Wrestling with the Eleatics in Plato’s *Parmenides*

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**Abstract**

This paper interprets the *Parmenides* agonistically as a constructive contest between Plato’s Socrates and the Eleatics of Western Greece. Not only is the dialogue set in the agonistic context of the Panathenaic Games, it features agonistic language, employs an agonistic method, and may even present an agonistic model for participation in the forms. The inspiration for this agonistic motif may be that Parmenides and his student Zeno represent Western Greece, which was a key rival for the mainland at the Olympics and other Panhellenic festivals. This athletic rivalry was complemented by a philosophical rivalry, which is dramatized in the dialogue by pitting a very young (flyweight) Socrates against the Eleatic (heavyweight) Parmenides. Through dialectic, an agonistic form of philosophy attributed to the Eleatics, Plato subjects his theory of forms to a variety of conceptual challenges. This process is described as *gymnasia* (training) at 135d, and the power of dialectic and philosophy itself are said to depend on it. The object of *gymnasia* (136c) is to achieve a full view (*kyriōs diopsethai*) of the truth. This philosophical “vision” corresponds to the physical fitness achieved through athletic training, and it distinguishes philosophers (lovers of wisdom) from *philtheamones* (lovers of images) as explained at *Republic* 475d-476c. Just as trained athletes are able to participate in the contest while spectators merely watch it, philosophers are able to discern intelligible forms through the particulars that participate in them. In the words of the *Seventh Letter* 341c, it takes prolonged communion (*synousia*) with an idea to ignite the philosophical light in one’s soul. The *Parmenides*’s *gymnasia* provides an agonistic model for this process, inviting its readers to participate in philosophical training and develop a vision that transcends the material in a way these Eleatic spectators were unable to do.
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Introduction

In his *Lives*, Diogenes Laertius classifies Platonic dialogues into several types, including *gymnastikos* and *agōnistikos* forms of inquiry; the latter are aimed at victory, the former at training the mind.1 Although he classifies the *Parmenides* as neither of these but rather as one for instruction in metaphysics,2 we believe that the dialogue illustrates Plato’s adaptation of athletic techniques to philosophical inquiry on several levels. To demonstrate this, we will examine the *Parmenides*’s setting, its method, and its theory. On all three levels, we find an important connection between philosophy and *agōn*, a specifically gymnastic or training *agōn* that is aimed not at victory or defeat of one’s opponent, but constructively toward the achievement of a philosophical “vision.”

1. Setting and Characters

The *Parmenides* has an athletic setting and its philosophical characters are compared to athletes. We learn at 127a, that Parmenides and his protégé, Zeno, have come to Athens eis Παναθήναια τὰ μεγάλα, for the Greater Panathenaic Games. The Panathenaia was a local religious festival honoring Athena that took place annually. Every fourth year, athletic contests were added and athletes came from all over the Hellenic world to compete for the sacred olive oil contained in those Panathenaic vases, which are familiar from museums all over the world. Although these games, like all the “money” games that awarded valuable prizes, were less prestigious than the “crown” games at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and Isthmia, they grew to

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1 Diogenes Laertius III.49: “Of the Platonic dialogues there are two most general types, the one adapted for instruction and the other for inquiry…The dialogue of inquiry also has two main divisions, the one of which aims at training the mind and the other at victory in controversy. Again, the part which aims at training the mind has two subdivisions, the one akin to the midwife’s art, the other merely tentative. And that suited to controversy is also subdivided into one part which raises critical objections, and another which is subversive of the main position.” [Τὸ ὅμως Ἔλλογω τοῖς Ἐποιητικοῖς δοῦ εἰσὶν ἀνδραττόι χαρακτήρες, δὲ τὸ ἐν τῇ ἔργῳ καὶ τὸ ἔντεικνός…τὸ τούτῳ καὶ τούτῳ δοῦ εἰσὶν οἱ πρῶτοι χαρακτήρες, δὲ τὴν γυμναστικήν καὶ ἐν εἰκονικόν, καὶ τὸ μὲν γυμναστικὸν ἐμειωτικόν καὶ τὸ πειραστικόν, τὸ δὲ ἐγκατηρικὸν ἐνδεικτικόν καὶ ἀνατρεπτικόν.]

