Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics

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Presently there is a flood of ontologies, an uproar over being. Not only is metaphysics permitted, it has become, perhaps, expected. Not that continental philosophy has returned to some sort of Wolffian systematic science of ontology. Rather, we now find ourselves inundated by a variety of ontological styles: it seems that every philosopher and scholar has their own theory of being. To make our way through this torrent, we might ask: what is ontology? How can we speak of being? Can it be narrated, accounted for, expressed?

In this essay I explore three philosophically and historically decisive answers to these questions: those of Parmenides, Aristotle, and Gilles Deleuze. I examine not only what each thinker says about being, but also how they say it, that is, what the project of ontology is for each. Rather than proposing so many different hypotheses in a single pre-established discourse on being, each of them endeavors to create a new ontology. Parmenides inaugurates ontology, leading us on a journey to the truth through the path of what is. Aristotle, rejecting Parmenides’ way of truth, instead proposes a knowledge of being, a science of ontology, which leads in turn to knowledge of the divine as the first causes of things. Deleuze, denying both the truth of Parmenides and the first causes of Aristotle, instead contends that there is only one proposition about being, just a single voice of ontology. Path, knowledge, and proposition: each philosopher institutes his own ontological style. Each defends an ontology apparently unassimilable to the others.
To better motivate this topic, let us begin by considering Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, one of the crucial texts of (and behind) contemporary metaphysics. In this work, Deleuze notoriously proposes that “Being is univocal.” In contrast to any theory which postulates various categories of things, the univocity of being (that is, the claim that being is univocal) implies that everything is said to be in one and the same way. Deleuze links this univocity with his attempt to think difference in itself, to conceptualize difference without subordinating it to some prior identity. The self-sameness of being is not despite the differences between beings but is, rather, on account of them: “It is being which is Difference, in the sense that it is said of difference.” Beyond its role in *Difference and Repetition*, the idea of univocity has shaped much of contemporary metaphysics. Alain Badiou situates his own mathematical ontology against Deleuze’s philosophy of difference, arguing that univocity remains a vestige of the transcendent One in Deleuze’s project. Moreover, the univocity of being is the source for Manuel DeLanda’s popular idea of a flat ontology, which is further employed in the writings of Levi Bryant and Tristan Garcia. Deleuze’s proposition is thus a pivotal thesis in today’s deluge of ontologies, generating both detractors and defenders.

Yet for Deleuze the univocity proposition is not one ontological hypothesis among many. Instead he defiantly asserts that “there has only ever been one ontological proposition.” We should not brush this aside as flippant exaggeration. Ontology, for Deleuze, begins and ends with the univocity of being: “From Parmenides to Heidegger it is the same voice which is taken up, in an echo which itself forms the whole deployment of the universal.” Not only is there no project of distinguishing the various senses or categories of being (a project already forbidden by univocity itself), there are no theorems, articulations, or decisions about being beyond univocity. There is no science or path of ontology. All that remains is an “elaboration of the univocity of being.” Hence, according to Deleuze, there is no proliferation of ontologies but instead “there has only ever been one ontology, that of Duns Scotus, which gave being a single voice.”

While scholars have quarreled over Deleuze’s proposition about the univocity of being, the claim about ontology – that there is only one ontological proposition – has been neglected. Yet we must think through this latter contention if we hope to appreciate the novel discourse on being in *Difference and Repetition*. At this point most commentators follow Deleuze’s own lead, focusing on the “three principle moments” of univocal ontology, namely the works of Scotus, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. However, in this essay I articulate Deleuze’s univocal ontology not as the culmination of some hidden minor tradition, but in contrast to some major ontologies which differ from his own.

One might attempt to find a different sort of culmination, wherein first Aristotle corrects Parmenides and then Deleuze Aristotle. Indeed, these three are so linked, each contending with the one(s) who came before, conceding some points while denying others. While I will address and discuss these critical intertextual references, I am not defending here any image
of development from one thinker to the next. Instead, in this chapter I set these various metaphysics against one another, articulating the trajectory of each as it diverges and converges with the others. In what follows we consider each ontological project for its own sake. Let us not be Eleatics, Peripatetics, or (post-)Structuralists. We might characterize our own style as an itinerant, or perhaps zetetic, metaphysics: let us inhabit and explore these doctrines. Let them speak for themselves, whether through myth or by science or in a single echoing voice.

Yet there are other figures, other ontologies, and other discourses: why here privilege these three, about whom we have already heard so much? We could note the nearly suffocating influence on philosophy of the ontologies of Parmenides and Aristotle, and the incipient but growing importance of the writings of Deleuze. More optimistically, we might add that this influence is for good reason— that these philosophers dare to think and speak about being with a creativity and power rarely found and, despite their acknowledged importance, still underappreciated. But broad claims like these hold just as well for a host of other thinkers (insert here whoever you think is of more interest). What remains— some overlap in topics, a gap in the scholarship on Deleuze, a few small but crucial dialogical-intertextual references between these thinkers— may seem like dregs in comparison with the flood of material available to us. However, from these (perhaps contingent) encounters, from the overlaps, gaps, and references, from another reconsideration of Parmenides, of Aristotle, and of Deleuze we can better understand what ontology is and might be, both long ago and still now.

