

# Parmenides and the Tradition of the Religious Poet/Philosopher

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The extant fragments of Parmenides of Elea's book, *On Nature*, speak to us in poetic, mysterious, and oracular tones. Although usually seen as a central figure in the Greek rationalist/scientific philosophical tradition, Parmenides can also profitably be viewed as a religious poet/philosopher. The tradition of religious poet/philosophers includes, among many others of course, the ancient authors of the Upanishads, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Dhammapada* and the Old Testament.

All of the above demonstrate significant affinities to the fragments of Parmenides which, it will be seen, warrant a place among them. The ancient authors mentioned above mirror Parmenides' notion of *what-is* very closely. Although Kirk, Raven, and Schofield claim that "ancients and moderns alike are agreed upon a low estimation of Parmenides' gifts as a writer, "they later concede that there are passages of "clumsy grandeur" (241).

David Gallop, however, confers upon Parmenides the appellation "philosopher-poet" and thinks that Parmenides' work was "consciously modelled on the bold enterprise of an epic hero, Odysseus" (5).

Parmenides introduced a notion of reality that was new and difficult for his Greek contemporaries to comprehend. To him reality, or *what-is*, is not a perceptible physical substance. It is suprasensible, if not transcendent. This notion an suprasensible authentic reality was, nonetheless, commonly expressed in the ancient Asian religious texts already mentioned. And their cryptic yet majestic style (which derives from the belief that they are conveying eternal truths received directly from their gods) is shared by Parmenides, in contrast to the logical, closely-reasoned approach of the Greek philosophers.

These great religious works employ pregnant phrases, richly resonating with implications and multiple meanings, to assure us that *what-is* is not to be found in the world of appearances. Unlike his Greek predecessors Thales and Anaximenes, or his nearer contemporary Heraclitus, Parmenides did not think that the world's primary originative substance was a discernible element such as water, air, or fire. He did not base his cosmogonical and ontological conclusions, as the others did, on observations of the natural world. Nor, like his successors Plato and Democritus, did he specify that the originative substance was either an abstract concept or a tiny physical, yet imperceptible, element. (Although *what is* and originative substance needn't be identical, for Parmenides the necessarily are. Parmenides' *what-is* is one, indivisible, ungenerated, and eternal; *is* is now, always was, and always will be. Therefore for Parmenides *what-is* must also be the originative substance.)

Parmenides was not so much a natural scientist as a mystical, poetic prophet, zealously burning with knowledge received from on high. He does not seek to persuade us of his truth

through logical discourse, but instead claims for it an empyreal provenance—a celestial source. This source is the “goddess” who bestows upon Parmenides her “trustworthy speech... and thought about truth” (frag. 8:50-51).

David Gallop defines Parmenides’ notion of what-is as “a single continuous, changeless, and motionless plenum” (21). Parmenides himself says that it is “un-beginning and unceasing” (8:27) and “whole and changeless” (8:38).

For mortals, however, “the things which seem had to have genuine existence” (1:31-32). But the goddess cautions Parmenides against following “the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true trust” (1:30) and discloses to him her idea of authentic reality :

What-is is ungenerated and imperishable;

Whole, single-limbed, steadfast, and complete;

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

One, continuous .... (8:3-6)

This description of what-is, of the basic, original, sustaining force or substance in things, sets Parmenides in opposition to the Greek rationalists who employed scientific observation to discover in nature’s visible, palpable elements an originative substance.

(Only Anaximander seems to have anticipated Parmenides by designating his originative substance apeiron, meaning the indefinite or infinite. Thus his apeiron is suprasensible, but vague and undefined- “without further qualification” according to Raven, Kirk, and Schofield ((108)). Parmenides, on the other hand, attempted an evocative yet precise definition of what-is.)