2 Diogenes Laertius III.50.
become an important Panhellenic event. And just as the Olympic Games provided an opportunity for intellectuals to gather and exchange ideas, the Greater Panathenaia would be a likely occasion – perhaps the only likely occasion – upon which Socrates would meet the Eleatic philosophers. Socrates rarely wandered far from Athens and, unlike Plato, never travelled to Olympia or Western Greece.

The dialogue’s narrator, Cephalus (whose name suggests the beginning of something)\(^3\) says that he has traveled to Athens from Clazomenae in Asia Minor – the home of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras. It is not clear whether the Clazomenians were also in town for (a later edition) of the Festival, but it is well-attested by the distribution of Panathenaic amphorae in tombs that delegations from Asia Minor as well as Western Greece attended the Games. In fact, athletes from Sicily and Southern Italy, particularly the city of Croton, were so dominant that a proverb claimed, “The last of the Crotonites is the first of the rest of the Greeks.”\(^4\) Croton, of course, is also the adopted home of Pythagoras,\(^5\) who very likely had a hand in its athletes’ success, and certainly had a major influence on Western Greek thinkers including Empedocles, Parmenides, and Zeno. That Plato was exposed to the athletic side of Pythagoreanism is suggested by his decision to set up a school in the Academy gymnasium upon returning from his (in)famous voyage to Syracuse and Taranto, where he met the Pythagorean Archytas who, by at least one account, rescued the Athenian from slavery after a later voyage.

The point is that the athletic rivalry between Mainland and Western Greeks was accompanied in Plato’s mind by a philosophical rivalry. As a former wrestler,\(^6\) furthermore, Plato would have understood this rivalry as a constructive one in which good competition serves to improve the competitors. By pitting a very young (flyweight) Socrates against the Eleatic

\(^3\) In this case, the beginning of the Platonic dialogues, since Socrates is younger here than in any other dialogue.  
\(^4\) Strabo, *Geog.* 6.1.12  
\(^6\) Diogenes Laertius, 3.1.4
(heavyweight) Parmenides in dialectic (a form of inquiry attributed to Zeno),\(^7\) Plato subjects his theory of forms to a variety of conceptual challenges in the effort to make it stronger. The dialogue’s participants, furthermore, are described in athletic terms. Socrates is complimented by Parmenides for his *ormē* toward argument\(^8\) – an athletic word that suggests the eagerness of a runner or racehorse bursting from the starting gate [ #2]. Zeno, meanwhile, confesses to writing his book out of a “competitive spirit” *philonikia*.\(^9\) [ #3] It is worth noting, as well, that Plato himself is engaged in the parallel act of writing a book to competitively defend his theory of forms.

Finally, Parmenides himself is compared with the aging racehorse in a song from the Western Greek poet, Ibycus. [ #4]

I am obliged to go along with you. And yet I feel like the horse in the poem of Ibycus. Ibycus compares himself to a horse – a champion but no longer young, on the point of drawing a chariot in a race and trembling at what experience tells him is about to happen – and says that he himself, old man that he is, is being forced against his will to compete in Love’s game. I too, when I think back, feel a good deal of anxiety as to how at my age I am to make my way across such a vast and formidable sea of words. 136e-137a

\[\text{ἀνάγκη, φάναι, πείθεσθαι. καίτοι δοκῶ μοι τὸ τοῦ Ἰβυκείου ἦπειρον πεπονθέναι, ὃ ἐκείνος ἄλλητι ὄντι καὶ πρεσβυτέρῳ, ὃς ἁμαρτὶ μέλλοντι ἄγονισθαι καὶ δι’ ἐμπειρίαν τρέμοντι τὸ μέλλον, ἐκεῖνὸν ἀπεικάζον ἄκον ἔρη καὶ αὐτὸς οὕτω πρεσβύτης ἢ τὸν ἔρωτα ἀναγκάζεσθαι ἢν: κἀγὼ μοι δοκῶ μεμνημένος μάλα φοβεῖσθαι πῶς χρῆ τηλικῶνδε ὄντα διανεῖσαι τοιοῦτον τε καὶ τοσοῦτον πέλαγος λόγων}

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\(^7\) According to Diogenes Laertius 8.2.57, Aristotle in his *Sophist* calls Empedocles the inventor of rhetoric and Zeno of dialectic. “ψης δ’ Αριστοτέλης εὐφετην [Ζήνων] γενέσθαι διαλεκτικής, ὅσπερ Έμπεδοκλέα ῥητορικῆς.” See also the prologue, section 18.

