

# Can Words Carve a Jointless Reality? Parmenides and Śaṅkara\*

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*Parmenides and Śaṅkara are two ontological non-dualists who regard any division—for instance, between everyday objects or individuals—as conventional. Both Parmenides and Śaṅkara, by arguing for the undividedness of absolute reality, provide a vantage point from which to consider the possible arbitrariness of all divisions, which originate from human distinctions, rather than reflect gaps between different joints of reality. Human distinctions—and words used to draw them—are secondary to a reality that cannot be cut at its natural joints, since it does not have such joints. Reality can only be cut in useful pieces, according to the cutter’s perspective and purpose—thus no individual, science, or discourse can claim to know the allegedly real divisions of reality. In spite of this, Parmenides and Śaṅkara regard distinctions as both useful for everyday life and necessary for doing philosophy. I visualize their non-dual reality as an undivided background that can be both known immediately and non-dually, and foregrounded by means of distinctions, such as being and not-being, atman and non-atman—while they make it clear that such distinctions are just useful words. Epistemological dualism might be a useful tag for both of their philosophies. A reflection on these two philosophers is an example of borderless philosophy: an inquiry into conceptual tools that come from different philosophical traditions, and that provide a vantage point for reflection on our practices—in this case, our use of words that create distinctions rather than divisions.*

Key words: Parmenides; Śaṅkara; ontological non-dualism; epistemological dualism; words; distinctions; awareness; carving

## 1 Introduction: This Project and Its Relevance

I submit that Parmenides’ and Śaṅkara’s rejection of separate individuals and things as metaphysically fundamental and their elaboration on the deceitful power of words provide excellent reasons to look into their philosophies. Their philosophies are geared towards rescuing their audience from regarding what is at the foreground of their attention as absolutely real, whereas the contours of what they take for real entities are drawn by human concepts and words. By arguing for the undividedness of absolute reality, Parmenides and Śaṅkara provide a vantage point from which to expose the arbitrariness of all divisions, which are superimpositions that are not grounded in gaps between separate joints of reality, since there are no such gaps.

A metaphysical model that regards individuals and things as less real than the undivided background seems to have an evident “political” value: any division, for instance, between “us” and “them,” or East and West, becomes secondary and always dependent on the purpose of the one who makes such division. Scholars engaged in “borderless philosophy”<sup>1</sup> might well profit from acquaintance with this model, which, most importantly, does not recommend a *rejection* of distinctions, but rather a heightened *attention* to them. “Borderless philosophy” is neither a night in which all cows are black nor a free ticket to indiscriminately mix different metaphysical ingredients, but a way of doing philosophy in which awareness of different frameworks leads to the development of new insights. Such insights are developed in dialogue with philosophers who model reality differently from each other, by means of different words and concepts.

I have chosen to look into Parmenides and Śaṅkara, because, while they both defend ontological non-dualism, they both offer an explicit reflection on the status of words, showing us

that it is possible to use them while holding ontological non-dualism at the same time. In this paper, I will look at Parmenides' and Śaṅkara's explanations that words are, on the one hand, deceitful to those who believe them to label fundamentally separate portions of reality and, on the other hand, useful in order to expose ignorance, challenge assumptions, and shock the audience out of their engrained beliefs.

## 2 Interpretations of Parmenides' Being

Parmenides (fifth century BCE) wrote a poem in Ancient Greek, starting with a journey of a youth to the abode of a goddess who encourages him both to realize "being," or the heart of the trustworthy reality, and to inquire into untrustworthy theories.

Parmenides DK<sup>2</sup> B8, 28-32: [...] And you should find out everything, on the one hand, the unshaken heart of the trustworthy reality (*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.<sup>3</sup>

Parmenides has been interpreted in the most different ways: as a cosmologist, a logician, a metaphysician, a shaman, and a mystic. Not only is there much disagreement about the status of the astronomical and biological theories presented in the poem, but especially the question "what is being?" has been answered in the most different ways.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of interpreters take being to be a kind of object—by "object" I mean "what is different from a knowing subject."<sup>5</sup> Some take it to be the one real, birthless and deathless, changeless, undivided, and complete entity (DKB8). They claim that it was logic that forced Parmenides to describe reality as a changeless entity and to reject the testimony of the senses.<sup>6</sup> Other interpreters take being to be *any* changeless and undivided entity; that is, possibly more than one.<sup>7</sup> There is a minority of scholars who do not regard Parmenides' being as an object that can be described by logic, physics, or metaphysics: to them being is rather the reality of experience that can be realized by mystical initiation or intuition and facilitated by the sounds of poetry.<sup>8</sup> The problem with these interpretations<sup>8</sup> is that they discredit Parmenides' philosophical arguments.