PARMENIDES: “AND STILL ONE TALE OF A WAY REMAINS, THAT IT IS”

Parmenides’ Poem tells of a three-part journey. In the first, told in the proem, Parmenides is carried along in a chariot guided by the daughters of Helios, and brought “as far as the spirit [θυμός] might reach,” to the audience of an unnamed goddess. Yet rather than finding accomplishment simply in the divine presence, the arrival to the goddess’s abode is only a beginning. There, in a divine voice, the goddess informs Parmenides that he must “learn all things,” both the unchanging truth and also the opinions of mortals. These are the second and third parts of the journey, which later readers have called the way of truth and the way of opinion, respectively. These are not ways that Parmenides can travel on foot, nor even by means of a supernatural chariot escorted by maidens; instead he can only accomplish the remainder of the journey by listening and learning from the goddess’s tale (μῦθος: “narrative,” “story,” “myth”). This μῦθος performs a dual function: it indicates the way to be taken and guides Parmenides along this path. Narrative can thus grant what heroic labors cannot: access to the “steady heart of well-rounded truth.”
More important than access to the goddess herself, or the voyage needed to achieve it, is her lesson and the paths they disclose. Truth is not a matter of a privileged place, or even of a privileged speaker, but instead concerns what is said and how it is said. This divine teaching is transmittable by human words: the goddess orders that Parmenides conveys the μῦθος after he hears it,15 a command he executes by writing the very Poem we read. Hence Parmenides obviates the first part of the journey for future pilgrims: they need not undertake the Orphic expedition to the goddess, but may rather hear the divine μῦθος from Parmenides himself. Anyone with ears to hear or eyes to read – and most importantly, a mind to follow – may hearken to and tell in turn the goddess’s tale.16

The goddess invokes the first way, “the path of assurance,” which “follows the truth,”17 with the obscure phrase: “that [it] is and that [it] is not not to be” (ἡ μὲν ὡς ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι).18 This is to be contrasted with the second path, which is “completely impenetrable,”19 and established with the phrase “that [it] is not and that [it] must not be.”20 The goddess thus riddles her listeners, and the interpretation of these lines is at the crux of contemporary debates about Parmenides’ ontology. One problem concerns how to understand ἔστιν, or “is”: is it existential, predicative, or perhaps something in between, veridical, or “speculative”?21 Scholars also disagree about the subject apparently missing from this phrase: some doubt that we are meant to supply one at all, although perhaps the most prevalent view is the one of Jonathan Barnes, who contends that the subject is “whatever we inquire into”22 (implied by the previous line’s mention of the “only ways of inquiry”).23 More recently, Palmer argues for a modal interpretation of these passages, contending that the second clauses of each phrase (“is not not to be,” “must not be”) imply necessity.24 With all of these hermeneutic possibilities, the goddess’s riddle, then, provokes a slew of conflicting interpretations of what the way of truth is.

Yet this is nothing new: Aristotle, while discussing Eleatic philosophy (that of Melissus, Parmenides, and Zeno), asks “since being is said in many ways, how is it said, when they say that all are one?”25 This proposition, “all are one,” is Aristotle’s summation of Eleaticism as a whole, and not a direct quotation from Parmenides’ Poem; regardless, his question indicates a long history of disagreement about Parmenides’ doctrines, one which continues in the scholarly debates today. Aristotle, like contemporary commentators, is uncertain of whether Parmenides holds that there is only one being or rather one type of being.26 We cannot hope here to resolve these difficulties; but since, in this essay, we are more interested in the project of ontology as such than in any particular ontological doctrines, we can concentrate on the explicit features of Parmenides’ way of truth.

In Fragments 6 and 8 of the Poem the goddess is clear that the way of truth concerns τὸ ἐόν, “being” or “what is.” Even G. E. L. Owen, who reinvigorated the hermeneutic disputes over the expression “that [it] is”27 for the twentieth century, says that “no one will deny that, as the argument goes, τὸ ἐόν is a
correct description of the subject [of this passage].”28 The longest surviving section of the Poem, Fragment 8, posits and argues for a number of features of τὸ ἐόν, for example that it is undivided, ungenerated, and unified. So even if we do not know whether τὸ ἐόν refers to some single being, a way of being, the totality of beings, or the character of predication, we can still justifiably call this path or way of truth “ontology,” using a term anachronistic to classical Greek philosophy.

The goddess distinguishes this ontology, or way of persuasion, both from the impenetrable path of “what is not and must not be,”29 and from the way “along which mortals who understand nothing / amble two-headed,”30 that is, the way which confuses is and is not. (The latter is known as the way of opinion: a path down which the goddess in fact leads Parmenides in latter portions of the Poem.) Thus as we travel along the way of truth, inquiring after τὸ ἐόν (being), we cannot mix it with any sort of not-being. It is impossible for not-being to be, or for being not to be.

According to the goddess, ontology is necessary. We are compelled to speak of being, even if the human voice frequently fails to do so. This is clear both at the beginning of the path of truth and along its way. We are constrained to follow this path of “is”: “one must say and think that being is; for it is to be, / but nothing it is not.”31 Meanwhile, the first alternative path, “is not and must not be,”32 turns out to be impossible to follow, since not-being cannot be recognized or indicated.33 And the second alternative, which confuses being and not-being, which says that not-beings are, “may never be tamed.”34 Not only must we pursue ontology, but our other options are either impossible or inconclusive: “and yet a single tale of a way remains, that it is.”35 Moreover, necessity guides us along this path of truth. In her tale the goddess shows that being must be “uncreated and indestructible / whole and one-in-kind and steady and perfect.”36 Consider, for example, how she demonstrates that being is uncreated:

But not ever was [being], nor yet will [it] be, since [it] is now together entire,
One, holding-together; for what birth will you seek of it?
Where and whence does it grow? Not from not-being will I let
You say or think: for not said nor thought
Is it that it is not.37

In these verses the goddess argues from the impossibility of not-being to the claim that being cannot have an origin. A number of passages use the same strategy, arguing from the impossibility of not-being to the necessity of some property of being.