\(^8\) 130b: Ἡμεινήν: ὃ Σώκρατες, φάναι, ὡς ἄξιος ἐγασθαι τῆς ὁμήρης τῆς ἐπί τούς λόγους (“what an admirable talent for argument you have!”) Also, 135d καλὴ μὲν οὖν καὶ θεία, ἐὰν ἰσθι, ἢ ὁμὴν ἢν ὁμήρης ἐπί τούς λόγους (Your impulse towards dialectic is noble and divine, you may be assured of that).

\(^9\) 128de: διὰ τοιαύτην δὴ φιλονικικὰν ὑπὸ νέου ὄντος ἐνοῦ ἐγκαθιστήσει, καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἐκλεισας γραφῆν… ταῦτα οὖν σε λεγενάναι, ὃ Σώκρατες, ὃσιος ὑπὸ νέου φιλονικίας ὡς αὐτῷ γεγραφθαι, ἀλλ’ ὑπὸ πρεσβυτέρου φιλοτιμίαι. “In that competitive spirit, I wrote the book when I was a young man. […] So in this respect, I think you missed the point, Socrates, you think it was written not out of a young man’s competitiveness but out of a mature man’s vainglory.” Both of *philonikia* and *philotimia* are considered by Plato to be vices characteristic of athletes and sophists.

\(^{10}\) Unless otherwise stated, all English translations of Plato are taken from John Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett, 1997.
By 137b, however, Parmenides has agreed “to play the strenuous game” (πραγματειώδη παιδίων παίζειν) he has been recommending to Socrates. After all, he observes, they are by themselves – no one is watching.

2. Method: the “Gymnasia”

At 135c, the “game” in question is actually called “gymnasia” (training) and Parmenides tells Socrates that nothing less than the power of dialectic and the future of philosophy depend on it. Dialectic, as we said, was a form of inquiry attributed by Aristotle to Zeno of Elea. The method demonstrated by Parmenides in the dialogue is certainly an example of Eleatic dialectic. But why, apart from its affinity with athletic contest, is this dialectic called gymnasia? The first hint comes from the aforementioned comments about it taking place in private. At 136de, Zeno says it wouldn’t be appropriate to ask Parmenides to perform the gymnasia in public:

…it’s not fitting, especially for a man his age, to engage in such a discussion in front of a crowd. Ordinary people don’t know that without this comprehensive and circuitous treatment we cannot hit upon the truth and gain insight.

 ei μὲν οὖν πλείους ἦμεν, οὐκ ἂν ἂξιον ἢν δεῖχθαι: ἀπερπη γὰρ τὰ τοιαύτα πολλῶν ἐναντίον λέγειν ἄλλως τε καὶ τηλικοῦτο: ἀγνοούσιν γάρ οἱ πολλοὶ ὁτι ἄνευ ταύτης τῆς διὰ πάντων διεξόδου τε καὶ πλάνης ἀδύνατον ἐντυχόντα τῷ ἀληθείᾳ νοῦν σχέιν.

Just as athletes train privately in the gymnasium and compete publically in the games, philosophers need to train in private before they perform in public. And once a champion like

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11 It is significant that Parmenides uses the terms paidia/paizein here (to play a game), which reveal the sophists’ abuse of such tools of philosophy as dialectic.

12 135c: “In this way he [who doesn’t allow for forms] will destroy the power of dialectic entirely. But I think you are only too well aware of that.” “What you say is true,” Socrates said. “What then will you do about philosophy? Where will you turn, while these difficulties remain unresolved? οἴδας τῶν ὧν ἐκάστοι τὴν αὐτήν οἷς ἔλα, καὶ οὕτως τὴν τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν παντάπασι διαφθεραί. τοῦ τοιοῦτον μὲν οὐν μοι δοκεῖς καὶ μᾶλλον ἥσθισθαι. ἀληθῆ, φάναι. τί οὖν ποιήσας φιλοσοφίας πέρε; ἡ τρέψῃ ἀγνοοομένων τούτων;

13 See note #7 above

14 The lack of spectators transforms the dialectic from a public agon (the prefix ag- indicates a public gathering) into a private gymnasia (training exercise).

