an indeterminacy or perhaps *finitude* in reality that can be thought and is (not) at the same time. It can hence only function in a philosophical whole which acknowledges that there is a changing reality which finite human beings can grasp by means of their capacity for thought. Yet, as Rödl, Kimhi and Kern state, subscribing to those conditions is not standard in contemporary philosophy. The following presumptions seem to be far more widespread: the ideas that knowledge is infallible (Kern), that logic is separated from the psychological (Kimhi) and truth is timeless, meaning that it can be captured in a deductive calculus (Rödl).¹⁴⁵ All of those ideas refer to a reality that is in its true nature not changeable, not finite and not (easily) understandable to human beings. In their respective works, Rödl, Kimhi and Kern explain why this would not be the right way of seeing the relation of human beings to reality, since thinking and being are irrevocably related.

In this chapter, I will attempt to shed light on the way in which a conception of not-being as potentiality for being could belong to the sort of framework sketched by Rödl, Kimhi and Kern. Each section up until the last discusses one of those philosophers in relation to the conceptualization of not-being developed in this essay and, in the last section, those are all brought together. In section 4.1, I go into Rödl's argument

¹⁴⁵ Kern (2017) p. 4; Kimhi (2018) p. 30-31 and Rödl (2012) p. 2.

for the unity of being and thinking in *Categories of the Temporal*. In section 4.2, I relate this to Kimhi's book *Thinking and Being* and, in section 4.3, I discuss Kern's *Sources for Knowledge* and investigate the way in which knowledge can be seen as part of the dichotomy between thinking and being. In 4.4, I conclude the chapter by stating that those three works provide a solid basis on which a conception of not-being as potentiality for being can thrive.

4.1 Not-being and Rödl's unity of thinking and being.

In his book *Categories of the Temporal*, Rödl introduces the distinction between logic as the study of deductive calculi and 'metaphysical logic'. He argues that the first kind of logic has become prevalent in current-day (analytic) debates and refers to "the study of the properties of formal calculi".¹⁴⁶ According to Rödl, this kind neglects the metaphysical dimension of logic, which it has carried throughout the history of philosophy in the sense that logic would investigate the *form of thought as such*.¹⁴⁷ In contrast to this prevalent conception of logic, he describes another, second kind of logic, which functions as "thought reflecting upon itself". This metaphysical logic does not neglect its metaphysical roots since it focusses on what defines a thought in its being a thought and thus on the *logical* unity of thought.¹⁴⁸ Rödl states that metaphysical logic exactly captures what Aristotle meant by metaphysics or the study of *what is*:

Logic in the second sense can be called metaphysical logic, for it is the same science as that which Aristotle describes as follows: "There is a science that investigates what is insofar as it is and what belongs to it in itself." If we call the science that Aristotle describes in this passage metaphysics, then metaphysics investigates the general form of what is. This is another name for the general form of thought.¹⁴⁹

Hence, Rödl identifies the unity of thought with the unity of *what is*, or being, and creates a science that is able to capture both at the same time, i.e. metaphysical logic. Being and thought are able to form the same unity, since both reality and the mind are finite and are thus both articulated through *time*. This finitude or temporality is expressed in intuition, which allows human beings and their finite intellects to grasp reality that contains movement and change.

Rödl argues that the form of thought as such, or the unity of thought and being, can be divided into the *categories of the temporal*, which are all present in the finite intellect: tense, aspect and generic thought.¹⁵⁰

Tensed thoughts and thoughts whose unity exhibits aspect are both logical, transcendental-logical forms of time consciousness.¹⁵¹ The third kind of thought, time-general, articulates *laws of the temporal*, which are based on and form part of the other two kinds of thought. It is interesting, for the purpose of the essay,

¹⁴⁶ Rödl (2012) p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Rödl (2012) p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Rödl (2012) p. 19.

¹⁴⁹ Rödl (2012) p. 22.

¹⁵⁰ Rödl (2012) p. 9-10.

