



Parmenides

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Parmenides was a native of Elea or Velia, a Greek colony on the southwestern coast of Italy. His date is quite uncertain, but he probably lived through the first half of the fifth century B.C. There was a story that he had been a pupil of Xenophanes, and another to the effect that he had been associated with a Pythagorean; the latter may very well be true, for there are Pythagorean elements in his doctrines, but the former is very doubtful. Parmenides was either the founder or the chief figure of a school of philosophy, known as the Eleatic and numbering among its members Zeno, the author of the famous paradoxes. Parmenides set forth his philosophy in a poem, large portions of which have been preserved; but the metrical form was not a happy experiment, and Parmenides seems to have had very little poetry in his soul.

The understanding of his view of the world is complicated by the fact that it seems to be double, one complete system being expounded in that part of the poem called The Way of Truth, while another and incompatible interpretation is sketched in The Way of Opinion. The difficulty is made specific by the author's own statement that the former of these Ways contains the true account of the world, while the latter is false and deceptive. That being the case, why did he set forth a worthless doctrine, after giving the true one? And so some historians of philosophy have refused to accept literally the author's expressed judgment of The Way of Opinion and have attributed to it a measure of truth, while others have taken his words at their face value and have busied themselves with reasons why he should publish this false theory.

The poem commences with an apocalyptic Introduction, the significance of which constitutes another, though a minor, problem for the historian. But we shall leave this for the present, and turn straight to The Way of Truth, in which the author professes to develop the true account of the world. Here we seem to be in quite a different intellectual situation from that which was characteristic of the previous thinkers. We seem to start with a concept called What-is, whose content is never filled in with objects of experience, but which evidently refers to the world as a whole. Its existence is said to be necessarily implied by thought. Its attributes also are not derived from perceptions, but are deduced as corollaries of the bare concept itself. This method of exposition finally yields a conclusion to the following effect: What-is (the world) must be and is an uncreated, indestructible, immovable, indivisible, finite, spherical continuum.

The first thing to notice is that Parmenides seems to be aware of the novelty of his method. At the end of the Introduction, he prepares his readers by stating that what is coming is to be regarded as a "proof," which they are to judge by reasoning or argument; and The Way of Truth opens with an exhortation to use the mind. This intellectual procedure is contrasted with the habitual inquiry by eye, ear, and tongue; and the contrast reminds us

of that which Heraclitus drew between the understanding and the senses, but it turns out to be quite different. The basis of the distinction is the same for both authors, namely between the mind and the senses; but in Parmenides the mind yields a truth that is proved, and this proof is the feature which is new.

The previous systems of cosmology started with empirical facts, like combustion (Heraclitus), or evaporation and condensation (Anaximenes and possibly Thales), or the obvious changes produced by the interaction of two physical elements (Anaximander and probably Pythagoras). These primary facts were used to explain other phenomena or supposed phenomena by analogy, and this use resulted in formulae for water condensing into earth and stones (Anaximenes), wind arising from sea (Xenophanes), fire turning into sea and sea into fire (Heraclitus). These secondary principles are to be considered as theoretical extensions of experience, or analogical generalizations from observed facts. On top of them there is a third stratum of pure theory, chiefly on the subject of creation, like the supposition of Anaximenes that from air “gods and things divine took their rise, while other things come from its offspring,” or the doctrine of Heraclitus that god is “the thought which steers all things through all things.” These theories were probably also analogical, though they seem to us to be so far removed from any premisses in experience that it is impossible for us to reconstruct their derivation with any assurance. But we may at least think of the pre-Parmenidean systems as composed of a basis of empirical fact, a middle layer of analogy, and a crown of speculation.