How does Parmenides introduce his concept of being? Throughout the poem, he points to a reality that is more fundamental than what people naively regard as real: individuals and things that are born and die (see below, DKB19). In fragment DKB3—"In fact it is the same to know and to be" (*to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*)—he presents being as the same as *noein* ("to know," "to be aware," "to think," "to realize"). The majority of Parmenides scholars, however, do not accept this literal translation,<sup>9</sup> which some even regard as "utter nonsense."<sup>10</sup> The identity of knowing and being is nonsensical only if taken together with their own unchallenged assumption that being is an object, that is, something ontologically separate from the subject that knows it (not only distinguishable in thought from it). Apparently, they find it unproblematic that the knowing subject can "do some metaphysics" while sitting on their laurels in a different metaphysical domain from being's domain. However, Parmenides explicitly excludes this possibility by stressing both the homogeneity—that is, non-discontinuity—of being, and the fact that there is nothing other than being (which excludes the possibility of a separate subject): "for nothing else is or will be/ apart from being" (DKB8, 36-37). This pleads for the natural reading of DKB3, which, as we will see, does make sense.

### 3 The Undivided Background as a Helpful Visualization

I suggest to visualize being as an undivided background, which is more fundamental than any of the divisions at the foreground of our attention: the division, for instance, between knowing subjects and known objects, and between objects.

The distinction between being, as such a background, and everyday, usually foregrounded objects should not be seen as a separation or as a fundamental ontological discontinuity. I will argue that Śaṅkara's self (here referred to as *dr̥ṣṭi*, that is "Seeing," in the sense of "the mere act of seeing," "seeing as action") functions like Parmenides' being, that is, as the *distinct* background of pairs that depend on it, such as the subject and the object: distinct because it "needs" to be pointed to, but not separate: "The subject of seeing, the object of seeing, and seeing—all this is an error, since it is what you have falsely constructed. The object of seeing is not considered to be different from the Seeing (*dr̥ṣṭi*). [The *ātman*] in the state of deep sleep is not different [from *ātman*] in the waking state" (*Upad.*<sup>11</sup> I, 19, 9, cf. also I, 17, 87).<sup>12</sup>

Parmenides' knowing and being, Śaṅkara's subject of seeing and object of seeing are human distinctions and words for pairs of items, both of which ultimately refer to the undivided reality, which is usually in the background—Parmenides' being or Śaṅkara's *ātman* or seeing—and which is non-different from both items of the pairs.

Śaṅkara wrote, among other things, commentaries in Sanskrit on the Vedānta (or Upaniṣads: the last part of the Veda) in the eighth century CE. He is an exponent of Advaita, that is, non-dual, Vedānta: non-dual because he interprets literally the Upaniṣadic claim that *ātman* (our self) is the same as *brahman* (the essence of reality), which is unchangeable, undivided, and absolutely real and which is what we are at a more fundamental level than our body or our thoughts.<sup>13</sup>

Śaṅkara writes to help his audience achieve liberation (*mokṣa*) from *saṃsāra* (mundane existence). Liberation can only be achieved through realization of the identity of *ātman* and *brahman*,<sup>14</sup> which is absolute reality: the indeterminate reality,<sup>15</sup> which appears like many separate entities because of superimposition created by name and form. Absolute reality transcends language and conceptual thought: it cannot be described by well-formed propositions. And yet arguments can facilitate its knowledge, since they can help dispel the ignorance, or misconception (*avidyā*), that covers the background. The background is revealed when the attention shifts away from the many things in the foreground: "The Absolute is not proved by positive arguments. The advaitins negate the illusion of duality and the Absolute shines as the ground-reality" (Sharma 1996: 11).

The undivided background will be the *tertium comparationis*<sup>16</sup> between Parmenides' and Śaṅkara's absolute realities. I am well aware of the obvious differences between the ways these two philosophers point to these two realities. For instance, Parmenides does identify being with knowing (or being aware), but he does not explicitly say that being is our self or what we are. Śaṅkara often refers to the Veda as the scriptures, whereas nothing plays the role of a traditional scripture in Parmenides. But this will not be a "compare and contrast" paper.<sup>17</sup> I will specifically focus on their common use of distinctions in order to dispel human ignorance about what is real and undivided, and on their elaborations on the status of words.

### 4 Ignorance Is Belief in a Second Being. Anything Other than Being Is Just Words

Being, like *brahman*, can be realized once ignorance is removed.<sup>18</sup> What is the source of ignorance that both philosophers want to remove from their audience? Ignorance is, according to both, grounded in the belief in the reality of a second being other than the fundamental one.

Śaṅkara explains that belief in "this," that is, anything other than self or *ātman*, creates confusion. "This" is like a forest: believing in its existence is analogous to being lost in that

forest: “When one has traversed the forest of ‘this’ (= non-Ātman), which is contaminated with anxiety, delusion, and so on, one arrives at one’s own Ātman, just as the man from the land of Gandhāra through the forest” (*Upad.* I, 2,4). From *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI. 14, 1-2 we learn that this forest is a place in which a man is led with his eyes covered and left alone.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the man gets out of the forest and reaches his destination (his *ātman*).

Parmenides refers to blind and astonished people who believe in something in addition to the first fundamental reality. Parmenides’ confused people think that not-being is something real, in addition to being. They are incapable of distinguishing being and not-being and realizing their respective status.

Parmenides DKB6, 4-9: [...] 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 [*akrita*]  
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.

