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PLATO'S
PARMENIDES

Translation and introduction
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Plato's Parmenides

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The main event in the arising of philosophy is the discovery of the asking of this question, the unasked question about the One. Wherever in its history instead of repeating its birth it does something else, philosophy is merely the name of a name.

Kurt Riezler, *Parmenides*

Introduction

The most pressing fact that faces the student of Plato's *Parmenides* is the replacement of Socrates by Parmenides. In most Platonic dialogues we meet an old yet sprightly Socrates who eagerly discusses matters of great moral importance with young men, often more handsome than intelligent. But for most of this dialogue Parmenides takes the role of mature interlocutor, first with a very young Socrates himself, and then with another young man named Aristotle. Who is Parmenides? Who is this young Socrates? And what are they talking about? The subject is certainly not the usual Socratic fare: the just, the beautiful, the good. Instead we face a long, complicated and seemingly scientific discussion of the most abstract matters: Forms, the One, the Many. When beginning the *Parmenides* it is helpful to keep the last lines in mind:

So it looks, whether one *is* or *is* not, both it and the different things, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other, all, in all ways, both *are* and *are* not and both appear and do not appear.

Most true.¹

These lines, as does all that precedes them, force the reader to ask without fail, "What is going on here?"

A Beginning

Who was Plato? The man was born and died in the Greek city of Athens; he lived from 427 B.C. to 347 B.C. According to the ancient canon his life's

¹ Wherever in the introduction or in the translation the verb "to be" or one of its many forms is italicized, the verb should be taken in the existential rather than copulative sense. The reason the verb "to exist" is not used instead is that "exist" has a locative and assertive sense that "to be" does not. One could say that it is Parmenides' very point, in this dialogue, to force us to give up thinking about the highest things, such as Being, in such imagistic terms.

work is a corpus of thirty-six dialogues (his letters the old scholars counted as one “dialogue”), which after his death was divided into nine tetralogies (groups of four). The *Parmenides* is the first dialogue of the third tetralogy, whose other members are the *Philebus*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In modern times scholars have labored greatly to try to determine Plato’s “development” as a thinker and writer; they have thus directed their main efforts towards establishing an order to Plato’s writings. This attempt, though whole-hearted and prosecuted with great skill, has left us only with stale results and controversy. Not the least problem for this approach is the ancient report that Plato wrote and rewrote his dialogues continuously throughout his long life. Since confusion hobbles the “developmental” approach, and as this is a volume for newcomers to the *Parmenides*, I have thought it best, while allowing us to follow up any dramatic hints towards other dialogues, simply to try to learn what the *Parmenides* on its own can teach us.

And that, in itself, is no light task. The *Parmenides* is, to put it mildly, a puzzle. No other Platonic dialogue leaves its reader with such a sense of *aporia* or “being without anywhere to go.” If you stick with it, and read it carefully, you will end with many more questions than when you began. So why read the thing, if it is so tedious and, ultimately, so unsatisfying? I hope this introduction may provide some incentive and some guidance. But before you conclude that the profundity of the *Parmenides* is too serious, too weighty, too imposing for you even to attempt to plumb it, recall the story of the wise professor who, one hour of leisure while he was laughing and playing with some friends, spied a pretentious colleague drawing near. “My boys,” he said, “let us be grave: here comes a fool.” The *Parmenides* will respond best to your wonder if you not only approach it willing to work, but with a sense of humor as well.

But why should we try to understand this puzzling work? A possible answer is that we wish to understand better the life and thought of the greatest philosopher in history, Socrates. Besides the works of Plato, there are two other accounts of Socrates’ life by people who knew him, the *Clouds* of the comic poet Aristophanes and the Socratic dialogues of the philosopher Xenophon. If we imagine all these sources as giving us moments in the life of Socrates, a sort of scattered biography of the man, then we will soon recognize that the *Parmenides* offers us the first dramatic picture of Socrates’ life; that is, the *Parmenides* presents Socrates as younger than we ever see him elsewhere. Furthermore, the *Parmenides* is the only example we possess of a conversation between Socrates, albeit a very young Socrates, and another philosopher. By studying this dialogue, then, we may learn something about the source of Socratic philosophy, especially as it relates to earlier Greek philosophy.

But the question of the genesis of Socratic philosophy is, one may con-

Translator's Note

The translation is based upon Burnet's edition of the *Parmenides* (Oxford Classical Texts, 1901) with favor given to some divergent readings in Moreschini's more recent edition (Bibliotheca Athena, 1966).

