regards the objections as serious; but he nowhere answers them explicitly—in the *Parmenides* or elsewhere. Nor does he recant on the theory of forms in any (later) dialogue. For another, the second half of the dialogue is a relentless sequence of arguments quite unlike anything else in the Platonic corpus. At first glance, it might appear that the two halves of the dialogue have been spliced together accidentally by some compiler. Since this is, it would seem, not the case, one cannot but believe that Plato holds that something about the deductions holds the key to the solution to Parmenides’ objections—but what this is, is, to put it mildly, opaque. Fourth, the arguments appear to establish that the one (whatever that is) has a variety of contradictory properties. Indeed the dialogue ends abruptly with the simple endorsement of a contradiction (166c):

“Let us say ..., as it seems, whether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to others.”—“Very true.”

So much is agreed by all commentators, but, as Rickless puts it:

Beyond this, there is precious little scholarly consensus. Commentators disagree about the proper way to reconstruct Parmenides’ challenges, about the overall logical structure of the Deductions, about the main subject of the Deductions, about the function of the Deductions in relation to the challenges, and about the final philosophical moral of the dialogue as a whole.

The point of this paper is to suggest a new interpretation of the dialogue. The central idea is to take the final conclusion at face value. Plato is indeed suggesting that the one has contradictory properties, and that this is a key to answering Parmenides’ arguments.

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2For example, it is employed in the *Timaeus*, which usual chronologies dates later than the *Parmenides*. See, e.g., Cherniss (1957).

3Translations from the *Parmenides* are taken from Gill and Ryan (1996).

4In the introduction to Rickless (2007).
Such a possibility has never been countenanced before.\textsuperscript{5} This is presumably for two reasons. The first is that dialetheism (the view that some contradictions are true) itself is taken to be manifestly untenable. But dialetheism, whatever one thinks about its truth, is a coherent view with many interesting applications.\textsuperscript{6} The second is that it is implausible to attribute to Plato the possibility of countenancing dialetheism. If this is not just an appeal to the first point, together with the claim that Plato was a sensible fellow, the basis for it is, presumably, the fact that Plato himself appears to endorse a version of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) in the \textit{Republic} (436b):\textsuperscript{7}

It is obvious that the same thing will never do or suffer opposites in the same respect in relation to the same thing and at the same time.

But little weight can be placed on this, since the \textit{Republic} is earlier (according to standard chronologies), and Plato, it appears, is being forced to rethink his views in the light of the problems with the theory of forms which he has discovered.\textsuperscript{8} So even if we take it that Plato endorsed the PNC in the \textit{Republic},\textsuperscript{9} he may well be arguing against his previous self in the \textit{Parmenides}. Indeed, on standard chronologies, the \textit{Parmenides} marks something of a turning point in Plato’s dialectical method. After the \textit{Parmenides}, the earlier method of finding a definition by hypothesis/counter-example/improved hypothesis/counter-example/etc. is replaced in the \textit{Sophist} and the \textit{States-}

\textsuperscript{5}With the notable exception of Hegel (and, according to him, some of the Neo-Platonists—notably Proclus). That the one and the many had contradictory properties was all grist to his dialectical mill. See Haldane and Simson (1995), p. 59 ff.


\textsuperscript{7}Translation from Hamilton and Cairns (1961). It should be noted, though, that a little later (437a) he calls the Principle an hypothesis, and countenances the possibility that it might turn out to be untenable.

\textsuperscript{8}Quite generally, and for the same reason, the method of citing quotations from supposedly earlier dialogues in support of some interpretation of the \textit{Parmenides} is one that must be used with caution. Whilst it can provide some evidence for the sort of thing that Plato may have been sympathetic to, it cannot be definitive.

\textsuperscript{9}One of the problems of the dialogue form is the provisionality of what is said: a view expressed by a character, even Plato’s presumed mouthpiece, cannot necessarily be taken to represent his considered opinion.
man with the method of finding a definition by iterated subdivision of categories. It should be remembered, also, that Plato is writing before Aristotle’s attack on dialetheism in the *Metaphysics*, the attack which firmly locked the PNC into Western philosophical orthodoxy.