Much of the modal terms in the goddess’s tale condition speech and thought, rather than being itself. We are required to speak of being, and cannot utter any word which grants reality to not-being, so long as we follow the truth. Yet, as in the above quotation, these verbal and mental constraints
can lead us to conclusions about being. Indeed, at one point in Fragment 8 the goddess affirms that it is the “force of assurance” that does not permit anything beyond being (rather than the existence of any feature or property of being which would inform our assurance). Still, there are a few places in the Poem where modal conditions are placed on being itself: for instance, wherever “necessity” proper is named, Ἀνάγκη (in contrast to modal words like χρή, “one must”), the goddess speaks of it as a force (or even as another goddess) that literally shapes being and the world. In general, it seems that any conditions of speech or thought must hold likewise of being, and vice versa: speech, thought, and being are bound by the same demands, “for the same is for thinking and being.”

Since necessity guides us to and along the way of truth, we might be surprised that there are any other paths available at all. Although narrative, μῦθος, leads us to ontology, speech also engenders confusion. We saw above that the path of “is not” cannot be indicated, and at one point the goddess says it is “without name.” But we might be tempted down the third path, the path of “echoing hearing / and tongue,” the one that confuses being and not-being. This is the great risk of speech: making or using false names while “persuaded that they are true.” These are names which cannot refer to any being, like “becoming and destruction” and “not-being.” Even as she begins to lead us down this confused way of mortal opinion, the goddess tells Parmenides to hear “the deceptive arrangement of [her] verses.” Thus we hear how narrow Parmenides’ ontological way is: although the goddess obliges thought and speech to follow the path of truth, “much-experienced habit” easily turns us away from it, to opinion. The necessity of the truth is not guaranteed to mortals, but must be chosen and pursued.

We have, now, the basic trajectory of Parmenides’ ontology. Ontology is a way that thought can choose, a path that can be navigated only by hearkening to a μῦθος, which itself can be repeated and transmitted. To journey on this path is to be constrained to think and say being as utterly unconnected to not-being, and hence to find that being is whole, indivisible, and so on. False speech, which mixes being and not-being, puts this journey in danger. Yet if ontology must be chosen, if it is a way to be undertaken, what are we choosing, and to where do we finally journey? The goddess announced this from the start: the “steady heart of well-rounded truth.” Truth, ἀλήθεια, is not a feature of this ontological way, not a characteristic of speech or thought, but rather their guide and goal. For this and other reasons Palmer suggests understanding ἀλήθεια in Parmenides’ text as “reality.” This perhaps goes too far and is too objective: the word ἀλήθεια may refer to being itself, but it also may indicate a change that takes place in those mortals who undertake this journey, and I prefer the more traditional translation of “truth” for preserving this connotation. Whatever way we translate the word, it is surely the case that ἀλήθεια is the real of both the goddess’s μῦθος and Parmenides’ ontology: we must follow truth in order to think being, and we think being in order to access the truth.
Aristotle, too, is interested in reaching the truth: “it is right also to call philosophy knowledge of the truth.” Knowledge, ἐπιστήμη (sometimes translated as “science”), is a state of the soul which discloses truth (ἀληθεύειν). The most choiceworthy kind of knowledge he calls wisdom or first philosophy. Like Parmenides’ path, knowledge is bound by necessity: “For we all suppose that what we know does not admit of holding otherwise.” Further, as with the goddess’s μῦθος, knowledge can be taught and learned. Yet despite their shared pursuit of truth, acceptance of necessity, and commitment to transmission, Aristotle’s knowledge of being drastically diverges from Parmenides’ path. Knowledge depends on demonstration rather than narrative, and a demonstration is possible only if the terms of one’s account are made clear; for this reason, an important component of Aristotle’s work is the identification and articulation of different senses of words (or different things which share a name). Moreover, for Aristotle knowledge of something is not just a recognition of its features, but also requires an understanding of its cause. In this section we find that these two tasks (articulating the difference senses of words and inquiring into causes), which are absent from Parmenides’ ontological path, are decisive for Aristotle’s project of first philosophy, that is, his ontology as wisdom or knowledge of the principles of being.

According to Aristotle, to reach the truth, to gain knowledge, one must rely on λόγοι, accounts (λόγος can be translated in a number of ways, including “speech,” “argument,” “ratio,” “reason”). Knowledge arises from demonstrations, deductions, refutations, premises, conclusions, definitions, and other various kinds of accounts. An account is true or false when it refers or fails to refer to a real state of affairs. But an account might also be ambiguous, indicating more than one state of affairs at the same time. For Parmenides, names are deceptive when they mix together “is” and “is not” (that is, when they fail to indicate anything real), and Aristotle also ensures that his words and accounts refer to something that is, rather than something that only seems to be. With ambiguity, though, we have another type of deception, one where words say too much, rather than not enough. Different things might share one name, and yet have nothing significant in common (for example, a rodent and an electronic device): Aristotle calls these homonyms (or “equivocals”). Or there are things which share both a name and some other features, but still do not have a single account (for example, formal and material causes are different sorts of things, but “causes” are not strictly homonymous because they are structurally analogous). It does not matter whether we speak about different senses of a word or different things that share a name; if we do not clarify which thing we mean or which sense we are using, then we cannot achieve knowledge of being or anything else. Aristotle’s work is filled with investigations into these things that are neither synonymous (or “univocal,” sharing
both a name and an account)\textsuperscript{59} nor truly homonymous: consider Book Δ of the *Metaphysics*, which distinguishes the various senses of over thirty terms pertinent to first philosophy.