To these astonished people, being and not-being are the same (real items) and not the same (a couple of opposites). As we will see, both points are wrong, since there is only being (rather than two items), whereas not-being is just a concept.

## 5 The Way Out of Confusion

How do our philosophers help their audience out of the confused belief in the reality of something in addition to absolute reality? They use arguments. First, they both offer a distinction or discrimination between what is real and what is not real. This is the argument, the “much contested test,” to which Parmenides refers back in DKB7 as something the youth must judge with his reasoning.<sup>20</sup> The next step will be to realize that only the real *is*, whereas what was regarded as a second reality is just words.

In fragment DKB2, Parmenides rules out the notion that not-being is a second item next to being. He explains that understanding being and understanding not-being are two completely different enterprises, which need to be kept separated.

Parmenides DKB2, 1-5: 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.

The reason for the need to keep being and not-being separate is their asymmetry or incommensurability. Being (or “is”) is certain: it is available to immediate knowing, along the route “that ‘is’” (DKB2, 3), that is the “course of trust” (DKB2, 4); whereas not-being cannot be directly experienced and, thus, there is no evidence for its reality: “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]” (DKB2, 6-8). We can neither know nor trust not-being: there is no immediate experience of it; it must be just a human notion devised to divide reality into opposites, trace boundaries, and develop theories.<sup>21</sup>

The reasoning of the Indian philosopher Śāṅkara is similar in that it also starts with a crucial distinction<sup>22</sup>: the distinction between self and not-self, presented as of utmost importance at the beginning of his most famous work, the *Brahmasūtra-bhāṣya* (*BSB*<sup>23</sup>), which turns out to be the discrimination between what is fundamentally real and what is believed to be real: “The contents circumscribed by the dual concepts (*pratyayagocara*) of “you” (*yuṣmat*) and “I” (*asmat*), namely, the object (*viśaya*) and subject (*viśayin*) respectively, being by their nature as contrary as light is to darkness, cannot reasonably have any identity (*itaretarabhāva*) [...]” (*BSB* Introduction, Bilimoria 1997: 255).<sup>24</sup> What is described as the object that is completely contrary to the subject as darkness to light is the “you” (*yuṣmat*), which is presented as completely other than the “I” (or “royal we”: *asmat*). What one might take for a relation between two similar entities turns out to be the impossible pairing (*mithunīkaraṇa*) of two ontological incommensurables: what is real (*satya*) and what is unreal, illusion and falsehood (*mithyā*, *anṛta*). Those who are capable of discrimination know that only *ātman*, which is *brahman*, is real, whereas the rest is a product of ignorance—just like the snake that “disappears” once one realizes that it is just a rope.

Why are “I” and “you” incommensurable? A few pages later (*BSB* I, 1,1: 200), Śāṅkara explains that everyone is conscious of oneself and could never say “I am not”: “the existence of *brahman* is known on the ground of its being the Self of every one. For every one is conscious of the existence of (his) Self, and never thinks ‘I am not.’”<sup>25</sup> I believe that this is Śāṅkara’s strongest argument for why “you” and “I” are incommensurable: the “you” can never be known with the same immediacy as the “I”: the “you” is doomed to remain only an object of opinions. And yet to superimpose one on the other is *naisargika lokavyavahāra*, as stated by Śāṅkara in the introduction of the *BSB*, and translated as “humankind’s conventional praxis” (Bilimoria 1997: 258) or “on the part of man a natural procedure”:

It is on the part of man a natural procedure—which has its cause in wrong knowledge not to distinguish the two entities (object and subject) and their respective attributes, although they are absolutely distinct, but to superimpose upon each the characteristic nature and the attributes of the other, and thus, coupling the Real and the Unreal, to make use of expressions such as ‘That am I,’ ‘That is mine’ (Deutsch and Dalvi 2004: 196).

What is here translated as “wrong knowledge” is the ignorance, or better, the misconception (*avidyā*) at the root of the confusion that our philosophers want to eradicate: it is our spontaneous, unexamined, and ultimately erroneous way to make sense of the world, which is based on unawareness of this distinction—between self and object. Awareness of this misconception is also the first step out of confusion.

## 6 Śāṅkara *Avidyā* and Parmenides’ Deceitful Cosmos—the Power of Words

Sharma (1996: 6) explains *avidyā*, as “the beginningless transcendental Illusion which is the mother of this phenomenal world of subjects and objects,” that is, the power that “appears to perform the logically impossible feat of relating these two incompatibles”: “I” and “you” (or object). It consists in the superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of many objects and notions on *brahman* that is *ātman*, which is our self. It is the superimposition (or “transference,” Bilimoria 1997) onto what we all fundamentally are (*ātman*) of what we believe ourselves to be: our body, our character-traits, our thoughts, opinions, belonging, families, etc. (*BSB* I, 1,1).

What makes it so difficult to eradicate *avidyā* is that it is deeply engrained in humans, being at the basis of all distinctions and all relational thought. *Avidyā* is what allows us to see reality as a well-ordered cosmos.

