

Chapter 8

Parmenides

1. Life and work

It is very difficult to decide when Parmenides was born. The issue has been completely confused (as I now think) by the dramatic needs of Plato in composing the dialogue named after him. Plato had to have his own revered spiritual grandfather in Athens at a time when his spiritual father (Sokrates) was old enough to be a serious student of philosophy. So he has Sokrates tell us that Parmenides and Zeno came on a visit, when Parmenides was about sixty-five, and Sokrates himself was not yet eighteen (literally “very young”).ⁱ That gives us the date 518/17 for Parmenides’ birth.

But we ought not to follow Plato, because the ancient scholars knew what he had said as well as we do; and they could do the mathematics of it as well as we can. Yet, beginning with Apollodoros (as far as we know) they adopted a different date. They said that Parmenides’ *akme* was in 504-501, which means that he was born about 540 BCE (or shortly before that). It is easy (and quite correct) to say that Apollodoros had mechanical methods for manufacturing a date (and sometimes a rather implausible date) when he had nothing to go on. But here he *did* have something to go on. Yet he calmly ignored it; and almost everyone else did likewise.ⁱⁱ

If Parmenides was born between 545 and 540 BCE, then he was a near contemporary of Herakleitos. But that is only a conjecture; Herakleitos was probably a bit older; or at least his book

came out some years sooner than that of Parmenides, because Parmenides fairly clearly refers to it.ⁱⁱⁱ Each of them wrote only one book; and in neither case does it seem to be a young man's book.^{iv}

We do have some credible information about the philosophical formation of Parmenides before he wrote his book. He was associated with a Pythagorean named Ameinias; and it was Ameinias who made a philosopher out of him. "When Ameinias died," says Diogenes Laertios, "Parmenides built a shrine to him" (28 A 1). Now, how did the ultimate source of Diogenes — whoever he was — know that? To my mind, the most plausible hypothesis is that Parmenides put an inscription on the shrine itself. And if that inscription had a date in it, then Apollodoros does not deserve sarcastic comments in this instance. (But Parmenides may well have been under forty at that time. So perhaps he was born as late as 535 BCE.)^v

From Ameinias Parmenides learned the "Pythagorean" cosmology (as I assume it to be) that he put into his "Way of Opinion." The great insight that downgraded it to this status, and gave birth to the "Way of Truth," came from contact with the wanderer Xenophanes (and probably from long arguments and discussions — since Xenophanes cannot see how anyone could be as certain of anything as Parmenides was about "true Being"). But he set Parmenides off on the track of this new kind of truth, and this certainty came much more easily and naturally to a Pythagorean. The rational Scepticism of Xenophanes *purified* his habitual intellectual security. (It seems reasonable to assume that Xenophanes spent a fairly long time in Elea. He is supposed to have written a longish poem about its foundation [21 A 1].^{vi})

Parmenides, for his part, was well-born and rich — well able to entertain a philosophical wanderer who had such exciting and attractive ideas about God and the world. Both of them were deeply interested in political life, and Parmenides was a recognized leader in his community. Elea was still a fairly new foundation in his time; and he is reported (on the authority of Plato's nephew Speusippos) to have "served his native city as a legislator" (28 A 1 [23]).^{vii} Quite recently, excavations in what was apparently later a medical school have uncovered an inscription in which he is referred to as a doctor.^{viii}

As we shall see (in spite of the scrappiness of the evidence), Parmenides made careful empirical observations over quite a wide range. As we might expect in a physician, he was keenly interested in human physiology. But he was also a very thoughtful observer of the Heavens. He was the first to suggest that the Morning Star and the Evening Star were really the same body; and the first to recognize that the Moon shines by reflected light.^{ix} (He must have made these observations in his younger days as a loyal Pythagorean, because both of these discoveries were duly credited to the Master.)

2. “It is not”

The epic poem of Parmenides may have had some such title as “Truth” or “Journey to Truth.”^x It contains some deliberate echoes of the *Odyssey*; and it is probable that the author saw himself as a philosophical Odysseus. Later on, the scholars gave the title “On Nature” to it; but that was certainly not the title that Parmenides intended, since “Nature” — the growth or coming to be and passing away of things — does not belong to Truth at all. The Goddess explains it to the Youth, only as an appendix after he reaches home in the truly divine Phaeacia.^{xi} (It is “Ithaka” to which he belongs as a mere mortal.)

The poem begins with an imaginary scene — there are reasons why we can be sure that it was not an actual visionary experience — in which Parmenides is travelling in a two-horse chariot, with an escort of maiden daughters of the Sun going ahead of him; and the chariot comes to the “double gate of the paths of Night and Day.”^{xii} He is on the “much-speaking” route of an unnamed *Daimon*, later identified as a Goddess. The gates are closed, but Right (*Dike*) is there with “keys of exchange” and the maidens “cunningly persuade” *Dike* to unbar the gates.^{xiii} (What this “cunning persuasion” signifies is a mystery. But if it was Xenophanes who set things of, then he had something to do with it.) The maidens are Parmenides’ “charioteers” (they are probably riding on the horses); and they drive the chariot straight through the gates.