In fact Aristotle criticizes Parmenides precisely for ignoring a major case of polysemy: “false is [Parmenides’] assumption that being is said simply [ἀπλῶς], as it is said in several ways [πολλαχῶς].”\textsuperscript{60} Parmenides, not worried about possible homonymy, regards “being” as synonymous, as having just one meaning. Aristotle never attacks this hypothesis as such; the closest he comes is the argument that being is not a class or genus (for a genus cannot be predicated of the differences that divide it into sub-classes, but being is predicated of all things, including these differences).\textsuperscript{61} But this argument is effectively an aside, and is made in a passage having apparently nothing to do with Parmenides. Instead, Aristotle typically counters the hypothesis that being is synonymous by articulating the various ways things are said to be. Indeed, he contends that being is simply said in several ways. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle identifies four primary ways in which things are said to be:

But since being, said simply [ἀπλῶς], is said in several ways [πολλαχῶς],

[1] one of which is according to the accidental, [2] another is as the true, and not-being as the false, and besides these there are [3] the figures of predication [τῆς κατηγορίας] (such as what, of what sort, how much, where, and when something is, and anything else [being] means in this way), and still besides all these [4] [being] potentially and actually.\textsuperscript{62}

This is not merely a claim about the word “being,” for it also pertains to things themselves (for example: some things are actually so, while others are only capable of being so; some things are accidentally the case, while others are in virtue of what they are). But it is also more than a category theory, wherein everything is one type of being or another (according to the different categories or figures of possible predicates in a judgement), for the figures of predication are only one part of this fourfold distinction. Rather, Aristotle here establishes the different ways beings are. These ways may overlap, for example “is” in “Virgil the cat is striped” accords with the figures of predication, actuality, and also truth. Yet each of these is still an independent and distinct determination, a different way of being, such that one of these determinations might change while the others stay the same.

Although Aristotle does not directly argue against the synonymy hypothesis he ascribes to Parmenides, he does contend that this premise leads to a very un-Parmenidean conclusion, namely that not-being must be.\textsuperscript{63} The argument he makes is opaque, and probably not even his own,\textsuperscript{64} but it seems to run as follows. Whenever there is predication (or a judgement) the predicate differs from its subject (as being-grey differs from Matilda the cat). And if being is said in only one way, then it must be said either as a predicate or as a subject.
However, either choice implies that not-being must be, despite Parmenides’ injunctions against saying not-being. If being is said as a predicate, then it differs from the beings of which it is predicated, which hence must somehow both be and not be.\(^6\) Or if being is the subject (it is \textit{just} what is) then any of its predicates or attributes must both be and not be.\(^6\) Although he admits that some of his predecessors have embraced one or more of these alternatives (perhaps the atomists and Platonists),\(^6\) Aristotle himself can quickly refuse both conclusions as he affirms, against the assumption of this \textit{reductio ad absurdum}, that there are a number of ways in which things are said to be.

Aristotle proposes that “there is a kind of knowledge that contemplates being as being and what belongs to it in virtue of itself,”\(^6\) that is there is an ontological knowledge. Yet there is a tension between the many ways of being and the possibility of this ontology: knowledge investigates the causes of some object, and so we might expect there to be a number of different knowledges for the various ways of being. Of course one could just propose to account for the different senses of being, but this would not be knowledge, for it would not lead to an understanding of the causes of being. To resolve this, Aristotle clarifies that there can be a knowledge of things that are not themselves one, but are “said in relation to one nature, for these too are in a way said as one.”\(^6\) For instance, the various kinds of healthy things can be known through medical knowledge insofar as they all relate to health. Being, like health, “is said in several ways, but related to one and to some single nature, rather than homonymously.”\(^7\) As everything healthy relates in some way to health, all beings, everything that is, depend on \textit{οὐσία} (sometimes translated “substance,” “essence,” or “entity”), either by being an \textit{οὐσία}, or being an attribute of \textit{οὐσία}, being generative of \textit{οὐσία}, etc. \textit{Οὐσία} is the first of the figures of predication, the first category. It can indicate both what something is and that it is. Most importantly, \textit{οὐσία} is “primary in every way, in accounts, in understanding, and in time.”\(^7\) There would be nothing at all if there were not \textit{οὐσία}. Thus our knowledge of being is a knowledge of \textit{οὐσία}: “and in fact, what long ago and now and always is sought, and always leads to impasses – what is being? – is just this – what is \textit{οὐσία}?\(^7\)

If Aristotle’s project of first philosophy were just an investigation into what being is, it would largely be a revision of Parmenides’ ontology. Parmenides attempts to establish the features of being, and Aristotle corrects this with an account of \textit{οὐσία} and its attributes. Yet knowledge of something is more than an account of what it is: knowledge is concerned with why, with the \textit{αἰτία}, the cause. “Since it is impossible for that of which there is knowledge without qualification to hold otherwise, what is known in virtue of demonstrative knowledge will be necessary,”\(^7\) but most things are not necessary in virtue of themselves, but on account of their causes. So to have knowledge proper we need not only know that something is, and what it is, but also that on account of which it is: “we do not understand the truth without the cause.”\(^7\) This is so even for our knowledge of \textit{οὐσία}: although nothing can exist without \textit{οὐσία}, we may still wonder why there are \textit{οὐσίαι}, especially since most \textit{οὐσίαι} are not
simple, but rather a composite of matter and form. Hence Aristotle tells us from the start of his *Metaphysics* that he is investigating causes, that wisdom “must be a contemplation of the first principles and the causes.”

