

COMMENTS ON "THE THESIS OF PARMENIDES" \*

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I WANT TO SUGGEST that the conclusions of your beautiful paper on the Greek verb "to be," which you apply in what seems to me a very convincing way to the analysis of Parmenides, can be exploited further than you have done, with a gain of coherence for the doctrine. I offer my suggestions diffidently: they are rather speculative, and I have no scholarship in the language and little in the period.

1. The principal question I want to raise is that of the interpretation of what you call Parmenides' "wildly paradoxical conclusions about the impossibility of plurality and change." An argument that leads to a truly paradoxical conclusion is always open (if it escapes conviction for fallacy) to construction as a *reductio ad absurdum*. And the (meager) biographical tradition represents Parmenides—quite unlike Heraclitus, for instance—as a reasonable and even practically effective man, not at all a fanatic. It therefore seems natural to ask, if he maintained a paradoxical doctrine, whether it did not possess for him (and perhaps for his successors who took him seriously) an interpretation that made some sense. Further, setting aside this not very weighty *prima facie* argument, I think the search for plausible interpretations is worthwhile in any case: for (1) to make a rational assessment of the historical evidence one needs the widest possible survey of hypotheses to choose among; (2) since conclusions in such matters are always uncertain, a list of possibilities may retain a kind of permanent (not just heuristic) value, as the best we can do; and (3) readings which are even dismissed as unsound on adequate critical grounds may still be of interest, both for the

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\* These remarks are a revised version of comments made in correspondence concerning an earlier redaction of Kahn's paper. It has seemed, on the whole, least stilted to retain the informality of second person address. I wish to record my gratitude to Kahn for suggesting that these comments be published with his paper.

understanding of historical influence—I have in mind in the present case especially Parmenides' influence on Plato—and for our own philosophical edification.

Now, accepting your explication of Parmenides' words, his conclusion about change can be formulated as: "what is does not change"; or: "what can be known does not change"; or: "truth does not change." But the third formulation isn't paradoxical: I think it's what we ordinarily suppose about truth; it is certainly what conventional logic presupposes; and when a sentence like "It is now six seconds past three o'clock" is used as an example of "now true, now false," it is *this* that seems a paradox—or a sophistry, based upon a continual change of the sentence's meaning, rather than a change of truth-value of any one meaning. To express this construction of Parmenides' thesis of unity and immutability in the "formal mode," but somewhat picturesquely, we may imagine a Book of the World, or Bible, in which everything true is written (*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*): anyone, anywhere, at any time, may consult this book; and what he finds will always be the same (there is no supplementary year-book: all years are included in the main work).

Of course this notion becomes entangled in the whole cluster of traditional questions about necessity or determinism versus freedom or accident or spontaneity or emergence—strengthening Parmenides' claim to be the initiator of metaphysics. But what I'm mainly concerned to emphasize is that his position on these issues is not at all clearly more paradoxical than the contrary position. I have argued elsewhere<sup>1</sup> against the claim that the theory of relativity *requires* a Parmenidean view of "changeless Being"; but it is undeniable that this theory—and equally, for that matter, classical physics—*lends itself naturally* to such a view. Quantum physics, on the other hand, seems in a certain sense to be anti-Parmenidean (namely, to involve a notion of truth as essentially changing); and this is one of the most paradoxical aspects of the subject, which I think is far from having been fully appreciated from a philosophical point of view.