Inside the double gate, Parmenides is greeted kindly (as “Youth”) by the Goddess. She says that it is no evil fate (i.e. not the normal mortal fate of *death*), but “holy order” (*themis*) and right (*dike*), that have sent him to travel this road, though it is so far from the familiar world of men. It is necessary for him to learn everything, “both the unshaking heart of convincing [or possibly “well rounded”] truth, and the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true trust. But all the same thou shalt learn them too, how the things that seem had to be respectably, just being all in all [or possibly: . . . respectably, all things permeating the whole]” (28 B 1).^{xiv}

It is important that the encounter occurs not in the world of Day, but at the point where Night and Day can be seen to be “one” (as Herakleitos would put it). In Parmenides’ poem, Night and Day symbolize routes of inquiry that are radically distinct. To see them as “one” is our typical mortal error. Parmenides does not go from Night to Day, but to the Gateway from which the two paths lead away. The Heliads (Daughters of the Sun) have now pushed back their veils; this is the Dawn, and *they* must now journey on into the realm of Day. But the Goddess (or the *Daimon* of *true* happiness — *eudaimonia*) dwells forever here, where the two ways meet. Her *name* is (probably) “Wisdom” or “Truth” but we shall see how ambiguous her “being” is, when we understand the “ways” better. It is the path of the Daylight to which she will give precedence; but she will not omit the path of Night.

There is much about the chariot and the horses that will remain mysterious, even when we have done our best with them. Plato took them over later as an image of the soul-body complex — reducing the two Heliads to the unitary guidance of Reason.^{xv} *That* unifying role belongs here to Parmenides himself (and to the Goddess). We might perhaps follow Plato’s lead so far as to suggest that the Heliads are thought and sense-experience as necessary contributors to knowledge. But we shall soon see that this is actually a step on the pathway of temptation that we are forbidden to follow. We must leave the chariot, the horses, and the Heliads alone; but we cannot avoid the problem of the Goddess herself.

The Goddess tells Parmenides that the “route of searching” [*dizesis*]^{xvi} which is “the truth of Persuasion because it attends upon truth” is “that <it> is and cannot not be.” This route will be the topic of our next section. For the moment we must be concerned with the other route that the Goddess mentions: “that <it> is not and that it needs must not be.” She describes this route as “beyond all tidings [or perhaps “completely unpersuasive”] for you could not know what is not (for that cannot be done) nor could you point it out” (28 B 2).^{xvii}

Later on she returns to this: “For never shall this prevail, that things that are not *are*; but do you hold back your mind (*nøema*) from this route of searching/ And do not let the habit of much experience force you to travel by this route of much experience/ With aimless eye and echoing ear/ And parrot-tongue” (B 7: 2-5).^{xviii}

What is this “route of Is Not”? It is so habitual that we can be “forced” into it without noticing; yet we cannot learn anything upon it, because we cannot “know” what is not, or point it out. We use an “aimless eye,” we hear and speak in words that are only echoes like the sounds made by a parrot. When do we habitually do this?

The reader of Xenophanes and Herakleitos will realize at once that the answer is: When we are reading Homer and Hesiod, and all of the other poets whose words we learn to repeat wholesale in school. To look no further than the *Odyssey*, to which this poem’s echoes direct our attention, where can we find the Cyclops? We cannot point him out, or know him by acquaintance. More misleading still is the wonderworking of Circe, who transforms the crew of Odysseus into pigs; and their hero-captain has a herb that turns them back into men again. Pythagoras (and Jonathan Barnes) may think that it makes some kind of sense to suppose that the human “soul” is an “identity” to which this could happen. But the Greek doctors Alkmaeon and Parmenides (supported by Herakleitos and myself, who are not physicians) say that it is nonsense. When poets speak about the soul in this way, they speak of “what is not and needs must not be.” Never shall this prevail, that things that are not *are*. The magic of Circe is not now, it was not then, and it never will be. So just what *is* it?

Most of the translators make Parmenides say that this route “cannot be learned.” But we can learn what it is; Plato put his mind to that.^{xix} What is more immediately important (since Parmenides could not see Plato coming) is that Parmenides himself enables us to learn something very important travelling *on* this route; and in view of the conscious parallel that he makes between himself and Odysseus, he can hardly have helped being aware of that. So I think the report of Proclus is right: he wrote “unpersuasive,” not “beyond all tidings.” In Parmenides’ poem, this route is not “beyond tidings”; but it is “completely unpersuasive.” We put no trust at all in the claim that he rode in a two-horse carriage, driven by the Heliads to meet a Goddess. If he had any experience of this sort it was a dream; and as Herakleitos pithily puts it “what we see sleeping is sleep” (22 B 21).

