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PARMENIDES

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Plato
Parmenides

INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

The awe with which Plato regarded the character of 'the great' Parmenides has extended to the dialogue which he calls by his name. None of the writings of Plato have been more copiously illustrated, both in ancient and modern times, and in none of them have the interpreters been more at variance with one another. Nor is this surprising. For the Parmenides is more fragmentary and isolated than any other dialogue, and the design of the writer is not expressly stated. The date is uncertain; the relation to the other writings of Plato is also uncertain; the connexion between the two parts is at first sight extremely obscure; and in the latter of the two we are left in doubt as to whether Plato is speaking his own sentiments by the lips of Parmenides, and overthrowing him out of his own mouth, or whether he is propounding consequences which would have been admitted by Zeno and Parmenides themselves. The contradictions which follow from the hypotheses of the one and many have been regarded by some as transcendental mysteries; by others as a mere illustration, taken at random, of a new method. They seem to have been inspired by a sort of dialectical frenzy, such as may be supposed to have prevailed in the Megarian School (compare Cratylus, etc.). The criticism on his own doctrine of Ideas has also been considered, not as a real criticism, but as an exuberance of the metaphysical imagination which enabled Plato to go beyond himself. To the latter part of the dialogue we may certainly apply the words in which he himself describes the earlier philosophers in the Sophist: 'They went on their way rather regardless of whether we understood them or not.'

The Parmenides in point of style is one of the best of the Platonic writings; the first portion of the dialogue is in no way defective in ease and grace and dramatic interest; nor in the second part, where there was no room for such qualities, is there any want of clearness or precision. The latter half is an exquisite mosaic, of which the small pieces are with the utmost fineness and regularity adapted to one another. Like the Protagoras, Phaedo, and others, the whole is a narrated dialogue, combining with the mere recital of the words spoken, the observations of the reciter on the effect produced by them. Thus we are informed by him that Zeno and Parmenides were not altogether pleased at the request of Socrates that they would examine into the nature of the one and many in the sphere of Ideas, although they received his suggestion with approving smiles. And we are glad to be told that Parmenides was 'aged but well-favoured,' and that Zeno was 'very good-looking'; also that Parmenides affected to decline the great argument, on which, as Zeno knew from experience, he was not unwilling to enter. The character of Antiphon, the half-brother of Plato, who had once been inclined to philosophy, but has now shown the hereditary disposition for horses, is very naturally described. He is the sole depositary of the famous dialogue; but, although he receives the strangers like a courteous gentleman, he is impatient of the trouble of reciting it. As they enter, he has been giving orders to a bridle-maker; by this slight touch Plato verifies the previous description of him. After a little persuasion he is induced to favour the Clazomenians, who come from a distance, with a rehearsal. Respecting the visit of Zeno and Parmenides to Athens, we may observe – first, that such a visit is consistent with dates, and may possibly have occurred; secondly, that Plato is very likely to have invented the meeting ('You, Socrates, can easily invent Egyptian tales or anything else,' Phaedrus); thirdly, that no reliance can be placed on the circumstance as determining the date of Parmenides and Zeno; fourthly, that the same occasion appears to be referred to by Plato in two other places (Theaet., Soph.).

Many interpreters have regarded the Parmenides as a 'reductio ad absurdum' of the Eleatic philosophy. But would Plato have been likely to place this in the mouth of the great Parmenides

himself, who appeared to him, in Homeric language, to be 'venerable and awful,' and to have a 'glorious depth of mind'? (Theaet.). It may be admitted that he has ascribed to an Eleatic stranger in the Sophist opinions which went beyond the doctrines of the Eleatics. But the Eleatic stranger expressly criticises the doctrines in which he had been brought up; he admits that he is going to 'lay hands on his father Parmenides.' Nothing of this kind is said of Zeno and Parmenides. How then, without a word of explanation, could Plato assign to them the refutation of their own tenets?

The conclusion at which we must arrive is that the Parmenides is not a refutation of the Eleatic philosophy. Nor would such an explanation afford any satisfactory connexion of the first and second parts of the dialogue. And it is quite inconsistent with Plato's own relation to the Eleatics. For of all the pre-Socratic philosophers, he speaks of them with the greatest respect. But he could hardly have passed upon them a more unmeaning slight than to ascribe to their great master tenets the reverse of those which he actually held.

Two preliminary remarks may be made. First, that whatever latitude we may allow to Plato in bringing together by a 'tour de force,' as in the Phaedrus, dissimilar themes, yet he always in some way seeks to find a connexion for them. Many threads join together in one the love and dialectic of the Phaedrus. We cannot conceive that the great artist would place in juxtaposition two absolutely divided and incoherent subjects. And hence we are led to make a second remark: viz. that no explanation of the Parmenides can be satisfactory which does not indicate the connexion of the first and second parts. To suppose that Plato would first go out of his way to make Parmenides attack the Platonic Ideas, and then proceed to a similar but more fatal assault on his own doctrine of Being, appears to be the height of absurdity.

