

An Historical Discourse on Phenomenological Platonism

Simone Testino

June 2023

Abstract

Parmenides definitely played a crucial role in the formation of the Platonic thought and therefore my analysis will start from a couple of his verses, which I comment referring to the interpretation by E. Husserl. After this first analysis of the text I will consider the subject more conceptually, aiming to show that Platonism, given the right context, can be well interpreted in a phenomenological way.

1 Parmenides in Two Verses

I have two aims in this section: first I want to give an intuition of the Parmenidean εἶναι through just two verses and their analysis¹; secondly I want to sketch a connection between Parmenides and Husserl in order to provide reasons to believe that even the Platonic groundings in Parmenides have at least a very phenomenological taste. Such a palatable intuition will then become a concrete thesis when I analyse the two definitions of *objectivity* and see how Platonic realism relates to the phenomenological conception though the interpretation of modern authors.

I. The Circularity

Ευνόν δέ μοί ἐστιν, ὀππόθεν ἄρξωμαι. τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἴξομαι αὔθις.²

Only after having well captured the Parmenidean picture, one can actually read in such brief sentences the whole system. The sentence begins in a weak adversative (δέ) since the author well knows that what he'll state is against common sense. He affirms that *to him* (μοί) it is ξυνός, which denotes the *least significance of something*, often translated as *common to many* or *indifferent*; the object of this is ὀππόθεν ἄρξωμαι, where the first word denotes a *starting point*³, though as often happens in many languages, and in Greek even more, locative locutions are mostly to be understood metaphorically, this will be of most significance for the interpretation; the following verb, ἄρξωμαι, which comes from the well known word ἀρχή, is a declination of the verb ἄρχω denoting sometimes, like the Latin *duco*, the action of *command* and *being in control* but also *being the first* both in significance and time (we shall again notice that locality is one of the many meanings that ἄρξωμαι as ὀππόθεν have); the mediopassive voice shifts the meaning to the one involving less action by the subject, we shall here therefore understand it as *to begin* (for more precision, one might identify it, the mediopassive voice only, with the deponent Latin verb *orior*). The next sentence begins recalling ὀππόθεν, we can here simply translate τόθι as *there* and γὰρ adds emphasis to his statement. On the other hand, πάλιν has two main meanings which can be reassembled in the German distinction between *wieder* and *wider*, the precise meaning is remarked by repetition by the last word αὔθις denoting recurrence, it may be interpreted as never ending. The verb ἴξομαι which comes from ἴκω, or ἰκνέομαι it mediopassive voice; in order to understand better its meaning we can compare it with another Greek verb meaning *to come*, namely ἔρχομαι: our verb has a more passive meaning, denoting that this *return to the starting point* is not in the will of the author but instead imposed by more powerful strengths.

¹Original sentences have been taken from *Parmenide, Sulla Natura*, Bompiani, G. Reale 2021 and I used the vocabulary *GI*, Vocabolario della Lingua Greca 3^a Edizione, Franco Montanari. Books that helped the interpretation are *Storia della Filosofia Greca e Romana*, G. Reale, Bompiani, 2018 and *Platone, Alla ricerca della sapienza segreta*, G. Reale, i Fari, 2019 and *La Filosofia dai Greci al Nostro Tempo*, E. Severino, Rizzoli, 2021.

²Parmenides, B. 5

³Remark: for a more proper translation one should consider it as an adverb, not a noun

The interpretation I want to give to this sentence in order to let it span the whole Parmenidean system is the following: one should completely drop the locative and instead consider every dimension of the being so that time will recur on every predicate we can assert and therefore all that is, will be and has been is all part of εἶν; and time itself is, not ruler of πάντα χωρεῖ⁴, instead anything but part of it.

II. The νόημα

In order to have a deeper understanding of the limits (if they shall be called so) and the context of what εἶναι denotes, one should understand its relation to νοεῖν which is captured in the following passage:

[...]τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι.⁵

This brief passage ends an unknown sentence with a crucial equality: the well known (yet unclear) εἶναι with νοεῖν. Two are the words that form Greek into English could be simply translated with the verb *think*: the just met νοέω or φρονέω. The former has in Greek a broader meaning, can be translated as *feel, acknowledge, know, understand* and, not least, *see*⁶. On the other hand φρονέω ranges over a way narrower set of meanings, all referring solely to mental activities, from proper actions of the mind, like *think* or *understand* to some states like *have something in mind, being wise* or, more generally, *have mental faculties*.