We cannot recognize or point out the Goddess — it is no accident that she remains anonymous. But we can point (in our thought) to the place from which she speaks; and of course we can “know” what she speaks about, and “see” the truth of what she says about it. To this we must now go on.

3. “It is”

The way that this necessarily non-existent Goddess recommends is that of “necessary existence.” If we think of the options thus, we shall avoid the mistake of supposing that Parmenides has simply achieved a clear concept of logical necessity. He is much clearer about that than his predecessors; but he makes some *material* assumptions that are really still optional.

These assumptions appear to him to be *necessary*, because of certain concerns that he inherits from his predecessors. Like them he is concerned with what it means to be “divine,” or to close the circle of life so that it is securely *immortal* — beyond all death and ending. The divine life must be

unitary; and it must somehow be *visible* in the world of change and mortality in which we human agents and observers live.

Parmenides did not need to get these assumptions from his meeting with Xenophanes. They were present in his Pythagorean education. But they came together for him in a new way because of a further assumption that Xenophanes made explicit. God, the immortal life, the eternal standpoint, is at *rest*. Rest is logically prior to motion. We do not know just how nearly *this* assumption was already explicit in the Pythagorean school; but in any case, Xenophanes set it up clearly in direct proximity to the “life” and the “unity” assumptions. He established clearly the concept of a “divine totality” that is at rest.

But he also set up a tension in the mind of this Pythagorean student, by claiming that human consciousness is essentially *democratic*. His own conception of God was an opinion; and “Opinion is allotted to all” (21 B 34, last line).^{xx} Parmenides decided that with respect to the thought of “what is,” Xenophanes’ way was a mistake; and that his error can be demonstrated. The being of God is *first*. It is not caught up in the cloud of unknowing opinions; this can be proved to all who know how to think.

Over in Ephesos, Herakleitos has already demonstrated the “optional” character of the assumed primacy of *rest*: “Changing, it rests” (22 B 84a), he said.^{xxi} But by the time Parmenides discovered what Herakleitos had said, he had made his own decision; he thought that, if truth is to be secured against the maelstrom of opinion, it must be *rest* that belongs properly to “the eternal.” It is the *eternity* of Being (as distinct from its *immortality*) that Parmenides has discovered. “To be” is to be an eternal thought (and its real object): “For Thinking and Being <are> the same” (B 3).^{xxii}

The truth is as “far off” as the motionless sphere of Heaven that Xenophanes “saw.” But “what is” is not to be separated from the firmly fixed “*thought that it is*” in our mind. “What is” does not “disperse itself and gather itself together” (B 4) (in space and time, but especially in *space* since the most obvious reference is to the “rarefaction and condensation” of Anaximenes).^{xxiii}

Parmenides is conscious that his position is very simple, and that continual repetition of the focal point in a number of different perspectives is necessary: “It is a common point [*xunon*] for me/ From which I shall begin. For I shall arrive back there again” (B 5).^{xxiv} He does not argue in a circle, but the divine Being is a completed circle; that is where we must begin, and like the compass-stylus we must always come back to that. For us, the important circle is that from our thought to the *being* of what is thought of. This is what must be expressed in speech. In this way we can avoid the vagaries of opinion. This “route of searching” is the proper logical thinking that must be distinguished from the simple freedom of imaginative fantasy (the “route of Is Not” with which we have already dealt).

Midway between them, there *seems* to be the route of “Is *and* Is Not” which has been brought to a supposed “Divine Identity” by Herakleitos. But Herakleitos is a “man with two heads.” Anaximenes was at least a *monist*. He needed to distinguish the unity of God (the Air) from the multiplicity of the *kosmos*; and even Pythagoras (who avoided the crudity of a mechanical rarefaction and condensation of God) had to distinguish between God as “gathered” (in the One), and God as “dispersed” (in Number). But now we have Herakleitos saying that God is a simple unity (or “identity”) of opposites: “Day and Night are One.” Herakleitos certainly said *that*; and it was the first error that Parmenides “corrected” in his own fiction.

Parmenides *accuses* Herakleitos of saying things that are logically far more outrageous than that. He is the leader of an uncritical tribe of mortals who have “considered being [*pelein*, literally “being in motion”] and not-being [*ouk einai*] the same/ And not the same; but the journey of all [things] is back-turning” (B 6).^{xxv}

Herakleitos is as bad as the poets. He has pushed the “route of Is and Is Not” — for which Parmenides intends to preserve its own proper respectability — into a supposed “identity” with the “route of Is Not.” For he claims that “things that are not, *are*”; and this claim must never prevail (B 7, line 1).^{xxvi} Parmenides calls his own refutation of the “route of Is Not” *polyderis*. I think he

means “much-battling” rather than “much-battled,” because there is such a multitude of mistaken opinions that it overthrows. But his argument has been “much-contested”; and thanks to Herakleitos — who causes Parmenides to go from Is-Not, to Is-and-Is-Not, and back again finally to Is-Not^{xxvii} before finally dealing properly with It Is — the argument has generally been misunderstood.

