

PARMENIDES' *ON NATURE*

(ΠΑΡΜΕΝΙΔΗΟΥ ΠΕΡΙ ΦΥΣΕΩΣ)

Translated from the Greek by Lee Churchman

(Selections from "The Way of Seeming" translated by D Gallop and D.S. Hutchinson)

The exact dates of Parmenides' birth and death are unknown to us; however we can be sure of the fact that he was born in the second half of the sixth century BC and died somewhere towards the middle of the fifth century BC. Unlike contemporary philosophers Parmenides used verse to express his philosophical ideas; but this should not be thought strange or idiosyncratic since at the time he was writing there was no fixed manner in which philosophy was supposed to be presented to its audience. Indeed, among the writings of the other Presocratic philosophers we find a wide variety of styles.

We do not possess the complete text of Parmenides' poem nor do we possess a complete text of philosophical work by any of the other Presocratic philosophers. What we do have are *fragments* of their works preserved as quotations and *testimonia* as to their opinions in the works of later authors. It is rather like as if the works of Wittgenstein or Hume had come down to us in the form of referenced quotations in the work of contemporary authors. In the case of Parmenides there is much scholarly dispute over the ordering of the extant fragments and the texts themselves. This should not discourage potential students of Parmenides' work as it is simply the price we must pay for reading works which are so ancient and remote from us and of which the remnants are so few. The ancient sources for each of our fragments are listed in the footnotes.

This translation uses the Greek text of Gallop (*Parmenides of Elea: A Text and Translation*, University of Toronto Press, 1984). Students who wish to study Parmenides further are directed to this excellent work, which contains a text, translation and an excellent interpretative essay.

Although it is possible (but difficult) to attempt a reconstruction of the poem itself, I have chosen to translate the fragments individually in the order given by Gallop in order to preserve the fragmentary nature of the text. In some places alternative translations are given in a footnote where the Greek text is ambiguous. In my view it is quite difficult using this meagre evidence ever to come to a satisfactory view of what Parmenides actually thought. But that is not so much of a problem for us, since we are concerned with Parmenides as he influenced Plato, and the latter is reasonably clear about what he takes Parmenides to mean.

The poem has three sections: the introductory proem; the Way of Truth (ΑΛΗΘΕΙΑ); and the Way of Opinion (ΔΟΞΑ). I have translated the entirety of the first two and we have chosen existent translations of selected fragments from the latter, which will not concern us so much.

If you find Parmenides' philosophy confusing, you are in good company. Scholars are still struggling to understand the ideas and influences of this fundamental figure of Western Philosophy and you should not feel discouraged if you find him opaque.

THE PROEM

*Fragment 1.*¹

- The mares which bear me, as far as suffices for spirit
 Were taking me, when they brought and set me on the renowned² road
 Of the goddess, which bears the man who knows everywhere unharmed;
 That way was I borne, for there were the much guided steeds bearing me,
 5 Strongly drawing the chariot, and maidens were leading the way.
 The axle glowing in the naves made the sound of a pipe,
 (For it was driven on by two rounded wheels
 On both sides), when the Daughters of the Sun, having left the house of
 Night, were hurrying to convey me into the light, ,
 10 With their hands having thrust their veils from their heads.
 There are the gates of the roads of Night and Day,
 And surrounding them a lintel and threshold of stone;
 And these [portals] on high are filled with mighty doors;
 And of these Justice much avenging has the keys of retribution
 15 Who, persuading with soft words, they cunningly
 Convinced that she should push back the bolted fastening for them
 Quickly from the gates; and these made of the doors
 A yawning gap as they were opened wide,
 Swinging in turn in their sockets the axles
 20 fastened with bolts and pins; at once straight through them there
 The maidens turned the chariot and mares along the way.
 And the goddess received me gladly, and taking my right hand in hers
 She spoke and thus addressed me:
 "Youth who comes to our house with immortal charioteers,
 25 Whose horses carry you,
 Hail, since no ill fate sent you forth to travel
 This road (for it is far from the trodden path of men),
 But Right and Justice. And you must learn everything
 Both the steady heart of convincing³ truth
 30 And mortal beliefs in which there is no real trust.
 But nevertheless you shall learn these things⁴ as well,

¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* VII. 111-14 (lines 1-30); Simplicius, Commentary on *De Caelo* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* VII, 557) (lines 28-32)

² Or "much spoken of".

³ Simplicius' text reads "well-rounded" here, Proclus' reads "convincing".

⁴ i.e. the opinions of mortals.