¹⁵¹ Rödl (2012) p. 10.

that in the formation of those laws, Rödl contends that there can be *interference*; indicating that not-being may be the concept responsible for interfering with them. This means that there are no general thoughts that bridge temporal differences, which do not have exceptions. Rödl describes this interference as a necessary part of laws that capture the temporality of being in thought:

A generic statement says what happens if nothing interferes. The expression “if nothing interferes” does *not* vaguely hint at a set of conditions such that we would formulate an exceptionless law if we could identify that set. (...) The formula “if nothing interferes” does not designate an unknown content but *a known form*: it signifies that form of predication of the statement is the time-general predication of generic statements. (...) [In this way,] Generic statements *explain* the temporal reality that exemplifies them. (...) If nothing interferes, we can explain why a substance is moving, and how it is moving, by the law according to which it is moving (...) [It simply means that] The subject of such thoughts remains the same through changing states, and that requires that a law connect these states.¹⁵²

So, human beings may be able to formulate a law and know the general result of a mix between being and not-being, i.e. X is able to move and has the potentiality to move in such-and-such circumstances, but this does not always explain the particular cases in which that mix is seen, i.e. X moves or X does not move. Namely, in special cases, the same circumstances might have a different outcome, which can be perceived in the actualization of another potentiality of X: there occurs a deviation from the general, i.e. X is not moving, although it would normally move in these circumstances. Thus, not-being, as X’s potentiality not to move in the same circumstances, interferes with that law and another temporal actuality of X is reached. However, in those exceptions, not-being also exhibits the intrinsic temporality of those laws: a law can only be said to have temporal unity if it is liable to time and its particular instances.

Rödl therefore makes way for the conception that reality and the intellect in their temporality include indeterminacy and potentiality for being. For, if both thinking and being are expressed through their finitude, not-being as potentiality for being is always present in their unity. That is, one cannot maintain that time is a crucial factor in formulating thoughts containing being *and* reject not-being at the same time. Thus, by accepting time as a crucial factor in reality, its changeability, and things existing in their potentiality through not-being, form a necessary part of it, as was maintained by Plato. Therefore, by saying that time is the common factor in both thinking and being, Rödl is also assuming that not-being plays a role in the dichotomy. This is further demonstrated by the fact that the content of thoughts is variable according to the particular mix of being and not-being that is being expressed in them. Because being and thinking are the same for Rödl, thought has to correspond to the changes in being (and not-being). And, because there is continuous change as time is going by, being and not-being are differently mixed every time that they are thought. In this manner, being *and* not-being correspond to thought in their timely form. Furthermore, not-being’s role in the formulation of thoughts is magnified, when those

¹⁵² Rödl (2012) p. 197-200.

thoughts try to bridge temporal differences in time-general statements, by for example stating the same in the past tense and the present tense. Since the continuation of the same is made difficult by not-being, which *interferes*, one has to think carefully in capturing reality that potentially changed into something different over time. Rödl for instance acknowledges that one has to change the formulation of a thought in order to account for the temporal shifts that have occurred in the meantime: “a difference in the temporal position of what is stated may be compensated for by the shift of the temporal position of the act of stating it”.¹⁵³ Not-being thus plays a continuous role in the unity of thought and being or, in other words, in changing reality itself and the finite mind that represents it.

Moreover, it is relevant for this essay that Rödl also ‘solves’ how it is possible for human beings to be “thinking the temporal and knowing the changeable” reality in the first place.¹⁵⁴ That is, by developing a framework in which metaphysics and logic have the same subject matter, since being and thinking are the same, Rödl is able to establish new ways in which we conceive of the particular and the general. He argues that both the particular and the general are needed to capture and understand reality, since “we perceive the temporal only as we apprehend the general in it, and we apprehend the general only as we see it at work in the temporal”.¹⁵⁵ In this way, similar to Aristotle’s, Rödl is able to connect the Platonic realm of change, motion and time to the Parmenidian idea of a changeless, motionless, eternal realm of being in the particular and the general. Within this kind of framework, the particular refers to those thoughts or statements which represent temporal differences and the general signifies those thoughts or statements which bridge them.¹⁵⁶ The general does, however, not refer to thoughts which are true without exception, as they would for Parmenides, but which are true in *general*, i.e. general statements do not always capture the same reality, although they are formulated in corresponding temporal forms. By this interdependence between the particular and the general, Rödl indeed shows that not only time manifests itself both in particular instances and in a general form, but that the unity of being and thinking does too in respect of its temporal structure.

