Book Reviews


As the above title announces, this volume is the footprint—pun intended—of an International Symposium on Parmenides’ philosophy, hosted by the Centro de Estudios de Filosofía Antigua of the National University of San Martín (Buenos Aires) in fall 2007. The conference and its proceedings reflect the enduring prominence of Parmenides in the study of ancient philosophy and reveal the vast expanse of the still uncharted territory surrounding the subject.

The collection of papers reviewed below, celebrates the inexhaustible and refreshing array of approaches to Parmenides’ fragments as well as the many-faceted challenges his philosophy still holds for us. Undoubtedly some of the papers will attract great scholarly enthusiasm and scrutiny. Among these are the contributions of Jean Bollack†, Giovanni Casertano, Giovanni Cerri, Néstor-Luis Cordero, Patricia Curd, and Alexander P.D. Mourelatos, in the order of their appearance in the volume. Their innovation and originality are notable. However, the volume as a whole suffers from the chronic weaknesses of most publications of this kind: lack of coherent thematic organization, unevenness of argument and execution. In some instances, as will be noted below, these symptoms are rather pronounced. Nevertheless, considering the impact of the strongest contributions, I am confident that these shortcomings will not irreparably diminish the scholarly stature of the volume.

The collection falls into two parts with the cursus honorum of the participants in the symposium as the criterion for the division. The first part, as Cordero specifies in the Foreword (p. xi), contains the presentations of some of the elite in Parmenidean studies today, who have earned their invitation to the Symposium by publishing “at least [sic] one book” on the subject (p. ix). The second part contains the presentations of “eight young and high-level Argentine researchers” who, in the editor’s words, were given “the opportunity to present a short paper in front of the prestigious assembly of foreign authors” (p. xi). The emphatic explanation of this caste-oriented division may cause some unease in the mind of more open-minded colleagues, but, after reading the papers in question, I understood
Cordero’s intent better. The papers are charmingly enthusiastic and bode well for the future of the study of ancient philosophy in Argentina.

There are 24 contributions altogether: 16 in part one and 8 in part two. Within each part, the articles appear alphabetically, although in the Foreword (p. ix) Cordero points out that, at least, the first part is thematically divided between Parmenides’ notions of “the way of truth” and “the opinions (δόξα) of mortals.” Following my brief introduction of the individual papers below, the reader will be in a better position to understand why I find this explanation unconvincing and even confusing in the few cases where apparently related papers are not placed together.

The collection opens with Scott Austin, who examines the monolithic nature of Parmenides’ understanding of essence and existence and points to its future segmentation in later philosophers from Plotinus to Hegel. The heart of Austin’s argument about the fusion of the concepts of essence and existence in Parmenides is centered on the essential and denominative overlap between subject and predicate. According to him, the overlap is best illustrated in “the participialized version of the copula”—“the ἐόν” [sic]—which denotes both essence and existence (p. 2). Next he systematizes all possible relations between one and many in Parmenides’ text and traces their conceptual separation in later philosophers. He concludes by cautioning us against the excessive and often oversimplified distinction between presentation and representation in postmodern philosophy.

In the second paper, on the subject of Opinion (δόξα), Jean Bollack questions the validity of the traditional bi-partite division of the fragments of Parmenides’ poem. Instead he proposes a new method of understanding the Parmenidean concept of Being so as to inform his concept of Opinion. According to Bollack, this new interpretation enables us “to reread the introduction [to the poem] as an initiation from a man who ‘already knows’ better than anyone else, but lets himself be told everything by an honored authority” (p. 9). His argument for the tight correlation between the two parts of the poem is one of the most rewarding experiences this volume has to offer.