Could *avidyā* be seen as the real power of creating a cosmos that, with all its differentiations, would endanger the non-duality of reality? Mayeda (1992: 20-1) comments that, when Śaṅkara introduces the principle of Unevolved Name and Form (*avyākṛta nāmarūpa*), which can be seen as a primary material state out of which the whole world evolves, he comes close to Sāṃkhyan dualism. Mayeda (1992: 24) comments that this explanation, which appears in the first chapter of the prose part (*Upad.* II, 1,19), was meant for a novice who was not yet ready to understand examples like the one of the snake and the rope. Mohanty<sup>26</sup> also looks into the tension between the non-dual reality that cannot be objectified and the power of *avidyā*<sup>27</sup> that seems to bring about precisely this impossible feat: it objectifies the self, thus concealing it. Mohanty refers to Śaṅkara's own claim that *ātman* is not entirely *a-viśaya* (non-object): in fact, *ātman* can become a notion, that is, the I-notion: *ahamdhī* (*Upad.* I, 2,2) or *ahampratyaya* (*Upad.* II, 2,52; II, 2,53, etc.; Mayeda 1992: 40). Once made into a notion, the "I" is one of the many objects of *avidyā*. Can reality still be seen as non-dual if this kind of objectification is possible?

How can we explain the attention given by both philosophers to the everyday world of the many things, a world which presupposes the existence of something other than absolute non-dual reality and is therefore not ultimately real? More specifically, how can we explain the traces of dualism that we can detect in Śaṅkara? And how can we explain the attention that Parmenides devotes to science (e.g. astronomy and biology) after having ruled out any trustworthy knowledge besides the immediate knowledge of being?

I will start from the explicit relation that they both draw between words and the everyday world of the many things that will enable me to argue that non-dualism is not threatened in either system. I will end this section showing that the labels "epistemological dualist" and "ontological non-dualist" fit both philosophers.<sup>28</sup>

Both philosophers seem to agree that words are what creates the world of the many. Ignorance is blindness to the origin of the many in words and acceptance of the many as real (rather than "word-dependent" or "constructed").

*Nāmarūpa* is Śaṅkara's principle that creates a cosmos: it is a compound that means "name and form." Names are the "verbal handles" that transform the one reality into many things. At the beginning of the *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Śaṅkara explains: "The notion '[I am] this' arises from the *ātman* [which is identified with] 'this' (= non-*Ātman*) and is within the range of a verbal handle" (*Upad.* I, 2,2). The phrase "within the range of a verbal handle" refers to *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI, 1, 4-6 (Mayeda 1992: 108, n. 2): "By means of just one lump of clay one would perceive everything made of clay—the transformation is a verbal handle, a name—while the reality is just this: 'It's clay.'" Thus, the way out of ignorance is the realization that all objects are just clay—and everything we identify with is fundamentally *ātman*. How can the many objects be, on the one hand, nothing other than undivided clay, and, on the other hand, illusion or *māyā*? How can my thoughts and my body be, on the one hand, *ātman* and, on the other hand, mere superimpositions?

The reasoning seems to be this: the many are just names that all refer to the same one. And then again names or words are needed, not only for making sense of everyday reality, but also for doing philosophy, as we will see.

Does Parmenides regard the many changing things as just words? He maintains that, by assigning a distinguishing name (*onom'(a) episémon*) to various aspects of reality, humans "create" things that are born and die and that are objects of their opinions and theories. "So according to opinion those things were born and now are/ and afterwards from now on, having developed, will end:/ to them men assigned a distinguishing name to each" (DKB19). According to opinion (*doxa*), what has a name is real. *Doxa* is similar to *adhyāsa*: it is what we superimpose on reality to make sense of it. Names (words) are what allow us to make sense of our everyday reality where we see entities being born and dying.

Making sense of reality by means of words means transforming it into a cosmos, that is, an ordered configuration in which, for instance, day is opposed to night and light to darkness.

The first Greek author to use the word *kosmos* (*kosmos*) *not* to refer to something man-made was Heraclitus—a contemporary of Parmenides. Heraclitus is the first one to use the word “cosmos” in the same way as we do now, that is to refer to something that is *not* made by somebody. Thus he needs to specify that he is talking of a different kind of cosmos than the ones his predecessors and contemporary talk about: one that is neither made by humans nor by gods.<sup>29</sup> Parmenides, on the contrary, uses the word as it was always used before Heraclitus: *kosmos* usually refers to jewels on a body, troops in an army, or words in a poem: human-made well-ordered dispositions that are effective and beautiful.<sup>30</sup> This is how Parmenides’ goddess refers to her own words: “[...] learn the opinions of the mortals/ listening to the deceitful order of my words (*kosmon emôn epeôn apatélon*) (DKB8, 51-56). A few lines later the goddess refers to what she will say, by using the composite *diakosmos* (“*dia*,” denotes division and distribution) which she now characterizes as “likely” (*diakosmon eikota*): “I tell you that this order of things is completely likely,/ never fear that any opinion of the mortals will ride past you” (DKB8, 60-61), signaling that her cosmos is the best explanation available. What makes the “scientific” explanations (for instance, about cosmology and biology) present in the poem both deceitful and likely?

