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9 PARMENIDES

Parmenides, son of Pyres, came from Elea, a Greek foundation in southern Italy. He was of a noble family, and it is reported that 'he organized his own country by the best laws, so that each year the citizens still get the officials to swear that they will abide by Parmenides' laws' (Plutarch, Against Colotes 1126AB). His dates are uncertain: the Greek chroniclers put his birth in 540 BC, but a passage in Plato (which will be quoted in the chapter on Zeno) suggests that he was born in about 515.

According to Diogenes Laertius,

He was a pupil of Xenophanes but did not follow him. He was also associated (as Sotion said) with Ameinias, son of Diochaitas, the Pythagorean, a poor man but of good character. It was rather Ameinias that he followed, and when he died he set up a shrine for him, since he came from a famous and wealthy family, and he was led to calm by Ameinias and not by Xenophanes.

(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* IX 21)

The story about Ameinias has led some scholars to look (in vain) for Pythagorean elements in Parmenides' thought.

Parmenides produced one short work written in ungainly hexameter verse. A substantial proportion of the poem survives. It opened with a fanciful prologue, after which the main body of the work divided into two parts: the first part, the Way of Truth, gives Parmenides' own views about the true nature of reality, the second part, the Way of Opinion, followed the traditional Ionian pattern of works On Nature.

The prologue and most of the Way of Truth survive; there are fragments of the Way of Opinion.

It should be said at the outset that Parmenides' poem is in many ways a bizarre and puzzling production. He presents an account the second half of which, the Way of Opinion, is confessedly 'deceitful' or false, and he does not clearly explain why he has written these lies. The Way of Truth is not intended to be deceitful, but the views it advocates are paradoxical in the extreme. Moreover, Parmenides is never an easy writer. His meaning is rarely plain to the first glance, and some lines of the poem are obscure to the point of unintelligibility. There are also textual uncertainties. Nonetheless, Parmenides had, through the medium of Plato, an unrivalled influence on the course of western philosophy.

The prologue is preserved by Sextus Empiricus, who also offers an allegorical interpretation of Parmenides' verses which I shall not transcribe.

Xenophanes' friend Parmenides condemned the reason associated with belief, which has weak opinions, and, since he also gave up trust in the senses, supposed that the reason associated with knowledge, or infallible reason, was the criterion of truth. Thus at the beginning of his *On Nature* he writes in this way:

*The mares that carry me as far as my heart may aspire
were my escorts: they had guided me and set me on the celebrated
road
of the god which carries the man of knowledge* . . . *
There was I being carried; for there the wise mares were carrying
me,
straining at the chariot, and maidens were leading the way.
The axle in the axle-box roared from its socket
as it blazed – for it was driven on by two whirling
wheels on either side – while the maidens, daughters of the sun,
hastened to escort it, having left the house of Night
for the light and pushed back with their hands the veils from their
heads.*

*Here are the gates of the paths of Night and Day,
and a lintel and a stone threshold enclose them.*

*They themselves, high in the air, are filled by great doors,
and all-avenging Justice holds their alternate keys.
Her the maidens appeased with soft words,
skilfully persuading her to push back for them the bolted bar
swiftly from the gates. They flew back
and made a yawning gap between the doors, swinging
in turn in their sockets the bronze pivots,
fitted with pegs and pins. And through them
the maidens held the chariot and mares straight on the highway.*

*And the goddess graciously received me, taking
my right hand in hers; and she spoke thus and addressed me:
'Young man, companion to the immortal charioteers
with the mares who carry you as you come to my house,
I greet you. For no evil fate was sending you to travel
this road (for indeed it is far from the tread of men)
but Right and Justice. You must learn all things,
both the unwavering heart of persuasive truth
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust.'*

[28 B 1.1–30]

(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* VII 111)

Simplicius adds two further lines:

Parmenides says:

*You must learn all things,
both the unwavering heart of well-rounded truth
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust.
But nevertheless you will learn these things too – how what seems
had reliably to be, forever traversing everything. [B 1.28–32]
(Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 557.24–558.2)*

*A couplet from the prologue is quoted by Proclus, who then cites a
further eight lines:*

Plato explicitly distinguishes different types of reason and knowledge, corresponding to the different objects of knowledge. Parmenides too, though his poetry makes him obscure, nevertheless points in this direction himself when he says:

*Both the unwavering heart of well-lit truth
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust;*
[B 1.29-30]

and again:

*But come, I will tell you – preserve the account when you hear
it–*

*the only roads of enquiry there are to be thought of:
one, that it is and cannot not be,
is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it);
another, that it is not and must not be –
this I say to you is a trail devoid of all knowledge.* [B 2.1-6]

And:

*For you could not recognize that which is not (for it is not to be
done),*

nor could you mention it. [B 2.7-8]

(Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* I 345.11-27)

[Note that in B 1.29 Sextus, Simplicius and Proclus attach different adjectives to the noun 'truth'.]

