

The Roots of Platonic dialectic – Parmenides

Plato's exploration of dialectic – the art of arriving at stable truth – culminates in his dialogue the *Parmenides*, so it is not surprising that we should find many of the threads which Plato weaves together in his system of dialectic in the earlier poem of Parmenides, *On Nature*. Although this mystical poem has come down to us in fragmentary form, we can, perhaps, see enough of the elements of mysticism and logic that make it such a startling challenge to our thinking – indeed as it has been to so many philosophers down through the centuries.

This evening we are going to concentrate on the passage now known as fragment 8, because it outlines the tensions between being and non-being with which we must involve ourselves when we try to work out not only what is true; the way particular things participate of truth; and what relation the material world of "becoming" has to stable truth. But before fragment 8, let us remind ourselves how the poem opens in its unmistakable atmosphere of mystical initiation:

The mares that carry me, as far as impulse might reach,
Were taking me, when they brought and placed me upon the much-speaking route
Of the goddess, that carries everywhere unscathed the man who knows;
Thereon was I carried, for thereon the much-guided mares were carrying me,
Straining to pull the chariot, with maidens guiding the way.
The axle, glowing in its naves, gave forth the shrill sound of a pipe,
(For it was urged on by two rounded
Wheels on either end, even whilst maidens, Daughters of the Sun, were hastening
To escort me, after leaving the House of Night for the light,
Having pushed back the veils from their heads with their hands.
The gates of the paths of Night and Day.
And a lintel and threshold of stone surround them.
And the aetherial gates themselves are filled with great doors,
And for these Justice, much-avenging, holds the keys of retribution.
Coaxing her with gentle words, the maidens
Did cunningly persuade her to push back the bolted bar for them
Swiftly from the gates; and these made of the doors
A gaping gap as they were opened wide,
Swinging in turn in their sockets the branzen posts
fastened with rivets and pins; straight through them at that point
Did the maidens drive the chariot and mares along the broad way.
And the goddess received me kindly, and took my right hand with her hand,
And uttered speech and thus addressed me:
'Youth attended by immortal charioteers,
Who come to our House with mares that carry you,
Welcome; for it is no ill fortune that sent you forth to travel
This route (for it lies far indeed from the beaten track of men),
But right and justice. And it is right that you should learn all things,
Both the steadfast heart of persuasive truth,

And the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true trust.
 But nevertheless you shall learn these things as well, how the things which seem
 Had to have genuine existence, permeating all things completely. . . .

(frag. 1)

These two paths – that of truth, and that of belief – are the subject of the rest of Parmenides poem. The division of things we can perceive into things that are genuinely true and things which *appear* to be true requires some kind of art by which we can distinguish the one from the other. The first division embraces the "is-ness" of reality which, Parmenides claims, has no "not-is-ness" – we know what is, but we cannot know what is not. But in the world of change everything is mixed up with "not-is" and every characteristic which we attach to things when we describe them is mixed with its opposite: the sun, for example, which we call hot is not absolutely hot (otherwise nothing could ever be described as hotter than the sun) and so in our everyday language we use the same name for the absolute and a thing which is participating in it quality – something which Plato notes in his *Timaeus* (49d): "That the nature which we always perceive becoming something different at different times, such, for instance, as fire, is not fire absolutely, but something fiery." He says that if we wish to be accurate when describing the flowing world of matter, we should only ever say that something is circle-like or tree-like or cold-like rather than use the name – circle, tree, or cold – which is used to name the form or unchanging idea that lies behind the manifestation. We will see at the end of the next fragment, as we get to the 'Way of Belief' that Parmenides says "For they established two forms in their minds for naming,/ Of which it is not right to name one."

Parmenides' poem holds up an ideal in which there is a convergence between what is, and what is thought – and Plato's development of dialectic is based upon that ideal. Dialectic is, from one point of view, a careful examination of any particular thing or relationship which aims to discover the "is-ness" of it, and, if there is such, to expose the "not-is-ness" of it. Here is fragment 8 of the poem, with its description of the way of truth, and the beginning of the way of appearance (or "belief"):

The Way of Truth

A single story of a route still

Is left: that [it] is; on this [route] there are signs

Very numerous: that what-is **is ungenerated and imperishable;**

Whole, single-limbed, steadfast, and complete;

Nor was [it] once, now will [it] be, since [it] is, now, all together,

One, continuous; for what coming-to-be of it will you seek?

In what way, whence, did [it] grow? Neither from what-is-not shall I allow

You to say or think; for it is not to be said or thought

That [it] is not. And what need could have impelled it to grow

Later or sooner, if it began from nothing?

