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PARMENIDES AS PSYCHOLOGIST
– PART ONE: FRAGMENTS DK 1
AND 2

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to examine an aspect of Parmenides’ poem which is often overlooked: the psychological grounds Parmenides uses to construct his view. While it is widely recognized by scholars that following Parmenides’ view requires addressing mental activity, i.e. both the possibility of thinking the truth, as well as thinking along the wrong path that mortals follow, a closer examination of the psychological assumptions involved have, to my knowledge, not yet been attempted.

I argue that by identifying and analyzing the psychological vocabulary in his poem, it is revealed that Parmenides was a keen observer of human mental behavior. Through these psychological (perhaps “cognitivist,” following some recent categories) observations of thought processes, Parmenides gains insight into the structure of thought itself. The outcome of this inquiry reveals three notable conclusions: First, the poem contains a remarkably extensive use of strictly psychological vocabulary. Second, the presence of this psychological material and the lack of scholarly attention to it means there is a significant aspect...
of Parmenides intellectual legacy that remains unexplored—Parmenides as psychologist, keen observer of human mental behavior. Furthermore, the recognition of this material helps shed important light on Parmenides’ philosophical message.

Ultimately, I intend to provide an exhaustive treatment of Parmenides’ psychological language, which requires close examination of DK B 1, 2, 6, and 7. Due to spatial constraints, I have divided the inquiry into two parts, and will only address DK 1-2 below.

**Keywords:** Parmenides, Eleaticism, Presocratics, ancient epistemology, ancient psychology.
The presence and importance of psychological language in Parmenides poem has been largely overlooked by modern scholarship. While it is widely recognized by scholars that following Parmenides’ view requires addressing mental activity, i.e. the possibility of thinking the truth and the wrong path mortals follow, a closer examination of the psychological assumptions involved have, to my knowledge, not yet been attempted.

Prior to proceeding further, it is important to clarify my use of the term ‘psychology’ and its cognates in this context. Here, I employ the modern scientific meaning—i.e. “study of mind”—rather than the more common ancient meaning of “soul” (one of the many possible translations of ψῡχή). More precisely, by “psychology,” I mean “the science of the nature, functions and phenomena of the human mind,” exactly as found in the first definition of the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009). Properly speaking, scientific “psychology” only arises in the 19th century and consolidates in the 20th century. Therefore, it would not be possible for any examination of Parmenides from this perspective to precede the beginning of the 20th century. However, after that point, and the multiplication of disciplines in cognitive inquiry — from Neuroscience to Social Psychology and the Philosophy of Mind — such treatments could be expected.

However, the application of such theoretical approaches has not yet been retroactively applied to ancient thought beyond a few notes in texts on the History of Psychology. I aim to correct this oversight here, as I believe these aspects provide vital keys to fully understanding Parmenides’ view. By
closely examining the psychological language in Parmenides’ poem, he is revealed to be a keen observer of the nature, functions, and behavior of the human mind—observations upon which he grounds his entire view. Thus, in these pages, I would like to provide evidence suggesting how Parmenides’ text demonstrates that he was a keen observer of the nature, functions and phenomena of the human mind; and, from this, offer some suggestions on how his psychological observations influenced his philosophical views.

Fragment 1

DK 1.1-27: The Philosopher-Youth’s Journey. In the first 27 verses of fragment 1, Parmenides carefully narrates the trip of a young disciple, or kouros, to the meeting of an anonymous goddess, who will provide a didactic program for him to follow with his mind. The chosen language, setting, and actions for this whole section are entirely mythical. The right interpretation, or even the most likely interpretation of this part of the proem, is a highly-contested matter amongst scholars, and I do not wish to engage in that far-ranging discussion here, nor review the literature, but to focus solely on the presence of of psychological language and its relevance. Outside of DK 1.1, there is no reference to any psychological aspect in these lines, unless we want to understand the entire journey as an allegory of some kind of mental process, as Sextus Empiricus did. Therefore, here I focus solely DK 1.1, and how the emphasis of placing the psychologically-charged term θυμὸς in the first line might contribute to our understanding of the youth’s overall journey: