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Summary Article: **Parmenides**

From *The Classical Tradition*

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Greek philosopher from Elea, in Italy (fl. early 5th cent. bce). He wrote only a single work, a poem, of which only fragments survive. He has always been perceived, at least since Plato, as holding a foundational position within the history of philosophy. In the *Sophist* Plato calls him the "father" (241D3) for having raised the question "what is being?"—the question that has been central to philosophy ever since, from Aristotle (*Metaphysics Zeta*, 1028b2-4) to Heidegger, who took the epigraph of *Being and Time* from this passage of the *Sophist*.

We have firsthand access to Parmenides' main argument thanks to the extensive quotes made by Simplicius from the first part of the poem, aware as he was in his own time of the rarity of a text that deserved to be passed on to posterity (see his commentary on Aristotle, *Physics* 144.2 8 Diels). Given the impossibility of conceiving non-being, Parmenides made impossible any doctrine of being that would deny its essential predicates, such as eternity, immobility, impassibility, and unicity (this last predicate may result from an interpretation as old as Parmenides' disciple Melissus, but which was then taken up and popularized through Plato's *Sophist*); therefore, engendering and destroying, and any form of "becoming," were deprived of philosophical legitimacy. They could survive only at the level of the "opinions (*doxai*) of the mortals" (fr. 1.30 and 8.51 DK), treated in the second, cosmological part of the poem. One of the most important lines of development of post-Parmenidean thinking was to find a solution to the obstacle presented by a doctrine that ontologically prohibited conceptualizing the world. This is what Plato's *Sophist* called the "parricide" (241D5). In the *Republic* Plato had distinguished, in a Parmenidean vein, the domain of truth (*aletheia*) dealing with separate Forms, from the domain of opinion (*doxa*) dealing with sensible objects, and proposed a theory of participation (*methexis*) to fill the gap between them. The *Sophist* went further by developing an analysis according to which "not being" does not mean "not being, absolutely speaking," but rather, and foremost, "not being *something*," which is of course compatible with "being something" (258A). By distinguishing among different meanings of being ("being is said in a plurality of senses"), Aristotle too could escape the constraint of Parmenides' ontology. The semantic perspective has systematically been pursued in modern times by interpreters directly or indirectly inspired by Gottlob Frege; they wondered how to read the word "being" in Parmenides: was it "to exist," "to be such" (predicative meaning), "to be the case" (veridical meaning)? Parmenides will not yield an answer to the question. His enormous importance lies, rather, in the fact that by *not* distinguishing between the different meanings of the verb "to be," he prompted later thinkers to do so.

There is more to Parmenides than the true ontology exposed in the first part of the poem. In its second part he developed a cosmology of which we know much less, but which has nevertheless been influential. In antiquity Empedocles derived much from it; and it may be the elaboration of a system of the world, more than the ontology, that allowed Parmenides to be seen as a "natural philosopher" (*physikos*), as attested by the inscription on a statue from the 1st century discovered at Elea in 1962, although the term *phusis* also serves, in some of its occurrences, to refer to "being." For the moderns, the cosmology was less interesting for itself than for the problem raised by its relationship, from a

philosophical perspective, with the first part of the poem—"one of the most difficult and obscure questions, one of the most discussed in the history of Greek philosophy," according to Ernst Cassirer. Was it simply a dialectical game (as proposed by the influential interpretation of Diels) or a hypothetical construction, as is the case for scientific practices, or, despite appearances, was the continuity between the two parts of the poem more profound (K. Reinhardt and the phenomenological tradition after him)? Once more, the question is not easy to settle. But what really matters here is probably the challenge itself. It was taken up by Zeno, Parmenides' most important disciple and the one designated by Aristotle as the founder of dialectic (hence Diels's interpretation of Parmenides). Parmenides' original paradox consisted in juxtaposing an "untrustworthy" cosmological discourse in the second part of his poem to the true ontological discourse of the first part; Zeno deepened the gap by building a series of arguments to the effect that neither plurality nor motion can be logically thought (Achilles will never catch up with the tortoise, the thrown arrow cannot advance). Zeno's paradoxes have teased everyone who has dealt with the issue of infinite division, from Aristotle in book 6 of *Physics* to Bergson. Paul Valéry's famous poem "Le cimetière marin" ("The Cemetery by the Sea") is an anti-Eleatic ode to life that directly apostrophizes Zeno ("Zeno! Cruel Zeno!").

Parmenides' poem as a whole presents itself as the revelation of an anonymous goddess to an exceptional mortal. The introduction, or "proem," explains the circumstances of this encounter. After a cosmic trip, a "young man" (*kouros*), "keen" and "knowledgeable," reaches the dwelling of a benevolent goddess who instructs him in "all things." Philosophers in antiquity were intrigued by this fantastic cavalcade, which made sense to them only if taken as an allegory (see Sextus Empiricus, who transmitted the whole of the proem, *Adversus mathematicos* 7.111-114). The relationship between this "mystical" introduction and the "rationalism" that manifests itself in the poem is as interesting as the relationship between the two parts of the poem. Taken as a trace of the passage from one type of discourse to another, it played an important role for the development of an anthropological perspective on the origins of Greek philosophy, first for Louis Gernet, and later for his disciple Jean-Pierre Vernant.

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