Thus [it] must either be completely or not at all.
 Nor will the strength of trust ever allow anything to come-to-be from what
 Besides it; therefore neither [its] coming-to-be
 Nor [its] perishing has Justice allowed, relaxing her shackles,
 But she holds [it] fast; the decision about these matters depends on this:
**Is [it] or is [it] not? but it has been decided, as is necessary,
 To let go the one as unthinkable, unnameable (for it is no true
 Route), but to allow the other, so that it is, and is true.**
 And how could what-is be in the future; and how could [it] come-to-be?
 For if [it] came-to-be, [it] is not, nor [is it] if at some time [it] is going to be.
 Thus, coming-to-be is extinguished and perishing not to be heard of.
 Nor is [it] divisible, since [it] all alike is;
 Nor is [it] somewhat more here, which would keep it from holding together,
 Nor is [it] somewhat less, but [it] is all full of what-is.
 Therefore [it] is all continuous; for what-is is in contact with what-is.
 Moreover, changeless in the limits of great chains
 [It] is un-beginning and unceasing, since coming-to-be and perishing
 Have been driven far off, and true trust has thrust them out.
Remaining the same and in the same, [it] lies by itself
 And remains thus firmly in place; for strong Necessity
 Holds [it] fast in the chains of a limit, which fences it about.
 Wherefore it is not right for what-is to be incomplete;
 For [it] is not lacking; but if [it] were, [it] would lack everything.
The same thing is for thinking and [is] that there is thought;
 For not without what-is, on which [it] depends, having been declared,
 Will you find thinking; for nothing else <either> is or will be
 Besides what-is, since it was just this that Fate did shackle
 To be whole and changeless; wherefore it has been named all things
 That mortals have established, trusting them to be true,
 To come-to-be and to perish, to be and not to be,
 And to shift place and to exchange bright colour.
 Since, then, there is a furthest limit, [it] is completed,
 From every direction like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere,
 Everywhere from the centre equally matched; for [it] must not be any larger
 Or any smaller here or there;
 For neither is there what-is-not, which could stop if from reaching
 [Its] like, nor is there a way in which what-is could be
 More here and less there, since [it] all inviolably is;
 For equal to itself from every direction, [it] lies uniformly within limits.

The Way of Belief

Here I stop my trustworthy speech to you and thought
 About truth; from here onwards learn mortal beliefs,
 Listening to the deceitful ordering of my words;

For they established two forms in their minds for naming,
 Of which it is not right to name one—wherein they have gone astray —
 And they distinguished opposites in body and established signs
 Apart from one another: here, on the one hand, aetherial fire of flame,
 Which is gentle, very light, everywhere the same as itself,
 But not the same as the other; but on the other hand, that one too by itself
 In contrast, dark night, a dense and heavy body;
 All this arrangement I proclaim to you as plausible;
 Thus no opinion of mortals shall ever overtake you. (frag. 8)

Plato, *The Parmenides*, 135a- 135c

A young Socrates has just tried to defend the theory of forms against the questioning of Parmenides, but it appears that his rather naive understanding of forms has many flaws. Should he abandon them? Parmenides says -

Parmenides: These, O Socrates, and many other difficulties besides these, must necessarily happen to forms, if they are the ideas of things, and if any one separates each form apart from other things; so that anyone who hears these assertions, may doubt and hesitate whether such forms have any subsistence; or if they do subsist in a most eminent degree, whether it is not very necessary that they should be unknown by the human nature. Hence he who thus speaks may seem to say something to the purpose; and as we just now said, it may be considered as a wonderful thing, on account of the difficulty of being persuaded, and as the province of a man naturally gifted, to be able to perceive *that there is a certain genus of every thing, and an essence itself subsisting by itself*. But he will deserve still greater admiration, who, after having made this discovery, shall be able to teach another how to discern and distinguish all these in a becoming manner.

Socrates: I assent to you, O Parmenides, for you entirely speak agreeably to my opinion.

Parmenides: But indeed, O Socrates, if any one on the contrary refuses to admit the reality of forms of things, regarding all that has now been said, and other things of the same kind, he will not find where to turn his dianoëtic part, while he does not permit the idea of every thing which exists to be always the same, and by this means entirely destroys the dialectic power of the soul: but you also seem in this respect to perceive perfectly the same with myself.

Notes

Parmenidea of Elea was born at some point in the last half of the sixth century BCE. Plato has him (in his last years) meeting a young Socrates which might put his birth as late as 515.

Plato was born around 428 BCE, so approximately 100 years after Parmenides: many of his dialogues speak directly about the nature of dialectic but perhaps the most extensive passages on the subject are to be found in the *Sophist* and the *Parmenides*.

In the coming weeks we will look at both Plotinus (3rd century CE) and Proclus (5th century CE) as they continue to refine the Platonic traditions understanding of dialectic.