Human beings can therefore think the temporal and know the changeable both because and although not-being plays a role in these processes. Thought and being in their temporal instances are there in that particular form, since some potentialities for being, parts of not-being, are realized into being, while others are not at that time. Furthermore, through forming an understanding of how being and not-being mix over time, human beings can think temporal and general thoughts and follow reality as it changes over time. The difficulty, on the other hand, is that not-being’s role in temporal processes makes it harder to see clearly *what is* and what would be a correct thought in general. Rödl describes not-being’s role as *interference* in forming general thoughts on temporal processes. These arguments show that Rödl’s

¹⁵³ Rödl (2012) p. 160.

¹⁵⁴ Rödl (2012) p. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Rödl (2012) p. 207.

¹⁵⁶ Rödl (2012) p. 198.

framework on the unity of thinking and being in time permit not-being to play a constitutive role in accounting for the temporal differences contained in thought and being. The force of this argument lies in the fact that Rödl unites thought and being by means of their temporality and, thus, as a parallel to Plato, opens the possibility for difference, change and fallibility, or in other words: indeterminacy, without undermining the Parmenidian conception of reality to a great extent. By admitting to or believing in the intrinsicality of time in the being of *what is* or thought, he creates a metaphysics, or rather a metaphysical logic, which is, on the one hand, not restricted to the rigid frame of eternal truth and changeless being and, on the other hand, not without the possibility of (eternal) truth and knowledge of being. He is hence able to widen the scope of metaphysics so as to include temporal thought, changeable being *and* not-being with its potentiality for being.

4.2 Not-being and Kimhi's syncategorematic unity of thinking, being and not-being.

Kimhi provides a similar, yet Quietist critique against those logical views which assume a difference between “logical principles as principles of being and logical principles as principles of thinking” in his book *Thinking and Being*.¹⁵⁷ Especially in the case of Frege, who argued for a hard separation of the logical (how people should think) and psychological (how people actually think), Kimhi finds fault. According to Kimhi, all these views neglect the fact that while making a judgement one is also conscious of doing the judging, whereby the logical (*p*) and psychological (*I think p*) cannot be separated.¹⁵⁸ When these are separated from one another, one cannot account for the dual nature of language, as Kimhi states:

Language, we can say, belongs to the form or the unity of consciousness insofar as it is the same as self-consciousness. I shall dub this result the deep linguistic turn in philosophy. From [the] point of view of the deep linguistic turn, we come to see consciousness, the capacity to judge, and the capacity [to] communicate judgment by propositional signs, as one and the same capacity.¹⁵⁹

The problem with those philosophical views, which separate the logical and psychological, is that these do not acknowledge how language relates to the reality of making a judgment. That is, because Kimhi contends that the logical and the psychological are parts of the same coin, language cannot be seen as the decisive form determining the truth and falsity of a statement: language is only the way of communication by which we convey our self-consciously achieved thoughts and judgments. And truth and falsity can be independently added to those thoughts and judgments.¹⁶⁰ Through this separation of self-conscious language and truth-false values, Kimhi is able to argue that there are not only categorematic, but also *syncategorematic* parts of language. He defines the categorematic parts or *units*, when for instance a whole proposition is classified as categorematic, of language to be *categorematic* “if something can be predicated of it, or if it can be predicated of something – in other words, if it can stand as a subject or a predicate in a

¹⁵⁷ Kimhi (2017) p. 10 (Part I).

¹⁵⁸ Kimhi (2017) p. 75 (Part I).

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Kimhi (2018) p. 60.

proposition".¹⁶¹ *Syncategorematic* parts or units of language are such, if they cannot play a categorematic role or cannot occur within a predicative proposition. Kimhi argues that these syncategorematic words are words such as connectors *and* and *or*, propositional attitudes such as *believes* and truth-value predicates such as *is true* and *is false*, which all govern propositions while not being part of them themselves.¹⁶² This distinction indicates that language has a function beyond the formulation of predicative statements and that this 'beyond' is actually what constitutes the self-consciousness of the judger herself. By his denial of the role of self-consciousness in the logic of the *Begriffsschrift*, Frege can hence not account for the fact that there are *syncategorematic* expressions that do play a role in judgements, but not in propositions.¹⁶³ And because of Frege's and other philosophers' tendency to deny the relevance of non-representational, syncategorematic expressions, Kimhi asserts that they are unable to give a correct explanation of the logical and psychological principles of non-contradiction. Although *p* or *not-p* (and *I think p* or *I think not p*) cannot both be in correspondence with positive reality, they form a *syncategorematic* unity, since they are both part of the two-way capacity (*p* or *not-p*) underlying reality.

