

Parmenides
by
Plato

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PARMENIDES

by

PLATO

Translated by Benjamin Jowett

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 en-

abled 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 origi-

nally 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 Soph-

ist, 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 an-

swered, 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 birth-place 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 Ppyrilampes.' '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 divi-

sion 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 fall-

ing 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 phe-

nomena. 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

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