Moreover, wisdom, or first philosophy, does not just consider any cause whatsoever, but instead is concerned with the first and highest of principles (ὑπογεία), what is most eminently knowable, what is necessary and simple in itself, what is separate and motionless. If there were no such first causes of things, no οὐσία other than sensible, composite, natural οὐσίαι, then “the study of nature would be the primary kind of knowledge,” that is, wisdom would be nothing but physics. Aristotle, however, contends that there are such separate causes, that in fact they are the divine itself, and he names the study of these causes, knowledge of being as such, theology.

We have, now, the basic trajectory of Aristotle’s ontology. Ontology is the highest kind of knowledge, a wisdom that can be achieved only through articulating λόγοι and establishing αἰτίαι. To gain this wisdom is to discover the divine and immutable causes of being as being, and hence to know both what and why being is. There are various ways in which beings can be, and yet being is not homonymous, for every being relates to and depends on οὐσία. First philosophy circulates between ontology, ousiology, archeology, and theology. It would be incorrect to say that the project *Metaphysics* is only one of these; instead, each of these is a different component of a single undertaking. As with Parmenides, Aristotle hopes to reach the truth. Yet while Parmenides’ path started with a goddess and from there leads to truth, for Aristotle the highest truth is the divine itself: “The principles of eternal beings are by necessity most true.”

**DELEUZE: “THERE HAS ONLY EVER BEEN ONE ONTOLOGICAL PROPOSITION”**

Deleuze is not interested in discovering – with Aristotle – the divine causes of beings. Nor is he devoted to reaching – with Parmenides – the truth of being as such. He does, in *Difference and Repetition*, establish what we might call a theory of causality, in his examination of the virtual, individuation, and actualization; he also attends to “the most extraordinary play of the true and the false which occurs not at the level of answers and solutions but at the level of problems themselves.” Yet no causes and no truths have a privileged relation to being, and ontology is about neither. Moreover, unlike the strenuous μῦθος of Parmenides’ ontological path and the various λόγοι of Aristotle’s ontological knowledge, Deleuze’s philosophy collapses ontology into a single φωνή, or voice: “Being is univocal.” Like a narrative or an account, this voice can be transmitted, it echoes; but unlike them it only ever repeats itself, it only ever says the one thing. Deleuze hears this echo in the writings of Parmenides and Aristotle; still, he deliberately and explicitly extricates his project from theirs. In this section we ask why Deleuze’s ontology in *Difference and Repetition*
diverges so severely, with respect to content and form, from those of his predeces- sors. In so doing we must consider how the univocity of being relates to the singularity of the ontological proposition, and interrogate the function of an ontology that expresses only one idea.

*Difference and Repetition* opens with two tasks: to establish a concept of difference (“one which is not reducible to simple conceptual difference but demands its own Idea”) and to discover an essence of repetition (“one which is not reducible to difference without concept, and cannot be confused with the apparent character of objects represented by the same concept”). Deleuze undertakes the first task by reviewing his predecessors’ attempts to account for what difference is. He begins with the philosophy of Aristotle, in which he finds two levels of difference: there are what Deleuze names the “generic differences,” the different classes or ways of being that are unassignable to any highest single class, and also the “specific differences,” the qualitative differences that divide and subdivide classes into species. These two kinds of differences “are tied together by their complicity in representation,” they reinforce one another and ultimately prop up the genus-species model of representation (the identity of the concept). As noted in the previous section, since specific differences are, since they have being, being cannot be a genus (for a genus cannot coherently be predicated of what differentiates it). If being is not a genus, there must be a number of highest genera, and thus generic differences, that is, a number of different ways of being.

Deleuze is searching for what it is that makes a difference, what differentiates, a concept of difference in itself, absolute. Neither generic difference nor specific difference lead to such a concept, for both are relative to a higher identity. Specific differences are relative to the class, or concept, they subdivide. Generic differences, the highest different ways of being, are relative to and dependent on a primary kind of being, *οὐσία* (and, in later medieval Aristotelianisms, god), which generates what Deleuze calls an analogy of being (adopting the term from those later Aristotelians). This analogy of being provides us with a “quasi-concept” of being that is neither homonymous/equivocal nor synonymous/univocal. With both specific and generic differences, then, “Difference appears only as a reflexive concept.” Specific differences are only discovered by reflection on the identity of quasi-universal concepts; generic differences are only discovered by reflection on the identity of the quasi-concept of *οὐσία*. Both are subordinate to the generalization-specification representational scheme. For Deleuze, Aristotle only represents the differences of representation itself, “a difference already mediated by representation,” not the differences of particular individuals.

According to Deleuze, this failure to provide an adequate account of difference is not a minor oversight; rather it is an inevitable consequence and “unresolvable difficulty” of Aristotle’s ontology. The basis for this failure is the premise that there are different ways of being, or that being is said in many ways. While we might have supposed that these different ways of being furnish us with a concept of difference in itself, they actually institute
a schema of representation that prevents us from thinking individuals and their individuating differences. Every being is assigned its way of being, which in turn is further specified and particularized and embodied in some matter. There is no way to talk about the being of the embodied particular as such, only these various classifications. Aristotelian ontology “must essentially relate being to particular existents, but at the same time it cannot say what constitutes their individuality.” The issue is less that Aristotle allows for a single quasi-concept of being, a one to which the many senses of being relate analogously, than that he posits more than one way of being at all. These various ways become an obstacle in our effort to account for the being of beings, a net which ensnares our thought while letting pass the object we seek. What is therefore needed is a universal understanding of being, the being of singular beings, indeed of all beings whatsoever: only through this universal can we grasp the individual and conceptualize difference in itself. If we stick with the generic differences of Aristotle, “the genuine universal is missed no less than the true singular: the only common sense of being is distributive, and the only individual difference is general.”