Having disposed of the “One over Many” theorists, and the “Identity of Opposites” error, we can come finally to the “many signs” on the one true “route of searching.” The divine Being is “ungenerated and imperishable” (just as Xenophanes said). It is “whole, single-limbed, unshaking and complete.” It is outside of time, so it cannot have come to be, or be growing. It would never have come to be, for “out of nothing, nothing comes.” (Parmenides did not actually say this; but everyone after him said it for him.) Nor can it grow, because nothing new can emerge from it; and it cannot perish (either wholly or in part). We are speaking of what is out of time, and Right (*Dike*) holds it fast against any temporal sequence of variation. The decision is between *Is* and *Is Not*; and for what is fully eternal, the *Is Not* option is closed. “That then has been decided, as necessary” (B 8: 16).^{xxviii}

This “single limb” is not divisible, because temporal emergence or perishing would be the only way to divide it. It is not rarefied or condensed at different points. But it is self-identical and complete; and as such it is definite. It is not spatially bounded; but because of its perfect homogeneity, it falls — even spatially — under the category of (qualitative) Limit, rather than that of the Unlimited (or Boundless). To Melissos, whose inclinations are more Ionian, this insistence on Limit as qualitative fixity will appear to be nothing but a Pythagorean prejudice. So the optional character of “true Being” will soon be illustrated among the very “followers” of Parmenides. But Parmenides is impressed by the theological consideration that if “What is” lacked anything, it would come tumbling back into the world of time, the world of coming-to-be and perishing; and then, lacking its eternity, it would “lack everything” (B 8: 33).^{xxix}

From this it follows that we, who must say of ourselves that as natural beings we “are and are not,” lack being altogether, properly speaking. The seemingly different way of *Is* and *Is-Not* reduces

logically to Is Not. It is only as the thought of what is true that we *are*. But the human thinking for which the option between Is and Is-Not presents itself as necessarily settled, is identical with the thinking of God (or of Being itself). “Thinking (*noein*) is the same as that for the sake of which there is thought” (B 8: 34).^{xxx} All of the things that we say when we are not imagining, but consciously trying to think about what really exists, refer to this eternal identity of Being. But then in our daily lives, we set up the standpoint of Is-and-Is-Not. We *believe* in a world of coming to be and perishing, a world of things that move and change their character; and we cannot help having different opinions about that world.

We have to get beyond that standpoint, to the true limit of what completely *is*, because it is complete. What truly is resembles a perfect sphere, because it is everywhere equal, and everywhere within a circular limit. The Divine simply *is*; for it there is no “seeing, hearing, and shaking” (as in Xenophanes), but only the thought that “It is.”

4. “It is and it is not”

We can rise with our minds to the standpoint of this perfectly stable Being; but we are not ourselves immortal. So we have to form beliefs that are appropriate to our mortal status (cf. B 8: 19). The words of the Goddess now form a “deceitful order” because mortals have established and named two forms in their minds “of which it is not right to name one” (B 8: 54).^{xxxii} The qualitative homogeneity of true Being — its “Limit” — is not *imaginable*; Anaximander had already realized that *this* was true about the “Boundless.” (We cannot properly say what the Boundless *looks like* — although Anaxagoras will claim to do just that.)

Mortals have distinguished opposite sensible qualities (light and dark, but also light and heavy); and although this is all “deceitful,” Parmenides is confident that he can give the best “opinions” at this level of human consciousness. The Goddess says that she will tell him what is most plausible, “so that no judgment of mortals shall ever overtake you” (B 8, 60-1).^{xxxiii} Being a

Goddess (and the imaginary poetic mouthpiece of the true God) she has to speak of the human standpoint as contemptuously as she does. But let us not forget that her own status is worse than that of our empirically-founded opinions — or at any rate it is no better. She “is Not.”

We should not be misled by her contemptuous attitude. She cannot tell us what opinions are *true*, because *no* opinions are true.^{xxxiii} But no one will overtake her “Youth” in the race (even in the race for the best *opinions*) because *he* has understood this. Outside the sphere of scientific theology, Parmenides has to agree with Xenophanes that “opinion is wrought over all things” (21 B 34, 4).^{xxxiv}

But some opinions are *better* than others nevertheless; and Parmenides himself, the recognized lawgiver and practising physician, thinks that having the best possible opinions about mortal life, and about the sensible consciousness of the world, is of vital importance to us humans. He agrees with Herakleitos that human justice and human judgment is of no significance to the true God. Like Herakleitos he actually uses the language of justice at the divine level. But the effect of this is not to suggest the possibility of *material* philosophical access to God’s knowledge, but rather to cut off our logical knowledge of “the necessary existence” neatly and sharply from any theories that we may develop about “cosmic cycles” or other images of the total order of Nature. All such theories must remain “matters of opinion,” and subject to dispute.