The case of contradictory pairs such as (*p* or *not-p*), and thus negation, is of special importance to Kimhi, since negation is part of the syncategorematic capacity underlying every judgement in the principle of noncontradiction. The law of noncontradiction is, according to Kimhi, a self-conscious realization of the judger not to both think *p* and *not-p*.¹⁶⁴ The law itself is thus a unity in the consciousness of the judger and *not* a propositional impossibility. By interpreting Aristotle's writings, Kimhi concludes that negation itself signifies a syncategorematic act, and that the formation of contradictory pairs is an expression of the subject to affirm or deny a combination of words:

We can now take again the argument that introduces contradictory pairs in De Int. 6 without ascribing to Aristotle a distinction between force and content. Aristotle's point is that the same combination that holds or does not hold can also be held to hold or not to hold by the subject. A combination is held to hold by the judging subject as a combination (affirmation), and it is held not to hold as a separation (denial).¹⁶⁵

A contradictory pair such as (*p* or *not-p*) has an internal unity, because it underlies every judgment in the metaphysical priority of the judger to affirm or deny it in correspondence with reality.¹⁶⁶ This metaphysical priority of affirming or denying a judgement before adopting it, refers back to Kimhi's argument that being and thinking are the same (but also different!). That is, he believes that the act of forming a judgement involves both being and the act of thinking, since a judgment can be affirmed or denied in thought in accordance with *how things are* in reality. Kimhi's argument for the logical unity of (*p* or *not-p*) thus portrays the idea that negation and therefore not-being in general are metaphysically coherent with

¹⁶¹ Kimhi (2018) p. 81.

¹⁶² Kimhi (2018) p. 81-86.

¹⁶³ Kimhi (2018) p. 81.

¹⁶⁴ Kimhi (2017) p. 54 (Part I).

¹⁶⁵ Kimhi (2017) p. 69-70 (Part II).

¹⁶⁶ Kimhi (2018) p.108-112.

the unity of thinking and being. That can be the case, because the syncategorematic refers to the capacity of a judgement to be and be thought as p and not to be and be thought as $not-p$ before any categorematic meanings can be attached to p .

So, before any predicative values or functions are connected to being and thinking, a metaphysical, syncategorematic unity underlies those values and functions. In this lies Kimhi's quietism, as he himself describes:

Quietism does not seek to reduce not-being to being through an analysis of negation and truth- and falsity conditions, or to show that the point of view from which the use of negation appears unintelligible rests merely on a confusion about the actual use of words. Instead, the quietist seeks to render the unity of thinking and being (and non-being) self-evident by attaining clarity concerning the way logical unity is revealed through the occurrence of propositions and predicates inside and outside negations and other logical contexts. I want to suggest that we can come to recognize metaphysics (...) is quietism (...) we can conclude from quietism that the 'meta-' is the beyond of the syncategorematic relative to the categorematic; in particular, it is the syncategorematic unity of simple contradictory pairs.¹⁶⁷

With this quote in mind, and neglecting their systematic differences, it can be said that Kimhi adds the thesis that not-being can be understood as part of the syncategorematic, contradictory pair with being, and hence forms a unity with being and thinking, to Rödl's framework. This is essential in understanding the values and functions that are attached to not-being: those are only part of not-being in so far as not-being in its unity with thinking and being relates to them. In a way similar to Rödl, Kimhi thus maintains that metaphysics does not go beyond the unity of thinking, being and not-being, but portrays how the logical and epistemological can only be understood through this unity.

In this framework, not-being does not possess a categorematic form itself, yet Kimhi seems to shed light on the way that not-being can take part in both syncategorematical and categorematical forms. Moreover, exactly because he connects the meaning of not-being to the paradoxes of falsehood and negation, as in the case of the Greek philosophers, Kimhi also makes way for a not-being that can be seen as potentiality for being. In a syncategorematic unity, not-being always belongs to being *and* opposes it: not-being and being can thus be seen as the contradictory pair in the syncategorematic form (p or $not-p$); being and the potentiality that not- p is p at another time. Not-being then signifies to the possibility of p to be $not-p$ and thus also to the dependence of p on the influence of other syncategorematic capacities on this one. In a categorematic sense, veridical not-being (in the form of negative facts) as well as veridical being underlies the reality of a positive fact, i.e. the potentiality for being is now not actualized. In both cases, not-being always stays in a relation to categorematic being, be it in an underlying syncategorematic opposition or by