These explanations are founded on two opposites: light and night. In order to have an ordered configuration, a cosmos, at least two principles are needed; one principle will not do: “For they decided to name two forms,/ of which it is not possible to name [only] one—in this men have gone wrong” (DKB8, 53-4). This is our human predicament: it is not possible to form opinions and theories about reality by means of one principle. However, by using two principles, humans commit the fundamental epistemological mistake of relying on a second principle that cannot be immediately known or trusted. When one builds a cosmos on two principles, one needs to be aware that we only have certainty about one—the “is,” the immediate certainty. Any second principle, of which we have no experience (see above, DKB2, 5-8), is a man-made concept. Therefore, words that make up even the best theory—that is, words that express even the most likely cosmos—are deceitful; they look trustworthy but cannot be:

Parmenides, DKB8, 51-56: [...] 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 this men have gone wrong  
And they *chose* as opposites in form—and assigned signs  
apart from one another.

Notice the phrases “they decided” (*katethento*—from *katatithêmi*, “to lay down”) and “they chose” (*ekrinanto*—from *krinô* “to separate,” “to divide,” “to choose,” “to judge”). Parmenides offers a model of a reality in which all discontinuities and oppositions are man-made. Reality cannot be pinned down by a theory that carves reality at its alleged joints since reality does not have such joints (*pace* Plato, *Phaedrus* 265e).<sup>31</sup> Reality can be described in various ways—none of which, however, can be regarded as the master theory of reality. In fact, because theories are based on words and distinctions, there is no master theory of reality: only better or worse theories, all based on untrustworthy concepts. And then again, we need these concepts to account for everyday perceptions and to talk meaningfully, even if not trustworthily, about them.

Is there ontological dualism in Parmenides and Śāṅkara that threatens the non-duality of their ultimate reality? They both seem to reject ontological dualism and to propose epistemological dualism.

Śāṅkara writes: “the Self within is one only; two internal Selves (sic) are not possible. But owing to its limiting adjunct the one Self is practically treated as if it were two; just as we make distinction between the ether of the jar and the universal ether [...]” (*BSB* I, 2,20: 210). Śāṅkara suggests that, when we identify with our bodies regarded as separate from the rest, it is as if we thought that jars and pots enclose different and separate “spaces,” whereas space (*ākāśa* or

*vyoman*), notwithstanding its apparent enclosure in jars and pots, is the same everywhere (*BSB* I, 1,5: 205; *BSB* I, 2,6: 209). We are self (*ātman*) that is *brahman*, which is a background that, just like space, is always available to us: “a person’s Self [...] is not something to be attained by that person [...] for as it is omnipresent it is part of its nature that is ever present to every one, just as the (all-pervading) ether is” (*BSB* I, 1,4: 203). Parmenides says: “all is full together of light and invisible night/ of both of them equally, since not-being is in neither” (DKB9, 3-4). Both opposites are names for being, the same non-dual reality. There is nothing other than being (Parmenides) or self (Śaṅkara) for superimpositions and opposites to be: there is no not-being, no other reality. Whatever distinction we might formulate, it always refers to reality, that is, to the undivided background, not to a domain separate from it.

Whereas none of the principles used to explain the many is regarded as an ontologically second being (*nāmarūpa*, which refers to “limiting adjuncts,” is not a second being, nor are night and invisible light), there are two distinct ways to approach reality: Parmenides’ *noein* (knowing, being aware) that is the same as being (DKB3) and the many *doxai* (opinions);<sup>32</sup> *brahman* without qualifications—*nirguṇa brahman*, what is unconditionally (*paramārthika*) real—and *brahman* with qualifications—*saguṇa brahman*, what is conventionally or empirically (*vyāvahārika*) real;<sup>33</sup> knowing that is being, on the one hand, and theories based on names (*onomata, nāmāni*) or words, on the other. Epistemological dualism and ontological non-dualism fit both philosophers.<sup>34</sup>

## 7 Philosophy Is Made of Words

Both philosophers use words in order to create awareness of words’ deceptive status. Any text—be it astronomical, biological, scriptural, or philosophical—is made of words: it cannot possibly refer to what is ultimately real, but only to superimposed entities.

We have already seen how Parmenides’ goddess refers to her own words as to a deceitful cosmos, since they might be mistaken for an expression of an ontological dualism or pluralism by those who do not understand the status of words. Śaṅkara mentions that even the Veda cannot operate other than within the world of superimposition that assumes real differences between subjects and objects.<sup>35</sup> Śaṅkara explicitly claims that the philosophical notions at the basis of his own arguments, that is, the discriminating notions *ātman* and non-*ātman*, are just notions entertained by the intellect: “The discriminating notion (*vivekē pratyayah*) ‘I am the knower, not the object of knowledge, pure, always free’ also belongs to the *buddhi*, since it is the object of cognition and perishable” (*Upad.* I, 12,14). The *buddhi*, intellect or mind, which is the maker of notions, is one of the things we wrongly identify with. Thus, philosophy is only a human-made cosmos, which deals in the currency of an ultimately non-trustworthy system of distinctions in order to save the readers from ignorance.