The “opinions” that the Goddess recommends as “outstripping all others” are probably an appropriate transformation of the views of the Pythagoreans at about the time that the Master died. Xenophanes has had some influence upon them (and Alkmaeon too, if we have his dates about right). Let us consider first the fragment about human knowledge — in which all three influences are probably present: “For as each man has a mixing of the much wandering limbs,/ So is mind present to men; for it is the same thing/ Which the natural growth of the limbs thinks/ For each and every man; for the full is thought” (B 16).^{xxxv}

God is “single-limbed.” We can infer that (metaphorically, anyway) Parmenides agrees with Xenophanes about the *material* claim that “He sees, hears and knows everywhere at once.” (The Goddess does not tell her Youth this, because it is not a rational certainty, and the truth about God is not a matter of opinion at all). We humans have a “mixture” of sense knowledge delivered to our

mind from our various “limbs” (these are, specifically, our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and touch-feeling members). “The full is *noema*” — perfect correspondence of Being and Thought for God, and for us the reconciled correspondence of our available fragment of the sense-world within our thought-consciousness. This *finite* identity for each of us, is “the same thing” for all of us only in a generic sense. We must *all* have sights, sounds, smells etc. But since each of us is aware of a different fragment of the world, we are bound to have different opinions. Only the invariant general structure of the sense-world is a possible object of thought; and our common *noema* can never be equal to God’s, because it is only a poetic metaphor that God “sees and hears.” Theophrastos read this fragment (in its context, whatever that was) as asserting that “perceiving and thinking are the same” (A 46). As far as ordinary human cognition is concerned it is clear that this is right; but the result of Parmenides’ doctrine is to abolish “perceiving” for God. God does not have an outside world, and he *cannot* form opinions. He *is* the whole that he identically thinks.

About the world-system that is “the same for all” of us finite perceiving thinkers, Parmenides holds some very “Ionian” views. But we can recognize the distinctively “Pythagorean” emphasis in the primacy of the opposition between Day and Night.^{xxxvi} This opposition is doubled in that between fire and earth (“light and heavy”) (B 8, 55-9).^{xxxvii} Fire is the life-principle, so all organic bodies are “mixtures”; and all bodies in Parmenides’ world are organic at some level. Everything is “full of both [Light and Night, Fire and Earth, Soul and Body]” (B 9 — cf. A 33).

We can plausibly infer that by now the Pythagoreans have a “table of opposites,” because we find the pairs “rare and dense,” “male and female,” “right and left” ranged under “light and dark” in our fragments of Parmenides (B 8: 57-9, B9, B 12, B 17);^{xxxviii} from Aristotle’s reports we can be sure of “fire and earth,” “hot and cold”; and surely we need not hesitate to add “dry and wet” — with the water of Thales on the subordinate “female” side (A 24, A 34, A 35).

The opposites are divided into an active agent, and a passive material in each case. The Goddess promises to explain the formation of the *kosmos* — including the Milky Way, and the heavenly fire, or *aether*, which takes over the role of Anaximenes’ encompassing Air (B 10, B 11).

The reporters say that Parmenides went into considerable detail (though they supply very little of it themselves). It is no surprise to discover that animal physiology was dealt with (B 11).^{xxxix}

We have a short doxographic account of the cosmology; and one or two fragments that fit into it. There is a “solid wall” round the whole *kosmos*, with a band of aether immediately inside it. Inside that there is a band of dense (dark) matter (probably Air). Then there is another fiery band (or “crown”). At the center is the solid Earth (spherical); and (although it is not mentioned) we must assume a band of (transparent) Air, between us and the inner “crown” of fire (A 37, A 44, B 12).

This is a minimal interpretation. The Evening/Morning Star is closest to the outer aether; and the Sun is next below it. “The other stars” (meaning surely the other *planets*?) are below the Sun. Parmenides may have identified the Milky Way as the outer fiery band; for the Sun and Moon are reported to have separated off from it.^{xi} The Moon shines by reflecting the light of the Sun. The stars are “condensed” fire.^{xii}

Apparently Parmenides called the Milky Way a “crown”; and he said it was divine (A 37).^{xiii} This was probably because the Sun (and so all of our Daylight) originated from it. But (as we should expect in a Pythagorean cosmology) the divine directing power was “in the midst.”

