

## Perplexity, Dialectic, and Truth in Plato's *Parmenides*

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In several middle-period dialogues (*Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*) Plato expounds a theory of Forms according to which whenever we ascribe a common predicate to many things we implicitly indicate the presence of an eternal Form in perishable individuals. For instance, when we truly call beautiful a particular human body, a particular behaviour, a particular poem, a particular sunrise, and a particular law or custom we announce the presence of the eternal Form of Beauty in several distinct entities which may have nothing other in common than their sharing in this Form. This standard account of the theory of Forms had for Plato an ontological as well as an epistemological significance. Forms were supposed to be the real causes of things' being what they are. And Forms were also regarded as the real destinations of scientific knowledge. To achieve a contemplation of the stable Forms in themselves quite apart from their presence in the ever-shifting world of sensible particulars was for Plato the end purpose of all scientific endeavour. In the *Parmenides*, however, Plato has the old and venerable sage of Elea who provides the name of the dialogue raise serious objections to the theory, especially about the precise manner in which we should conceive the participation of Forms in sensible things, and the young Socrates who defends the theory is unable to provide adequate answers (130a-135d). Since Parmenides' questions are left pending in the dialogue some scholars have thought that Plato must have been close to the abandonment, or at least a radical revision, of his middle-period theory of Forms. But this is not confirmed in subsequent dialogues such as the *Timaeus*, *Philebus* and *Laws*. Plato stuck to the postulation of Forms, which is the single most distinctive mark of his thought, well into his old age.

The *Parmenides* consists of two parts. In the first (up to 135d4) the eponymous philosopher raises his objections to Socrates' theory of Forms. In the second, and longer, part Parmenides exhibits a very abstract and rather tedious demonstration of a method of investigation which he thinks indispensable for the attainment of truth. This method consists in postulating the existence of a certain abstract notion or Form (such as unity, similarity, motion or rest, etc.) and determining the logical consequences of its postulation both for the Form and for other things, in respect both to the Form itself and to things other than it. But Parmenides does not stop here. He considers the method complete only if one is willing to see the consequences that follow also from the contradictory of the chosen hypothesis. The theoretical formulation of the method (135d2-136c8) is followed by an actual example of its use (from 137c4 to the end of the dialogue). For purposes of illustration

Parmenides examines his favourite subject, i.e. the existence of the One or Unity, and demonstrates the absurd consequences that follow both from its hypothetical affirmation and its hypothetical denial. The dialogue ends with an emphatic “most true”. But what has been proven to be most true is that both the postulation that the One is and the contradictory hypothesis that the One is not lead to insuperable absurdities. And the question immediately suggests itself: what is the purpose of this long and tedious demonstration of a method that is explicitly said to have been devised for the discernment of truth but whose actual application to the case of Unity reaches an unacceptable impasse full of contradictions? And also: how are we to interpret the dialogue as a whole in order to find Plato's real intention behind its composition?

In the dialogue Parmenides does not positively deny the existence of Forms. Without their postulation, he maintains, the mind would not have stable objects of cognition, and the power of thoughtful discourse would be abolished (135b-c). Parmenides does not give a technical name to his method. He regards it as a “serious play” (137b2), despised by the many as “idle talk” (135d5), and thinks of it as an “exercise” similar to, but more complete than, the way of arguing which Zeno of Elea employed (135d8). Since Zeno of Elea was the assumed inventor of dialectic, it is reasonable to think that Parmenides' method was meant to be Plato's own perfected dialectic.

According to Plato's *Republic VII*, the dialectic is the last discipline which the guardians of the ideal polity should learn (534e). Its teaching should begin after the successful completion of all mathematical sciences (arithmetic, plane geometry, stereometry, astronomy, and music) at the age of thirty (537d), and continue for five years (539e). The dialectic is the culmination of the education of the guardians because it awakens the mind to a firm grasp of the Forms by eliminating the *merely* hypothetical character of their earlier postulation (533b-d). Plato's dialectic is the summit or crowning moment of knowledge and as such the ultimate end of all scientific understanding.