The next paper, by Giovanni Casertano, presents a portrait of Parmenides as “a scholar of nature” (p. 21) who, in his own way, contributed to the scientific debates and theories of the fifth century. With encyclopedic breadth, Casertano begins with the basic Greek conception of one reality which, depending on the viewpoint, is both total and unique, particular and multiple. For Parmenides, these two sides of reality take the form of two principles or elements: fire (πῦρ) and night (νύξ) in B8.56 and 59 or light (φῶς) and night (νύξ) in B9.1. After a critical evaluation of Aristotle’s systematically distorted interpretation of these principles, Casertano ‘uneartths’ in Parmenides a series of strictly scientific “intuitions” related to physics, cosmology, anthropology, biology and embryology (pp. 36ff). The paper abounds with leads for future research.
Casertano’s scientifically oriented paper is followed by Barbara Cassin’s philosophically based exploration of the world of Parmenides’ hermeneutics. Showing that translation is “the extreme degree of interpretation” (p. 59), she exposes the inability of any translation to present an exact match of its original. This loss of meaning, she concludes, is induced to a large extent by the unique ways in which every language equivocates and disambiguates the translated text both syntactically and semantically (p. 77). Cassin’s conclusion is inspiring if not reassuring.

“The Astronomical Section in Parmenides’ Poem” by Giovanni Cerri is the most stimulating and original piece in the collection. Based on a complete collection of testimonia and fragmenta, Cerri builds a convincing case for the existence of such a section in the poem which may have softened the contrariety in Parmenides’ understanding of Being per se and “the world of plurality” (p. 94).

The next paper, by exception thematically sequential to Cerri’s, is by Néstor-Luis Cordero who argues that Parmenidean “physics,” as he calls it, should not be considered to be part of the section on δόξα. Although the main characteristic of Parmenides’ stance on Opinion is that it is deceitful, a close reading of the text between B8.51 and B9—the two fragments in which δόξα appears—does not convey a notion of deceit or falsehood. The nine fragments filling the stretch between B8 and B9, in the Diels-Kranz order, do not mention δόξα at all and relate to what we call nowadays “physical” (p. 99). Cordero points at the anachronistic influence of Platonic dualism as one of the possible culprits for this “disinformation” (p. 103). A close textual analysis of the intermediate fragments places them conceptually closer to the section on the Way of Truth, although their exact place remains uncertain. By postponing the location of B7 (based on the misconstrued understanding of the word ἔλεγχος in it) towards the end of the sequence, Cordero proposes a new arrangement of fragments 1-19 in which the “physical fragments” 10-11 and 13-18 are proximate to the exposition of Being. Cordero’s thesis is groundbreaking and his conclusion bound to attract the scrutiny of many a later scholar.

Patricia Curd’s paper examines the puzzling joined appearance of “thought” and “body” in B16. Re-evaluating the controversy as to whether the fragment belongs to the Way of Truth or the Way of Opinion, she argues for the latter, but also ventures to suggest that Parmenides was using the concept of the body here in order to get to the question of immateriality. Conceding that the initial findings of her exploration may be inconclusive, she yet claims them to be encouraging.

Next Jean Frère questions the prevalent view that in βροτοί Parmenides implies the whole of humanity. His nuanced textual analysis discerns, in the different words Parmenides uses to denote man, three different categories of man. The criterion for this distinction is the relation of each category to Parmenides’ philosophy. Thus φῶς refers to the knowledgeable youth embarking on the philosophical quest of the poem, ἄνθρωποι denotes men in general, and βροτοί erroneous thinkers
such as Herodotus and Heraclitus. Frère's attention is predominantly occupied by the third category and lists Parmenides' objections against the mortals' false beliefs in the order of cosmos (B8.53-61) and in non-Being (B6), their incorrect use of the verbs "to come into being" and "to pass away" (B8.38-40), and their sense-perceptual illusions (B1.28-32). The thesis of the paper is intriguing but the evidence and analysis of specific texts from Heraclitus and Hesiod are insufficient to substantiate it. Personally I find more original the philosophical lesson found in Parmenides' juxtaposition between the singularity of the philosophically engaged φώς and the indeterminate plurality of ἄνθρωποι and βροτοὶ.