¹⁶⁷ Kimhi (2018) p. 161.

syncategorematic difference to the categorematic fact. Not-being as potentiality for being can therefore not be seen as playing a part in denying impossibilities, such as “ $2+2\neq 5$ ” and “A whale is not a horse”. These are also syncategorematic statements, however their corresponding syncategorematic forms in being, i.e. “ $2+2=5$ ” and “A whale is a horse”, only relate to them by being impossible. This indicates that these statements concerning impossibilities do not form a contradictory pair with syncategorematic being, meaning that they can never be actualized, and are purely syncategorematic: metaphysically speaking, they stand alone. By formulating negations of impossibilities, the judger believes she is self-conscious of a certain negative truth, but not one belonging to veridical not-being which would deny an unactualized potentiality for categorematic being. Rather, denials of impossible statements can be said to be logical *expansions*, based on the capacities and actualizations of other syncategorematic unities. In this way, Kimhi already seems to have formulated the roles of not-being as potentiality for being. Furthermore, inspired by Plato, he specifies these roles as being part of Otherness, although he does not explicitly mention not-being:

in its supervening role, Otherness holds between categorematic forms, whereas in its constitutive role Otherness is an operation that displays the dependence of one act of a syncategorematic form on another.¹⁶⁸

Hence, not-being at large has two metaphysical roles: (1) it demonstrates the differences between categorematic forms and (2) its syncategorematic presence displays the dependence of the positive on the negative and the negative upon the positive form of a judgment. Not-being adopts the first, because it indicates that a positive, actualized categorematic form (p) could have been different, which can be seen in another unactualized syncategorematic form ($not-p$) at another time or in another entity, i.e. implying a difference between categorematic forms. Not-being has attained the second role, because the actualization of a specific syncategorematic unity may be interdependent on the actualization of other syncategorematic unities. That is, before a syncategorematic unity would be actualized in a positive, categorematic form of being, not-being exists as a negative fact until it is actualized and signifies the possibility that it will not be actualized.

Overall, Kimhi created an account in which not-being can be understood in itself as having syncategorematic form. In its metaphysical, logical and epistemological basis, it forms a unity with thinking and being. Not-being then forms part of the syncategorematic capacity for being and thinking to be different – depending on other, determined or undetermined syncategorematic capacities in which not-being takes part. In practice, when it is used to describe reality, it does refer to a difference with *what is*. Then, not-being conveys the relation between the things that are, since if something is p it may also be $not-p$ at another time or another entity. By making this argument, Kimhi believes to have removed the

¹⁶⁸ Kimhi (2018) p. 157.

Parmenidian concern that the sameness of being and thinking render not-being unintelligible.¹⁶⁹ He explains this as follows:

It will be useful to recall here a challenge that goes back to Parmenides's *Poem* and the Goddess's statement that being and thinking are the same. This should be read as stating that everything relevant to the truth of a judgment is already contained within judgment. The Goddess concludes on the basis of this point that negation and falsehood are unintelligible. But I wish to propose that, in fact, the difficulties concerning negation and falsehood are removed through acknowledgement of the sameness of thinking and being.¹⁷⁰

By introducing the syncategorematic form or capacity, negation and falsehood are explicitly separated from one another in logic: negation only exists syncategorematically or metaphysically (in Kimhi's sense of the word), in the way that something possesses the capacity not to be, i.e., *not-p*. Falsehood (and truth) only enters when in reality *p* is not so that the judgement that *p* is, would be false. The not-being of this essay, as potentiality for being, *is* a syncategorematic negation and in this capacity fits in a framework that forms a unity with thinking and being. The potentiality for being exactly lies in the fact that it forms a unity with being and can change from *not-p* to *p* and can be thought about in this unity.