Perhaps there is no passage in Plato showing greater metaphysical power than that in which he assails his own theory of Ideas. The arguments are nearly, if not quite, those of Aristotle; they are the objections which naturally occur to a modern student of philosophy. Many persons will be surprised to find Plato criticizing the very conceptions which have been supposed in after ages to be peculiarly characteristic of him. How can he have placed himself so completely without them? How can he have ever persisted in them after seeing the fatal objections which might be urged against them? The consideration of this difficulty has led a recent critic (Ueberweg), who in general accepts the authorised canon of the Platonic writings, to condemn the Parmenides as spurious. The accidental want of external evidence, at first sight, seems to favour this opinion.

In answer, it might be sufficient to say, that no ancient writing of equal length and excellence is known to be spurious. Nor is the silence of Aristotle to be hastily assumed; there is at least a doubt whether his use of the same arguments does not involve the inference that he knew the work. And, if the Parmenides is spurious, like Ueberweg, we are led on further than we originally intended, to pass a similar condemnation on the Theaetetus and Sophist, and therefore on the Politicus (compare Theaet., Soph.). But the objection is in reality fanciful, and rests on the assumption that the doctrine of the Ideas was held by Plato throughout his life in the same form. For the truth is, that the Platonic Ideas were in constant process of growth and transmutation; sometimes veiled in poetry and mythology, then again emerging as fixed Ideas, in some passages regarded as absolute and eternal, and in others as relative to the human mind, existing in and derived from external objects as well as transcending them. The anamnesis of the Ideas is chiefly insisted upon in the mythical portions of the dialogues, and really occupies a very small space in the entire works of Plato. Their transcendental existence is not asserted, and is therefore implicitly denied in the Philebus; different forms are ascribed to them in the Republic, and they are mentioned in the Theaetetus, the Sophist, the Politicus, and the Laws, much as Universals would be spoken of in modern books. Indeed, there are very faint traces of the transcendental doctrine of Ideas, that is, of their existence apart from the mind, in any of Plato's writings, with the exception of the Meno, the Phaedrus, the Phaedo, and in portions of the Republic. The stereotyped form which Aristotle has given to them is not found in Plato (compare Essay on the Platonic Ideas in the Introduction to the Meno.)

The full discussion of this subject involves a comprehensive survey of the philosophy of Plato, which would be out of place here. But, without digressing further from the immediate subject of the Parmenides, we may remark that Plato is quite serious in his objections to his own doctrines: nor does Socrates attempt to offer any answer to them. The perplexities which surround the one and many in the sphere of the Ideas are also alluded to in the Philebus, and no answer is given to them. Nor have they ever been answered, nor can they be answered by any one else who separates the phenomenal from the real. To suppose that Plato, at a later period of his life, reached a point of view from which he was able to answer them, is a groundless assumption. The real progress of Plato's own mind has been partly concealed from us by the dogmatic statements of Aristotle, and also by the degeneracy of his own followers, with whom a doctrine of numbers quickly superseded Ideas.

As a preparation for answering some of the difficulties which have been suggested, we may begin by sketching the first portion of the dialogue: —

Cephalus, of Clazomenae in Ionia, the birthplace of Anaxagoras, a citizen of no mean city in the history of philosophy, who is the narrator of the dialogue, describes himself as meeting Adeimantus and Glaucon in the Agora at Athens. 'Welcome, Cephalus: can we do anything for you in Athens?' 'Why, yes: I came to ask a favour of you. First, tell me your half-brother's name, which I have forgotten – he was a mere child when I was last here; – I know his father's, which is Pyrilampes.' 'Yes, and the name of our brother is Antiphon. But why do you ask?' 'Let me introduce to you some countrymen of mine, who are lovers of philosophy; they have heard that Antiphon remembers a conversation of Socrates with Parmenides and Zeno, of which the report came to him from Pythodorus, Zeno's friend.' 'That is quite true.' 'And can they hear the dialogue?' 'Nothing easier; in the days of his youth he made a careful study of the piece; at present, his thoughts have another direction: he takes after his grandfather, and has given up philosophy for horses.'

'We went to look for him, and found him giving instructions to a worker in brass about a bridle. When he had done with him, and had learned from his brothers the purpose of our visit, he saluted me as an old acquaintance, and we asked him to repeat the dialogue. At first, he complained of the trouble, but he soon consented. He told us that Pythodorus had described to him the appearance of Parmenides and Zeno; they had come to Athens at the great Panathenaea, the former being at the time about sixty-five years old, aged but well-favoured – Zeno, who was said to have been beloved of Parmenides in the days of his youth, about forty, and very good-looking: – that they lodged with Pythodorus at the Ceramicus outside the wall, whither Socrates, then a very young man, came to see them: Zeno was reading one of his theses, which he had nearly finished, when Pythodorus entered with Parmenides and Aristoteles, who was afterwards one of the Thirty. When the recitation was completed, Socrates requested that the first thesis of the treatise might be read again.'