How the things which seem must have truly existed,
Penetrating completely through all things.⁵



THE WAY OF TRUTH

*Fragment 2.*⁶

Come now, I shall tell you, heed my story, hearing,
Which paths of inquiry there are alone for thinking;
The one: that that it *is* and that it *cannot not be*,
Is the path of persuasion (for it follows truth);
5 The other: that it *is not* and *must not be*,
I indicate to you to be a path utterly unlearnable;
For you may neither know *what is not* (for that is impossible)
Nor could you point [it] out.

*Fragment 3.*⁷

... for the same thing exists for thinking and for being.⁸

*Fragment 4.*⁹

Nevertheless, behold that which is far off, yet firmly present to
Mind; for you cannot cut off being from cleaving to being
[Because it is] neither dispersing itself completely in order,
Nor uniting itself.

*Fragment 5.*¹⁰

It's all the same to me
Whence I begin, for thither I shall return once more.

⁵ This last part is fairly confusing. Some alternative translations have been offered, such as: "How the appearances, which pervade all things, had to be acceptable." (Tarán); "How passing right through all things one should judge the things which seem to be." (Burnet); "How the things that seem, as they all pass through everything, must gain the semblance of being." (Kirk & Raven)

⁶ Proclus, Commentary on *Timaeus* (Diehl, vol I, 345) (lines 1-8); Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 116)

⁷ Clement, *Miscellanies* VI.2,23; Plotinus *Ennead* V.1.8.

⁸ Alternative translations include: "For the same thing can be thought and exist." (Tarán); "Thinking and being are the same." (Vlastos).

⁹ Clement, *Miscellanies* V.2,15

¹⁰ Proclus, Commentary on *Parmenides* (Cousin 708)

Fragment 6.¹¹

- That which is for speaking and thinking must be; for it is possible to be,
 But nothing is not; I order you to consider these things.
 For <I restrain> you from that first route of inquiry,
 Yet since from that, which mortals knowing nothing
 5 Wander two headed; for helplessness in their
 Breasts guides wandering mind; and they are borne along nevertheless,
 Dumb and blind, amazed, uncritical tribes,
 By whom being and not being have been thought the same
 And not the same; and the path of all is backward turning

Fragment 7.¹²

- For never shall this prevail – that what is not *is*;
 but restrain thought from this path of inquiry
 and let not habit force you down this road of much experience,
 to wield unseeing eye and ringing ear
 5 and tongue, but judge with reason the much contested refutation
 spoken by me.

Fragment 8.¹³

- ... and a single story of a path still
 Remains – that it is; and set over this there are
 Very many signs, that what is, is ungenerated and indestructible,
 A whole both single limbed and unmoved and complete;
 5 Nor was it once nor will it be, since it is now entirely altogether,
 One, continuous; for what birth of it will you seek?
 In what way, whence, did it grow? Not from not being shall I allow
 You to say or think; for it is not utterable or thinkable
 That it is not. What need might incite it to grow
 10 Later or earlier, when beginning from nothing?
 Thus, either it must be completely or not [be at all].
 Nor will the strength of trust ever permit something out of being
 To come to be beside it; For this reason neither for coming to be
 Nor destruction does Justice allow slackening her shackles
 15 But [she] holds it [fast]; the judgement about these things is in the following:
 Is it or is it not? So it has been decided, as is necessary
 To let go the one as unthinkable, unnameable
 (for it is not a real path), but [to allow] the other so that it is and is true.

¹¹ Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 117) (lines 1-9); Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 78) (lines 8-9)

¹² Plato, *Sophist* 237a (lines 1-2); Aristotle, *Metaphysics* N2, 1089a2 (line 1); Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* VII. 114 (lines 3-6)

¹³ Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 144) (lines 1-52); Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 78) (lines 1-14); Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 38) (lines 50-61); Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 179) (lines 53-59).