If we now turn to The Way of Truth, we shall find that the foregoing description will not apply to it. It starts with no observed phenomena, it contains no appeals to facts in support of its conclusions, and its thought is not developed by analogical processes. Parmenides seems to start with the concept of What-is, which we must regard as an intuition referring to the whole of what exists. He then proceeds to manipulate this concept by analysis and synthesis, in a series of logical processes which sometimes seem like syllogistic reasoning, while at other times they are little more than immediate inference. All the arguments stick so closely to the central concept of What-is that they are interdependent to a high degree, and it is no doubt this feature that leads the author to remark: “It is all one to me where I begin, for I shall come back there again”. The process is, however, inferential, and in this respect is to be contrasted with the method of previous thinkers, which consisted in making a principle plausible by explaining phenomena by it.

We must next ask why Parmenides believed the old method of cosmological investigation was erroneous. On this point he makes three important statements: first, this false philosophy amounts to saying that “it is and is not the same and not the same, and all things travel in opposite directions”; second, it depends on the existence of What-is-not ; third, it is the belief of stupid mortals. The first of these indictments must refer specifically to Heraclitus, and it can only mean that Heraclitus had reduced philosophy to nonsense by affirming that a thing is identical with its opposite. We may recall such fragments of the Ephesian thinker as “Mortals are immortals,” “The way up and the way down is one and the same,” and “It rests by changing.” Parmenides makes the point that if things are identical with their opposites, then everything is only a name which has no object corresponding to it. On this basis thought cannot operate, for thought must have some definite objective reference — “something that is, as to which it is uttered”. Hence Parmenides lays down a principle: what can be thought and what can be are the same. But this principle has a positive and a negative form. Positively, it means that what can be thought is; that is, a true thought carries the implication of an object which is possible and necessary and real. Thus truth is

the concern of mind or thought, rather than of the senses; and what is thinkable and can be proved has an object which exists.

The negative form of this principle leads to the second of the three points mentioned above. If what can be thought and what can be are the same, then what is not cannot be thought, that is, it is unthinkable. There is also the implication that what cannot be thought as true does not exist and is nothing. Now when Parmenides speaks of What-is-not, he must be referring to empty space, which had been implied by Heraclitus and earlier thinkers in their accounts of change. The error of these thinkers lay in naming two things, a substance like fire, and a medium of change, like darkness or air which was confused with empty space. Now empty space is nothing and therefore cannot be. But if so, then motion is impossible, and coming into being, passing away, change, and alteration are nothing but names which have no reality.

This brings us to the third point. All previous philosophers had employed the notion of change, and in fact it is a common notion of all mortals. Heraclitus had merely carried the idea to its logical conclusion, and this conclusion made thought impossible. The Milesians had started with the notion of a changing substance; Heraclitus showed that if the notion of change were logically worked out, it must apply to the substance itself, and then there is no self-identical substance at all — nothing is left but a process. Parmenides therefore turns away from the concept of change, to develop the concept of substance; and he shows that if you work out this concept logically, change becomes impossible. The “beliefs of mortals” thus include all thought which involves the notion of change.

We must now examine Parmenides’ conception of truth and reason. From his own statements we have already gathered that truth rested on proof, and reason was the “way” of proving a proposition. Now this view is almost identical with the typical position of rhetoric, and I shall accordingly examine the latter in order to see whether it may not throw some light on The Way of Truth.

Cicero claimed that Aristotle said rhetoric originated in law-suits for the restoration of property, which followed the expulsion of the tyrants from Syracuse about 465 b.c.;⁶ but Diogenes asserted that Aristotle said Empedocles was the founder of rhetoric, and we have reason to believe that Empedocles’ speeches, made in Acragas a few years after the fall of Thrasydeus in 472 b.c., were marked by certain conscious artistic traits which Gorgias afterwards developed. Now these two statements are not far apart, and they indicate that rhetorical devices were being employed in public arguments in Sicily about 470 b.c. We do not know when The Way of Truth was composed; but if we accept Burnet’s chronology, to which I am inclined, Parmenides would have been forty-five years old in 470.⁸ I see therefore no chronological impossibility in supposing that the Eleatic philosopher was acquainted with the beginnings of rhetoric when he wrote his poem. Nor do I believe the difference in locality makes this unlikely, as there is evidence of intellectual intercourse among the cities of western Hellas at that date.