'You mean, Zeno,' said Socrates, 'to argue that being, if it is many, must be both like and unlike, which is a contradiction; and each division of your argument is intended to elicit a similar absurdity, which may be supposed to follow from the assumption that being is many.' 'Such is my meaning.' 'I see,' said Socrates, turning to Parmenides, 'that Zeno is your second self in his writings too; you prove admirably that the all is one: he gives proofs no less convincing that the many are nought. To deceive the world by saying the same thing in entirely different forms, is a strain of art beyond most of us.' 'Yes, Socrates,' said Zeno; 'but though you are as keen as a Spartan hound, you do not quite catch the motive of the piece, which was only intended to protect Parmenides against ridicule by showing that the hypothesis of the existence of the many involved greater absurdities than the hypothesis of the one. The book was a youthful composition of mine, which was stolen from me, and therefore I had no choice about the publication.' 'I quite believe you,' said Socrates; 'but will you answer me a question? I should like to know, whether you would assume an idea of likeness in the abstract, which is the contradictory of unlikeness in the abstract, by participation in either or both of which things are like or unlike or partly both. For the same things may very well partake of like and unlike in the concrete, though like and unlike in the abstract are irreconcilable. Nor does there appear to me

to be any absurdity in maintaining that the same things may partake of the one and many, though I should be indeed surprised to hear that the absolute one is also many. For example, I, being many, that is to say, having many parts or members, am yet also one, and partake of the one, being one of seven who are here present (compare Philebus). This is not an absurdity, but a truism. But I should be amazed if there were a similar entanglement in the nature of the ideas themselves, nor can I believe that one and many, like and unlike, rest and motion, in the abstract, are capable either of admixture or of separation.'

Pythodorus said that in his opinion Parmenides and Zeno were not very well pleased at the questions which were raised; nevertheless, they looked at one another and smiled in seeming delight and admiration of Socrates. 'Tell me,' said Parmenides, 'do you think that the abstract ideas of likeness, unity, and the rest, exist apart from individuals which partake of them? and is this your own distinction?' 'I think that there are such ideas.' 'And would you make abstract ideas of the just, the beautiful, the good?' 'Yes,' he said. 'And of human beings like ourselves, of water, fire, and the like?' 'I am not certain.' 'And would you be undecided also about ideas of which the mention will, perhaps, appear laughable: of hair, mud, filth, and other things which are base and vile?' 'No, Parmenides; visible things like these are, as I believe, only what they appear to be: though I am sometimes disposed to imagine that there is nothing without an idea; but I repress any such notion, from a fear of falling into an abyss of nonsense.' 'You are young, Socrates, and therefore naturally regard the opinions of men; the time will come when philosophy will have a firmer hold of you, and you will not despise even the meanest things. But tell me, is your meaning that things become like by partaking of likeness, great by partaking of greatness, just and beautiful by partaking of justice and beauty, and so of other ideas?' 'Yes, that is my meaning.' 'And do you suppose the individual to partake of the whole, or of the part?' 'Why not of the whole?' said Socrates. 'Because,' said Parmenides, 'in that case the whole, which is one, will become many.' 'Nay,' said Socrates, 'the whole may be like the day, which is one and in many places: in this way the ideas may be one and also many.' 'In the same sort of way,' said Parmenides, 'as a sail, which is one, may be a cover to many – that is your meaning?' 'Yes.' 'And would you say that each man is covered by the whole sail, or by a part only?' 'By a part.' 'Then the ideas have parts, and the objects partake of a part of them only?' 'That seems to follow.' 'And would you like to say that the ideas are really divisible and yet remain one?' 'Certainly not.' 'Would you venture to affirm that great objects have a portion only of greatness transferred to them; or that small or equal objects are small or equal because they are only portions of smallness or equality?' 'Impossible.' 'But how can individuals participate in ideas, except in the ways which I have mentioned?' 'That is not an easy question to answer.' 'I should imagine the conception of ideas to arise as follows: you see great objects pervaded by a common form or idea of greatness, which you abstract.' 'That is quite true.' 'And supposing you embrace in one view the idea of greatness thus gained and the individuals which it comprises, a further idea of greatness arises, which makes both great; and this may go on to infinity.' Socrates replies that the ideas may be thoughts in the mind only; in this case, the consequence would no longer follow. 'But must not the thought be of something which is the same in all and is the idea? And if the world partakes in the ideas, and the ideas are thoughts, must not all things think? Or can thought be without thought?' 'I acknowledge the unmeaningness of this,' says Socrates, 'and would rather have recourse to the explanation that the ideas are types in nature, and that other things partake of them by becoming like them.' 'But to become like them is to be comprehended in the same idea; and the likeness of the idea and the individuals implies another idea of likeness, and another without end.' 'Quite true.' 'The theory, then, of participation by likeness has to be given up. You have hardly yet, Socrates, found out the real difficulty of maintaining abstract ideas.' 'What difficulty?' 'The greatest of all perhaps is this: an opponent will argue that the ideas are not within the range of human knowledge; and you cannot disprove the assertion without a long and laborious demonstration, which he may be unable or unwilling to follow. In the first place, neither you nor any one who maintains the existence of absolute ideas will affirm that they are subjective.' 'That