H. Fränkel suggests, very plausibly, that “in the midst” means “between the hemispheres of Night and Day.”^{xliii} Here there was the Goddess “who steers all things.” Must she not be our Goddess who reveals the Truth, as well as presiding over the world of Opinion? No wonder she is nameless in the Proem. Somewhere in the Way of Opinion she was called “the holder of the keys” (to the double gates of Night and Day?); and she was also called both “Right” and “Necessity” (A 37). She rules over “hateful birth,” over the coupling of the sexes, and the organic “mixing” of Fire, (Air), Earth, (and Water). First of all (among the Gods of Opinion) she devised Love, to bring about sexual coupling.^{xliv} Parmenides was very interested in embryology; and although he puts the female in the table of “passives,” he was enough of an empiricist (being a physician) to give the female side the principal (active) role in the process of animal formation. Both sexes contribute “seeds” in his

theory; and homosexuality is a natural propensity that arises from the failure of the two contributions to fuse properly (B 12, B 17-8; A 52-4).

Sleep is a cyclic dying down of our fiery component; old age and death are the gradual, but permanent, failing of the same. Our life-principle — the soul — is, of course, fiery, but there is some earth in it (A 45, A 46a, 46b).

The spherical Earth hangs in its place in the center, because that *is* its place; and because of its perfectly equal form, it never moves except for a slight trembling. Like the Heaven, it is divided into torrid, temperate and frigid zones (A 44, 44a).

Altogether, Parmenides is not only the first great rationalist, but a worthy successor to Xenophanes and the Milesians as an empirical observer, and a framer of explanatory hypotheses. The prevailing view seems to be that the Way of Opinion was only a dialectical weapon against dogmatic naturalist opponents. But Parmenides was not Zeno; and it is not only sad, but rather shocking, to see brilliant students well trained in the great tradition of British empiricism treat Parmenides' critical empiricism as unworthy of any serious notice.^{xlv}

Notes

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- i. *Theaetetos* 183e (cf. *Sophist*). In the *Parmenides*, Plato is a bit more honest (in his peculiar storytelling way). He lets us know that we are hearing the account at the third remove from reality (or in other words it is an artist's imitation of the truth): "According to Antiphon, then, this was Pythodoros' account . . ." (*Parmenides*, 127a). (All in 28 A 5. The testimonies and fragments are all translated in D. Gallop, 1984.)
- ii. 28 A 1 (Diogenes Laertios). Only Eusebios (A 11) seems to have accepted the Platonic chronology. Athenaeos says roundly that Plato's fiction is chronologically impossible (A 5). (Burnet and Taylor believed that Plato was a conscientious biographer of Sokrates. This is one place where their academic piety has infected the whole consensus of more sober later scholars. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is a plausible hypothesis that *Zeno* visited Athens — alone — when Sokrates was young — and *he* may have been sixty-five at that time.)
- iii. Gradually — and very grudgingly — I have found myself driven to admit that the "backward-turning" line in B 6 may *not* be a "clear reference" to Herakleitos, because it is possible that Parmenides wrote first — or before the book of Herakleitos reached him. The "two-headed" enemy in the poem could be Anaximenes (or even Pythagoras himself). My argument below would not be seriously affected. (The safest assumption is that Parmenides had no *particular* opponent in mind, but was criticizing the general, commonsense, view of things.)
- iv. The Goddess calls Parmenides "Youth." But, being a Goddess, she would naturally speak to

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- him in that way even if his hair was as white as Father William's. (I agree with A.P.D. Mourelatos — 1970, 16 — that Parmenides uses this identification as an anonymous young mortal for deliberate self-effacement.)
- v. The fact that Theophrastos believed that Leukippos had “associated with Parmenides” is a point in favor of this slightly later date (see 67 A 8).
- vi. The best early witnesses to the collaboration of Xenophanes and Parmenides are Aristotle and Theophrastos (see 21 A 30 — *Metaphysics*, A 986 b 22 and 28 A 7). Both may have depended entirely on Plato, *Sophist* 242 cd — 21 A 29 — which is more a joke than a serious historical assertion. But even if, for this reason, we set what they say aside, the connection remains highly probable (as well as internally plausible).
- vii. Plutarch says that the magistrates took an oath every year “to abide by the laws of Parmenides” (A 12).
- viii. See D. Gallop, 1984, 108, note to A 12.
- ix. See 28 A 1(23), A 40a, A 42, B 14, B 15. About the Moon there were alternative traditions that credited the discovery to Thales (28 A 42) or Anaxagoras (59 A 76; Plato, *Cratylus*, 409ab). But if Thales advanced the hypothesis, it is quite incredible that neither the Milesians nor Xenophanes followed it up. (Anaxagoras may have made the discovery independently. But the Pythagoreans, and particularly Parmenides, got there first.)
- x. Most likely of all, in my opinion, is “Journey to Wisdom,” since that would cover the whole

poem; and the Goddess will be Athena, if she has a traditional name at all. But quite probably she does not — she is just *Sophia* (Wisdom) or *Aletheia* (Truth). (Parmenides shows no sign of being interested in “civil theology”; but if we had more of the “Way of Opinion” that impression might be modified.)