Next on preliminary matters, an important word on the methodology adopted in this essay. Beyond the prophylactic comments of the last paragraph, I shall have nothing to say here about the relationship of the *Parmenides* to the other texts in the Platonic corpus. The *Parmenides*, it seems to me, has a certain integrity; and my aim is to let the text speak for itself.¹⁰

Of course, the relationship between the text and the rest of the Platonic corpus *is* an important scholarly question. Crucially, one may ask, how does the *Parmenides*, on my account, relate to the works generally taken to be later? Does the view which I shall attribute to Plato inform these, or was it just something that Plato tried out, and quietly gave up?¹¹ I am content to leave such questions to scholars who are much better placed to address them than I.

A few final comments to help orient the reader to what is to come. I shall start by explaining a certain (dialetheic) theory of forms and participation. I will then proceed, in the bulk of the paper, by way a commentary on the text. In the final section of the paper I will stand back and look at the whole.

The commentary I shall give is not intended to be a scholarly one. I am not qualified for such an undertaking.¹² The point of the commentary is to show how many puzzling features of the text make sense from the perspective of the theory of forms in question—though I make no claim to explain every one of its puzzling features.¹³ Indeed, that so many such features fall into

¹⁰Plato, it would seem, loves to play with ideas. He clearly runs incompatible lines in different dialogues—to take an obvious example: in the *Phaedo* it is crucial that the soul is simple; in the *Republic*, it is crucial that it is not. Arguably, one should understand the integrity of each text before worrying about how they do or do not fit together.

¹¹There are also important questions about the interpretation and texts outside the Platonic corpus. If Plato at least played with the idea of contradictory forms, why did not Aristotle mention Plato in his attack on dialetheism in the *Metaphysics*? Was he, perhaps, just as puzzled by the *Parmenides* as the rest of us are?

¹²There are many such commentaries. Gill (1996) is one dependable one.

¹³I wonder whether Plato himself could have done this. Creators of literary works are not always able to explain, themselves, exactly why they put particular features into them.
place is the fact that speaks most strongly in favour of the interpretation I shall offer. However, I shall make no serious attempt to describe other possible interpretations of the text, or to argue that the interpretation I suggest is preferable. That would require an inordinately longer and more scholarly work than this. The point of the present article is simply to put a certain interpretation of the *Parmenides* into play, and show its plausibility.

2 Unity and Participation

Before we turn to the commentary, I need to say something about the view which informs it. This is an account of the nature of forms (and maybe, more generally, of universals) and the participation relation. This account, in turn, depends on a view about the nature of unity. So let me start by describing that. I shall not attempt to justify it here, or to show its technical coherence. This is done elsewhere. I merely wish to explain the essence of the view in question.

Take an object with parts. What makes them into a single thing? There must be something in virtue of which they form a unity. Quite possibly, the kind of this thing depends on the unity in question. If the unity is a house, its parts are bricks, and maybe what makes them into a unity is their

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14Rickless (2007) provides an admirable account of the various interpretations of the text which have so far been offered, with some attempts to adjudicate.

15I have been helped in thinking through the issues the text poses by various seminars on the *Parmenides* that I have run over the last few years. The most important of these were two series of seminars run jointly by Sarah Brodie and myself in St Andrews, in 2007 and 2009. I would like to thank all those who have struggled with me through the text, helping to illuminate the dark material, but especially to Sarah herself, for her perceptive comments and her sympathetic encouragement. In this connection, special thanks also go to Amber Carpenter, Theodore Scaltsas, and Elia Zardini. Thanks, too, go to Maureen Eckert for discussions which helped illuminate a number of matters, and to Verity Harte and Christof Rapp for comments on a written draft of the paper. Last, but by no means least, thanks go to an anonymous referee from this journal. The first, and hardest, draft of the paper was written when I was a visiting professor at the Graduate Faculty of Letters, Kyoto University in 2008. My thanks go to my hosts there, and especially to Yasuo Deguchi, for their warm hospitality.

16See Priest (201+).
geometric configuration. If the unity is a symphony, its parts are notes, and maybe what makes them into a unity is their arrangement. But whatever the binding agent is, there must be one. Let us call it, neutrally, the *gluon* of the unity. As soon as one starts to think about gluons, they appear to have contradictory properties. A gluon is an object: we can think about it, quantify over it, refer to it. But it is not an object: if it were, the totality comprising it and the other parts would be just as much a plurality as the parts themselves, and we would want for an explanation of how the unity is achieved. Think of Bradley’s regress at this point. If the gluon were just another object, there would need to be a “hypergluon”, holding the gluon and the other parts together. And so on... The contradictory nature of gluons surfaces from time to time in the history of philosophy. One place is in Frege’s discussion of concepts. Concepts are the gluons of propositions. They hold them together in virtue of the fact that they are “unsaturated”. In consequence of their unsaturatedness, they are not objects. But the concept *is a horse* (to use Frege’s own example) is an object, since it is referred to by that very definite description.\(^{17}\)