2. Your analysis implies that Parmenides moves, dialectically, from a premiss that is a logical truism to a conclusion of a quite

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXV, No. 1 (1968).

different character; and from a conceptually rigorous point of view, such a transition must be fallacious. I agree with you; and I think what I have just said about Parmenides' view and the contrary one is also guilty of muddle. But I see two possible muddles here, one crude and one interesting; my basic question is, which did Parmenides commit? To explain the two muddles, I must distinguish three possible meanings of the apothegm, "Truth is unchanging":

(a) The first is purely logical, and is indeed a matter of convention. Let *S*, for instance, be the sentence: "Rain falls in Cleveland on April 27, 2063." Let us define "*S* is true" by the condition: *S* is true if and only if rain falls in Cleveland on April 27, 2063. The expression "*S* is true" contains no date: it is "timeless"; and we may choose to define "*S* is true at time *t*" to mean that *S* is true. Then if *S* is true, it is always true; it is either always true or never true; and, in particular, if someone observes rain to fall in Cleveland on April 27, 2063, he will be entitled to conclude (in the sense of this usage) that *S* was true in 1969. Obviously, none of this says anything about "reality."

(b) The second meaning results from the traditional assimilation of "truth" to "knowledge"—or, rather, to that which can *possibly* be known. According to it, the unchangingness of truth means the presence, at every time, of sufficient information—not necessarily in the sense of actual knowledge, but in the sense of discernible structure in the world at that time—to determine all possible questions about all times. (I should remark that this way of putting the matter is actually incompatible with the theory of relativity; but we needn't worry about that here.)

(c) The third meaning, paradoxical on its face, results (for instance) from the application of the notion of "unchanging truth" to sentences containing words like "now"; it says, literally, that nothing ever changes. It is hard to see how this position can ever have been seriously held, unless by a catatonic schizophrenic.

In characterizing my own previous remarks (e.g., about quantum mechanics) as muddled, I had in mind the slip from meaning (a) to meaning (b). Such a slip is logically indefensible. But there is a significant *relationship* between (a) and (b) (though not identity or entailment): although (a) constitutes a

way of speaking that is always possible, and possesses a certain clarity and simplicity, this way of speaking is most natural if we believe that (b) holds. Since the *idea* that (b) might hold is of great interest and has been very fruitful, the dialectical transition from (a) to (b) (which I am suggesting Parmenides made), despite its want of logical cogency, would have been a momentous step.

3. But there is still another position (related to (b)—perhaps intermediate between it and (c)), less clear in content than any of the preceding, which gives rise (on my interpretation) to Parmenides' most subtle problem. This position is that, since truth is unchanging and information permanent, change must be in some sense "unreal" or "untrue." In terms of my earlier figure, in the Bible the whole history of the world is present all at once: within it there are indeed narrative sequences; but nothing "truly" changes. Moreover, one cannot look up today's date in the book. Or rather: a reader who is himself in the world, finding in the book an account of his own reading of that account (and recognizing it as such), could thereby "date" himself (relatively, i.e., with respect to the other contents); but a reader outside this world cannot learn from the book how its events stand chronologically with respect to him; and such questions are no more meaningful for him than the corresponding questions about the world described by J. R. R. Tolkien are for me.

If Parmenides did hold such a position, it would seem that he would have had to confront the problem of how, in an "intrinsically changeless" world, the appearances of change come about. But this is the problem of the  $\delta\acute{\iota}\xi\alpha$ . It involves, for instance, not the "problem of time," but the problem of *the way time appears*. Within Einstein's "world" (viewed in Parmenidean fashion) there is time (in the sense, that is, of a structure of objective relations called "temporal"); but it is there all at once; and why we experience it not all at once but as we really do—even, perhaps, how to formulate in a precise way this contrast that we feel so sharply—remains a problem and a kind of mystery.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the discussion between Einstein and Carnap, reported by the latter in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, ed. by P. A. Schilpp (La Salle, Ill., 1963), pp. 37 f.