4.3 Not-being and Kern's fallibility of knowledge.

In her book *Sources of Knowledge*, Kern presents an Aristotelean (and Kantian), representational viewpoint on knowledge, which complements the positions of Rödl and Kimhi on the unity of thinking, being and not-being. As we have seen, Rödl seems to acknowledge that knowledge has an intrinsic fallibility, as something can interfere and no time-general thought is thus without exception, and Kimhi would say that knowledge has a built-in capacity to deviate, i.e. the syncategorematic two-way capacity of (*p* or *not-p*) underlies specific acts of judgment. Not-being is in these ways represented in their approaches to knowledge. And Kern connects those approaches in her critique on the contemporary tendency to ignore the distinction between skepticism and fallibilism. Both the skeptic herself and the opponents, she says, wrongly maintain that knowledge should result in certain, infallible knowledge (yet according to the skeptic this is an unachievable goal).¹⁷¹ This thesis neglects the fact that, metaphysically speaking, fallibility is inherent to knowers and knowledge alike.¹⁷² Fallibility and knowledge are hence not mutually exclusive, rather the opposite: because of the fact that knowledge is fallible can we gain knowledge. Thus, Kern's position can support those of Rödl and Kimhi and make way for the conception of not-being as potentiality for being without rendering knowledge necessarily doubtful or unattainable. That is, she develops a framework in which human beings can have access to knowledge *and* be part of a finite, changing reality.

¹⁶⁹ Kern (2017) p. 151

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Kern (2017) p. 4.

¹⁷² Kern (2017) p. 5.

Kern's argument rests on the metaphysical assumption that the basis of knowledge is *self*-knowledge. Human beings, or knowers, have imperfect minds and can err, which indicates that attaining knowledge is not a certainty but a capacity. Human beings thus do not reach knowledge every time that they try to do so, yet they have the possibility to attain it and are self-conscious of the process in which they attain it: in learning. Inspired by Aristotle, Kern states that human beings can acquire a rational capacity for knowledge by learning or exercising it and that forming knowledge is a form of teleological causality.¹⁷³ An idea which is also present in Rödl's inclusion of movement form, as the time-general thought, in movement itself.¹⁷⁴ This causality implies that the capacity for knowledge can function either perfectly or imperfectly, which is formulated by Kern as follows:

A capacity for knowledge is a cause that is logically dependent on its effect (viz., knowledge) in the sense that exercises of that capacity, as such, fall under the concept of knowledge as being in either perfect or imperfect agreement with the concept of knowledge.¹⁷⁵

This means that in learning one can achieve knowledge by exercising the capacity perfectly, but also in learning one is already achieving it imperfectly. Within the process of learning, fallibility plays a role, as the human being is not perfect and knowledge is not yet truly reached. Kern hence states that knowing is seen in the formula: "S knows that p = S's belief that p is a perfect exercise of her capacity for knowledge".¹⁷⁶ The importance of the knower's (justified) belief indicates that the way to ensure that we have knowledge is by using the capacity for knowledge and that it is necessary to have a self-understanding of attaining knowledge.

Thus, Kern suggests that human beings come to know reality through the metaphysical unity of thinking, being and not-being by realizing that as knowers they form part of reality and that the metaphysical basis is represented in them as well. In the conclusion, she declares the following:

we then came to realize that understanding of ourselves as subjects who have beliefs about how things are in the world already involves the exercise of a capacity for knowledge that one cannot have without exercising it. Hence, if nothing hinders us from perfectly exercising our rational capacity for knowledge, then to understand ourselves as subjects who can acquire knowledge about how things are in the world is actually to know that we are such subjects. Moreover, if nothing hinders us from perfectly actualizing our capacity for knowledge, we can even realize this kind of self-knowledge – a kind of self-knowledge

¹⁷³ Kern (2017) p. 8.

¹⁷⁴ Rödl (2012) p. 172-173.

¹⁷⁵ Kern (2017) p. 243.

¹⁷⁶ Kern (2017) p. 135.

that we actualize in everything we think and do – in its most articulate form. We can realize it as *philosophical* knowledge.¹⁷⁷

The argument that knowledge is metaphysically speaking a capacity articulates the idea according to which human beings come to know themselves as actualizing their capacity for knowledge. If they acknowledge that they form part of the finite, categorematic realm within which potentialities may be realized or not, perfectly or imperfectly, it is clear that underlying that very realm is the unity of thinking, being and not-being. That is, “everything we think and do” is based on this unity. Kern has therefore made possible that there is a constant factor of not-being as potentiality for being present in the attainment of knowledge, which can be seen its fallibility and the attainment of knowledge in spite of this fallibility. Those epistemologists that argue against the intrinsic fallibility of knowledge do not observe that within their argument fallibility is already contained, since it underlies any claim that is made in relation to or about knowledge.¹⁷⁸