Next, how is it that the gluon holds all the parts (including itself) together? If it were distinct from the other parts, Bradley’s regress would strike. A way to avoid this is to take the gluon to be identical with each of the other parts. How to make sense of this idea? We may define identity in the standard fashion, deploying Leibniz’ identity of indiscernibles: \(x = y\) is \(\forall Z (Zx \equiv Zy)\), where the quantifier is second-order, and the connective is the material biconditional. Note, however, that we are dealing with objects some of which are contradictory. Hence this must be the material biconditional of some paraconsistent logic.\(^{18}\) So suppose that we have a unity; let its gluon be \(g\), and let \(a, b, c\) and \(d\) be its (other) parts. Then \(g = a, g = b, g = c,\)

\(^{17}\)See Priest (1995), 12.1, 12.2.

\(^{18}\)A paraconsistent logic one in which an arbitrary contradiction does not imply an arbitrary conclusion, as it is said to do so in standard contemporary logic textbooks. There are, in fact, many paraconsistent logics, with significant differences between them—which are mostly not relevant here. For a very simple introduction to paraconsistency, see Priest (1998), and for a longer introduction, see Priest and Tanaka (2009).
and \( g = d: \)

\[
\begin{align*}
& d \\
\downarrow \\
& a = g = c \\
\downarrow \\
& b
\end{align*}
\]

We can insure that the identities hold by taking \( g \) to have all the properties of \( a, b, c \) and \( d \). Naturally, since the parts are liable to have a variety of disparate properties, \( g \) is liable to be a contradictory object—but we knew that already. Note, also, that in virtually all paraconsistent logics, the material biconditional is not transitive: \( A \equiv B, B \equiv C \not\implies A \equiv C \). So the fact that \( a = g \) and \( g = b \) does not entail that \( a = b \). The various parts are not, generally speaking, identical.

For a very simple illustration of how this all works, suppose that the parts are just \( a, b, c, \) and \( g \), and that there is only one property at issue, \( P \). Suppose that (consistently) \( Pa, \neg Pb \), but that \( Pg \land \neg Pg \). Then \( Pa \equiv Pg \) and \( Pg \equiv Pb \),\(^\text{19}\) but it is not the case that \( Pa \equiv Pb \). Hence (since \( P \) is the only property at issue), \( a = g \), \( g = b \), but it is not the case that \( a = b \).

So much for the theory of unity, of gluons, and identity. Let us now apply it to forms and participation. Given an object, \( a \), consider its tropes: \( a \)'s redness, \( a \)'s heaviness, \( a \)'s roundness, etc.\(^\text{20}\) Now, take a bunch of, say, red things, \( a, b, c, \ldots \) Consider \( a \)'s redness, \( b \)'s redness, etc. One can think of these as the parts a single totality. (They have a unity in a way that the redness of \( a \), the roundness of \( b \), the heaviness of \( c \), do not.) What unifies them is the gluon of this totality, and this, it is natural to suppose, is redness itself: what it is that makes them the same thing—red. Thus, we have the

\(^{19}\)And also \( \neg(Pa \equiv Pg) \) and \( \neg(Pg \equiv Pb) \).

\(^{20}\)We can, if we wish, think of the totality of these parts as \( a \) itself, as in standard trope theory. (See, e.g., Bacon (1995).)
following picture. \( r \) is redness itself, and \( r_x \) is \( x \)'s redness.

\[
\begin{align*}
    r_d \\
    \parallel \\
    r_a = r = r_c \\
    \parallel \\
    r_b
\end{align*}
\]

An understanding of the participation relation naturally follows. \( a \) is red just if its redness is identical to redness itself. More precisely, for \( a \) to participate in the form of \( F \)-ness is exactly for it to have a trope (the \( F \)-part of \( a \)) which is identical with \( F \)-ness, as follows. (The crosses are \( a \)'s other tropes.)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
    & . & . & . & . & . & . & . \\
| & \times & \times & \times & | \\
| & | \\
| & \times & \times & r_a = r \\
| & | \\
| & \times & \times & \times & | \\
\end{array}
\]

It follows that the universal of \( F \)-ness will have every property possessed by the \( F \)-trope of every \( x \) that has one. This is, indeed, the way that it manages to be identical with each of these \( F \)-tropes. It will therefore be an inconsistent object.