would be a contradiction.' 'True; and therefore any relation in these ideas is a relation which concerns themselves only; and the objects which are named after them, are relative to one another only, and have nothing to do with the ideas themselves.' 'How do you mean?' said Socrates. 'I may illustrate my meaning in this way: one of us has a slave; and the idea of a slave in the abstract is relative to the idea of a master in the abstract; this correspondence of ideas, however, has nothing to do with the particular relation of our slave to us. – Do you see my meaning?' 'Perfectly.' 'And absolute knowledge in the same way corresponds to absolute truth and being, and particular knowledge to particular truth and being.' Clearly.' 'And there is a subjective knowledge which is of subjective truth, having many kinds, general and particular. But the ideas themselves are not subjective, and therefore are not within our ken.' 'They are not.' 'Then the beautiful and the good in their own nature are unknown to us?' 'It would seem so.' 'There is a worse consequence yet.' 'What is that?' 'I think we must admit that absolute knowledge is the most exact knowledge, which we must therefore attribute to God. But then see what follows: God, having this exact knowledge, can have no knowledge of human things, as we have divided the two spheres, and forbidden any passing from one to the other: – the gods have knowledge and authority in their world only, as we have in ours.' 'Yet, surely, to deprive God of knowledge is monstrous.' – 'These are some of the difficulties which are involved in the assumption of absolute ideas; the learner will find them nearly impossible to understand, and the teacher who has to impart them will require superhuman ability; there will always be a suspicion, either that they have no existence, or are beyond human knowledge.' 'There I agree with you,' said Socrates. 'Yet if these difficulties induce you to give up universal ideas, what becomes of the mind? and where are the reasoning and reflecting powers? philosophy is at an end.' 'I certainly do not see my way.' 'I think,' said Parmenides, 'that this arises out of your attempting to define abstractions, such as the good and the beautiful and the just, before you have had sufficient previous training; I noticed your deficiency when you were talking with Aristoteles, the day before yesterday. Your enthusiasm is a wonderful gift; but I fear that unless you discipline yourself by dialectic while you are young, truth will elude your grasp.' 'And what kind of discipline would you recommend?' 'The training which you heard Zeno practising; at the same time, I admire your saying to him that you did not care to consider the difficulty in reference to visible objects, but only in relation to ideas.' 'Yes; because I think that in visible objects you may easily show any number of inconsistent consequences.' 'Yes; and you should consider, not only the consequences which follow from a given hypothesis, but the consequences also which follow from the denial of the hypothesis. For example, what follows from the assumption of the existence of the many, and the counter-argument of what follows from the denial of the existence of the many: and similarly of likeness and unlikeness, motion, rest, generation, corruption, being and not being. And the consequences must include consequences to the things supposed and to other things, in themselves and in relation to one another, to individuals whom you select, to the many, and to the all; these must be drawn out both on the affirmative and on the negative hypothesis, – that is, if you are to train yourself perfectly to the intelligence of the truth.' 'What you are suggesting seems to be a tremendous process, and one of which I do not quite understand the nature,' said Socrates; 'will you give me an example?' 'You must not impose such a task on a man of my years,' said Parmenides. 'Then will you, Zeno?' 'Let us rather,' said Zeno, with a smile, 'ask Parmenides, for the undertaking is a serious one, as he truly says; nor could I urge him to make the attempt, except in a select audience of persons who will understand him.' The whole party joined in the request.

Here we have, first of all, an unmistakable attack made by the youthful Socrates on the paradoxes of Zeno. He perfectly understands their drift, and Zeno himself is supposed to admit this. But they appear to him, as he says in the Philebus also, to be rather truisms than paradoxes. For every one must acknowledge the obvious fact, that the body being one has many members, and that, in a thousand ways, the like partakes of the unlike, the many of the one. The real difficulty begins with the relations of ideas in themselves, whether of the one and many, or of any other ideas, to one another

and to the mind. But this was a problem which the Eleatic philosophers had never considered; their thoughts had not gone beyond the contradictions of matter, motion, space, and the like.