Moreover, by means of Kern’s theory it is possible to explain the relation of not-being to doubtfulness and being unsure. More specifically, human beings are self-conscious of their lack of knowledge in those instances. And, although they have a strong inclination to believe that p , they are aware that they have not yet the right amount of information and are not yet perfectly exercising their capacity for knowledge to be able to conclude that p is the realization of the metaphysical unity of (p or $not-p$), i.e. it could still be $not-p$, the mere potential for being. Thus, doubting knowledge is asserting the potentiality still captivated within p ’s metaphysical unity with $not-p$. And this is the same as doubting whether the capacity for knowledge is fully actualized. It is, however, not doubting the capacity for knowledge itself, as Kern says: “it is absurd for someone who knows that she possesses a rational capacity for knowledge to entertain a skeptical doubt about that fact. She wouldn’t be able to intelligibly formulate such a doubt”.¹⁷⁹ In this way self-consciousness can make us see the metaphysical unity underlying thinking and knowing, but can also lead to justified true beliefs, without being bothered by skeptic doubt interfering with the sources of those beliefs.

4.4 A conceptual framework supporting not-being as potentiality for being.

Combining the writings of all three philosophers, Rödl, Kimhi and Kern, results in a framework that both presupposes and enables the view of not-being as potentiality for being. This framework presupposes such a conception of not-being, since its metaphysical basis is founded on indefinite being and finite thinking as capacities. Being and thinking are themselves characterizable by their possibilities and these possibilities can only be indefinite when not-being stands in relation to those two. Namely, as a negation to the positive and as potential counterpart to the actual, it is everywhere where actual being and positive

¹⁷⁷ Kern (2017) p. 278. Emphasis added by the author.

¹⁷⁸ Kern (2017) p. 275.

¹⁷⁹ Kern (2017) p. 274.

thinking (knowledge) are not. By functioning along these lines, this framework makes way for conceptualizing not-being in terms of potentiality for being, because it does not try to exclude change, difference and fallibility but fundamentally embraces them.

The re-instatement and embracement of an Aristotelean system including temporality, change, potentiality, actuality and capacity rejuvenates the idea that there can be a metaphysical basis underlying physical reality including human beings themselves. Such a system does not preclude concepts such as the *a priori*, transcendentalism or timelessness, but it shows that we cannot use those concepts without acknowledging where they come from and in relation to what they obtain meaning: human beings in a finite and changing reality. Eventually, such a metaphysical scheme in terms of the syncategorematic unity of thinking, being and not-being even enables discovering general rules guiding reality, exactly because not-being is accepted as a constant factor in that reality. Namely, in recognizing that not-being plays a metaphysical role in the acquisition of knowledge, we can explain the source of doubt, fallibility and indeterminacy in gaining it. And, in being self-conscious about the way this metaphysical unity forms the basis of thought, predication and knowledge, it is possible to understand the scope of our own human capacity for knowledge.

As Kimhi already pointed out, this framework hence shows that Parmenides' monism can in fact be extended so as to include not-being in the unity of being and thinking. Still, this kind of not-being does not refer to pure negativity but to a relation to being and thinking expressed in their indeterminacy. In its metaphysical basis, not-being as potentiality for being is always present in not-being used in particular instances and, hence, in predication. It can be said that the framework indicates that not-being is 'only' understandable in its metaphysical, syncategorematic nature. Not-being is not a positive, categorematic, finite notion itself, but signifies the fact that all positive, categorematic, finite things are in their nature not motionless, eternal or unchangeable. On account of its characterization as potentiality for being and its expression of the indeterminacy of reality, not-being is therefore a metaphysical concept *pur sang*. Although it cannot be intuited, it governs the things that are and signifies *what could be*, which is reflected in thought and speech. As such, it is adopted in logical and epistemological frames in its form *not-p*, indicating that in its basis *p* is not always and in every circumstance *p* but can be the *mere potentiality that p*.