But it is unnecessary to posit any actual influence of Sicilian rhetoric on The Way of Truth — we may regard each of them as typical but independent manifestations of the spirit of Greek civilization in the West. In order to appreciate this spirit, let us recall that during the first half of the fifth century there was displayed at various points in this region great originality in the development of medicine, religion, political constitutions, philosophy, and rhetorical argumentation. Even as early as the time of Polycrates of Samos and of Pisistratus, the Crotoniates had been noted for their physicians; and in the next century, interest in medicine and physiology was stimulated by the investigations of Alcmeon at

Croton, Parmenides at Elea, and Empedocles at Acragas. The spirit of science was also at work in the Pythagorean development of harmonics and geometry, and the biological researches and experiments of Empedocles. In religion there was the great vitality and the rapid propagation of Orphicism in southern Italy and Sicily, as well as the more local and more violent rise of Pythagoreanism. Furthermore there was a great political ferment in various cities, the most obvious instances being Croton, Syracuse, and Acragas; and though the occasions for these movements seem to have been often disconnected one with another, yet they all appear to have rested on the assertion of democratic principles in some form and to have involved the invention of new political institutions. Finally, we must notice the great originality of reflective thought which was manifested by Xenophanes, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Zeno, and in rhetoric by Corax, Tisias (or Teisias), and Gorgias. The mere catalog of these various new activities should suggest to our minds the spirit of freedom, the desire for something better, the impulse to invention, which seem to have characterized western Hellas at this time. It would in fact appear that the great originality of the Greek genius, which had heretofore been at home chiefly in Ionia, had now passed to the colonies of Italy and Sicily for a brief but vigorous effervescence, before its various phases were caught up in the culture of Athens.

The particular aspect of this genius in which we are now interested is the new use of reason, which we see in certain writers of this period. It would of course be absurd to imagine that the human mind before that time had been innocent of the process we know as reason; and yet upon a thorough examination of previous literature we are surprised at the primitive simplicity of illative sequences. I have already observed that pre-Parmenidean philosophy seemed content in the main with what might be called analogical generalization, and I have also remarked that with Heraclitus, in whose system the method is most typical, the quality of explanation toward which he implicitly worked was a general plausibility. Now this plausibility always connoted an ultimate reference to an objective fact or set of facts, so that the arguments from analogy were to be judged in the end according to their correspondence with facts. But in Parmenides' Way of Truth there is no specific external situation to start with, but only an idea; and in Tisias' rhetorical arguments the external situation is in dispute, so that the final criterion of judgment is a complicated set of mental factors comprising the general notion of probability. In such cases the appeal to facts was impossible, and judgment had to be based on the inner consistency of the argument. In other words both the philosopher and the rhetorician tried to make you believe something because it was implied in your thinking, without regard to external facts. And that was a new position in Greek thought.

In illustration of the new method, we may cite the typical argument attributed to the early rhetoricians, and several specimens from The Way of Truth. Corax and Tisias are said to have become famous by their use of the argument from probability, and their cases rested in the end on a proposition in the form: "it is likely that . . . (e.g. a small weak man would not by himself attack a big strong one)." Here the appeal is not to an actual, external situation, but to a subjective feeling of likelihood. In The Way of Truth, this argument appears in the expression: "it must needs be that . . .," that is, one must believe that . . .; and the converse is: "it can never be proved that . . ." The whole argument was a matter of what could be proved, and the proof depended on subjective assent to a logical manipulation of ideas.

The next question will concern the validity of reason, as conceived by Parmenides. His appeal to reason had resulted not only in failure to explain any and all phenomena of

nature, but also in conclusions violently opposed to all experience and common sense. Change is an obvious and wellnigh universal factor in the world, as we perceive it; and yet reason denied change. What right or prerogative had reason, so that it could deny the plain evidence of the senses'?