Parmenides’ what-is is a force which connects all things, or a substance which inheres in all things. Like the Old Testament God, the Tao, Brahman, or Dharma, it is somehow in or with all things yet separate from them. Owing to this dual nature, all of the above have been identified with the things of this world: Parmenides’ what-is “has been named all things” (8:38); the Tao is the “mother of all under heaven” (*Tao Te Ching*, chap. 25); Brahman “dwells in all beings but is separated from all beings” (*Upanishads*, 96); Dharmadhatu, one of the myriad aspects of Dharma is “the basic element of the universe” or “the Raw-material of Phenomena” (Bary 102); and the Hebrew God is a father to mankind (Malachi 1:6 and 2:10).

But it is in the transcendent nature of these terms that we find significant similarities. The *Katha Upanishad* was written, as were all the texts treated here, during the “axial age” (the era extending from about 800-200 B.C. in which many of the world’s earliest enduring, and most influential, religious and ethical thinkers lived—see Jaspers, 170). In it, the originative substance is addressed as Brahman. Brahman is the “Uncaused Cause” and the “Self-Existent:” it is “without beginning, without end, eternal, immutable” (*Upanishads*, 20).

Analogous to this is Parmenides’ what-is, which is “changeless” (8:26) “un-beginning and unceasing” (8:27) and, as we have already seen, “ungenerated and imperishable.”

The Old Testament God, in Exodus 3:14, declares “I AM THAT I AM.” This echoes Parmenides’ statement that “what-is is in contact with what-is” (8:25) and that it “is all full of what-is” (8:24).

In Malachi 3:6 God says: “I change not.” He is immutable and changeless as is Brahman

and Parmenides' what-is. And as Isaiah 44:6 God says: "I am the first, and I am the last." Again the close correspondence between this and the "un-beginning and unceasing" of what-is and Brahman's "without beginning, without end" is apparent.

A third work which promulgates a correlating view of authentic reality and its originative substance is the ancient Chinese book of wisdom, the *Tao Te Ching*. Tao is the way of all things, or the path that things would naturally follow if left unimpeded.

Tao is called "Unceasing" in chapter 14 of the *Tao Te Ching*. It is hailed as "Tao everlasting" in chapters 32 and 37, and deemed "inexhaustible" in chapters 4 and 35. These are adjectives which mirror those used to describe what-is, Brahman, and Jehovah.

The Tao is also a path, the "way of Heaven" (chap. 73, 77 and 81), or "the great path" (chap. 53). Parmenides, too, follows a path in search of truth. Conveyed by horse and chariot, he is placed on "the much-speaking route of the goddess" (1:2-3) and travels to "the gates of the paths of Night and Day" (1:11).

The Tao, too, is likened to a gate, or door, in chapter 1 of the *Tao Te Ching*. It is the "door to all hidden mysteries."

Both suggest a place before or beyond all differentiation and opposition. (The early seventeenth-century mystic, Jakob Boehme, described God as an "abyss" and Ninian Smart thinks that Boehme's God is "the *Ungrund*—the undifferentiated absolute that is ineffable and neither light nor darkness ((328)). All three authors propose a primordial place out of which truth emanates.)

Parmenides' gate may be an attempt to reconcile the opposites of Heraclitus. He may have wished to prove that he had penetrated to a place or time before opposites divide, or where they converge, in order that he may claim to possess a truth more fundamental than, and anterior to, that of Heraclitus.

Heraclitus, nonetheless, parallels the *Tao Te Ching* when he uses the metaphor of the stretching of a bow to explain that the dynamic tension of opposites balances the forces in the world (see *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 77 and p.193 of Kirk, Raven, and Schofield).

The Buddhist notion of Dharma is in accord with the Tao and Parmenides' what-is. Although the word is used to mean many things, Dharma is, perhaps above all, "the saving doctrine or way" (*Buddha*, 245). It is also "the one ultimate Reality" (*Scriptures*, 245).

The thoughts and teachings of the Buddha, a near contemporary of Parmenides, are collected in the *Dhammapada*. The title, like the *Tao Te Ching* or the fragments of Parmenides, has often been translated as *The Way of Truth*.

Dharma is the path that leads one out of the material world to extinction, or Nirvana. The *Dhammapada* tells us: "Strive to know the imperishable" (chap. 26). And the imperishable is one, for "all that consists of component parts will perish" (chap.26). Thus the Buddhist's ultimate reality, like the others I have cited, is whole and eternal.