Conclusion

How to determine the indeterminate

The research question of this essay was formulated as follows: *what are the presumptions underlying the philosophical treatment of not-being (and its basic form: not-p) in its relation to being, and is it possible to develop an adequate understanding of this notion in itself?* By means of both a historical and a systematic analysis of this research question, the answer that is presented here forms a continuation of those historical traditions and goes beyond them. On the basis of Parmenides' and Plato's writings, the historical part of the essay indicated that the presumptions underlying the philosophical treatment of not-being are: (1) not-being is the contradictory counterpart of being, (2) not-being as a purely negative notion cannot be known, (3) as otherness it stands in relation to being, (4) its nature forms part of difference, (5) the necessity of not-being lies in the fact that it accounts for diversity in reality. Not-being, with those presumptions in mind, seems to have developed into two forms: (1) not-being that stands in relation to being as difference and which plays a metaphysical *and* ontological role (Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Strawson) and (2) not-being that stands in opposition to being which is expressed in language and logic (Frege, Geach and Ayer). The systematic part of the essay, on the other hand, shows how those presumptions and two classes can be merged in the meaning of not-being and that it is possible to state that (2) is actually the underlying, metaphysical (and logical) structure of the ontological differences not-being presents as to being in (1). With the help of Aristotle's vocabulary and elaboration on Parmenides' and Plato's writings, it can be concluded that not-being *as such* is the *potentiality for being*. Such a characterization of not-being supports the thesis that purely negative not-being cannot be described or known, but that an adequate understanding of not-being can be found in its otherness to being, since the otherness to being is present in every mixture of being and not-being. Not-being can then be seen as a reference to the indeterminateness of being and reality, on the premise that reality includes this indeterminacy.

The question on the reality or truth of not-being is thus re-formulated in this essay as a question after the reality or truth of the indeterminate, i.e. what is to be determined and, hence, not directly given in intuition (which only presents what is fully determinate). Not-being is not the same as being and refers to those instances in which reality is, in some way or other, different than *what is*. As is formulated in the research question of the essay, the next step would be, if the indeterminate is part of reality, to ask whether we can theorize about and know something that is indeterminate in the relevant sense. In this essay, both

questions have been answered positively, given that reality is changeable, finite and our knowledge of it fallible. In this framework, not-being as *potentiality for being* functions as a metaphysical (in Kimhi's sense, syncategorematic) unity with being (and thinking) in the sense that it underlies the possibilities for being in reality. Not-being is therefore a purely metaphysical notion, in the sense that *as such* it is not positive or categorematic, only thinkable in its negativeness. Nevertheless, in the differences between the forms of being manifest in change, plurality and diversity, not-being's manifestations can be observed and directly referred to in *incomplete* negation. By negating something *specific*, we imply that it is now *not*, i.e. negatively present and not in this moment manifested or actualized, but that it has the potentiality to be present at another point in time. Because not-being in its unity with being and thinking functions in a temporal frame, negation further implies the constant possibility of not-being in *things that are* (i.e. being) and, conversely, a constant possibility of being within not-being. The relation between being and not-being thus stated comes down to the fact that the metaphysical, syncategorematic unity (p or $not-p$) cannot be excluded from the positive facts (i.e. from being).

The possibility of conceptualizing not-being therefore depends on a framework in which difference is part of reality, since difference refers to the idea that every part of being both is the same as itself and different in reference to other things. As Plato already maintained, sameness and difference stand in direct relation to being and not-being. He stressed that the dichotomy between being and not-being gets explicated in sameness and difference and is reliant on forces that result in sameness and difference such as time and motion. However, it is not a common tendency among contemporary philosophers to include difference in their frameworks – the philosophers I discussed, Rödl, Kimhi and Kern, are exceptions in this regard. They argue that those contemporary philosophers try to separate being and not-being from one another in order to argue for an eternal truth, for the primacy of (atemporal) logic and for a conception of knowledge as infallible. Those views can thus be characterized as Parmenidian in spirit; they cannot function with a conception of not-being as potentiality for being, as it would undermine the credibility of their basic notions. That is, the 'high levels' of truth and knowledge that they aim for could never be reached, when in every being there is a potentiality for it to be different and those *things that are not* could *be*. Nevertheless, Rödl, Kimhi and Kern have shown that these views forget from which reality truth, logic and knowledge originate and, hence, of which reality human beings themselves are part. When they realize the undeniable self-consciousness of their own thinking, they would realize that the metaphysical unity of (p or $not-p$) is present in every act of thinking. Moreover, if it would be acknowledged that reality is changeable and finite, and our knowledge of it fallible, it becomes clear that an Aristotelean framework of capacity, possibility and potentiality is actually able to determine the indeterminate. By endorsing not-being as *potentiality for being*, it makes for instance no sense to be afraid of fallibility, doubt and imperfection in language and thought, as these are part of truth, logic and knowledge. Not-being is then not always something purely negative, but also a notion capturing the indeterminacy of reality and the reality of the indeterminate.

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