It was no wonder that Parmenides and Zeno should hear the novel speculations of Socrates with mixed feelings of admiration and displeasure. He was going out of the received circle of disputation into a region in which they could hardly follow him. From the crude idea of Being in the abstract, he was about to proceed to universals or general notions. There is no contradiction in material things partaking of the ideas of one and many; neither is there any contradiction in the ideas of one and many, like and unlike, in themselves. But the contradiction arises when we attempt to conceive ideas in their connexion, or to ascertain their relation to phenomena. Still he affirms the existence of such ideas; and this is the position which is now in turn submitted to the criticisms of Parmenides.

To appreciate truly the character of these criticisms, we must remember the place held by Parmenides in the history of Greek philosophy. He is the founder of idealism, and also of dialectic, or, in modern phraseology, of metaphysics and logic (Theaet., Soph.). Like Plato, he is struggling after something wider and deeper than satisfied the contemporary Pythagoreans. And Plato with a true instinct recognizes him as his spiritual father, whom he 'revered and honoured more than all other philosophers together.' He may be supposed to have thought more than he said, or was able to express. And, although he could not, as a matter of fact, have criticized the ideas of Plato without an anachronism, the criticism is appropriately placed in the mouth of the founder of the ideal philosophy.

There was probably a time in the life of Plato when the ethical teaching of Socrates came into conflict with the metaphysical theories of the earlier philosophers, and he sought to supplement the one by the other. The older philosophers were great and awful; and they had the charm of antiquity. Something which found a response in his own mind seemed to have been lost as well as gained in the Socratic dialectic. He felt no incongruity in the veteran Parmenides correcting the youthful Socrates. Two points in his criticism are especially deserving of notice. First of all, Parmenides tries him by the test of consistency. Socrates is willing to assume ideas or principles of the just, the beautiful, the good, and to extend them to man (compare Phaedo); but he is reluctant to admit that there are general ideas of hair, mud, filth, etc. There is an ethical universal or idea, but is there also a universal of physics? – of the meanest things in the world as well as of the greatest? Parmenides rebukes this want of consistency in Socrates, which he attributes to his youth. As he grows older, philosophy will take a firmer hold of him, and then he will despise neither great things nor small, and he will think less of the opinions of mankind (compare Soph.). Here is lightly touched one of the most familiar principles of modern philosophy, that in the meanest operations of nature, as well as in the noblest, in mud and filth, as well as in the sun and stars, great truths are contained. At the same time, we may note also the transition in the mind of Plato, to which Aristotle alludes (Met.), when, as he says, he transferred the Socratic universal of ethics to the whole of nature.

The other criticism of Parmenides on Socrates attributes to him a want of practice in dialectic. He has observed this deficiency in him when talking to Aristoteles on a previous occasion. Plato seems to imply that there was something more in the dialectic of Zeno than in the mere interrogation of Socrates. Here, again, he may perhaps be describing the process which his own mind went through when he first became more intimately acquainted, whether at Megara or elsewhere, with the Eleatic and Megarian philosophers. Still, Parmenides does not deny to Socrates the credit of having gone beyond them in seeking to apply the paradoxes of Zeno to ideas; and this is the application which he himself makes of them in the latter part of the dialogue. He then proceeds to explain to him the sort of mental gymnastic which he should practise. He should consider not only what would follow from a given hypothesis, but what would follow from the denial of it, to that which is the subject of the hypothesis, and to all other things. There is no trace in the Memorabilia of Xenophon of any such method being attributed to Socrates; nor is the dialectic here spoken of that 'favourite method' of proceeding by regular divisions, which is described in the Phaedrus and Philebus, and of which

examples are given in the Politicus and in the Sophist. It is expressly spoken of as the method which Socrates had heard Zeno practise in the days of his youth (compare Soph.).

The discussion of Socrates with Parmenides is one of the most remarkable passages in Plato. Few writers have ever been able to anticipate 'the criticism of the morrow' on their favourite notions. But Plato may here be said to anticipate the judgment not only of the morrow, but of all after-ages on the Platonic Ideas. For in some points he touches questions which have not yet received their solution in modern philosophy.

The first difficulty which Parmenides raises respecting the Platonic ideas relates to the manner in which individuals are connected with them. Do they participate in the ideas, or do they merely resemble them? Parmenides shows that objections may be urged against either of these modes of conceiving the connection. Things are little by partaking of littleness, great by partaking of greatness, and the like. But they cannot partake of a part of greatness, for that will not make them great, etc.; nor can each object monopolise the whole. The only answer to this is, that 'partaking' is a figure of speech, really corresponding to the processes which a later logic designates by the terms 'abstraction' and 'generalization.' When we have described accurately the methods or forms which the mind employs, we cannot further criticize them; at least we can only criticize them with reference to their fitness as instruments of thought to express facts.

Socrates attempts to support his view of the ideas by the parallel of the day, which is one and in many places; but he is easily driven from his position by a counter illustration of Parmenides, who compares the idea of greatness to a sail. He truly explains to Socrates that he has attained the conception of ideas by a process of generalization. At the same time, he points out a difficulty, which appears to be involved – viz. that the process of generalization will go on to infinity. Socrates meets the supposed difficulty by a flash of light, which is indeed the true answer 'that the ideas are in our minds only.' Neither realism is the truth, nor nominalism is the truth, but conceptualism; and conceptualism or any other psychological theory falls very far short of the infinite subtlety of language and thought.