- xi. This seems to be the proper parallel with the *Odyssey*. Ithaka is the human world in which “Opinion” needs to be set right.
- xii. These “gates” come straight out of Hesiod (see Chapter 2 above); and it seems likely to me that Parmenides had arrived at my reading of precisely where they are in Hesiod’s vision. They are neither in Heaven, nor in the Underworld of Death, but here in this mortal life on Earth. I do not agree with A.P.D. Mourelatos (1970, 15) that the “topography of [Parmenides’] journey is blurred.”
- xiii. For a good interpretation of the role of *Dike* (and the relation of “Right” to “Truth”) in Parmenides’ poem, see H. Fränkel (1955, in Furley and Allen, 1975, 6-13).
- xiv. The text is from Sextus Empirikos; and the variants are from Simplicios.
- xv. See the *Phaedrus*, 246-250.
- xvi. The word is directly cognate with the verb Herakleitos used when he said: “I have searched myself” (22 B 101).

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- xvii. I think *panapeithea* (“completely unpersuasive”) is preferable. But view of A.P.D. Mourelatos (1970, 23-24) about *panapeuthea* could save that reading. The rejected route is not “unlearnable” at all. But we cannot learn anything from it.
- xviii. I have taken *polupeiron* with both *ethos* and *hodon*; and have translated *echeessan* twice over, with reference to *akouen* and *gløssan*.
- xix. In our communal myths we see *nothing real*, and our dreams are a strictly private world. But the “Way of Truth” does not rest upon any private visionary experience, and Parmenides means us to work this out. He *describes a shaman’s* journey, and he means to claim that he is a greater *shaman* than Pythagoras. But he also holds that the *shaman’s* “experience” — and indeed “experience” generally — is hallucinatory.
- xx. T.M. Robinson translates this “Seeming is wrought over all things” (1987, 181). This “objective” rendering brings the challenge even closer to the Parmenidean epic task. Thought must come home to God, and overcome this “seeming that is wrought by thought over thought itself.”
- xxi. Plotinus is probably quoting from memory — or paraphrasing.
- xxii. Perhaps we should write: “For the same *is* for thinking and for being.” Several translations are possible. F.E. Sparshott wrote (1972, 110): “Parmenides long ago said ‘To be and to be thought about, are one and the same.’ Or did he say ‘Only what can think can exist?’ Or even ‘Thinking and being are the same’? A certain crankiness in his venerable syntax, perhaps even in his venerable character, prevents us from ever being quite sure.” My

discussion goes to show that his character, at least, was not “cranky”; and certainly Plato made him “venerable,” but we ought not to. Nothing can be said in defense of his syntax; but he repeats himself so often, that most of the ambiguities get resolved.

- xxiii. Parmenides may actually be thinking of the distinction between God’s thinking and his seeing, hearing and shaking in Xenophanes.
- xxiv. In the way that I have put the story together, the circular conception of divinity began among the first Pythagoreans and became public property when Alkmaeon denied the circularity of *human* existence; but it is possible that Herakleitos was the first to use the circle metaphor — see 22 B 103 — and that Alkmaeon took it from him — or even later still from Parmenides who was closer at hand. Alkmaeon’s position in the story is quite uncertain.
- xxv. It is mortals generally who make the mistake of speaking of “what is” and “what is not” *indifferently*. But Herakleitos does something worse; he goes to the extreme of identifying these opposites, and saying that they are “one.” (From our surviving evidence it does not appear that Herakleitos said anything about the identity of “being” and “not being.” But there is no one else to whom Parmenides can plausibly be referring. No one else comes close; and speaking about our *mortal* experience, Herakleitos did say: “Into the same rivers we step and we do not step; we are and we are not” [22 B 49a]. In the “back-turning journey of all things” this paradox is resolved. But for Parmenides the “divine” is not a journey; it is the *goal of our* journey.
- xxvi. The reference is probably to paradoxical assertions in Herakleitos that require the distinction between the *invisible* being of things (their fiery essence) and their *visible* being. The “Being” of Parmenides is all on the “invisible” level of Herakleitos. So the complaint is only

about a “poetical” use of language (which Parmenides himself cannot avoid, though he employs it in a different way).