The question of the relation between the One and the Many is, arguably, the most fundamental question of Greek philosophy. In cosmological terms the One-Many contrariety turns out to give verbal articulation to the problem of the unity of the world as a whole vis-à-vis the plurality of extant things contained therein. However, there is another and deeper side to this problem and this deeper side concerns the generation of numbers. Once the Pythagoreans discovered the mathematical ratios behind the musical intervals of the diatonic scale and extrapolated to the general conclusion that everything is number, the question about the relation between the One and the Many surpassed applied mathematics and speculative cosmology and became, as we would say, a metaphysical problem. By illustrating his dialectical method by means of the hypothetical postulation of the One's existence and non-existence Parmenides aims to awaken the philosopher's mind to the extremely serious puzzles which attend the notion of Unity. The

illustration of his method is, therefore, a propaedeutic exercise for the proper understanding of the nature of the One. Since Parmenides does not proceed to offer a solution to the absurdities with which his dialectical exhibition is concluded, he presumably considers *perplexity* to be an *indispensable* stage to the end of cognition. His stance implies that scientific knowledge proper differs from the transmissible and teachable character of other kinds of knowledge (such as that implied in practical expertise and craftsmanship) in that it cannot be attained without *personal* involvement and the extreme *pain* entailed in preliminary mental *confusion*. *Revelation*, Plato seems to believe, is always the outcome of an extreme experience of the *mystery* of being.

Our reading of the dialogue will examine the conclusiveness or otherwise of Parmenides' objections to Socrates' immature understanding of Forms as well as the unspoken presuppositions of his dialectical method in the highly abstract discussion of the second part of the dialogue. Since Platonic Forms are meant to be the true objects of scientific cognition their assumption resembles the preliminary modern acceptance of regularities, laws or, at any rate, relative and statistical determinacy in the domain of nature. But since Platonic Forms are hypothetical constructs of the human mind their postulation resembles also the modern construction of hypothetical theories for demonstration or disproof. It also creates problems similar to those envisioned by a modern scientist in his/her search for universal explanations. The specific difference of modern science from Platonic philosophy lies of course in the distinctively empirical and experimental character of the former. With respect to some highly abstract notions (such as unity, equality, similarity, and their opposites), which have a distinctively mathematical provenance, much progress in modern science has been made possible by cutting loose from the constraints which those notions naturally impose on thinking. But a knot that we have decided to violently cut down does not become an untangled and unified piece of rope for that matter. The relevance of a philosophical artwork like Plato's *Parmenides* lies, among other things, in the fact that it shows us several lines of sustained abstract argument in intentionally contradictory directions. It thus reawakens us to the creative potential of genuine perplexity. To progress in knowledge is to be constantly overwhelmed by the miracle of Being and to raise questions which do not readily admit easy solutions.

The students attending this class must have antecedently read the entire dialogue in the English translation provided by Allen (1997) or Gill (1996). Special emphasis should be given to (i) Socrates' exposition of his theory of Forms (128e-130a), (ii) Parmenides' objections to Socrates' theory (130b-135b), and (iii) Parmenides' theoretical description of his method of dialectic (135d-136c). Attention should also be paid to the four or five deductions of the first hypothesis (137c-160b).

An excellent defence of the Platonic theory of Forms as a semantic theory of knowledge is

provided by Beston 1980. Interested students may also consult the seminal works in the following, highly select, bibliography. Apart from Rickless (2007), all other suggested studies avoid technical vocabulary and logical formalization of arguments. Cornford (1939) is the standard work of reference for a first acquaintance with the *Parmenides* – and a groundbreaking work in its own right. Miller (1986) is an elegantly written book that, irrespective of the stance one takes as to its main thesis, will inevitably provide mental satisfaction. Last but not least, Allen (1997) is a very precise and thoughtful comment on the dialogue.

### **Select Bibliography**

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