Here we shall be greatly aided, I believe, by our understanding of rhetoric. We are told that the Sicilian rhetoricians taught their pupils to argue on both sides of any case, and this suggests that they were striving for logical proof rather than correspondence with objective facts. Yet it must have been as obvious to those gentlemen as it is to us that two contradictory propositions cannot both be right. To be sure, the principle of contradiction had not yet been 'enunciated, and doubtless theoretical understanding of it was entirely lacking, or Plato would not have been at such pains to go into the minutiae of it much later. But even in the minds of Corax and Tisias, there would have been no dubiety on such a concrete point as that the small weak man either did or did not attack the big strong one. If they were ready to argue both sides of such a case, it must have been because they would be satisfied with a proof which was divorced from appeal to facts.

This surmise is confirmed by Sophistry. The Sophists that we meet in Plato's Dialogues were not mere dramatic fictions; they are at worst caricatures, which must have had some basis in fact to give them point; and for some of them we have independent testimony, which tends to corroborate the main features of Plato's picture. Now these Sophists, on the formal side of their teaching, were the intellectual heirs of the early rhetoricians, and it is noteworthy that Plato often represents them as arguing in precisely the same way as their rhetorical proto-types. For instance, in the Euthydemus, Dionysodorus maintains that the friends of Clinias, by wishing him to become wise, in reality wish him no longer to be what he is, which means that they wish him to perish. Why was such patently false juggling of ideas tolerated'? why did it even seem interesting? It could only be so because of a popular delight in trying to prove anything under the sun; verisimilitude was not the desideratum, and the sole interest lay in seeing what paradoxical conclusion could be proved by the unaided reason. The Sophists were thus like the rhetoricians in their willingness to play with proofs, even when these proofs yielded objective references that were absurd or manifestly incompatible with known facts.

Furthermore some expressions used by authors in the period following Parmenides suggest that the reason was regarded as a kind of tyrant, whose behests must be obeyed, no matter what the consequences...Plato says: "whithersoever the Xoyos, like a wind, bears us, thither we must go." Speaking of Plato himself, Jowett remarks truly: "He belonged to an age in which men felt too strongly the first pleasure of metaphysical speculation to be able to estimate the true value of the ideas which they conceived." The cosmic Nous or Mind of Anaxagoras was conceived somewhat differently from Logos; but it was at bottom the faculty of thought, and it was described as autocratic and supreme, the epithets of divinity. All these conceptions of reason, as well as that of Parmenides, seem to suggest that reason had autocratic power to establish its conclusions. These early Greeks, who first employed the reason for rhetorical, sophistic, or philosophical purposes, did not have a logical apparatus at their disposal, by which they could assess the worth of their instrument; and in the absence of this critical understanding, they regarded an inferential proof as something peremptory and absolute.

If the expressions of later times suggest a deification of reason, it is small wonder that Parmenides regarded it as a goddess of truth. He was the first to employ pure reason in philosophy; it yielded strange conclusions utterly at variance with sense experience; it

took him, as it were, to another realm, “far from the beaten track of men”; and yet these conclusions and this other realm seemed to have a kind of divine necessity about them, which gave them a transcendent validity. Reason or truth thus tended to become a cosmic agent, and Parmenides speaks of a “force of truth” which will not allow anything to come into being from that which is not. It is then this divine force of truth which speaks in the poem of Parmenides, and if its statements seem improbable to mortals, these statements are, it must be remembered, the revelations of an agent beyond the reach of mortal senses. It would therefore appear that the apocalyptic form of the Introduction and the poem in general was due to the author’s conception of reason as having some divine power; and we naturally do not understand the situation easily, because we think of reason as an impersonal machine.