I'm not inclined to claim that Parmenides, or anyone, has resolved this question. But it looks to me as if Parmenides may have made a very intelligent attack upon it: by distinguishing knowledge, which is of what is (or is so), from *all* that is really accessible to human thought (fragment 16: "For as at any time the mixture is of the much-wandering members, so does νόσ come to men"); and by trying somehow—but he says fallibly and even deceptively (8.50-52)—to account for the way unchanging truth can seem, through a kind of partial vision or limited perspective, to change. I think Parmenides' use of "light" and "night" as principles for the δόξα is very significant, especially when one compares this with his employment of the same terms in the proem. That this language may have been understood by his readers as having an epistemological (not just a cosmological) bearing is suggested by what seems to me an echo in Democritus' characterization of sensation as a "dark form of knowledge" (fragment 11). Again: can we suppose Parmenides to mean literally that all appearance comes from a misuse of words (8.54: "For they decided to name two forms . . .")? Taken literally this is pretty silly; and it is impossible to reconcile with your reading of the close of fragment 1: ". . . how what seems *had to be acceptable*, since *this seeming penetrates all things*" (a reading that seems to me very concordant with my own conjecture about Parmenides' doctrine). That Parmenides' way of speaking here either was, or (perhaps more likely) became, following him, a standard way of referring to the use of words for what is given empirically but not understood, seems confirmed by the parallels in Democritus (fragment 9: "By convention [or custom] there is sweet, [etc.]") and in Plato (who compares appearances both to shadows and to conventional signs). One more Platonic echo, which shows a very direct influence of Parmenides' division of ἀλήθεια and δόξα (and may therefore help to illuminate the meaning of the latter), is the basic distinction between what one can know (which Plato says cannot be written down at all without serious distortion and the inevitability of misinterpretation) and what one can have at most a "likely story" about.

4. The reading I have sketched leads to a certain reservation about what you suggest as a "philosophic justification" for the proem: "to make use of the form of a divine revelation in order

to . . . transcend the traditional Greek pieties on the subject of the deficiencies of human knowledge.” According to my reading, Parmenides does not exempt himself from the limitations of the  $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ ; or exempts himself only in withholding ultimate intellectual assent (thus perhaps adumbrating the skeptical side of the philosophy of the Academy—and this can be regarded as lying *within* the traditional pieties about the deficiencies of human knowledge). On the other hand, insofar as the distinction in subject-matter between the two main parts of Parmenides’ poem ( $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\iota\alpha$  and  $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ ) involves also a distinction in knowledge-claim, the first part claiming truth not only as its subject but as its character, a serious problem of philosophic (more especially, epistemological) justification arises; and this the poem surely does not resolve. If Parmenides is indeed saying that the partly obscure processes of mortal thought are unable to achieve true knowledge, which has to be knowledge of unchanging truth, then a philosophical justification must explain how Parmenides can attain true knowledge of just this point. On this issue, the story of a revelation by a goddess is an evasion (cf. James Branch Cabell’s paraphrase of Arcesilaus: “To believe that we know nothing assuredly, and cannot ever know anything assuredly, is to take too much on faith”).

In order to indicate a little more clearly the sort of account of the inevitability of the  $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ , based upon the limited perspective of human thought, that I envisage as an intelligent attack upon the problem of change, and also to indicate what kind of thing I mean by “philosophical justification” of the epistemological distinction, I’d like to point out a parallel in the philosophy of Spinoza. Spinoza doesn’t deal explicitly, so far as I know, with change as a special problem. But that problem can be raised, since his doctrine asserts the immutability of the one substance, namely God; and one finds that room is made for change, despite this fundamental assertion, by Spinoza’s distinction between infinite and finite modes. (I don’t argue that this solves the problem: I said earlier that I’m not inclined to make this claim for Parmenides or for anyone; I only mean to point out a similarity between Spinoza’s reference of mutability to limitation and what I have taken Parmenides’ attack on the problem to be.) As for “justification”: Spinoza makes the epistemological distinction between “adequate” and “inadequate” knowledge; and it thereupon be-

comes a fundamental point with him to establish how adequate knowledge is possible to us (on the one hand: "About the duration of individual things . . . we can have but a very inadequate knowledge"; on the other: "There will exist in the human mind an adequate idea of that which is common and proper to the human body and to any external bodies by which the human body is generally affected," and: "The human mind possesses an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God").