Therefore, Deleuze argues, there cannot be multiple senses of being, whether these are understood as analogues or equivocals. There can only be one way of being, it is said in a single voice: being is universal, univocal. Of course there are still differences among beings, but these differences never divvy up being itself; rather we find “a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space.” To a certain extent Deleuze seems to return to Parmenides’ way of truth: being is undivided, unaffected by the comings and goings of beings, it is “the univocity of simple presence.” However, Parmenides’ truth no more delivers a concept of difference than does Aristotle’s first philosophy. If the latter lets difference in itself pass by while thought is ensnared in a net of generalizations, the former excludes all differences whatsoever, relegating them to the second path of mere opinion. For Deleuze being is not said only in and of itself (as in Parmenides’ Poem), but instead it is said of all beings whatsoever.

This recalls Aristotle’s criticism of Parmenides: if being simply is, if it is said in just one way, if it is the single universal predicate, then that of which being is said, beings, are not. Deleuze concedes this point: “Univocal being is indeed common in so far as the (individuating) differences ‘are not’ and must not be,” although he qualifies that this is a peculiar “non-being without negation.” Later he recasts this same argument in the terms of the univocity of being: “Univocity signifies that being itself is univocal, while that of which it is said is equivocal.” Universal being is what is in common in all beings, but the only thing that all beings share in common is that they differ from one another; the true universal thus is difference itself. In other words, being is indeed, for Deleuze, the self-same; yet what is self-same in beings is only difference. The univocity of being means, simultaneously, the being is said equally of all things, but also that all things are equivocal, unequal.

Every time being is said, it is in one and the same way. Parmenides was right only to permit one way of being, but wrong to make this being coextensive with
a singular, most real, true thing. Instead being must be the universal, it must be said equally of all things: it is said of these differences, which somehow are not, it is said of disparate and diverse beings. If being eschews all diversity and forecloses all change, we will fail to grasp both being and difference. For being to be said univocally of all things, it must be “being which is Difference, in the sense that it is said of difference.” The philosophy of difference and univocal ontology are mutually implicating: to think difference in itself we must grant the univocity of being, but univocity is only genuine if being is said of differences. We cannot grant that there are different ways of being if we are to establish a concept of difference, for these various generic differences subordinate (true) difference to the identity of the concept and subordinate themselves to the quasi-concept and pseudo-universal of οὐσία. And if we hope to establish the univocity of being, we must grant that being is said of all things, including differences.

Aristotle postulates the many ways of being in part because of his attention to λόγος: there are many sorts of judgements, many schemas of predication, and these indicate different ways of being. So if being is only said in one way, we might wonder how we can speak of being at all. Deleuze urges us “to replace the model of judgement with that of the proposition,” that is to attend to expression rather than predication. An expression is composed of three independent elements: (1) the designator (that is the word or proposition itself); (2) the referent or designated (that is the thing to which the designator refers); and (3) the sense (that is what is expressed or the attribute of the thing). Two expressions might have the same designator but different senses or referents, as in the case of homonyms. Or two expressions might have the same referent but different senses, indicated by different designators, for example “Virgil and Matilda” and “the author’s cats.” For being to be expressed univocally, then, it must always have one and the same referent, and it must always have one and the same sense: “Being, this common designated, in so far as it expresses itself, is said in turn in a single and same sense of all the numerically distinct designators.” Written into the term “univocity” is this idea of a single voice, a φωνή of being.

Because univocal being has always and only one sense and one reference “there has only ever been one ontological proposition.” To speak of being is not to attribute a predicate to a subject, but to always express a sole way of being, to designate what is always equal and common in beings. The univocity of being implies that there is only one ontological proposition, that it is singular. Thus follows the unity of ontology: “From Parmenides to Heidegger it is the same voice which is taken up, in an echo which itself forms the whole deployment of the univocal.”

Of course, this ontology that says just one thing certainly cannot be Aristotle’s project of knowing being as being: even if we disregard the analogy of being, it would still be impossible for univocal ontology to inquire into the cause of beings. Yet we also find Deleuze contrasting the “paths” of Parmenides with the “voice” of ontology. We cannot journey along an ontological way: we
cannot (contra Parmenides) establish the features, properties, or attributes of being (even if these are only formally, and not numerically, distinct). That “being” has just one sense implies that being has just one attribute: univocity. To say anything about being – that it is universal, unaffected, undivided, etc. – is always and each time to indicate and intend the exact same thing: “The only realized Ontology – in other words, the univocity of being – is repetition.”

If there is only one ontological proposition, what function remains for the echoing voice of ontology? The univocity of being resounds as a demand to be heard. We saw the first demand in the previous paragraph: the ontological proposition acts as a standard for claims about being. Univocity implies that there are no various ways of being, no causes of being, no features or attributes of being (other than univocity itself). This measure is applied even more strictly in Deleuze’s examination of the “three principle moments in the history of philosophical elaboration of the univocity of being,” that is, the philosophies of Scotus, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. Deleuze examines not only how each institutes a univocal ontology, but also how the theses of Scotus and Spinoza fail to fully comply with the requirements of univocity. This culminates with a discussion of Nietzsche, wherein we find the fully realized ontology “according to which being is said of becoming, identity of that which is different, the one of the multiple, etc.” With this we see the second demand of univocity, also noted above: univocal ontology requires a philosophy of individual difference. The ontological proposition tells us that everything is equal, but “this ‘Everything is equal’ and this ‘Everything returns’ can be said only at the point at which the extremity of difference is reached.” Although ontology is absolute repetition, what is repeated always differs, as universal being must be of difference itself.