Two questions now remain for our consideration; we must come to an understanding of The Way of Opinion, and of its relation to the Truth. The Way of Opinion professes to describe the opinions of mortals, and we have already seen that this latter phrase refers to the common explanation of the world, which involves the notion of change. Now The Way of Truth had shown that the world must be one substance; but if change is to be explained at all, that can be done only by the use of two things. In other words, the most “likely” interpretation cannot be made on the Heraclitean basis of one substance that alters, but must rest on a Pythagorean basis of two principles or “forms” of things that interact; and certainly if you are going to attempt to explain change, you will want the most likely account of it. It is thus quite natural that The Way of Opinion should contain certain essential features of the Pythagorean dualism. But since it was meant as the most likely interpretation of the phenomena of change, there was no reason why it should be limited to Pythagorean doctrines; and in fact, the fragments of it that remain read like the latest and best cosmological science, without reference to any particular school of thought.

It would appear that the attention of cosmologists was being drawn more and more toward terrestrial phenomena, a tendency that is unmistakable in Empedocles, but of which the forerunner is evident in the physiological theories of Parmenides and of Alcmeon. Aristotle and Theophrastus have preserved a fragment of Parmenides’ physiology, in which he speaks, somewhat obscurely, of a “mixture” in the human body; and Theophrastus employs the same phrase in his elucidation of the passage. Moreover in the same fragment, Parmenides asserts that a person’s thought depends upon “that of which there is more in him,” which Theophrastus explains as the preponderance of the light or dark element in the body. These remarks would suggest that Parmenides believed the human body was composed of the two things, which he calls elsewhere the forms of light and night, or fire and darkness; and that the constitution of a body at any time was determined by the proportion in which these things or forms were mixed.

The idea of a variable proportion would seem to presuppose an oscillation of the two elements and thus to involve the old notion of a natural Justice, which makes up for encroachment by permitting an opposite one. In this connection, it is interesting to recall a phrase from the apocalyptic Introduction of the poem: “avenging Justice,” who is described as keeper of the keys that fit the gates of the ways of night and day. If we wonder why the divinity who controls night and day is called Justice, we can only surmise that this is the same eternal law of compensation, to which Anaximander and Heraclitus had alluded. Moreover, the significance of the epithet “avenging” must be found in compensation for encroachment — an idea which recalls the Heraclitean notion of a Justice with avenging power through the Erinyes. These references would indicate that the original notion of a

compensatory regularity was still in the mind of Parmenides.

On the other hand, Parmenides also uses the figure of Necessity, and he was probably the first thinker to employ this notion for cosmological purposes. Necessity was an Orphic personage, and may have come to the notice of Parmenides through Pythagorean sources. In *The Way of Opinion*, a divinity which must be identified with Necessity is said to direct the course of all things, to be the beginner of pairing and birth, and to have created Eros first of all the gods. But the statement that is most significant is* that Necessity took the heavens and bound them to keep the limits of the stars. Remembering that this is cosmology from *The Way of Opinion*, we may compare with it two phrases from *The Way of Truth*. In the first, Parmenides says that strong Necessity keeps What-is in the bonds of a limit which restrains it on every side; in the second, that Fate has bound What-is so as to be whole and immovable. Thus the some inexorable force which, according to reason, cannot allow any change, is for cosmological science the law which makes for celestial regularity. These different roles played by Necessity, as well as the use of both Justice and Necessity, suggest that Parmenides was guilty of the same confusion of thought, on the subject of natural regularity, as we found in Heraclitus. But the name Necessity and several of the references to it in the poem spring from the conception of an absolute, invariable regularity, comparable to the preordained limits in the system of Heraclitus and the mathematical law of Pythagoras. And Parmenides' use of this concept represents a further step in the transition from the old Milesian notion of natural Justice and Injustice to the later idea of mechanical regularity, which predominates in the Atomist system.

Parmenides regarded the heavenly bodies as bands of fire, separated from one another by intermediate bands of dark air — a view which was ultimately Milesian but was probably also held by Pythagoras. Furthermore Parmenides knew that the moon shone by the reflected light of the sun; and though he was the first cosmologist to mention the fact, he probably did not discover it. Professor Burnet is no doubt correct in supposing that the discovery was made within the Pythagorean Order; and this was probably the source of Parmenides' information.