As I noted above (note 1) I italicize the "existential" uses of the verb "to be" to distinguish them from the copulative. I also use italics to distinguish among translations of the forms of the noun "being," which though varied in Greek, appear nearly indistinguishable once translated into English. "Being" and "Non-being" (not italicized but capitalized) translate the Greek τὸ ὄν and τὸ μὴ ὄν, while "beings" translates the plural, τὰ ὄντα. "Beinghood," on the other hand, always translates οὐσία. "*Being*" and "*not-being*" (both italicized) translate the articular nominative forms of the verb "to be," namely, τὸ εἶναι and τὸ μὴ εἶναι. Finally, "to come into being" is often the translation of the Greek verb γίγνεσθαι, which in everyday speech can also have the connotation, "to be born." I have done my best to stick to these usages, so that the reader is not faced with more confusion than is already present in the dialogue itself.

Parmenides

(Or On Ideas: Logical)¹

The Persons of the Dialogue:

Cephalus, Adeimantus, Antiphon, Glaucon, Pythodorus
Socrates, Zeno, Parmenides, Aristotle

126a When we came to Athens from our home, from Clazomenae,² we chanced upon both Adeimantus and Glaucon in the market. And Adeimantus took me by the hand and said, “Welcome Cephalus! If you need anything here that’s in our power, just say it.”³

 “Well, in fact,” I replied, “I am here for this very thing: I need to ask you for something.”

 “Please tell us what you need,” he said.

b And I answered, “Your half-brother by your mother — what was his name? I can’t remember. For surely he was just a boy, when I came from Clazomenae to stay here before. And it’s been a long time since

¹ See Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III.57 and III.49 ff. about the notes that begin each Platonic dialogue and tell us something about their content and classification. The *Parmenides* is the only dialogue “On Ideas”; the *Statesman*, *Cratylus* and *Sophist* are also “logical” dialogues.

² Clazomenae was located on the west coast of Asia Minor and was one of the Ionian “dodecapolis,” twelve cities which the Greeks, under the leadership of Athens, settled in archaic times. One famous son of Clazomenae was the philosopher Anaxagoras, who moved to Athens at the time of Socrates’ youth and taught that *Nous* or Mind was the cause of all things.

³ Glaucon and Adeimantus were Plato’s brothers and play a large role in the *Republic*. Another Cephalus, a resident of Athens, also appears at the beginning of that dialogue.

then! But his father — I believe Pylilampes was his name.”

“Ah, yes,” he said, “and his own was Antiphon. But why in the world do you ask?”⁴

126c “These men,” I said, “are fellow citizens of mine and quite the philosophers. They heard that this Antiphon spent much of his time with a certain Pythodorus, a companion of Zeno. And that those speeches — that Antiphon heard them so many times from Pythodorus that he has them memorized.”

“That’s the truth,” he said.

“Well,” I replied, “this is what we need — to hear them through-and-through.”

“Oh, that’s no difficulty,” he said. “For when he was a boy he practised them quite well, thoroughly. But nowadays, just like his grandfather of the same name, he spends much of his time on horsemanship. But if it’s necessary, let’s go to him. For he only just left here for home, and his house is nearby in Melite.”⁵

127a This said, we started walking and came upon Antiphon at home, handing a bridle-bit or something to a smith to fit. Once he’d freed himself of that fellow and the brothers began to tell him why we were there, he recognized me from my previous stay and greeted me warmly. We then asked him to go through the speeches. At first he balked — for he said it was a lot of work — but at last he led us through them in full. And so Antiphon said that Pythodorus used to say that both Zeno and Parmenides once came to the Great Panathenea.⁶

b Now, Parmenides was already quite old — his hair all white — but the vision of a gentleman.⁷ He was sixty-five at most. Zeno was then nearly forty, tall and pleasing to look at. (He was said to have been

⁴ Pylilampes was Plato’s step-father and, as a descendant of a noble family and a friend of Pericles, was active in Athenian politics of the later fifth century. Antiphon, therefore, was younger than Plato, Glaucon and Adeimantus.

⁵ Melite was a particular “deme” or political subdivision of Athens, in which was located many of the city proper’s most famous places, including the Acropolis.

⁶ A Panathenea was celebrated in mid-summer every year to honor the birth of Athena and the “synoecism” or unification of Athens. Every four years the citizens held a much larger festival, with parades and contests, called the “Great Panathenea.”

The reader should remember that what follows, though it appears in dramatic ‘real-time,’ is all part of Cephalus’ trebly indirect narration.

⁷ A “gentleman,” in Greek, is literally someone who is both “beautiful (or noble) and good.”

“Keith Whitaker’s insightful introduction to this notoriously daunting text is valuable for its clarity and sobriety. The lucid interpretation will be of interest to those versed in the text and will be of great help to any who encounter the dialogue for the first time. The engaging translation humanizes the discourse without compromising its precision—a notable achievement that will earn the gratitude of readers.”

Joseph Cropsey
University of Chicago

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