The interpretation of such a passage requires certainly a solid knowledge of the context, there are definitely too many ways to interpret such a statement if taken by itself. In order to do so, I want to relate this passage to a couple of paragraphs by E. Husserl in which he gives his (*offenbar*) interpretation of the verse.

Die ersten Keime eigentlicher vernunftkritischen Problematik, die wir vor allem uns etwas näherbringen müssen, einer Problematik, die nicht auf Wahrheit und Sein, nicht auf Theorie und Wissenschaft im Sinn eines theoretischen Systems gerichtet ist, sondern eben auf das Vernunftbewußtsein selbst, treten uns im Altertum bei Parmenides und vor allem in wirksamer negativistischer Form in der Sophistik entgegen. Ihr Skeptizismus hinsichtlich der Wahrheit und des Seins als Korrelates der Wahrheit hat seine Parallele in einem Skeptizismus hinsichtlich des Erkennens, nämlich hinsichtlich der Möglichkeit eines auf Seiendes im Sinne einer bewußtseinstranszendenten Objektivität gerichteten Erkennens. Gegen die Parmenideische These von der "Identität" von Denken (noein) und Sein, deren Sinn offenbar der war, daß das im "vernünftigen" Denken Gedachte und das wahrhaft Seiende unabtrennbare Korrelate sind, endet Gorgias, indem er das Sein im natürlichen Sinn als objektives (bewußtseinsjenseitiges) Sein versteht, ein: Denken ist Vorstellen, Vorstellen ist aber nicht Vorgestelltes.⁷

This passage outlines a debate I regard as very central in the whole ancient philosophy, though in ancient times it remained very clouded, there were not yet the means to shed light upon the essence of the question. This brings me to make a jump in time while trying to keep the focus as closed as possible to the original Platonism.

2 Plato, Gödel and Husserl on Reality

Before getting into the core of the topic I need to define those words that will be necessary to state the question properly; in fact the following are two very different attempts to define objectivity which will show particular features of the metaphysical context they are inserted in.⁸

⁴All that changes, moves, becomes, from Heraclitus, Fr. 402.a

⁵Parmenides, B. 3

⁶Remarking the hypothesis on the strong bond present in the Greek culture between thought and visual perception.

⁷E. Husserl, *Phänomenologie und Erkenntnistheorie*, 1916, Kapitel II, 6

⁸The upcoming distinction has been sketched both in E. Husserl, *Phänomenologie und Erkenntnistheorie*, 1916, Kapitel II, 6 but also in Tieszen, R., 2011, *After Gödel: Platonism and Rationalism in Mathematics and Logic* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. That this lays in the very centre of both writings is though not surprising: as I will later better explain, Phenomenology has been of great influence in later Gödel's philosophy who, probably more than any (or most explicitly), synthesised Platonism and Phenomenology. For more, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goedel/goedel-phenomenology.html>

2.1 Objectivity Defined

Before distinguishing two very different definitions of objectivity, I want to list a couple of remarks that hold for both: first I have to make clear what *can* be objective, namely the domain of our predicate and I think that this is a feature that the two definitions, at a first sight⁹, have in common. They both are predicates on propositions, namely those that we call true or false¹⁰. One might alternatively say that those are predicates on events or on objects, though I see no relevant differences for the next stages and I want to stick with the following writings, which regard objectivity as being predicate on propositions.

Transcendental Objectivity

[...] eine Wahrheit, die "Objectives", nämlich außersubjektive Gegenstände, betrifft.¹¹

Those propositions whose truth we regard as being *outside* of the *subject* are to be called transcendental objective. Both words "subject" and "outside" are to be better clarified, I'll avoid to make a proper excursus on what we should call a "subject", I just refer to the Descartes consciousness as being made solely by *res cogitans*. Though "outside" really captures the idea of objectivity and is to be understood as a sort of independence of the truth from the subject. As anyone would notice from the just stated sentence, objectivity is, in this context, a synonym of "real" from the well known theories on realism¹². The philosophical object that most of all is to be considered *outside* of the subject, is definitely the *noumenon* by Kant and similarly any form of materialism.

Phenomenological Objectivity

[...] Wahrheit, die an sich gilt.¹³

Phenomenological objectivity is a predicate that we attribute to those propositions that, no matter what happens to us, we'll always regard them as true, it is absurd to deny them. In order to give a more precise description of this predicate, like I did previously when I connected transcendental objectivity with realism, I can now compare phenomenological objectivity with the predicate *x is believed by the subject to be necessary*. Here the role of the subject is crucial, since phenomenological objectivity refers to nothing but to what appears to the subject.