The Way of Opinion thus contains physiological theories on the composition of the human body, the mechanics of thinking, and the formation of embryos. It also embraces views of the origin and movement of the heavenly bodies, and these views rest on a dualistic conception of nature, as composed of fire and night. Finally there is the figure of Necessity, which seems to imply a new notion of natural regularity. The basic features and many details of this system appear to be Pythagorean; but certain other elements in it, such as the double idea of regularity and the psychological doctrine, are probably not derived from that source. On the whole, *The Way of Opinion* is best taken to represent a compendium of contemporary cosmology, the most likely scientific explanation of nature that Parmenides could make.

We must now attempt to discover the real relation between this *Way of Opinion* and *The Way of Truth*. Several times in the course of the poem, the statement is made that there is no truth in the beliefs of mortals, which are described in *The Way of Opinion*; but the significance of this statement is lost if we do not remember that it is not Parmenides, but the goddess, who is speaking. The goddess uses the phrase “the opinions of mortals,” and the goddess asserts that there is no truth in them, for truth is a divine possession. The superficial meaning of these words is not hard to guess; there is indeed no truth in *The Way of Opinion* because, as we have previously seen, truth is reasoned proof, and the explanations of phenomena offered by cosmology and resting on the idea of motion

in empty space cannot be “proved” in this sense. And these explanations are called the opinion of mortals, in contradistinction to the goddess’ own truth, because they involve the notion of separate, changing things, which are given in the general experience of mortal men.

But to accept these statements at their face value would be possible only if we entirely overlooked the question why Parmenides considered it worthwhile to describe the opinions of men, which were utterly false. To that question we demand an answer before we can be satisfied that the author means what he says. Now the only direct information on this point in the poem is the statement of the goddess that there are only two ways of investigation, and that she will tell Parmenides the true way because it is right for him to know the truth, and the false way in order that no other human mind shall ever outdo him. This remark does not afford much help, except that it agrees with several others in indicating that Parmenides knew there were two possible ways of investigating the world, although only one was right. But what makes the wrong way a way at all? Or how do the various opinions of men come to be a single method of interpreting the world? It is, we find, because these opinions can be formed into an orderly arrangement or system, which may seem likely or plausible. This system is made up of appearances, and to gain the truth, we must pass through each of these appearances and judge them all together. When we do that, we find that they are only “names,” which men have invented for their convenience, but which have no corresponding reality; for when we raise the question of existence or reality, we see that none of these named things has any existence of its own and the whole system of names collapses into the undifferentiated unity of What-is. Thus although there is no truth in these opinions of men, there is some use in knowing them, because we have to pass through this system on the way to the truth and the parts of this system of appearances must be rightly judged.

It should be noticed that there is a sharp opposition between Truth and Opinion, which the author takes pains to make prominent. This opposition in itself is enough to show that Parmenides had thought deeply on logical matters; and when we put it in conjunction with his views on the subject of names and their objective reference, it is evident that he was capable of dealing with very abstract considerations. But even that is not all ; for we have also found that he uses the expressions What-is , What-is-not, and What-seems-to-be, and that he identifies What-seems-to-be with What-is-not. Furthermore he connects reason with What-is; and he seems to refer eyes, ears, and tongue to opinion — a reference which is all the more natural in Greek on account of the confusion of perception and opinion.... There is, however, no question of two worlds, one sensible, the other intelligible; for the real world of reason is still the sensible, corporeal world. There are not two worlds, but rather two “Ways” of interpreting one and the same world. Thus Parmenides, after recognizing that appearances form a system which can appeal to the mind, could not establish any relation between this system and reality; and he ended by interpreting the appearances as equivalent to What-is-not, and their system as a falsehood.

Robert Scoon. *Greek Philosophy Before Plato*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1927.

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