We have, now, the basic trajectory of Deleuze’s ontology in *Difference and Repetition*. Ontology is the univocity of being, a single echoing φωνή that says the genuine universality of being. To express this voice is to affirm that being is everywhere equal and the same, and hence to say it strictly of what is everywhere unequal and different. Difference requires the univocity of being, and being in turn calls for difference. This “calling for” or “demand” is the imperative-interrogative aspect of univocity: “The imperatives are those of being, while every question is ontological and distributes ‘that which is’ among problems. Ontology is the dice throw, the chaosmos from which the cosmos emerges.” This ontological demand on beings is pure, that is, necessary and universal: “The gods themselves are subject to the Anankē or sky-chance.”

**KALEIDOSCOPIC ONTOLOGY**

So, what is ontology? Unable to confidently propose a single answer, we instead examined three. We considered Parmenides’ ontological path, Aristotle’s ontological knowledge, and Deleuze’s ontological proposition. These thinkers define what ontology can be, for each pursues being to the limits of
thought. And while there are certainly other sorts of ontology, both in the history of philosophy and today, these three in particular continue to be decisive, for each presents us with an original and powerful attempt to think through being. Yet what makes these disparate endeavors all ontology? If ontology is said in many ways, do these ways converge? We might be tempted to say that these are three different possible paths, or three ways of speaking of being, or three sciences of being, or perhaps even the echo of a single thought. Yet to affirm any of these is to give priority to one thinker over another. Let us instead consider what is common among them, by noting two of their shared commitments.

All three thinkers agree that it is possible to successfully speak about being, even if they disagree on how to do it. This is the discursive condition for the possibility of ontology. Of course language is not a transparent medium; it indeed poses dangers. These thinkers are attentive to how words distort. Yet linguistic error is neither inevitable nor irreversible: we can work to correct any confusions. Being is not eclipsed by language; it is narrated, accounted for, or expressed therein. Moreover, if ontology can be spoken then it can be repeated, communicated, and transformed. Repeated, in that we can reaffirm and reestablish a discourse of being (even if that discourse is a mere proposition). Communicated, in that this discourse can be heard and learned by others. Transformed, in that those others can modify it as they will, correcting or distorting this discourse about being. The speaking of being hence introduces a historical dimension to ontology.

Further, all three thinkers invoke ἀνάγκη: they link their ontology to the demand of necessity. (In the case of Deleuze we only saw a hint of this, at the end of the fourth section, with the idea of the ontological question and the imperative of being.) The task is not just to say anything whatever about being; rather ontology is constrained to say of what necessarily holds or fails to hold of being. Ontology, the speaking of being, thus occupies the space between being and necessity, between what is and what must be. It articulates the contours of a demand on being itself. While the speaking of being allows for a history of ontology, the restrictions of ἀνάγκη require that ontology hold for all times.

However, we should not presume that ontology is the lowest common denominator of these three projects. The divergences between these thinkers are not so many quirks and idiosyncrasies, but essential to each’s very endeavor. They are the media in which ontology happens, and they take it to its extremes. We can quickly review two sets of crucial distinctions.

The first concerns how we speak of being. Parmenides tells us a narrative that leads the reader to an understanding of what features being must have. Aristotle, paying careful attention to the various ways things are said to be, articulates and defends true accounts about being. Deleuze expresses being always and only with a single voice. The first divergence: narrative, accounts, voice – μῦθος, λόγοι, φωνή. Each thinker privileges one of these features of speech in his own attempt to speak about being.
The second concerns the sought for object of ontology. For Parmenides, the goddess promises access to the truth as a result of his journey on the path of being. For Aristotle, wisdom must be of the highest causes of things, and indeed of the divine itself insofar as it is a first principle of beings. For Deleuze, we can only establish a concept of difference in itself by affirming the univocity of being. The second divergence: truth, principle, differences – ἀλήθεια, ἀρχή, διαφορά. Each philosopher establishes his own ontology in pursuit of one of these ideas.

What remains, for us and for the history of ontology writ large, are, again, the gaps, the overlaps, and the dialogical and intertextual references. That is, the question of what each project makes of the others’ divergences. Can ontology be successfully uncoupled from truth, as in Deleuze’s project, or does ἀλήθεια return with the talk of the genuine universal and difference in itself? What role does the φωνή of the goddess have in Parmenides’ μῦθος? What is the relation between λόγοι and narrative? Does Deleuze’s model of the proposition successfully supplant Aristotle’s thinking of the predication in accounts, or is it merely a supplement? Can Aristotle’s hylomorphism account for individual differences? What role does not-being play in the determination of being(s)? If ontology bears a special relationship to ἀνάγκη, then there is a demand to pursue these and other questions. Of course, the answers are beyond the limits of this essay.

NOTES

[I would like to thank Charlie Salem, Ryan Johnson, and Andreea Greenstine for reading through and commenting on drafts of this essay.]

