



Parmenides

Plato , Keith Whitaker (Translator)

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This is an English translation of one of the more challenging and enigmatic of Plato's dialogues between Socrates and Parmenides and Zeno of Elea, that begins with Zeno defending his treatise of Parmenidean monism against those partisans of plurality.

Focus Philosophical Library translations are close to and are non-interpretative of the original text, with the notes and a glossary intending to provide the reader with some sense of the terms and the concepts as they were understood by Plato's immediate audience.

Parmenides Details

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From Reader Review Parmenides for online ebook

Daniel says

Most difficult Plato I've read. Part 2 is basically incomprehensible in the Jowett translation, no matter how many times you read it. Looking forward to finding a more thorough analysis of all the deductions made in part 2. There are many mentions of the "one" and the "many" - presumably something to do with (or even referring to) Plato's idea of Forms, which end up being quite confusing. But even in my current state of understanding, I can follow limited trains of thought. There are echoes of mathematics also, such as whether we can divide something infinitely, etc.

Tim says

Maybe I should have just stuck with Green Eggs and Ham. I'm not really qualified to rate the book, and I didn't try to struggle through many of the logic puzzles, though the Parmenides seems to be as much about ontology and to some extent language (or at least the verb "to be") as it is about valid argument. And as is characteristic with Plato, it's about considerably more, famously presenting serious and unresolved challenges to his Theory of Forms – part epistemology, part ontology, part everything else – after which it goes through a series of mazes about the One and the Many. Fun, fun, fun. Mary Louise Gill's introduction is very good, but I have the nagging sense that she misses something. I sometimes wonder what Plato would have thought of Aristotle's formal logic – certainly a great advance, and the Parmenides may be its most important forerunner, but Plato is almost Aristotle's opposite in that he systematically avoids systematizing anything. In spite of his having a more mathematical mind than Aristotle, Plato seems so close to developing a formal logic here but refuses to do so. Maybe he's unable to or just didn't get there. But I tend to think he's uninclined and not oriented towards formalizing logic as Aristotle does. Plato was also more of a mystic than Aristotle, which I think has some relevance to this question.

In Aristotle's defense, his logic can be seen as serving his metaphysical vision about the essential comprehensibility of the cosmos, with man and his rationality being a product of that cosmos, and with man having an essential "desire to understand," as he says at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*. Aristotle's formal logic is both a means for investigating the comprehensible cosmos and a demonstration of the rationality of the cosmos. Whether he's correct and whether (or to what extent) his logic succeeds are open questions. It seems Plato would have largely agreed with Aristotle's metaphysical vision, at least as I've described it, but I suspect he might have considered Aristotle's logic too reductive and exclusive. Our strengths are often also our weaknesses. One of Aristotle's strengths is that he frequently doesn't try to completely prove his point to the exclusion of all alternatives, but instead presents a case so compelling (he thinks) that he believes it will be thoroughly convincing, leaving alternatives to fend for themselves. Plato, on the other hand, sometimes tries to be comprehensive, but in those situations he's typically too wise to try to be definitive using rational argument, relying on myth or analogy, or on the ambiguity that's possible in the dialogue form, or leaving arguments incomplete or very likely knowing they have unresolved flaws. (Parmenides is the outstanding example of this, regarding the Theory of Forms. I don't think Plato abandoned the theory as some have thought; it seems he honestly investigated it, exposed and analyzed difficulties, left problems open that he couldn't solve, but continued holding to it. I believe his later works pretty strongly imply this.)

I suspect Plato would have been uncomfortable with an exclusive, definitive formal logic. It might not be possible for man to develop a perfect system of logic, and it seems to imply an unreal separation of the