But the realism of ancient philosophy will not admit of this answer, which is repelled by Parmenides with another truth or half-truth of later philosophy, 'Every subject or subjective must have an object.' Here is the great though unconscious truth (shall we say?) or error, which underlay the early Greek philosophy. 'Ideas must have a real existence;' they are not mere forms or opinions, which may be changed arbitrarily by individuals. But the early Greek philosopher never clearly saw that true ideas were only universal facts, and that there might be error in universals as well as in particulars.

Socrates makes one more attempt to defend the Platonic Ideas by representing them as paradigms; this is again answered by the 'argumentum ad infinitum.' We may remark, in passing, that the process which is thus described has no real existence. The mind, after having obtained a general idea, does not really go on to form another which includes that, and all the individuals contained under it, and another and another without end. The difficulty belongs in fact to the Megarian age of philosophy, and is due to their illogical logic, and to the general ignorance of the ancients respecting the part played by language in the process of thought. No such perplexity could ever trouble a modern metaphysician, any more than the fallacy of 'calvus' or 'acervus,' or of 'Achilles and the tortoise.' These 'surds' of metaphysics ought to occasion no more difficulty in speculation than a perpetually recurring fraction in arithmetic.

It is otherwise with the objection which follows: How are we to bridge the chasm between human truth and absolute truth, between gods and men? This is the difficulty of philosophy in all ages: How can we get beyond the circle of our own ideas, or how, remaining within them, can we have any criterion of a truth beyond and independent of them? Parmenides draws out this difficulty with great clearness. According to him, there are not only one but two chasms: the first, between individuals and the ideas which have a common name; the second, between the ideas in us and the ideas absolute. The first of these two difficulties mankind, as we may say, a little parodying the language of the Philebus, have long agreed to treat as obsolete; the second remains a difficulty for

us as well as for the Greeks of the fourth century before Christ, and is the stumbling-block of Kant's Kritik, and of the Hamiltonian adaptation of Kant, as well as of the Platonic ideas. It has been said that 'you cannot criticize Revelation.' 'Then how do you know what is Revelation, or that there is one at all,' is the immediate rejoinder – 'You know nothing of things in themselves.' 'Then how do you know that there are things in themselves?' In some respects, the difficulty pressed harder upon the Greek than upon ourselves. For conceiving of God more under the attribute of knowledge than we do, he was more under the necessity of separating the divine from the human, as two spheres which had no communication with one another.

It is remarkable that Plato, speaking by the mouth of Parmenides, does not treat even this second class of difficulties as hopeless or insoluble. He says only that they cannot be explained without a long and laborious demonstration: 'The teacher will require superhuman ability, and the learner will be hard of understanding.' But an attempt must be made to find an answer to them; for, as Socrates and Parmenides both admit, the denial of abstract ideas is the destruction of the mind. We can easily imagine that among the Greek schools of philosophy in the fourth century before Christ a panic might arise from the denial of universals, similar to that which arose in the last century from Hume's denial of our ideas of cause and effect. Men do not at first recognize that thought, like digestion, will go on much the same, notwithstanding any theories which may be entertained respecting the nature of the process. Parmenides attributes the difficulties in which Socrates is involved to a want of comprehensiveness in his mode of reasoning; he should consider every question on the negative as well as the positive hypothesis, with reference to the consequences which flow from the denial as well as from the assertion of a given statement.

The argument which follows is the most singular in Plato. It appears to be an imitation, or parody, of the Zenonian dialectic, just as the speeches in the Phaedrus are an imitation of the style of Lysias, or as the derivations in the Cratylus or the fallacies of the Euthydemus are a parody of some contemporary Sophist. The interlocutor is not supposed, as in most of the other Platonic dialogues, to take a living part in the argument; he is only required to say 'Yes' and 'No' in the right places. A hint has been already given that the paradoxes of Zeno admitted of a higher application. This hint is the thread by which Plato connects the two parts of the dialogue.

The paradoxes of Parmenides seem trivial to us, because the words to which they relate have become trivial; their true nature as abstract terms is perfectly understood by us, and we are inclined to regard the treatment of them in Plato as a mere straw-splitting, or legerdemain of words. Yet there was a power in them which fascinated the Neoplatonists for centuries afterwards. Something that they found in them, or brought to them – some echo or anticipation of a great truth or error, exercised a wonderful influence over their minds. To do the Parmenides justice, we should imagine similar aporiai raised on themes as sacred to us, as the notions of One or Being were to an ancient Eleatic. 'If God is, what follows? If God is not, what follows?' Or again: If God is or is not the world; or if God is or is not many, or has or has not parts, or is or is not in the world, or in time; or is or is not finite or infinite. Or if the world is or is not; or has or has not a beginning or end; or is or is not infinite, or infinitely divisible. Or again: if God is or is not identical with his laws; or if man is or is not identical with the laws of nature. We can easily see that here are many subjects for thought, and that from these and similar hypotheses questions of great interest might arise. And we also remark, that the conclusions derived from either of the two alternative propositions might be equally impossible and contradictory.