- And how might *what is* be hereafter? And how might it come to be?
- 20 For if it came to be, it is not, nor if it is ever going to be.
 So generation is extinguished and destruction unheard of.
 Nor is it divisible, since it is entirely alike
 Nor somewhat more here, which would prevent it holding together
 Nor less, but it is all full of *what is*,
- 25 So it is all continuous; for *what is* cleaves to¹⁴ *what is*.
 Moreover, unmoving in limits of great chains
 It is without beginning and cessation, since generation and destruction
 Have been driven far away, and true trust drove them off.
 Remaining the same and in the same it lies by itself
- 30 And thus stands fast there; for mighty Necessity
 Holds [it] in the chains of a limit, which encloses it about.
 Wherefore it is not right for *what is* to be incomplete;
 For it is not in want; but if it were, being would lack everything
 The same thing is for thinking and for the sake of what the thought is;
- 35 For you will not find thinking without *what is*, on which it has been uttered;
 For nothing else is or will be
 Except *what is*, since Fate bound this
 To be whole and unmoved; thus it has been named all things
 As many as mortals set down, having trusted [them] to be true,
- 40 To come to be and to be destroyed, and to be and not to be,
 And to change place and to change bright colour.
 Moreover, since [there is] an uttermost limit, it is complete,
 From all directions resembling the bulk of a well-rounded sphere
 From the middle equivalent in every way; for neither larger
- 45 Nor smaller must it be in this place or that.
 For neither does *what is not* exist, which might stop it approaching
 To its like, nor does *what is* exist in the way that there might be
 More of it here and less there, since it is utterly inviolate;
 For from all directions it is equal to itself, nevertheless it meets with limits.¹⁵
- 50 Here I stop for you the trusted account and thought
 About truth; but from the following learn mortal beliefs,
 Listening to the deceitful order of my words;
 For they set down two forms for naming in their minds,
 Of which one must not be – wherein they are deceived –
- 55 But they distinguished opposites in body and placed signs
 Separate from one another, in one place ethereal fire of flame,
 Being gentle, very light, everywhere the same as itself,
 But not the same as the other; but yet that one by itself¹⁶
 On the other hand, [is] dark night, a dense and heavy body.
- 60 All this arrangement I proclaim to you as plausible;
 Thus no opinion of mortals shall ever overtake you.

¹⁴ The Greek term implies “stays close to its neighbour”.

¹⁵ Or “can exist within limits.”

¹⁶ i.e. the other: night.



THE WAY OF SEEMING

Fragment 9 (Gallop).¹⁷

But since all things have been named light and night,
And these [have been applied] according to their powers to these things and
to those,
All is full of light and obscure night together,
Of both equally, since for neither [is it the case that] nothing shares in them.

Fragment 10. (Gallop).¹⁸

And you shall know both the nature of the aether and all
The signs in the aether, the destructive works of the splendid sun's
Pure torch, and whence they came-to-be,
And you shall learn the wandering works of the round-eyed moon,
5 And its nature, and you shall also know the surrounding sky,
Whence it grew and how Necessity did guide and shackle it
To hold the limits of the stars.

Fragment 11 (Hutchinson).¹⁹

...how earth and sun and moon
And universal aether and Milky Way and outermost heaven
And the stars' hot power thrust forth
To come into being.

Fragment 12 (Hutchinson).²⁰

The narrower rings are filled with unmixed fire
And those next to them with night, in which is injected a portion of flame.
In the midst of them is the Goddess who governs all things.
For she governs the hateful birth and union of all things,
5 Sending female to unite with male and
Male conversely with female.

¹⁷ Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 180)

¹⁸ Clement, *Miscellanies* V. 14, 138

¹⁹ Simplicius, Commentary on *De Caelo* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* VII, 559)

²⁰ Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 39) (Lines 1-3); Simplicius, Commentary on *Physics* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 31) (Lines 2-6)

*Fragment 16 (Gallop).*²¹

For as each man has a union of the much-wandering limbs,
 So is mind present to men; for it is the same thing
 Which the constitution of the limbs thinks,
 Both in each and every man; for the full is thought.

*Fragment 19 (Hutchinson).*²²

Thus, according to opinion, these things came to be and now are,
 And, having matured, will come to an end after this in the future.
 On them men have bestowed a name to distinguish each one.

*Cornford's Fragment (Gallop).*²³

Such, changeless, is that for which as a whole the name is: 'to be'.



In addition to the fragments of Parmenides' poem, there also exist many *testimonia* (reports about him from the works of other thinkers and anthologists), which purport to give details of his life and beliefs. If you would like to read these, they are translated in Gallop's volume along with translations of the fragment contexts (i.e. the actual texts within which the fragments are found) and an excellent interpretative essay, which also deals with difficulties presented by the Greek text.

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 August 2003

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 5, 1009b21; Theophrastus, *On Sense* 1-4 (*Dox. Gr.* 499-500)

²² Simplicius, Commentary on *De Caelo* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* VII, 558)

²³ Plato, *Theaetetus* 180e; Simplicius, Commentary on *De Caelo* (*Comm. Arist. Gr.* IX, 29, 16-18, 143, 10)