15 A similar point about training in private before performing in public is made at Gorgias 514e: “by Heaven, Callicles, would it not in truth be ridiculous that men should descend to such folly that, before having plenty of private practice, sometimes with indifferent results, sometimes with success, and so getting adequate training in the art, they should, as the saying is, try to learn pottery by starting on a wine-jar, and start public practice themselves and invite others of their like to do so? Do you not think it would be mere folly to act thus? πρὸς Διὸς, ὁ Καλλικλέες, οὐ καταγελάστων ἢν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ, εἰς τοσοούτον ἀνοίγας ἔλθεν ἀνθρώπους, ὥστε, πρὶν ἰδιωτεύοντας πολλὰ μὲν ὅποι πέττοχευν ποιήσαι, πολλὰ δὲ κατορθίσαι καὶ γυμνάσσεσθαι ικανοίς τὴν τέχνην,
Parmenides is past his prime, his experience is of special value in training younger competitors.\textsuperscript{16} By Plato’s time the training of both athletes and philosophers actually took place in the gymnasium and only the former competed in the Games. Parmenides, however, may well have performed his philosophical poem competitively during his prime; the rhetorical contests that Plato derides, may have descended from competition among serious philosophers like Parmenides and Empedocles.\textsuperscript{17}

In any case, the gymnasium demonstrated in \textit{Parmenides} has the flavor of a master sparring privately with his students, as we see the mature Socrates doing in such dialogues as \textit{Charmides}, \textit{Lysis}, and \textit{Theaetetus} - all of which are set in palaestras or gymasnia. Indeed, the \textit{Theaetetus} echoes several of the \textit{Parmenides}’s gymnastic themes. For example, Theodorus is reluctant to enter the “contest” and asks Socrates to (\textit{labe}) ‘get a hold on’ Theaetetus in the argument (162ab), also Theaetetus agrees to wrestle only upon the agreement that Socrates and Theodorus will ‘put him upright’ (\textit{epanorthō}) if he falls (146c). This atmosphere of friendly competition is compounded in \textit{Parmenides} by Zeno and Parmenides’s obvious delight in Socrates’s challenge to their ideas at 130a; if the atmosphere were one of \textit{philonikia} – such criticism might draw contempt. Although some scholars see the defeat either of Socrates or Parmenides in the dialectic\textsuperscript{18} – the very fact that it is unclear who “wins” illustrates that this gymnasia is a form of mutually-beneficial training rather than a winner-take-all contest.

The \textit{Parmenides}’s dialectic is called gymnasia, above all, because it is a form of preparation. Let’s go back to where Parmenides asks Socrates what he will do about philosophy

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\textsuperscript{16} Parmenides is called a trainer \textit{agonistikon} at.
\textsuperscript{17} See Nicolo Benzi, \textit{Philosophy in Verse: Competition and Early Greek Philosophical Thought}, Durham theses, Durham University. 2016 Available at \url{http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11568/}, esp. 181-186.
\textsuperscript{18} We do not believe that the \textit{Parmenides} depicts a dialectical defeat of Socrates, but rather shows how Parmenides’ objections to his theory are ultimately inconsistent.
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if his questions about the forms remain unresolved (135cd). “I don’t think I have anything clearly in view,” replies the young Socrates, “at least not at present” [#7]

Socrates, that’s because you are trying to mark off something beautiful, and just, and good, and each one of the forms, too soon…[prin gymnasthēnai] before you have been properly trained. I noticed that the other day too, as I listened to you conversing with Aristotle here. The [ormē] impulse you bring to argument is noble and divine, make no mistake about it. But while you are still young put your back into it and [gymnasai] get more training through something people think useless – what the crowd call idle talk. Otherwise the truth will escape you.