I see no way to tell whether Parmenides did attempt to deal with this problem of justification. What, for instance, could provide an adequate warrant for his use of the principle of sufficient reason? Without more textual material, we are in the dark. I wish especially that fragment 16 were more extensive. The contextual matter from Theophrastus includes the remark (in the version of Kirk and Raven): "And he adds that in general everything that exists has some measure of knowledge." Once again, the Spinozistic parallel is striking. (If this remark is reliable, by the way, doesn't it count somewhat against your statement that "Parmenides never says that Being is thinking"?)

5. The gist of my suggestion is that the content of the "way of truth" is logical and epistemological from beginning to end; so that the denial of change, plurality, etc., isn't to be construed as a denial that *things* change, are many, etc., but that *truth* changes, is plural, etc. So I demur to the part of your analysis that demands, for the understanding of Parmenides, the tripartite distinction of *Gegenstand*, *Sinn*, and *Sachverhalt*: I take him to say that the *object* of knowledge is the unique *Sachverhalt*: *alles, was der Fall ist*.

But there is a serious textual objection: namely, the series of statements in fragment 8 which attribute to "what is" characteristics of a geometrical nature. If the subject of these predications is "truth," rather than some "thing," then the predications cannot be taken literally. We have to consider whether it is plausible that they aren't intended literally, and whether there is an acceptable alternative construction.

On the *prima facie* plausibility of something other than a literal interpretation I have only a brief remark: The literal reading, which has Parmenides say (for instance) that "what is" has the shape of a sphere, puts cosmological propositions in the midst

of the section on truth, and takes Parmenides to assert these propositions without any shadow of an argument—and with no indication of the principle which distinguishes these “true” statements of cosmology from the merely “apparent” ones of the *δόξα*. It therefore seems to me that the *prima facie* assumption of the integrity of Parmenides’ doctrine is enough to motivate the search for another possible meaning.

As to what the alternative meaning might be, I offer a number of detailed textual and historical comments (but with a reminder of the tentative spirit of my suggestions, and of my diffidence of venturing into these waters at all):

(a) The text contains two sorts of term that have been construed as referring to “limits,” in the sense of “spatial boundaries,” of what-is: those derived from the word *πέλος*, and those derived from *πείρας*. Terms of the first sort occur in two crucial places, 8.32 and 8.42. In both places, they have been taken by some translators to refer to “completeness” rather than “limitedness”; whatever the linguistic considerations may indicate as between the two constructions, that in terms of completeness does certainly make very good sense of the passages as wholes, whereas in the case of 8.32-33 the other rendering seems incoherent. (I know that you favor the readings “incomplete” and “complete,” rather than “unlimited” and “limited,” in these two places.)

(b) The references to *πείρατα* are much harder. There are four in fragment 8; and I remark that in two of them the idea of “limit” or “bound” is presented in immediate association with that of a *bond*—and, indeed, with an actual semantic interchange between the two cases: 8.26, “motionless in the limits of mighty bonds”; 8.30-31, “for powerful *Ἀνάγκη* holds it in the bonds of the limit that fences it in.” These *bonds* of Necessity, holding fast what-is, are clearly the same as the *fetters* of Justice (8.14) and Fate (8.37), which do the same (the effect of *Ἀνάγκη* holding is said, literally, to be that “it abides fettered where it is”). It seems worth mentioning, too, that *Δίκη* appears in the poem as gatekeeper—guarding, as it were, the gates of truth. So I’m led to conjecture that the connotation of “limit” in these passages is not that of a spatial boundary, but that of a *restraint*: the bound is a bond. And I believe that this notion is confirmed to some degree by the only occurrence I have found outside fragment 8,



namely in fragment 10: "You will know . . . the sky . . . how 'Ανάγκη guiding it fettered it to hold the πείρατα of the stars." Not only do we have the same association; here we have a case in which "outer boundaries" gives a somewhat strained sense, while "restraints" is very natural. A final clue having some consonance with the foregoing: among the meanings of πείρας that I find in Liddell and Scott are *verdict* and *doom*; that the association with Δίκη may have been intended by Parmenides to carry a special connotation thus seems not at all far-fetched.