So much for the theory of universals and instantiation which provides the backdrop to the commentary. Let us now turn to this.

### 3 The Reply to Zeno (126a-130a)

After a brief stage-setting, the dialogue starts just after Zeno has finished reading his book. It is established that the content of the book is a defence of Parmenides’ view that what is is one thing. Many had objected to Parmenides’ view that it had contradictory consequences. Zeno’s tract attempts to ‘pay them back in kind’ (128d), by showing that the view that there is a
surely it doesn’t change without changing.”—“Hardly.”—“So when does it change? For it does not change while it is at rest or in motion, or while it is in time.”—“Yes, you’re quite right.”

Moreover, at the instant outside time, the one is neither at rest nor in motion (156d-156e):

“Is there, then, this queer thing in which it might be, just when it changes?”—“What queer thing?”—“The instant. The instant seems to signify something such that changing occurs from it to each of the two states. For a thing doesn’t change from rest while rest continues, or from motion while motion continues. Rather, this queer creature, the instant, lurks between motion and rest—being in no time at all—and to it and from it the moving thing changes to resting and the resting thing changes to moving.”—“It looks that way.”—“And the one, if in fact it both rests and moves, could change to each state—for only in that way could it do both. But in changing, it changes at an instant, and when it changes, it would be in no time at all, and just then would be neither in motion nor at rest.”—“No, it wouldn’t.”

The next paragraph claims that the same is true of other pairs of states, being and not being, many and one, like and unlike, equal and unequal, etc. The subject is then abruptly dropped, and Deduction IIA commences.

What to make of this? The point, it is clear, is to establish something about an instant of change, outside time; and prima facie this something is that at this instant, neither of the pairs of states, prior and posterior, is realised. But wait a minute. Weren’t these states contradictories: to be in rest is not to be in motion, and vice versa? So to be in neither of them is itself a contradiction. The instant, then, is a contradictory creature. Plato is careful to say that it is only at the same time that something cannot, e.g., both be and not be (155e, my italics): “When it partakes, can it at that time not partake, or partake when it doesn’t?”—“It cannot.” The instant is outside time.

It might be suggested that rest and motion, etc., are not contradictories, but contraries. The trouble with this suggestion is that the opposing pairs
are not always specified independently (rest/motion, same/different), but are frequently specified using negation. Thus, we have in Deduction I: is [is not] a whole (IA, 2; IB, 3), has [has not] a beginning (IA, 3; IB, 6), is [is not] in itself (IA, 6; IB, 8), is [is not] in time (IA, 12; IB, 14). And negation is a contradictory-forming operator. To say that something has neither of a pair of contradictory properties is itself contradictory.

Plato is blunt about the matter concerning one such pair: is [is not]. Just after the last passage quoted, Parmenides says (157a, my italics):

“Is it so with the other changes too? Whenever the one changes from being to ceasing-to-be, or from not-being to coming-to-be, isn’t it then between states of motion and rest? And then it neither is nor is not, and neither comes nor ceases to be.”

Look at the italicised claim. It says that the one is not, and it is not the case that it is not. Even without the law of double negation (which would convert this into ‘the one is not and is’), this is a flat contradiction.

There is a general point here: to say that something is neither ¬A nor A is to say ¬(¬A ∨ A), and by De Morgan’s law, this is equivalent to A ∧ ¬A. To be in a state of neither is to be in a state of both.

So what is going on here? IA and IB have established that the one has contradictory properties. Plato expects objections. IC starts with a natural one: the one is not really contradictory, since the contradictions may be defused by an appeal to time. The rest of the deduction then shows that, even if one appeals to time, one still ends up with a contradictory object: the instant.

And now, crucially: Plato puts in an appendix to Deduction I, but not to the others; why not? He has no reason to. If I am right, the appendix is a reply to an objection to the effect contradictions can be avoided by appealing to time. He does not have to reply to this objection more than once.

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60 Which is valid in most paraconsistent logics. There is nothing about dialetheism that renders it invalid.
15 Putting Things into Perspective

So much for the commentary. Let me now step back and put the whole thing into perspective. According to the interpretation of the *Parmenides* I am mooting, things look like this. At some stage after Plato had formulated his theory of forms, he came to see that there were problems with it, and especially with the notion of participation. Maybe these occurred to him, himself; more likely, I would guess, they were put to him by others. The fact that he has Parmenides put the arguments might suggest that it was, perhaps, by some Eleatics. This is the dialogue he wrote about the problems.