- xxvii. This is the circle made in B 6 and B 7. My hope that this “elementary” treatment by a poetically inclined “amateur” will end the contention *about* Parmenides’ argument is very faint. But if students would only begin by distinguishing *three* “routes of searching” (and then take them *all* seriously) there is a reasonable possibility that a fairly uncontentious consensus may one day be established. (It must be admitted that the Goddess distinguishes only two routes clearly. But it is much easier to understand what she says, if we treat their combination as a third way.)
- xxviii. The preceding quotations are from lines 3-4. According to the careful and persuasive analysis of G.E.L. Owen (1960, in Furley and Allen, 1965, 61-68), B 8, 6-21 argues against the beginning or end of Being in time; then Parmenides proves that Being is “one and continuous” in time (22-25); then that it has a limit, being a temporal circle (26-33); then he sums up (34-41) before arguing (42-49) that it is everywhere spatially homogeneous.
- xxix. Melissos assimilates the logical eternity of Being to the *infinity* of temporal perpetuity — and in this way the Unlimited is restored to honor.
- xxx. Again several renderings are possible — see D. Gallop, 1984, 71, where renderings that have actually been proposed are assembled.
- xxxi. Guthrie, II, 54 understands this rightly. It is not right to name *either* of the opposites, but only the One Being. For a different view — and a review of the possibilities — see A.A.

Long (1963, in Furley and Allen II, 1975, 82-101). See also P. Curd (1998), pp. 102-3, 109-10, 114.

xxxii. Having given her account of “God’s Truth,” the Goddess must explain the human standpoint. The only surprising thing is that she does not simply agree with Xenophanes that “Opinion is allotted to (or wrought over) all.” She claims that there are better and worse opinions; and the best is that which treats the sensible world as a system of opposite qualities. The opposites are to be understood in their difference, not in their continuity. But we must not think of them as different substantial *things*, because our world of opinions is the realm of *change*; and change is not substantially real.

xxxiii. This was a point that Protagoras grasped.

xxxiv. See further note 20 above.

xxxv. To suppose that this fragment was part of the “Way of Truth” is to put an intellectual disgrace upon Parmenides that only the worst of the eristic Sophists could have deserved. This disgrace belongs properly to ourselves. What is needed is serious reflection upon how this generally admired physician and statesman could — reasonably — have regarded finite sense-experience, once he had seen that it did not give rationally certain knowledge.

xxxvi. As H. Fränkel notes (1955, in Furley and Allen II, 1975, 20-22), it is important that the opposites are not just complementary, but poles of a qualitative continuum.

xxxvii. Compare A 35 (Aristotle, *On Coming to Be and Passing Away*, 330b 13).

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- xxxviii. The table of opposites has probably not yet assumed its canonical form — but Guthrie [II 77] conjecturally identified a column of ten pairs.
- xxxix. The context translated in Gallop (1984, 101) is important. Diels thought that we have about nine-tenths of Truth, but only one-tenth of Opinion. He was only guessing, but we certainly ought to remember his view on this question (see P. Curd, 1998, p. 48, n. 1).
- xl. The Sun came from the hot part of the “mixture” and the Moon from the cold part; the Moon is a mixture of Air and Fire — i.e. it is one of Xenophanes’ “clouds.”
- xli. A 37, A 39, A 42, A 43, A 44; B 14, B 15. (A.P.D. Mourelatos — 1970, 224-5 — gives a brilliant exposition of the concealed ambiguities in B 14. In this one truly beautiful line of poetry that survives from Parmenides, the Moon can be recognized as an image of Opinion generally — in its relation to the Sun as the image of Truth.)
- xlii. A.P.D. Mourelatos (1970, 44) underlines the fact that Parmenides does not use “divine” — or any of the familiar epithets of the divine — in the account of “true Being” (which is always neuter). “God(s)” belong(s) entirely to the sphere of Opinion. “What is” is a thought that thinks itself. We poor mortals can think it; and perhaps we are the only ones who *do* think it.
- xliii. H. Fränkel, 1955 (in Furley and Allen II, 1975, 22-25).
- xliv. From the expression “hateful birth,” we might infer that Parmenides regarded human

existence in the realm of opinion as a “fallen” condition. Perhaps he conceived of “union with God” as the goal of philosophic existence; and he may have carried the Pythagorean belief in reincarnation over into his later theological rationalism. (Compare what Simplicios says in the context for 28 B 13 — translated in D. Gallop, 1984, 102.)

- xlv. Guthrie gives a conscientious (and intelligent) account of the Way of Opinion (II, 50-80); so does P. Curd (1998), Chapter III. But neither J. Barnes (1979, chapter IX) nor D. Gallop (1984) can be bothered with it. No one has managed to give a plausible account of how Parmenides could make a “dialectical” use of the “best” opinions (which as a rational theologian, he was supposedly barred from holding); or of why those opinions should have been as detailed as they obviously were. But even scholars who are prepared to emulate the Red Queen, and believe impossible things before breakfast, ought to be more interested in the problem of why these *are* the *best* opinions.