

**Vishwa ADLURI**  
**Two-Headed Mortals in Parmenides**

In interpreting Parmenides, scholars emphasize the long speech (in fr. 8) by the unnamed goddess about eternal, unchanging, unitary being. In introducing this speech, she describes mortals as “two-headed” (*dikranoi*, 6.5). This expression, I argue, provides a key to understanding the entire poem, *Peri Phuseos*, in its totality. When the goddess calls mortals “two-headed”, she refers to the paradoxical duality of our mortal nature and our ability to think, speak, and long for immortality.

We must set the speech on truth (*aletheia*) in the context of the entire poem, and not focus only on Fragment 8 as if it were the entire message of the Presocratic. The two-part speech of the goddess presents both an account of immortal being and (in a lengthy cosmology too often overlooked) mortal opinion (*doxa*) about the *cosmos*. Parmenides also articulates these two *logoi* through a dialogue represented poetically by the encounter of a mortal with an immortal goddess, who claims to demonstrate the false opinions of mortals. But the dialogue is a conversation, not a conversion.

Traditionally, Parmenides’ interpreters assume that the protagonist (the *kouros*) was persuaded by the goddess’ logic to forsake mortal phenomena. Some scholars question whether Parmenides and the Eleatics even believed in the existence of the *cosmos* of becoming. We should rethink our assumption that the mortal *doxai* presented in this poem are to be dismissed on either logical or ontological grounds. Why does the goddess present a lengthy Presocratic cosmology at all? I argue that we can see the two ways of knowing of the goddess’ speech differently than as two contestants in a logical contradiction with one winner. Rather, the double *logoi* express two irreducible ways of experiencing temporality.

Mortals are “two-headed” because they can conceive two realms of being: one atemporal and unchanging, the other mortal and rooted in time and *phusis* (coming-to-be, flourishing, and passing-away). The poem begins with the journey of the *kouros* from one realm of temporality (namely becoming) to the other (unchanging being). His encounter with the goddess juxtaposes these two realms dialogically. However, mortals cannot remain in this aetherial realm of logical monism to which *Dike* (Justice; 1.14) usually bars the way. To do so would be *hubris*. Our nature includes a desire to transcend. The *kouros* travels on the ways of thinking, through language, propelled by his desire (*thumos*, 1.1).

But the *kouros* inevitably returns to the mortal world and to his death. We can understand his return as a *nostos*. Odysseus’ refusal to stay with Kalypso provides a parallel, and we should situate Parmenides against this Homeric background of concern with the tragic mortal condition. The poem presents, rather than solves or negates, this *ainigma*. The poem’s different parts, comprising the journey (of the poem), the goddess’ realm of *logos*, and the mortal *cosmos*, convey the true condition of mortal life. The poem is two-headed, the speech of the goddess is two-headed, and mortals are, and always will be, two-headed: blessed with immortal *logos* and cursed with mortal *moira*.