πρὸ γάρ, εἰπεῖν, πρὶν γυμνασθῆναι, ὁ Σώκρατες, ὁ ὡφιασθῇ ἐπιχειρεῖς καλὸν τέ τι καὶ δίκαιον καὶ ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἐν ἑκαστὸν τῶν εἰδῶν. ἐνενόησα γάρ καὶ πρῷην σου ἀκοῦν διαλεγομένου ἐνθάδε Αριστοτέλει τὸ ἔχειν. καλὴ μὲν οὖν καὶ θεία, εἶ ἱσθι, ἡ ὀρμὴ ἣν ὀρμῆς ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους: ἔλκυσον δὲ σαυτὸν καὶ γύμνασαι μᾶλλον διὰ τῆς δοκοῦσθε ἀρχήτου εἶναι καὶ καλομενῆς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἀδολεσχίας, ἐκς ἐτι νέος εἴ: εἰ δὲ μὴ, σὲ διαφεύξεται ἡ ἀλήθεια.

The image of truth “escaping” the hold of a wrestler is unavoidable here. Young Socrates wants to learn the old champion’s technique. “What matter of training is that? (τίς οὖν ὁ τρόπος…τῆς γυμνασίας;)” he asks.

The method that Parmenides describes is a special type of dialectic -- a kind of round-robin reductio. Reductio ad absurdum works by hypothesizing the opposite of what you want to prove and then showing that the consequences are absurd. Standard dialectic envisions an objector who challenges each hypothesis – not unlike a wrestling match. What Parmenides proposes is a comprehensive system that subjects a hypothesis and its opposite to a series of reductio challenges.19 Ancient wrestling tournaments were single elimination, with wrestlers drawing lots to determine matches and the winners advancing until a victor was determined.20

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19 The structure of the gymnasia may be summarized as follows:

1st Hypothesis – The one is
The one related to itself
The one related to the many
The many related to the one
The many related to themselves

2nd Hypothesis – The one is not
The one related to the many
The one related to itself
The many related to themselves
The many related to the one

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Parmenides’s method looks more like a round-robin tournament, in which each competitor faces every other competitor – as in the group play phase of the soccer World Cup. The round-robin method is less efficient at picking winners, but it has the advantage of revealing each contestant’s individual weaknesses. It makes sense, furthermore, to prepare for a competition, where you never know exactly who you will be wrestling, by testing yourself against everyone else in the gymnasium who can provide an appropriate challenge. This is the kind of “comprehensive and circuitous treatment” (διὰ πάντων διεξόδου τε και πλάνης) Zeno was describing at 136e. So Parmenides’s *gymnasia* is private, cooperative, comprehensive preparation, akin to that undertaken in traditional gymasia by athletes preparing for the Games. But what, exactly, is the philosopher training for?

3. Theory: Philosophical Vision

The theory and method of the *Parmenides* come together in the idea of a philosophical vision. The dialogue’s theoretical background holds that material particulars participate in intelligible forms without being identical to them or completely separate. At 136c, Parmenides says to Socrates that he must complete the gymasia in order to “achieve a full view (kyriōs diopsesthai) of truth.” The goal of the philosopher’s *gymnasia*, then, is to develop the “vision” by which sensible objects can be distinguished from intelligible forms, and the latter discerned through the former’s participation in them. In other words, the gymnastic method cultivates a capacity to see things philosophically, just as athletic exercises cultivate the capacity to wrestle competitively. Specifically, the philosopher is able to look beyond particulars as they show up superficially in our sense-data, and see through to the ideals in which they participate. This is because the round-robin *reductio*, discussed above, forces us to imagine and consider all of the different consequences of each hypothesis. The challenge provided by opposing hypotheses, which is the basic method of dialectic, pushes us to transcend the limitations of material reality and consider what exists only in the intelligible realm. By forcing us to consider what *would be*
if things were opposite, it renders the invisible visible, considers the possibility of the apparently impossible, and in short evokes that sense of wonder characteristic of philosophers.

Such a concept of philosophical vision is illustrated in *Republic* V, appropriately enough with a contrast between spectators (*philotheamones*) who love to watch festivals, and philosophers who “love the sight of truth.” At 476b, spectators are described as those able to see the many beautiful things but not the beautiful itself [#8].

