
In his Foreword to this volume Douglas Hedley takes a question as his starting point: ‘Why should we read Plato’s Parmenides today?’ (p. VII). The question is ambiguous in view of the ‘eccentric’ nature of the dialogue, compared with ‘Plato’s other works in several ways’ (see S. Peterson, The Parmenides, in The Oxford Handbook of Plato, ed. G. Fine, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2008, p. 383). Moreover, it is far from being fully answered in the volume.

Hedley interprets the issue starting from the two ‘classical’ ways of reading Plato’s Parmenides: the logical approach and the metaphysical approach. The many ancient and modern thinkers who take the former approach are struck by the ‘puzzling and aporetic’ character of the dialogue (p. VII) and often regard it ‘as a set of logical exercises’ (p. VII) or gymnasia. Those who take the latter approach maintain that Plato’s Parmenides ‘is perhaps the pivotal document of Western metaphysics’ (p. VII). On this particular interpretation, all of Socrates’ attempts to dispute the arguments about the theory of forms are serious and represent a ‘challenge’ as well as a response to Parmenides’ questions on the aporiai of chorismos in defense of the participation model.

Hedley’s aim is to downplay the logical context in order to highlight the metaphysical significance of Plato’s arguments: he agrees with those scholars who argue that the problems treated in the dialogue deal with the central issues of Platonic metaphysics such as the one and the many, parts and wholes, the scope of ideas, the idea of participation, and the exact relation between material items and immaterial forms.’ (pp. VII-VIII) On this view, the possibility of regarding the Parmenides as a key text for the interpretation of Plato’s ontology derives from Plotinus who, as is well known, connected the hypotheseis developed in the dialogue with his metaphysical system of hypostaseis.

The reference to Plotinus’ ‘Parmenidean theology’ (p. XV) and, as a consequence, the link made between Plato and Plotinus need to be considered carefully, if only because they might lead to what many would regard as a ‘Plotinisation’ of Plato. In Plotinus’ complex and quite original model, the sole cause of every being, either intelligible or sensible, is the One. Distancing himself from Aristotle’s arguments, Plotinus rejects the identity between being and the One. Since the One is before every being, it can be said that everything which exists must be one, while the One itself does not need being for its existence. In the Plotinian model, all beings depend on the One for their existence. They are similar to it since they proceed from it while, at the same time, being distinct from it. Indeed, if they were not distinct from the One, they would be the same as it, and the many would...
not exist. On the basis of these arguments, Plotinus asserts that while the One exists separate from beings of all kinds, they depend on it. Using as a starting point an original exegesis of Plato’s dialogues, the *Parmenides* in particular, Plotinus maintains that there are three degrees of reality: 1. the One, which is one for itself, separate from everything else and inconceivable as many since its nature is not to possess any attribute other than simplicity; 2. the One-many, which Plotinus calls Intellect, in which it is possible to find a distinction as well as a kind of identity between the One and the many, on the grounds of an identification of parts and whole in things without matter. When a nature is without matter, it is possible to assert, not only that the whole has all its parts in itself, but also that each part has in itself the whole and the other parts. This is so because matter lacks the ability to generate parts distinguished from one another, according to spatial parameters; 3. the One-and-the-many (the Soul), that is the One separated, though not necessarily in spatial terms, i.e. according to material parameters, from the many. Can something similar to the Plotinian structure of reality be found in Plato? Not really, according to our way of thinking since we believe that Plato’s *Parmenides* treats the problem of the one and the many, i.e. the problem of participation, in a non-Plotinian way.

In his *Introductory Essay* (pp. 3-71) Arnold Hermann touches on the debate between the socalled ‘Developmentalists’ and ‘Unitarians’, without considering it in depth (pp. 3-6). In his presentation of the structure of the dialogue (pp. 7-16), he discusses a number of well-known themes, drawing on previous scholarly studies. What requires further analysis is Hermann’s view of the relationship between the intelligible and the sensible realms (pp. 17-27), which entails that the first part of the dialogue refers to the subject under discussion in the second part (see p. 17). Hermann, after arguing that ‘Plato […] was acutely aware of the possibility that there were unknown booby traps in his designs’ (p. 21), underlines that most of the difficulties listed by Plato in the first part of the dialogue arise from the fact that he developed a new model of the ‘abstract’ realm—which could not be interpreted according to the Pre-Socratic way of considering the link between principles and visible beings—with the result that it was ‘distorted’ (p. 22) and misunderstood. Hermann’s aim in claiming that ‘Plato did not operate in a vacuum’ (p. 26) is to establish that ‘some of the essential notions that ended up in Plato’s theory were explored not only by the Pre-Socratic thinkers […] but also by the Archaic Poets’ (pp. 26-27). In other words, Plato was forced to fight against a philosophical model which made no distinction between ‘abstract’ and sensible realities. This interesting suggestion has been developed by other scholars, but not all its implications are explored in the volume. In the footnotes the translator says of the ‘Socratic’ image of the day (see 131b), that ‘Plato aims to demonstrate that one cannot apply physical criteria to abstracts, just as before he showed that
abstract criteria cannot be applied to tangible things’ (p. 87, note 23). That may
well be true, but a more careful substantiation of these claims would have been
in order.