rational from other parts of the soul (as both Plato and Aristotle in general conceived the soul). And if this is unreal for the soul, it's unreal for the cosmos (as Aristotle has the two intimately related and corresponding to one another). Can a statement about something that's supposed to exist be dealt with properly using rationality alone? Can rationality alone ensure that a statement is valid, much less cogent? Are unqualified conclusions about validity and cogency legitimate? Is it appropriate and ultimately is it truly meaningful to isolate statements the way Aristotle does in his syllogisms? Do they accurately represent anything that exists? Formal logic is linear, pure, exact, reducible to very simple components, at times purportedly incontrovertible in its conclusions. Does this correspond with the human soul or the cosmos as they really are? Another possible problem is that Aristotle's logic seems to operate contrary to Plato's apparent conception of philosophy as necessarily and essentially dialectical – a search for truth involving two or more souls in an active relationship. (Whether this is a definite or complete doctrine of Plato's is questionable; at a minimum he surely would have also included isolated individual contemplation. And though he clearly considers active dialectic to be very important, the late works seem to move away from this position.) Also, isn't Aristotle's metaphysical vision most fundamentally about an active and intimate relationship between man and the cosmos? I could be completely wrong suspecting Plato would have had serious reservations about Aristotle's logic, though I can't help thinking he would have at least sought to qualify it. Of course we'll never hear Plato and Aristotle discuss the Parmenides and Aristotle's logic, but wouldn't it be fascinating? (Okay, maybe not for everybody.)

10001010001 says

Dear heavens, this book is challenging my nerve as a mathematician. My mathematician personality usually stays in dormant state when I read, and my psychoanalytic-historic-philosophic-whatever personality usually hibernates when I'm at work. I kind of like, and put a lot of effort into keeping this clear-cut dichotomy between work and private life, but, boy, the divine Plato could do what others couldn't.

All things went bloody wrong the moment they assumed that One is some entity. If I ever want to persuade someone to appreciate set theory, I'd definitely turn to this book and screw their brain with these arguments, which are essentially a live demonstration of a well-known fact in set theory: you could deduce everything from a collection of premises that have contradiction amongst them.

A valuable lesson learnt: make good definitions first before you march on to proving stuff.

At some point the quote of David Hilbert came to me:

The infinity! No other question has ever moved so profoundly the spirit of man.

I giggled as I recalled another unfortunate mathematician, Georg Cantor, by proving there's hierarchy amongst infinity-s, pissed off the Pope. Hume once said that our concepts are mostly inherited from custom that we neither checked rigorously or defined precisely. This might be better than what it seemed like -- to think you need to prove mathematical induction first before you can prove that addition is commutative in natural numbers!

Speaking of which, what will happen if Cantor ever get to talk to Plato? That must be fun.

Satyajeet says

Ex nihilo, nihil fit.

Gary says

I think there are three ways to see "The One". The ultimate Good and the source of all reality, our consciousness for when we think, and literally the number '1', each are different ways for how we understand the nature of existence (being). We think about being either by our understanding, our experience, our ideas, our contemplation or our lack of contemplation (Heidegger, e.g.). Each is equally valid in its own way.

I've recently read Hegel's Phenomenology and that led me to his "Science of Logic" and that led me to this book. Hegel borrows heavily from this book. Hegel puts in his movement (dialectic) but he mostly insists that we need to understand the painting as the whole before we can understand the pieces of the painting just as Parmenides would say (actually as Parmenides does say in this dialog).

It is almost as if this book doesn't belong in the works of Plato's Socratic dialogs. So much really shouts out against what Socrates says elsewhere in Plato's dialogs. The 'forms' from our 'ideas' fall under assault by Parmenides. Opposites don't exist (proof by contradiction) are used without mercy against much of what Socrates held to be true. Socrates needs the absolute in order to defeat the sophisticated Sophists and therefore needs a starting point in order to get his negation (all determinations are negations), but he doesn't have it. Our being and becoming, the void and matter, motion and stillness, existence and nothing all need an absolute negation and Parmenides takes that away in this incredibly clever dialog. Kant has to have his intuition categories in order to get the universal. Parmenides gives only "the one".

Heidegger will start with Being (dasein, "understanding ones own understanding about ones understanding") and builds a complicated world structure (always in threes: past, present, and future) and ends in Temporality as if he wished to have started with time instead. What is the proper ontological foundation? Being or time? Parmenides will put "The One" outside of time (temporally) just as the God of an Evangelical will most often be and in my opinion Spinoza does the same but many (if not most) readers of Spinoza seem to disagree.

This is an incredibly important little book which seems to relate to most of the books I've recently have been reading and I wish I had read it before reading some of the others I've recently read (Hegel, Heidegger, Spinoza, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Sartre). It's not a hard to follow book and I actually re-listened to parts of it to make sure I was understanding it correctly.