A philosopher, by contrast (476cd)

-believes in the beautiful itself, can see both it and the things that participate in it and doesn’t believe that the participants are it or that it itself is the participants. [#9]

What is interesting, maybe even ironic, is that the heavyweight philosopher Parmenides himself seems to lack that vision because the mistake he makes in the dialogue’s *gymnasia* is precisely to fail to distinguish between forms and particulars, immaterial and material. For example, when Socrates tries to explain the relation between form and particular using the metaphor of the light of day, Parmenides counters with the materialistic example of a sail (131bc). The Eleatic seems hopelessly attached to the material world.

Like several Platonic dialogues, the *Parmenides* not only discusses dialectic, it attempts to engage the reader in practicing it. In Plato’s view philosophy requires active participation. Just as the wrestler improves through engagement with other wrestlers, the philosopher improves through engagement with other philosophers, and it is through this dialectical wrestling with each other that they both move closer to the ideal. Socrates’s refusal to write at all and Plato’s insistence on writing only dialogues are evidence for this belief. The *Seventh Letter*, meanwhile, states it specifically [#10]:

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21 *Republic* 476b: “The lovers of sights and sounds like beautiful sounds, colors, shapes, and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself φιλήκοοι καὶ φιλοθεάμονες τᾶς τε καλᾶς φωνᾶς ἀσπάζονται καὶ χρῶς καὶ σχήματα καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐκ τῶν τοιούτων δημιουργοῦμενα, αὐτοῦ δὲ τοῦ καλοῦ ἄδοναίοις αὐτῶν ἡ διάνοια τὴν φύσιν ἱδεῖν τε καὶ ἀπίστασθαι.

22 This model can be observed in *Lysis*, see H. Reid, “The Art of Teaching Philosophy in Plato’s *Lysis*,” *Skepsis* XVI i-ii (2005): 278-287.
Unlike other sciences, [philosophy] can in no way be communicated by means of words. On the contrary, it is only through a prolonged communion (synousia) with the subject, by living with it, that, like a light that is kindled by a flickering flame, it begins to suddenly nourish itself within one’s soul.

oriously γὰρ οὐδαιμός ἐστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα, ὁλῇ ἕκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γεγομένης περὶ τὸ πράγμα αὐτὸ καὶ τοῦ συζήν ἑξαίφνης, ὁδὸν ἀπὸ πυρὸς πηδῆσαντος ἔξαφθεν φῶς, ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γενόμενον αὐτὸ ἑαυτῷ ἥη ἱηθεῖν. (Seventh Letter 341cd)²³

We believe that this communion with the subject is imagined by Plato primarily as the kind of private dialectic modeled on athletic training that is called gymnasia in the Parmenides. And we believe that the dialogue itself is set up to engage readers in that gymnasia, in particular to get them to think beyond materialism, here represented by Parmenides. A full analysis of the philosophical problems presented by the dialectic must be left for another time, however.

Conclusion

It has been our purpose to show that Plato’s Parmenides can be interpreted agonistically as a constructive contest between Eleatic and Athenian philosophers. By setting the dialogue at the Panathenaic Games and using athletic language to describe its participants, Plato uses the athletic rivalry between Mainland and Western Greeks to highlight a parallel philosophical rivalry. As a former wrestler, Plato would envision this rivalry as constructive and the dialectical method, here called gymnasia, as a kind of philosophical training. It is a private, comprehensive, and challenging preparation designed to reveal the weaknesses in hypotheses, but also to develop the kind of “vision” described in Republic V, which distinguishes the philosopher from the mere spectator. This philosophical gymnasia resembles a round-robin training exercise in which the reader is called to participate. In Republic III, Socrates states that gymnastikê primarily benefits the soul psychê (410c), the Parmenides offers a philosophical gymnasiun in which we are all invited to train

²³ Translation by Jonah Radding from H. Reid and M. Ralkalwski, eds. Plato at Syracuse: Essays on Plato in Western Greece with a New Translation of the Seventh Letter by Jonah Radding, Parnassos Press, 2019. Even if Plato is not the author of the letter, it is widely believed to express the Philosopher’s views.