2. Ibid. p. 39/57.
5. DR p. 35/52.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid. p. 35/52.
examines the claim that there is only one ontological proposition. In this volume, one should turn to the contribution of John Bova and Paul Livingston, “Univocity, Duality, and Ideal Genesis: Deleuze and Plato,” which, by considering the dualism latent in Deleuze’s univocity, indeed acknowledges his claim that there is only one ontological proposition.


11. Palmer pp. 51–62, discussing the various possibilities of who this goddess might be, argues that it is Night.

12. Parmenides 1.27.

13. Ibid. 2.1–2.

14. Ibid. 1.29.

15. Ibid. 2.1.

16. Thus the tragedy of losing parts of the text of the Poem – we have lost pieces of the divine myth itself through the risk of textual transmission.

17. Ibid. 2.4.

18. Ibid. 2.3.

19. Ibid. 2.6.

20. Ibid. 2.5.


22. Barnes p. 163.

23. Parmenides 2.2.


27. Parmenides 2.3.


29. Parmenides 2.5.

30. Ibid. 6.4–5.

31. Ibid. 6.3.

32. Ibid. 2.5.

33. Ibid. 2.6–7.

34. Ibid. 7.1.
35. Ibid. 8.1–2.
36. Ibid. 8.3–4.
37. Ibid. 8.5–9.
38. Ibid. 8.12–13.
39. Ibid. 8.16, 8.30, 10.6; similarly with Μοῖρα, fate, at 8.37.
40. Ibid. 3.1. Or “the same is there for thought and that on account which there is thought”; ibid. 8.34.
41. Ibid. 8.17.
42. Ibid. 7.5–6.
43. Ibid. 8.39.
44. Ibid. 8.40.
45. Ibid. 8.52.
46. Ibid. 7.3.
47. Ibid. 8.15–16. It might be noted here that traditionally fragment 7 is seen as contrasting λόγος as something like reason with the echoing hearing and tongue that lead us to error. However, this traditional view has been criticized as misconstruing the text. Consider, for instance, Christopher Kurfess, Restoring Parmenides’ Poem, pp. 73–83.
48. Parmenides 1.29.
50. For the idea that Parmenides is a type of mystic, consider Peter Kingsley, In the Dark Places of Wisdom.
54. Ibid. VI.3, 1139b19–21.
55. Ibid. VI.3, 1139b25–35.
56. Aristotle, Analytica Posteriora [APo], I.2, 70b9–12.
57. Aristotle, Categoriae [Cat.], 1, 1a1–2.
58. For the argument that homonymy/equivocity is first of all a property of things, not words, consider Joseph Owens, Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics, pp. 107–37.
59. Cat. 1, 1a6–7.
64. Ibid. 187a1–10.
65. Ibid. 186a25–b4.
66. Ibid. 186a32–b12.
67. Ibid. 187a1–10. There is some scholarly disagreement over who Aristotle refers to in this passage. Most ancient commentators think it is Plato and the Platonist Xenocrates (Alexander of Aphrosias, as recorded in Simplicius, On Aristotle Physics 1.3–4, pp. 45, 49; Themistius, On Aristotle Physics 1–3, pp. 29–30; Philoponus, On Aristotle’s Physics 1.1–3, pp. 102–3), while

69. Ibid. Γ.2, 1003b12–15.
70. Ibid. Γ.2, 1003a33–4.
71. Ibid. Z.1, 1028a31–2.
72. Ibid. Z.1, 1028b2–4.
73. *APo* I.4, 73a21–3.
75. Ibid. A.2, 982b9–10.
76. Ibid. A.2, 982a30–b4.
77. Ibid. Δ.5, 1015b11–15.
78. Ibid. E.1, 1026a15–16.
79. Ibid. E.1, 1026a27–9.
80. Ibid. E.1, 1026a18–19.

81. Although perhaps it is appropriate to identify one of them as the overarching task of the *Metaphysics*, to which the others are subordinated. Stephen Menn, *The Aim and Argument of Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, argues compellingly and comprehensively that the foremost concern of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is archéology, the study of the first and highest principles and sources of being. But also consider Pierre Aubenque, *Le Problème de l’Être chez Aristote*, which argues that the project of first philosophy is ultimately, for Aristotle, aporetic; see, in this volume, Pierre Aubenque, “Science Regained,” trans. Clayton Shoppa.

83. *DR* p. 107/142.
84. Ibid. p. 35/52.
85. Ibid. p. 27/54.
86. Ibid.
88. Ibid. p. 34/51.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid. p. 27/41.
91. Ibid. p. 38/58.

93. Ibid. p. 303/387.
94. Ibid. p. 36/54.
95. Ibid. p. 37/54.
96. Ibid. p. 39/57. A full account of the peculiar non-being of individuating difference is beyond the scope of this essay, although we can mention that individuating differences are non-beings insofar as they are non-actual.
97. Ibid. p. 304/388.
98. Ibid. p. 39/57.
99. Ibid. p. 35/52.
100. In the *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze quickly complicates this distinction with a number of paradoxes; while these certainly develop the idea of univocity in new directions, they are not essential for understanding univocity in *Difference and Repetition* and thus are outside the scope of this essay.
101. *DR* p. 35/53.
102. Ibid. p. 35/52.
103. Ibid.
104. Deleuze seems to waver on whether Spinoza’s attributes would also be excluded, that is, whether they express formally distinct senses of being. Consider Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, pp. 104–5; *DR* pp. 35, 303.
105. *DR* p. 303/387.
106. Ibid. p. 39–57.
108. Ibid. p. 40/59.
109. Ibid. p. 304/388.
110. Ibid. p. 199/257.
111. Ibid.

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