Melika Khoshnezhad says

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Yomna Suwaïdan says

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Griffin Wilson says

Extremely important dialogue. In some ways I think Plato is best understood as a response to Parmenides and Heraclitus. However, even having read Parmenides' fragments and listening to some lectures on this dialogue, I still must confess that the second half was much too obscure for me to comprehend well; hence I hope to listen to some more lectures and perhaps read some secondary literature on this profoundly impactful thinker.

It was also nice to see Socrates get owned for once.

Barnaby Thieme says

This in-depth study should dispel the misguided belief that Plato's "Parmenides" is an exercise in spinning aporiae, or intellectual puzzles. Scolnicov's penetrating analysis and exegesis excavates the battle of wits going on between these seminal figures in western philosophy, and illuminates their competing conceptions of what it means for things to exist. The metaphysical and epistemological issues at stake raise important methodological considerations, and in this dialog we can clearly see the profound influence of Parmenides and Zeno on Socrates' dialectical method.

I am grateful for Scolnicov's magisterial guide work through this extremely difficult dialog - it has deepened my understanding and appreciation for Plato and Parmenides considerably.

ka?yap says

Parmenides is the most intriguing of Plato's dialogues. I like this dialogue for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the usual roles are reversed. Socrates here is a young and inexperienced lad and he is the one to be cross examined. Secondly it features Parmenides, whose metaphysics is very interesting.

First part of the dialogue deals with the internal inconsistencies and the incompleteness of the theory of forms. Here Plato criticises his own theory through Parmenides by reductio ad absurdum arguments. He deals with the problems that arise with the properties like Self predication and uniqueness of forms. Reminded me of the paradox that comes with a set of all sets that are not members of themselves.

In the second part, Parmenides decides to defend the forms through some convoluted reasoning and starting with the hypothesis,

If it is one/if one is.

But no consensus is reached at the end regarding "the one". I can only assume that this dialogue was intended as an epistemological and metaphysical work to challenge our basic assumptions of knowledge. Or probably as a dialogue to make us better understand the forms, by showing the properties like uniqueness, purity and self predication to be false.

Victoria says

I read this dialogue and was exhausted by its repetitive and confusing arguments. Only now that I've had time to step away from it and discuss it with others has the true beauty of *The Parmenides'* message struck me. This book allowed me to see everything as unified in a way I could never conceive of before. Everything: humans, love, mud, table, and injustice are one. It is only because of this connection that we can afford to think of ourselves as separate entities; I can call myself "I" in a conversation because I know that in our interaction we exist as a whole "we" that gives us common ground to understand one another.

For some reason, I really love this idea that all people and things are connected, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Ibis3 says

After a long hiatus, I picked up Plato's dialogues again in 2005. No review or notes written at the time and I don't recall my thoughts. The only thing I did was quote the following on the Book Talk Forum at BookCrossing:

Parmenides: Then the one which is not, if it is to maintain itself, must have the being of not-being, just as being must have as a bond the not-being of not-being in order to perfect its own being; for the truest assertion of the being of being and of the not-being of not-being is when being partakes of the being of being, and not of the being of not-being--that is, the perfection of being; and when not-being does not partake of the not-being of not-being but of the being of not-being--that is the perfection of not-being.

Socrates: Most true.

Glad that's cleared up.

Kyle van Oosterum says

What the hell did I just read? I will give someone money if they can understand this:

"Then the one which is not, if it is to maintain itself, must have the being of not-being as the bond of not-being, just as being must have as a bond the not-being of not-being in order to perfect its own being; for the truest assertion of the being of being and of the not-being of not being is when being partakes of the being of being, and not of the being of not-being-that is, the perfection of being; and when not-being does not partake of the not-being of not-being but of the being of not-being-that is the perfection of not-being."

Nouruddin M. Muhammed says

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Manny says

I am interested to discover that the doctrine of the One is still alive. It is now going by the name of blobjectivism, and is being met with the usual uninformed derision. Only fifteen minutes ago, Matt cruelly dismissed it in the following terms:

I opened the link and closed it right away. I mostly saw ?????????? Is this blobjectivism?

Ah, Matt, if only Parmenides of Elea were still with us! He'd put you in your place and tell you that all you need to do is switch the coding to Windows-1252. You can find his sage advice near the end of the famous dialogue with Aristoteles (no relation), but for some reason very few people read that far.