(c) According to the proem, Parmenides will learn from the goddess "the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth." "Unshaken" is one of the attributes of what-is, or "signs" on the road of truth, in 8.2-4; and "well-rounded" is an attribute of the sphere to which "it" is likened in the crucial passage 8.42-49. This certainly doesn't prove anything; but it may lend some support to a full identification of "what is" with "the truth," and to a figurative interpretation of the latter passage. (Unfortunately, both these words have variant readings in the proem; I see from your review of Tarán's book that you reject "well-rounded" there.)

(d) You defend the legitimacy of the attempt to see Parmenides in relation to the Ionians. I have noted three points of comparison between what we have of Parmenides and of Anaximander; and I'm going to be rash enough to suggest that these, in the light of what I have said above, may provide what amounts to a complete answer—that is, one at least worth considering—to our whole problem. First, we are told that Anaximander's "principle" was the "unlimited" or "boundless"; Parmenides insists upon "limits" or "bounds." Second, the extant passage of Anaximander represents the cosmic process of generation and perishing as a reciprocal series of reparations ("judgments") paid for injuries ("injustices"), ruled by the ordering or assessment of time; Parmenides insists that "Justice does not relax her fetters and release for coming-to-be or for perishing, but holds tight." Third, Anaximander accounts for the earth's stability by its equipoise in the center of the universe—i.e., by the principle of sufficient reason: nothing "dominates," to single out a direction for it to move in; Parmenides, as you explain, uses the same general principle to establish the total stability of what-is. Now, 8.42-49 is, to me, strikingly reminiscent of Anaximander's argument:

But since there is an ultimate limit, it is complete on every side; like the body of a well-rounded sphere, from the middle everywhere of equal strength; for it need not be somewhat more here or somewhat less there, for neither is there non-Being to prevent it from reaching its like, nor is there Being so that it could be more than Being here and less there, since it is all inviolable; for, equal to itself on every side, it stays alike in the limits.

The references to *πείρατα* that literally bound this passage are the two remaining ones in fragment 8 (cf. (b) above). If we may take these as having something like “verdict” or “decree” among their connotations, that will strengthen the case for my reading, although I think it isn’t crucial for it (since I formed the general conjecture before I found that particular meaning); and if the “ultimate limit” in the first clause can be taken to connote a final—unappealable or unshakable—decree, that will help still more. The meaning I attach to the whole passage is this: (1) If there is an “ultimate limit,” i.e., if the rule over what-is is unswerving, then what-is must be everywhere and always complete—otherwise the rule would be broken. (2) If what-is indeed is everywhere and always complete, then there will be neither excess nor defect, i.e., no “overbearing” or “domination”; and the limits will therefore be kept (not, so to speak, merely by force of authority, but naturally). So the equation balances, and the passage moves from the limit to the limit.

In referring to the contrast of *πείρας* and *ἄπειρον* I have in mind nothing more than a point about Parmenides’ rhetoric, namely, that he may have wished to call attention to a contrast with Anaximander. But if I am right in guessing that Parmenides is explicitly concerned to reject Anaximander’s cosmology of counter-vailing forces, doing injury and paying reparation under the fluctuating rule of a referee, on the grounds that the truth must be unchanging and the rule of justice must hold firm everywhere and always, then this has far more than a rhetorical significance: it would represent a very great advance from the notion of cosmic law in Anaximander towards the notion of law that reigns in modern science. So if the other dialectical transition I read in (or into) Parmenides would make him the father of metaphysics, this one would perhaps qualify him as one of the grandfathers of physics.

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