In the first part of the dialogue, the problems are expounded. Plato is not sure of the exact solution, though he wants to see if they can be answered. The key to a solution, it occurs to him, could be in the contradictory nature of the forms. A satisfactory solution cannot just, of course, simply accept the theory and the contradictory conclusions posed by the objections. That would be *ad hoc* and entirely unsatisfactory.\(^{61}\) There has to be a principled and unified account of participation that solves the worries. Still, he knows that the possibility of contradictory forms is likely to meet opposition. This is what the second part of the dialogue is about.

He sets things up at the beginning of the dialogue by getting the young (and naive) Socrates to contrast the world of the forms and the world of appearances, and claim that even if the latter are contradictory, the forms are not. This is what gets knocked down in the second part of the dialogue.

Deductions *IA* and *IB* establish that the form of unity is contradictory. The conclusion is liable to force a substantial balk in members of Plato’s audience; the arguments of Deduction *I* are therefore the most extensive and detailed. And it doesn’t matter if not all the arguments to contradiction work, as long as some of the arguments of the barrage do. At the end of Deduction *I*, Plato imagines an opponent objecting by suggesting that the contradictions may be resolved by appealing to time. *IC* shows that this objection will not work.

For the solution to work, there must be nothing special about the contradictory nature of the form of unity. So Deduction *II* establishes that the

other forms have contradictory properties too.

He knows that proponents of the PNC will still want to object; they may do so by denying the assumption of deductions I and II: that Plato’s one exists. So we have III and IV. These show that the consequences of its not existing (with contradictory properties) are just as bad—or even worse. This was the method reputed to have been used by Zeno in defence of Parmenides. So Plato brings Zeno into the dialogue, and has him spell out the method right at the start (128d):

“[M]y book speaks against those who assert the many and pays them back in kind with something for good measure, since it aims to make clear that their hypothesis, if one is many, would, if someone examined the matter thoroughly, suffer consequences even more absurd than those suffered by the hypothesis of its being one.”

By the end of the dialogue, the contradictory nature of the forms is defended, and the dialogue ends.

What was left for Plato to do to finish this defence of the theory of forms—the dialogue obviously ends in mid air—was to use the possibility that the forms are contradictory to articulate a principled account of the notion of participation which answered the objections to the theory of forms he had found. There are clearly thoughts that might feed into the project at places in the deductions, as we have seen; but he never succeeded in doing this—at least to judge by his extant dialogues. Maybe, like a particularly elusive form, he perceived it dimly, but was never able to get it into exact focus. As he has Parmenides say (135a-135b):

“Only a very gifted man can come to know that for each thing there is some kind, a being by itself; but only a prodigy more remarkable still will discover that and be able to teach someone else who has sifted through all these difficulties thoroughly and critically for himself.”

At any rate, over two millennia later, when the Aristotle-inspired horror contradictionis is finally beginning to fade, Plato’s project can now be brought to fruition.
Let me end by returning to the very first oddity of the dialogue that I noted in the introduction. Why does Plato make Parmenides the driver of the dialogue? One of the things centrally under attack in the dialogue, as I have interpreted it, is the PNC. Parmenides was the first person to formulate and advocate the Principle:  

Never will this prevail, that what is not is;  
restrain your thought from this road of inquiry  
and do not let custom, based on experience, force you along this road,  
directing unobservant eye and echoing ear  
and tongue; but judge by reason the battle-hardened proof  
which I have spoken.

Indeed, the Principle is the cornerstone of the view that the historical Parmenides articulated and defended. Ostensibly, the *Parmenides* is a critique of Plato (in the form of Socrates) by Parmenides. But in reality, the tables are actually turned, and the dialogue is a critique of Parmenides by Plato, since it attacks this cornerstone of his view—indeed, if deduction *IV* is *ad hominem*, then Plato is thinking of Eleatics as his real opponents in the dialogue. Moreover, in this critique, Plato not only commandeers Parmenides’ argument as part of his own (in *IA*), but mischievously puts the whole argument in Parmenides’ own mouth—an act of chutzpah perhaps unique in Western philosophy!

**References**


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63For what it is worth, after Socrates’ death, Plato studied with the Parmenidean Hermogenes, according to Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III, 6.


62