To conclude this section I note that the remark I made at the beginning is not quite right, the domain of the two predicates seems not to be the same anymore. Both regard proposition, though, before investigating if it is objective or not, we're able to say if such a proposition could either be transcendentially objective or phenomenologically objective¹⁴: in fact the distinction between these two classes of propositions can be done independently from the definition of objectivity, they come from the very first bricks one lays to build the metaphysical structure, only *transcendental*, propositions, those regarding *noumenic* objects can be transcendental objective and solely those that have no more than a *subjective* value can be phenomenologically objective. Though it is very practical to define these two words, since they will help me in distinguishing clearly the metaphysical systems that allow transcendentality and those which don't. Here that those definitions are laid down I can properly state the central question of the essay:

Question. *Are propositions on Platonic Ideas transcendentially objective?*

⁹I will later give a reason why one shall not believe so, though, for now, it is simpler to assume their domains to be the same.

¹⁰That is to say that the domain of objectivity is the same as the one of truth. One can alternatively regard objectivity as being a predicate on definitions of truth, as one might notice in the following definitions by E. Husserl, though no relevant difference will occur for the coming reasoning.

¹¹E. Husserl, *ibidem*

¹²First of all, it is common to see realism as a theory on events and not on propositions (or definitions of truth), this particularly holds when one considers that realism must be defined through causality (independence can be understood as "there being no causal relation"), which usually has events as domain, for more see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-metaphysics/>

¹³E. Husserl, *ibidem*

¹⁴What I'm implicitly meaning with this sentence is that the intersection of the domains of the two predicates is empty

2.2 The Original Platonic Standpoint

There are many ways one could approach any question and therefore one should firstly clarify precisely in which sense she's answering it. With this purpose, before analysing the actual texts by Plato, I want to underline the limits of this discourse.

2.2.1 An Historical Remark

Historically, I suppose, the former question is nonsense. The distinction, as I have sketched it, between phenomenological and transcendental objectivity is typical of the modern era:

Das Erkenntnisproblem im Sinne des besprochenen Transszedenzproblems [...] [wird] durch Descartes' *Meditationes* inauguriert.¹⁵

Therefore it makes no sense to ask if Plato actually meant his *ὑπερουράνιον τόπον* to be the place where all propositions are phenomenologically or transcendentially objective¹⁶.

2.2.2 Plato

After having made such considerations, there are definitely a couple of points that must be underlined. The first popping up is the word *νόημα* in the second verse I reported by Parmenides which, as I exposed, offers a very explicit connection with Husserl.

Here I want to focus on Platonic texts only, what I just noticed might suggest me to start from the Parmenides Dialogue in search for some clues on my former question. In the named dialogue there are several points that Parmenides makes to Socrates, the one of most interest to us is the sixth, the epistemological one:

Parmenides: "The greatest [difficulty] of all perhaps is this: an opponent will argue that the ideas are not within the range of human knowledge; and you cannot disprove the assertion without a long and laborious demonstration, which he may be unable or unwilling to follow. In the first place, neither you nor any one who maintains the existence of absolute ideas will affirm that they are subjective."
Socrates: "That would be a contradiction."
Parmenides: "True; and therefore any relation in these ideas is a relation which concerns themselves only; and the objects which are named after them, are relative to one another only, and have nothing to do with the ideas themselves."¹⁷

The dialogue goes on by exposing two main consequences from this difficulty: the first one is that humans are not allowed to access absolute knowledge, it will be accessible to God only. But similarly one notices also that this complete separation between the two spheres implies that God can't have either any mundane, human knowledge. We notice therefore that the substantial lack of contact between the epistemological plane and the metaphysical one allows the sceptical claim to arise.

The conclusion I want to derive from these pieces is that Plato had some difficulties in precisely draw a connection between what is knowable by humans and the ideas them self and his conclusion seems, on one hand, to completely divide the two spheres letting there almost no possibility for contact. On the other hand the consequences of such a conclusion seem to be unbearable and no satisfactory proof could deny the sceptical hypothesis.

This essay though, as already remarked, is on Platonism and not on Plato and therefore I have no intention to stop the discourse here. This paragraph showed very efficiently where the epistemological issue lies in Platonism, which are our most direct options and gave some suggestions on how we could look for solutions. Therefore I want now to see how the shape(s) of Platonism(s) have changed during

¹⁵E. Husserl, *ibidem*, Ch. 2, 8

¹⁶A similar standpoint can be found in J. Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, 2002, Princeton University Press, Ch. 4, in particular, p. 44. In these pages the author holds that there are two radical differences between the Cartesian Method and the ancient Skepticism, (i) it is much stronger, covering many more aspects of reality and (ii) it is, in some sense positivist, it is aimed to grounding a new First Philosophy and should therefore not be regarded as skepticism. The author goes then deeper into the subject in the first part of Ch. 5, though she never refers directly to Platonism but just to Academical and Pyrrhonical scepticisms.