The half-line at the end of fragment B 2 can be completed, both metrically and philosophically, by a half-line preserved elsewhere:

At an earlier date, Parmenides too touched on this doctrine inasmuch as he identified being and thought and did not locate being in sensible objects. He said:

For the same things can be thought of and can be. [B 3]

(Plotinus, *Enneads* V i 8)

The next surviving lines of the poem can be patched together from two separate passages in Simplicius. One of them, which assembles a few short quotations from Parmenides, includes these sentences:

That there is one and the same account of everything, the account of what is, Parmenides states in the following words:

*What is for being and for thinking must be; for it can be,
and nothing can not.* [B 6.1-2]

Now if whatever anyone says or thinks is being, then there will be one account of everything, the account of what is.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 86.25-30)

The second passage begins by quoting B 2 (except for the first line) and continues thus:

That contradictories are not true together he shows in the verses in which he finds fault with those who identify opposites. For having said:

for it can be,

and nothing can not. This I bid you say.

For from this first road of inquiry <I restrain> you, [B 6.1-3]
<he adds:>

*and then from the road along which mortals who know nothing
wander, two-headed; for impotence in their*

*breasts guides their erring mind. And they are borne along
alike deaf and blind, amazed, undiscerning crowds,*

for whom to be and not to be are deemed the same

and not the same; and the path of all turns back on itself.

[B 6.4-9]

(*ibid* 117.2-13)

A continuous passage of some sixty-six verses, which includes perhaps the whole of the Way of Truth, can be put together from three sources. The first two lines are quoted by Simplicius, and also, much earlier, by Plato:

When we were boys, my boy, the great Parmenides would testify against this [namely the view that what is not is] from beginning to end, constantly saying both in prose and in verse that:

Never will this prevail, that what is not is:

restrain your thought from this road of inquiry. [B 7.1-2]

(Plato, *Sophist* 237A)

Plato's quotation is continued by Sextus (though Sextus himself quotes the lines as though they were continuous with B 1):

Restrain your thought from this road of inquiry,

*and do not let custom, based on much experience, force you along
this road,*

directing unobservant eye and echoing ear

and tongue; but judge by reason the battle-hardened proof which I have spoken. Only one story, one road, now is left. [B 7.2-6]

(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* VII 111)

Sextus' quotation in turn is continued by Simplicius:

At the risk of seeming prolix, I would like to transcribe in this commentary Parmenides' verses on the one being (they are not many), both to justify what I have said about the matter and because of the rarity of Parmenides' treatise. After he has done away with what is not, he writes:

Only one story, one road, now is left: that it is. And on this there are signs in plenty that, being, it is ungenerated and indestructible, whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete. Nor was it, nor will it be, since now it is, all together, one, continuous. For what generation will you seek for it? How, whence, did it grow? That it came from what is not I shall not allow

you to say or think — for it is not sayable or thinkable that it is not. And what need would have impelled it, later or earlier, to grow — if it began from nothing?

Thus it must either altogether be or not be.

Nor from what is will the strength of trust permit it to come to be anything apart from itself. For that reason

Justice has not relaxed her fetters and let it come into being or

perish,

but she holds it. Decision in these matters lies in this:

it is or it is not. But it has been decided, as is necessary, to leave the one road unthought and unnamed (for it is not a true road), and to take the other as being and being genuine.

How might what is then perish? How might it come into being?

For if it came into being it is not, nor is it if it is ever going to be.

Thus generation is quenched and perishing unheard of.

Nor is it divided, since it all alike is —

neither more here (which would prevent it from cohering)

nor less; but it is all full of what is.

Hence it is all continuous; for what is approaches what is.

And unmoving in the limits of great chains it is beginningless and ceaseless, since generation and destruction

have wandered far away, and true trust has thrust them off.

The same and remaining in the same state, it lies by itself,

and thus remains fixed there. For powerful necessity

holds it enchained in a limit which hems it around,

because it is right that what is should be not incomplete.

For it is not lacking — if it were it would lack everything.

The same thing are thinking and a thought that it is.

For without what is, in which it has been expressed,

you will not find thinking. For nothing either is or will be

other than what is, since fate has fettered it

to be whole and unmoving. Hence all things are a name

which mortals lay down and trust to be true —

coming into being and perishing, being and not being,

and changing place and altering bright colour.

And since there is a last limit, it is completed

on all sides, like the bulk of a well-rounded ball,

equal in every way from the middle. For it must not be at all

greater

or smaller here or there.

For neither is there anything which is not, which might stop it

from reaching

its like, nor anything which is in such a way that it might be

more here or less there than what is, since it all is, inviolate.

Therefore, equal to itself on all sides, it lies uniformly in its limits.

Here I cease for you my trustworthy argument and thought

about the truth. Henceforward learn mortal opinions,

listening to the deceitful arrangement of my words. [B 8.1-52]

These, then, are Parmenides' verses about the one. After them he next discusses the objects of opinion, laying down for them

different first principles.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 144.25-146.27)