Once more we see why we should not be shocked by the discrimination between “I” and “you” (or “this”) in the introduction of the *BSB*, which Daya Krishna,<sup>36</sup> just like Mohanty (1993, see above), suggests could be mistaken for an expression of dualist Sāṃkhyan philosophy. Krishna suggests that non-dual philosophers might be expected to advocate *identification* between *ātman* and all the rest, rather than distinction. However, we are now in the position to see that Śaṅkara is well aware of the status of *ātman* and non-*ātman*, which are not two substances as Sāṃkhyan *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, but rather words, that is, notions of the intellect, which are fundamentally unreal—whereas reality is what manifests itself when none of the dualities needed for knowledge, action, and feelings apply (Krishna 1991: 161).

Parmenides makes the same point when he claims that that even being and not-being are just words. He writes: “all those things will be a name that mortals have laid down, trusting that they are real: [...] to be and not to be [...]” (DKB8, 38-40). Even “to be,” the cornerstone of his philosophy, is just a word. We need to see the words of the long fragment DKB8 in this light. They are not a description of the characteristics of being: there cannot be such a description,



given what Parmenides thinks of words. And indeed the arguments (all revolving around the absence of not-being) are presented as “signs” (*sēmata*)<sup>37</sup> spoken by a goddess: they are not a description, but pointers that the youth needs to interpret in order to realize reality.

Thus, on the one hand, we have a kind of—untrustworthy—knowledge that the intellect needs: discriminatory knowledge, based on opposites, which can build a cosmos, give meaning, and remove ignorance. On the other hand, we have knowing that is identical with *ātman*, which is reality. *Atman* is endowed with constant, objectless, or non-intentional perception<sup>38</sup> or awareness, rather than with intellectual notions.

We have briefly explored the explicit declarations by our philosophers that both the words of the scripture or the goddess and their own most fundamental philosophical notions are just words. Our impression is strengthened: they defend an epistemological dualism of a special kind: the value of one of two epistemological approaches is inferior to the other, and the superior approach consists of non-dual, non-intentional knowing. Their ontological non-dualism is unthreatened.

## 8 Conclusion: What is the Value of this Exercise?

I have argued that Parmenides’ and Śāṅkara’s non-dual metaphysics must be seen in connection with the awareness they want to engender regarding the status of the many entities. They do not deem divisions as fundamental and stable, but as parasitical and secondary to a reality that cannot be cut at its natural joints, since it does not have such joints. Reality can only be cut in useful pieces, according to the cutter’s perspective and purpose—thus no science or discourse can claim to reflect the allegedly real divisions of reality. As a consequence, since reality is undivided, there is no “us” and no “them” at a fundamental level. This might be the “political” value of a metaphysical system that describes boundaries and distinctions as conventional.

I have shown that their philosophies might well stimulate a reflection on the function of distinctions—and of the words used to draw them—whose value might lie, for instance, in creating a scientific model or bringing about a change in the hearer, rather than in mirroring reality. We might reflect on the suggestion that any dichotomy used to describe reality “can have only conventional or heuristic utility.”<sup>39</sup> What looked like insurmountable boundaries and differences could turn out to be the product of conventions that might well be discarded or replaced if different boundaries and distinctions turn out to be better attuned to the situation in which they need to function.

What could be the value of this model for those who want to engage in “borderless philosophy?” We might be inspired by this metaphysical model to see ourselves as the thinkers who are most capable of finding different ways of dividing the continuum of reality, thanks to our knowledge of different metaphysical frameworks. The scholar of intercultural philosophy is the thinker who, by being acquainted with radically different ways of cutting a jointless reality, is the most agile when it comes to finding the distinctions and concepts needed to gain insight into a certain project, question, or contemporary predicament.

This said, I do suggest neither that this metaphysics is the best available, nor that it is the only one with the assets described above. I will not go into its drawbacks,<sup>40</sup> but I will refer to another metaphysical model—which might be seen, for instance, in Heraclitus,’ David Bohm’s,<sup>41</sup> and Dōgen’s philosophies—according to which an undivided background would be regarded as an abstraction from the ever-changing forms and ever-shifting boundaries of reality, seen as an on-going process. Such a model shares Parmenides’ and Śāṅkara’s assumption that reality does not have joints and that any boundary is dependent on circumstances and points of view. Both models are different from a third one, preferred by Parmenides’ successors, such as Democritus and Plato, who, in different ways, postulate real divisions that structure reality and that are knowable by humans (either configurations of atoms or Platonic forms). And yet these three

models (invariant undivided background, ongoing process, and structured background) agree in not ascribing ultimate reality to individual subjects or objects. What is real is what is usually in the background and is what the philosopher needs to foreground: whether as an invariant or dynamic uncarved reality or a structured one.