¹⁷Parmenides, 133 b5-c5 from the translation by B. Jowett, 1892 OUP. I decided to quote here the translation and then underline the most relevant parts. This approach seems to fit better to the analysis of a prosaic text.

the centuries, while many enriching philosophical ideas came along. One of these steps in the evolution of Platonism can, in my opinion, be well observed in Gödel during the Husserlian developments of Phenomenology.

2.3 Gödelian Implications on Completeness

It is not the case that the name of Gödel can't be written without the word "(in)completeness" next to it, in fact I have a good reason to talk about completeness here. Previously I introduced the two forms of objectivity as signs of a specific feature of the metaphysical structure they were defined in and now I'll use completeness for a similar purpose. In fact Gödel develops a very strong conception of completeness as the result of a certain internal structure which might answer our previous question.

Rationalism is connected with Platonism because it is directed to the conceptual aspect rather than toward the (real) world.¹⁸

Such rationalism in the most Platonic sense is the one that gives Gödel the grounding to believe that the world, in a sense, is complete, in fact:

There are systematic methods for the solution of all problems (also art, etc.).¹⁹

And similarly:

I am under the impression that after sufficient clarification of the concepts in question it will be possible to conduct these discussions with mathematical rigour and that the result will then be [...] that the Platonistic view is the only one tenable.²⁰

I deduce from these paragraphs that in order to get the realism that is proper of Platonism, there is no need at all to assume there to be some noumenic objects which are to be considered *outside* of the subject. Instead it suffices to assume the existence of some phenomenological objective entities, like those Gödel is referring to under the phenomenological influences, that are able to grant the wished completeness, grounded on truths that the subject cannot deny. I have here no space left to dive deeper into the subject but I am happy to have designed the necessary frame, terms and question that enable deeper thoughts and analyses. Resuming my answer, which would need more space to be better sustained: there's no need in Platonism of such noumenic ideas, it can all be properly described by considering phenomenological objectivity instead of the more immediate transcendental one.

Question to the Prof.

In light of the former discourse there is a purely historical question I have found no answer to. Even though, as Husserl remarked, the actual modern scepticism and the discussions on phenomena is very modern, one cannot deny that it was a crucial topic of antiquity too.²¹ Scepticism together with the epistemological discourse, seems to me, to be a perfect grounding for the development of non-Boolean logics, those that allow there to be not just a yes/no truth value but also some "I don't know". I always supposed that the answer should lay in the fact that there has always been a Platonic assumption that states that all questions do, somewhere, have a yes/no answer. Now though, it is clearer to me that even in the Platonic view there are few epistemic concerns and therefore the "I don't know" answer seems to be not that irrelevant as I previously supposed. My question therefore is: since ancient philosophy is rich of epistemic questions where the answer "I don't know" (or, alternatively, I *can't know*) is definitely possible, why did we need to wait until the 20th century to see intuitionistic logic arise?

One might argue that since any proper formalisation has been missing until very recent times, there was no actual way to notice if there were three of what we today call truth values. Though this is clearly not true. As the basics of intuitionistic logic shows, there are very well known laws that

¹⁸Wang, 1996, *A Logical Journey: From Gödel to Philosophy (Representation and Mind)*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 9.4.18

¹⁹ibidem, p. 316.

²⁰*Gödel Collected Works, III: Unpublished essays and lectures*, S. Feferman, J. Dawson, S. Kleene, G. Moore, R. Solovay, and J. van Heijenoort, Oxford: Oxford University Press., p. 322

²¹This question also refers to a course on Descartes I'm following this semester on the book: Janet Broughton, *Descartes' Method of Doubt*.

hold if and only if²² we consider two valued logics like: $A \vdash \neg\neg A$ (double negation elimination) and $A \rightarrow B, \neg B \vdash \neg A$ (indirect proof) other than the well known tautology $A \vee \neg A$ (excluded middle or tertium non datur). If those laws have been doubted in antiquity then it could be a sign of the rise of some more-valued-logics, as far as I know though, there have been none.

²²There might be cases in which this “iff” doesn’t hold, though it should make the concept clear