The idea of a path, or route, to the truth survives in Greek thought at least until Plato. W.K.C. Guthrie writes of Plato's use of the word 'dike' (justice) in *The Republic*. Guthrie states that the "original meaning of *dike* may have been literally a way or path" (6). Although by Plato's time 'dike' is already personified as the majestic spirit of righteousness" (7). Guthrie

reflects that it is "impossible that the earlier meaning of the word should have ceased to colour the minds of the men who used it" (7).

Guthrie paraphrases Plato's final definition of *dike* as follows :

Justice. *dikaioσyne*, the state of the man who follows *dike*, is no more than 'minding your own business', doing the thing, or following the way, which is properly your own. (7)

This would serve an admirable definition of the Tao as well.

Whereas the Tao, Brahman, Jehovah, and Dharma are clearly transcendent powers, as well as somehow being 'in' material phenomenon, Parmenides never clarifies his stance on this issue. Is what-is a discarnate power or force which may unify, structure, or sustain the world but which comprehends no corporeal attributes? Or is it merely the basic material out of which all things are made?

Parmenides failed to make this distinction and others because, according to Guthrie, he lacked "the ordinary tools of logic, and even of grammar" that would make these distinctions possible (47).

Parmenides was unclear regarding the two possible modes of the verb "to be." Guthrie claims that "the difference between the existential and the predicative use of the verb had not yet been elucidated" (48). Parmenides concerns himself mostly with the existential to-be, but only by dealing with the predicative to-be can one identify what something is or isn't (the plate *is* hot, the ocean *is* wet), or ascertain differences between things.

Thus for Parmenides what-is simply is. He can describe it, but the subtle shadings of a definition based on a comparison of qualities between things, enumerating their similarities and differences, is lacking. This left Parmenides no alternative other than to say that what-is is all the same and that anything different is not what-is and, consequently, has no true existence.

Guthrie reminds us that the Greeks of Parmenides' day "did not yet command a language capable of such a phrase as 'not in the same sense', and paradox was their only resource" (60). Therefore Parmenides was forced to say that all of what-is is the same even though the evidence of one's senses might tell one different.

A possible solution to the question of the immanent or transcendent nature of what-is may be sought in fragment 3:1: "because the same thing is there for thinking and for being." If we knew that by 'being' Parmenides meant physical existence, we could then try to determine whether he gives precedence to thinking or being : if we decided that Parmenides meant that thinking comes before being, then we could claim that his originative substance, or the authentic what-is, is transcendent—it is thought; if we grant priority to being, we could say that what-is is physical, though perhaps imperceptible (Democritus would soon opt for this answer in his theory of atoms).

Heidegger thought that Parmenides "consigns thinking to Being, while Berkeley refers Being to thinking" (84). (Shakespeare, agreeing with his nearer contemporary, has Hamlet say "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." (II. ii. 265-66)

Unfortunately we don't know if by 'being' Parmenides meant physical being. He may just as easily have thought of being as a concept or abstraction. If virtue is our example of a

thing that has being, then fragment 3:1 could read as a proto-Platonic statement suggesting that virtue exists outside of us and that we can think of it as well.

Because both virtue itself and our thought of it are equally suprasensible, granting priority of existence to either one would still leave us with an originitive substance that is necessarily transcendent in nature. Nonetheless, the present writer feels that, like the Tao, Brahman, Dharma, and Jehovah, Parmenides' what-is is the authentic reality behind the appearances of the world and that it somehow also imbues these appearances, by transcendent power or a physical enrichment, with a spark of significance and dignity.

We have seen some correspondences between Parmenides' conception of what-is and that of other ancient religious poet/philosophers. They all speak of a reality more momentous and fundamental than that of the phenomenal world.

Parmenides' forceful, mysterious, sometimes sublime language, his contention that his message is divinely inspired, his authoritative, commanding stance and disdain of logical discourse all demand that he be considered a peer and equal of the greatest religious poet/philosophers of the axial age.

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