I like to think of this paper as an exercise in “borderless philosophy,” that is philosophy that can be called borderless, both for crossing boundaries of place and time in looking for relevant philosophical concepts, and for showing a model of reality in which borders, edges and discontinuities are not fundamentally real but always dependent on the purpose for which they are traced.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber, *Comparative Philosophy without Borders* (London etc.: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 22; Jonardon Ganeri, “Why Philosophy Must Go Global. A Manifesto,” *Confluence: An Online Journal of World Philosophies* 4, (2016): 134-41, and 164-86, 164.

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 6<sup>th</sup> edition: 1996)—herein cited as “DK” (Diels Kranz) plus B (quotation from Parmenides or Heraclitus) followed by the fragment number.

<sup>3</sup> Parmenides’ translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> For a survey, see e.g. Patricia Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides. Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004), 3-23.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of all interpretations that regard being as an object, see John Palmer (2016), who also summarizes his own interpretation, according to which Parmenides singled out “What Is” as the necessary being, which is “coterminous but not consubstantial with the perceptible cosmos: it is in exactly the same place where the perceptible cosmos is, but is a separate and distinct ‘substance.’” John Palmer, “Parmenides” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta 2016 (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/parmenides/>; last accessed on March 7 2018)

<sup>6</sup> See the long tradition started by Goldin E. L. Owen, “Eleatic Questions,” *Classical Quarterly* 10, (1960): 84–102; see also, David Sedley, “Parmenides and Melissus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. Anthony A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 113–33.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Alexander P. D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides*, second edition (Las Vegas etc.: Parmenides Publishing, 2008); Giovanni Cerri, *Parmenide di Elea, Poema sulla natura: Introduzione, testo, traduzione e note* (Milano: BUR, 1999) and Curd (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2003); M. Laura Gemelli Marciano, *Parmenide: Suoni, Immagini, Esperienza*, ed. M. Pulpito L. Rossetti (Sankt Augustin: Akademia Verlag, 2013).

- <sup>9</sup> See Donna M. Giancola, “Toward a Radical Reinterpretation of Parmenides’ B3,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26, (2001): 635-53, for a survey of the interpretations of DKB3 throughout the centuries and a defence of this translation, which she calls its “natural reading.” Also, Chiara Robbiano, “Being is Not an Object. An Interpretation of Parmenides’ Fragment DK B2 and a Reflection on Assumptions,” *Ancient Philosophy* 36, (2016b): 263-301, esp. 267-69 and 289-98.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. John Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 119: “The decision should be easy enough given that the first type of reading [(i) ‘for it is the same thing to think and to be’ or, what amounts to the same, as ‘for to think and to be are the same’;] yields something that is, philosophically speaking, utter nonsense.”
- <sup>11</sup> *Upad.* is being used as an abbreviation for: Śaṅkara, *A Thousand Teachings, The Upadeśasahasrī of Śaṅkara*, transl. and ed. Sengaku Mayeda (New York: State University of New York Press, reprint 1992).
- <sup>12</sup> Swami Jagadananda, *Upadesasahasri of Sankaracharya. Text and Translation* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1949), 291 translates this passage as follows: “As everything—the seer, seeing and the seen—is a false notion superimposed by you and as no object of perception is known to have an existence independent of that of the Self (*dr̥ṣṭi*), (the Self is one only). When this is so, the Self in the state of deep sleep does not differ from Itself when in waking (or dream).”
- <sup>13</sup> More precisely: “Consciousness as such (*ātman*), although having selfhood in the limited and discrete form that is life, is ultimately a unified, all-pervasive and eternal power of awareness. That is to say, the intrinsic nature of consciousness is not constituted by a collection of discrete existences but by a completely homogeneous and inclusive state of being. This undifferentiated, this beingness—which is what we call consciousness when such consciousness is not limited but all-pervasive—is the source of the rest of existence. Universal being, which is consciousness so understood, is called *brahman* (from a root that means “limitless growth”). The key idea here is that the individuated consciousness is ultimately not different from universal consciousness.” Ram-Prasad Chakravarti, *Knowledge and Liberation in Classical Indian Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 179.
- <sup>14</sup> “Liberating cognition consists in the hitherto self-individuating consciousness recognizing that it is no different from the universal supporting consciousness [...] non-dualism refers [...] to that between the individuated and the universal consciousness, not as such between consciousness and the world” (Chakravarti 2001: 188-89).
- <sup>15</sup> “As transcendent, the Absolute is indeterminate (*nirviśeṣa*). It is beyond senses (*atīndriya*), thought (*nirvikalpa*) and language (*anirvacanīya*). It is pure consciousness [...]. As immanent, the Absolute is the reality of the manifested world of individual subjects and objects. It is infinite, all-pervasive and all-inclusive.” Chandradhar Sharma, *The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasiidass Publishers, 1996), 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Chakrabarti and Weber (2016: 7).
- <sup>17</sup> For a survey of the comparisons between Parmenides and Śaṅkara, see Chiara Robbiano, “Parmenides’ and Śaṅkara’s Nondual *Being* Without Not-Being,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 1, (2016a): 290-327.
- <sup>18</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect on the disagreement among Śaṅkara’s interpreters about the role played by the scripture in realizing *brahman*.
- <sup>19</sup> Sengaku Mayeda, “An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Śaṅkara” in *Upad.*, 109, n. 4. And ed. Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> DKB7, 3-7: “and do not let habit force you down that often-attempted journey/ to direct your unseeing eye and your echoing ear/ and tongue, but judge with your reasoning the much-contested test/ pronounced by me.”
- <sup>21</sup> For a thorough interpretation of DK B2, see Robbiano (2016b).
- <sup>22</sup> See Robbiano (2016a). About *anubhava* as nondual experience of *brahman*, see also Arvind Sharma, “Is Anubhava a Pramana According to Śaṅkara,” *Philosophy East and West* 42, no. 3, (1992): 517-26.