The section dealing with the ‘being of One’ first goes into the ‘technical’ terms
of Plato’s ontology (see pp. 29-39), but not as thoroughly as might have been
expected. Hermann tries to relate the One of the first hypothesis to Parmenides’
Being and its semata. This key interpretation is, in our opinion, rather ambiguous:
while Parmenides seems to conceive a Being provided with attributes, Plato pre-
sents the One as deprived of all attributes. More importantly, whereas Parmenides’
Being comprehends the being of the entire world, thus representing a positive
principle, Plato’s One is a paradigm, namely an example in a philosophical exer-
cise. Might it be here that we find that ‘Plotinisation’ of Plato, which was men-
tioned earlier? When the discussion about the relation between the One and Being
acquires a metaphysical and ontological status; when the possibility of conceiving
the One as metaphysically separate from Being is recognized as a ‘positive’ condition
for philosophical research, then, on condition that we admit that the Good beyond
Being is similar to a Parmenidean-Plotinian principle, it might become possible to
consider the One of Plato as similar to the Parmenidean way of treating Being. But
it would be better to read the hypothesis of the Parmenides, as Hermann himself does
(see also pp. 55 ff. and cross references), as an introductory discussion of the one-
and-many multiplicity of ideas, which are one and simple in themselves, but are
many, if sensible things are considered as participating in them.

An inquiry into the eight arguments of the Parmenides’ exercise can be found in
the volume as well as an attempt to re-examine some of the difficulties presented
by it, in order ‘to reconcile’ them ‘with its cousin dialogue, the Sophist.’ (p. 55).
Hermann suggests a ‘holistic approach’ (p. 56), according to which the first part
of the Parmenides can offer ‘the agenda for the philosopher’s inquiry, fueled by the
need to distinguish the Forms from the sensible things.’ (p. 61) Only when ‘the
agenda is set’, so it is claimed on p. 62, can the reader be introduced to the second
part of the dialogue.

We now come to some final remarks about the text, the translation and the
bibliography. The philological remarks, which are based on the Greek text of the
Harvard Loeb Edition (Plato IV), cannot be said to be very original. By contrast,
the translation is sound and mostly felicitous. Hermann and Chrysakopoulou’s
linguistic decisions give us a text that is vivid, modern and close to spoken Eng-
lish. Take pathe (129c 3), for example, which they render by ‘qualifications’ on the
ground that the literal translation ‘affection’ is obsolete, and on the proviso that
their choice is in no way ‘an attempt to evoke Aristotelian terminology.’ (p. 81,
note 13). Generally, the translators have aimed at renderings which, while being
both literal and consistent, also reflect modern English usage. Our sole reservation
is that too much non-technical language might impoverish Plato's semantics. The footnotes mostly explain either some technical Greek term (see, for instance, p. 77, note 3 and p. 79, note 11) or the translation chosen by the authors (see, for instance p. 81, note 13). Alas, they are not always detailed enough to assist the reader in understanding some of the more intricate passages of the dialogue. Hermann, as mentioned earlier, seems to defend a particular interpretation of methexis, according to which Plato needed to clarify the distinction between physical and non-physical realities. Unfortunately, when he gets to a section such as 131a ff., where the problem of the whole is treated, he does not discuss his preferred interpretation from every perspective. More particularly, he does not mention that the paradigm of the relationship between the physical and the non-physical was developed mainly by Plotinus, precisely in relation to the exegesis of the image of the day (see above), as some scholars have indeed noted (see Enneads VI 4-5). J.S. Lee in particular has argued that ‘Plotinus’ response to the objections of Parmenides […] is very much in the spirit of Socrates’ analogy of the day’ (‘Omnipresence and Eidetic Causation in Plotinus’, in The Structure of Being, A Neoplatonic Approach, ed. by R. Baine Harris, Albany 1982, p. 92). Similarly, the complex section devoted to the so called ‘generation of numbers’ is not commented on, although, in our opinion, an interpretation of it might have helped the reader to understand the role of the one and the many in relation to the nature of ideas. About 158c, which raises the question as to whether there are multitudes absolutely without oneness, Hermann refers to irrational numbers, ‘quantities or magnitudes not expressible by means of finite hence unitary fractions’ (p. 183, note 110) without reflecting upon the meaning of these notions in the dialogue.

There are no detailed references to other dialogues in the notes. This is a pity in so far as such references might have given support to Hermann’s thesis, as developed in the Introductory Essay, that the Parmenides plays a central role in the development of Plato’s ontology. Instead, Hermann prefers to emphasize, whenever possible, the parallels between Plato and Eleatism (see, for instance, p. 77, note 4; p. 81, note 12; p. 89, note 28; p. 91, note 33; p. 101, notes 46-47, and p. 121, note 70). The bibliography, detailed enough though it is, is not as thoroughly made use of in the footnotes as might have been expected.

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