When we ask what is the object of these paradoxes, some have answered that they are a mere logical puzzle, while others have seen in them an Hegelian propaedeutic of the doctrine of Ideas. The first of these views derives support from the manner in which Parmenides speaks of a similar method being applied to all Ideas. Yet it is hard to suppose that Plato would have furnished so elaborate an example, not of his own but of the Eleatic dialectic, had he intended only to give an illustration of method. The second view has been often overstated by those who, like Hegel himself, have tended

to confuse ancient with modern philosophy. We need not deny that Plato, trained in the school of Cratylus and Heracleitus, may have seen that a contradiction in terms is sometimes the best expression of a truth higher than either (compare Soph.). But his ideal theory is not based on antinomies. The correlation of Ideas was the metaphysical difficulty of the age in which he lived; and the Megarian and Cynic philosophy was a 'reductio ad absurdum' of their isolation. To restore them to their natural connexion and to detect the negative element in them is the aim of Plato in the Sophist. But his view of their connexion falls very far short of the Hegelian identity of Being and Not-being. The Being and Not-being of Plato never merge in each other, though he is aware that 'determination is only negation.'

After criticizing the hypotheses of others, it may appear presumptuous to add another guess to the many which have been already offered. May we say, in Platonic language, that we still seem to see vestiges of a track which has not yet been taken? It is quite possible that the obscurity of the Parmenides would not have existed to a contemporary student of philosophy, and, like the similar difficulty in the Philebus, is really due to our ignorance of the mind of the age. There is an obscure Megarian influence on Plato which cannot wholly be cleared up, and is not much illustrated by the doubtful tradition of his retirement to Megara after the death of Socrates. For Megara was within a walk of Athens (Phaedr.), and Plato might have learned the Megarian doctrines without settling there.

We may begin by remarking that the theses of Parmenides are expressly said to follow the method of Zeno, and that the complex dilemma, though declared to be capable of universal application, is applied in this instance to Zeno's familiar question of the 'one and many.' Here, then, is a double indication of the connexion of the Parmenides with the Eristic school. The old Eleatics had asserted the existence of Being, which they at first regarded as finite, then as infinite, then as neither finite nor infinite, to which some of them had given what Aristotle calls 'a form,' others had ascribed a material nature only. The tendency of their philosophy was to deny to Being all predicates. The Megarians, who succeeded them, like the Cynics, affirmed that no predicate could be asserted of any subject; they also converted the idea of Being into an abstraction of Good, perhaps with the view of preserving a sort of neutrality or indifference between the mind and things. As if they had said, in the language of modern philosophy: 'Being is not only neither finite nor infinite, neither at rest nor in motion, but neither subjective nor objective.'

This is the track along which Plato is leading us. Zeno had attempted to prove the existence of the one by disproving the existence of the many, and Parmenides seems to aim at proving the existence of the subject by showing the contradictions which follow from the assertion of any predicates. Take the simplest of all notions, 'unity'; you cannot even assert being or time of this without involving a contradiction. But is the contradiction also the final conclusion? Probably no more than of Zeno's denial of the many, or of Parmenides' assault upon the Ideas; no more than of the earlier dialogues 'of search.' To us there seems to be no residuum of this long piece of dialectics. But to the mind of Parmenides and Plato, 'Gott-betrunkene Menschen,' there still remained the idea of 'being' or 'good,' which could not be conceived, defined, uttered, but could not be got rid of. Neither of them would have imagined that their disputation ever touched the Divine Being (compare Phil.). The same difficulties about Unity and Being are raised in the Sophist; but there only as preliminary to their final solution.

If this view is correct, the real aim of the hypotheses of Parmenides is to criticize the earlier Eleatic philosophy from the point of view of Zeno or the Megarians. It is the same kind of criticism which Plato has extended to his own doctrine of Ideas. Nor is there any want of poetical consistency in attributing to the 'father Parmenides' the last review of the Eleatic doctrines. The latest phases of all philosophies were fathered upon the founder of the school.