- 23 When not otherwise specified, *BSB* refers to Thibaut's translation in ed. Eliot Deutsch and Rohit Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta. A New Source Book of Advaita Vedānta*, (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004).
- 24 Cf.: "It is a matter not requiring any proof that the object and the subject whose respective spheres are the notions of the 'Thou' (the non-Ego) and the 'Ego,' and which are opposed to each other as much as darkness and light are, cannot be identified" (Deutsch and Dalvi 2004: 196).
- 25 See also Chakravarti about another passage of the *BSB* in which Śāṅkara makes a similar point (2001: 164): "The point that impresses the Indian Philosophers (and the Advaitins in particular state this very clearly) is the sheer primitive presence of consciousness—its refusal to be denied: '[Even] he who denies it has it as his intrinsic form; its intrinsic nature is that of being ever-present (of abiding at all times)' (*BSB* II.iii.7: 585).
- 26 Jitendra Nath Mohanty, "Can the Self become an Object? (Thoughts on Śāṅkaras statement: *nāyam ātmā ekāntena aviśaya*)," in *Essays on Indian Philosophy*, ed. Purushottama Bilimoria (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 68-73, here 72.
- 27 The power of *avidyā-māyā* and its ontological relation to *brahman-ātman* is one of the main foci of most of Śāṅkara's early Sanskrit commentators (Sureśvara, Vācaspati, Prakāśātman). Cf. e.g. Christopher Bartley, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy: Hindu and Buddhist Ideas from Original Sources* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), Chapter 11.
- 28 In this paper, I will neither enter the debate about the status of Parmenides' opinions nor the discussion of Śāṅkara's acceptance of the validity of a realistic epistemology before realization of *brahman*.
- 29 Heraclitus, DKB30: "The ordering (*kosmos*), the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire everliving, kindled in measures and in measures going out." Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979).
- 30 Cf. Gregory Vlastos, *Plato's Universe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 3.
- 31 In this passage, Socrates talks of a principle: "That of dividing things again by classes, where the natural joints are, and not trying to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver." *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925). See: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg012.perseus-eng1:265e>; last accessed on March 7 2018.
- 32 Notice that this kind of epistemological dualism radically differs from the model applied by Mourelatos' (2008: xlv) to Parmenides, which is based on Sellars' Manifest Image *versus* Scientific Image. I argue that Parmenides would consider both the entities of our language (Manifest Image) and the entities of physics (Scientific Image) as human abstractions from being: both untrustworthy—since they involve not-being—carved by humans according to different needs.
- 33 Cf. Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968), 12-4.
- 34 This is usually called "two truths theory." It was developed in the Buddhist context (cf. Sonam Thakchoe, "The Theory of Two Truths in India," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/twotruths-india/>; last accessed on 7 March 2018) and adopted by Śāṅkara. Cf. also *Upad.* II, 1,40: "[...] Ātman is one alone and [only] appears as many through the vision [affected] by nescience just as the moon [appears] as many to sight [affected] by *timira* eye-disease [...]."
- 35 "[...] the means of right knowledge cannot operate unless there be a knowing personality, [...] the existence of the latter depends on the erroneous notion that the body, the sense and so on, are identical with, or belong to, the Self or the knowing person [...] Hence perception and the other means of right knowledge, and the Vedic texts have for their object that which is dependent on Nescience" (*BSB* I, 1,1: 197-98).
- 36 Daya Krishna, *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 161.

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- 37 DKB8, 1-6: “Only one story still remains of the way/ that ‘is’: on that way there are very many signs (*sēmata*)/ that *being* [1.] is not generated and imperishable/ [2.] entire, unique and [3.] unmoving; and [4.] incomplete/ never was nor will be, since [it] is now all together/ one, continuous.”
- 38 The contemporary discussions about the possibility and meaning of non-intentional knowledge are beyond the scope of this paper.
- 39 Peter D. Hershock, *Valuing Diversity: Buddhist Reflection on Realizing a More Equitable Global Future*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 12.
- 40 But see, for instance, Purushottama Bilimoria, “Śaṅkara’s Attempted Reconciliation of ‘You’ and ‘I’: *yuṣmatasmatsamanvaya*,” in *Relativism, Suffering and Beyond Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, ed. P. Bilimoria and J. N. Mohanty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 252-77.
- 41 David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 1980).