Other critics have regarded the final conclusion of the Parmenides either as sceptical or as Heracleitean. In the first case, they assume that Plato means to show the impossibility of any truth. But this is not the spirit of Plato, and could not with propriety be put into the mouth of Parmenides, who, in this very dialogue, is urging Socrates, not to doubt everything, but to discipline his mind with

a view to the more precise attainment of truth. The same remark applies to the second of the two theories. Plato everywhere ridicules (perhaps unfairly) his Heracleitean contemporaries: and if he had intended to support an Heracleitean thesis, would hardly have chosen Parmenides, the condemner of the 'undiscerning tribe who say that things both are and are not,' to be the speaker. Nor, thirdly, can we easily persuade ourselves with Zeller that by the 'one' he means the Idea; and that he is seeking to prove indirectly the unity of the Idea in the multiplicity of phenomena.

We may now endeavour to thread the mazes of the labyrinth which Parmenides knew so well, and trembled at the thought of them.

The argument has two divisions: There is the hypothesis that

1. One is.
2. One is not.
If one is, it is nothing.
If one is not, it is everything.
But is and is not may be taken in two senses:
Either one is one,
Or, one has being,
from which opposite consequences are deduced,
1. a. If one is one, it is nothing.
1. b. If one has being, it is all things.
To which are appended two subordinate consequences:
1. aa. If one has being, all other things are.
1. bb. If one is one, all other things are not.
The same distinction is then applied to the negative hypothesis:
2. a. If one is not one, it is all things.
2. b. If one has not being, it is nothing.
Involving two parallel consequences respecting the other or remainder:
2. aa. If one is not one, other things are all.
2. bb. If one has not being, other things are not.

…

'I cannot refuse,' said Parmenides, 'since, as Zeno remarks, we are alone, though I may say with Ibycus, who in his old age fell in love, I, like the old racehorse, tremble at the prospect of the course which I am to run, and which I know so well. But as I must attempt this laborious game, what shall be the subject? Suppose I take my own hypothesis of the one.' 'By all means,' said Zeno. 'And who will answer me? Shall I propose the youngest? he will be the most likely to say what he thinks, and his answers will give me time to breathe.' 'I am the youngest,' said Aristoteles, 'and at your service; proceed with your questions.' – The result may be summed up as follows: —

1. a. One is not many, and therefore has no parts, and therefore is not a whole, which is a sum of parts, and therefore has neither beginning, middle, nor end, and is therefore unlimited, and therefore formless, being neither round nor straight, for neither round nor straight can be defined without assuming that they have parts; and therefore is not in place, whether in another which would encircle and touch the one at many points; or in itself, because that which is self-containing is also contained, and therefore not one but two. This being premised, let us consider whether one is capable either of motion or rest. For motion is either change of substance, or motion on an axis, or from one place to another. But the one is incapable of change of substance, which implies that it ceases to be itself, or of motion on an axis, because there would be parts around the axis; and any other motion involves change of place. But existence in place has been already shown to be impossible; and yet more impossible is coming into being in place, which implies partial existence in two places at once, or entire existence neither within nor without the same; and how can this be? And more impossible

still is the coming into being either as a whole or parts of that which is neither a whole nor parts. The one, then, is incapable of motion. But neither can the one be in anything, and therefore not in the same, whether itself or some other, and is therefore incapable of rest. Neither is one the same with itself or any other, or other than itself or any other. For if other than itself, then other than one, and therefore not one; and, if the same with other, it would be other, and other than one. Neither can one while remaining one be other than other; for other, and not one, is the other than other. But if not other by virtue of being one, not by virtue of itself; and if not by virtue of itself, not itself other, and if not itself other, not other than anything. Neither will one be the same with itself. For the nature of the same is not that of the one, but a thing which becomes the same with anything does not become one; for example, that which becomes the same with the many becomes many and not one. And therefore if the one is the same with itself, the one is not one with itself; and therefore one and not one. And therefore one is neither other than other, nor the same with itself. Neither will the one be like or unlike itself or other; for likeness is sameness of affections, and the one and the same are different. And one having any affection which is other than being one would be more than one. The one, then, cannot have the same affection with and therefore cannot be like itself or other; nor can the one have any other affection than its own, that is, be unlike itself or any other, for this would imply that it was more than one. The one, then, is neither like nor unlike itself or other. This being the case, neither can the one be equal or unequal to itself or other. For equality implies sameness of measure, as inequality implies a greater or less number of measures. But the one, not having sameness, cannot have sameness of measure; nor a greater or less number of measures, for that would imply parts and multitude. Once more, can one be older or younger than itself or other? or of the same age with itself or other? That would imply likeness and unlikeness, equality and inequality. Therefore one cannot be in time, because that which is in time is ever becoming older and younger than itself, (for older and younger are relative terms, and he who becomes older becomes younger,) and is also of the same age with itself. None of which, or any other expressions of time, whether past, future, or present, can be affirmed of one. One neither is, has been, nor will be, nor becomes, nor has, nor will become. And, as these are the only modes of being, one is not, and is not one. But to that which is not, there is no attribute or relative, neither name nor word nor idea nor science nor perception nor opinion appertaining. One, then, is neither named, nor uttered, nor known, nor perceived, nor imagined. But can all this be true? 'I think not.'

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