Arnold Hermann zooms in on Plato's "parricide" metaphor in the Sophist 241d to show that Plato “misses the mark” by accusing Parmenides of understanding “What-is-not” only existentially and not predicatively. His careful study of Parmenides’ use of alpha-privatives in relation to the concepts of Being and Non-Being demonstrates the Eleatic's awareness of the distinction between the two usages. The paper benefits from perfect chemistry between exhaustive philological observation and rigorous philosophical analysis.

With Alexander Mourelatos’ contribution on “Parmenides, Early Greek Astronomy, and Modern Scientific Realism,” the scientific theme returns in the collection. His thesis that Parmenides' astronomical fragments rightfully belong to the section on δόξα opposes Cordero's argument for disassociating the fragments from the treatment of Opinion. The paper also enriches Cerri’s examination of the nature of Parmenides’ “physics” by offering an exhaustive parallel with modern scientific propositions.

Massimo Pulpito revisits the topic of the bi-partite structure of the poem to propose the addition of a third one, dealing specifically with physical forms. His suggestion is based on the interpretation of μορφαί in B8.53 as referring to the two “forms” which the anonymous Goddess presents as Fire and Night and which denote all visible things in B9.1. Pulpito’s thesis is strengthened by its bold suggestion that Parmenides’s use of μορφή be considered the rightful predecessor of the emerging distinction between μορφή as physical phenomena and εἶδος as invisible eternal forms.

Chiara Robbiano examines the relation between the semantic and the didactic structure of Parmenides’ account of Being, in particular his fourth σῆμα postulating a unity between “What-is” and “What-understands.” In this unity, she finds evidence for Parmenides’ belief in the possibility of grasping the truth of existence.

Fernando Santoro’s paper offers a welcome segue to Robbiano’s topic by studying Parmenides’ list of σήματα in B8 as composing a list of the ontological markers or categories of Being in the tradition of the catalogue literature of Homer and Hesiod and the early physicists’ interest in enumerating the parameters of objects.
José Trindade Santos contributes to the topic of Parmenides' conception of “thought”—thus amplifying Curd's paper mentioned earlier—by revealing the innate connection between “thought” and “being.” This connection, Santos argues, suggests that Parmenides, while denying any valuable results to it, still admits the faculties of perception and the formation of “opinion” not as opposites to “thought” but as providing “contrasting results” (p. 270).

José Solana Dueso is interested in the relation between logic and ontology in Parmenides. His analysis of the use of ἀλήθεια (B2-B8.50) demonstrates, unsurprisingly perhaps for this type of investigation, the primacy of the logical nuances of the concept over its ontological meaning.

The last installment in the first part—an examination of “Parmenidean Dualisms” by Panagiotis Thanassas—continues Dueso's line of interest by broadening the study of pairs in the poem to include Being and Non-Being, Being and Thought, Light and Night. He finds the conspicuous predominance of such “pairing” paradoxical in regards to “the traditional perception of Parmenides as a rigorous ‘monist’ ” (p. 289). He concludes that the ontological monism found in the concept of Being is possible only on such antithetical presentation.

The second part of the collection, entitled generally Parmenides in the Tradition and Cognate Themes, presents a mixed bag of eight papers by up and coming Argentinian scholars. The first presentation, by Esteban Bieda, exposes Gorgias' inconsistent understanding of λόγος, in the Encomium to Helen, as distinct from reality but non-distinct from the person who utters it. María Elena Díaz analyzes Aristotle's criticism of Parmenides (Met. IV.5.1009b22-25) for considering thought as a physiological activity whose object is analogous to perception. Gabriel Livov returns to the topic of Plato's metaphor of parricide in the Sophist and extends it to Plato's criticism of Parmenides' "metaphysico-political unity" (p. 331) found in the Statesman and the Republic. Ezequiel Ludueña turns to the Symposium, to discern the ontological roots of Plato's use of ἀγάλματα ἀρετῆς (Smp. 22a4) and εἴδωλα ἀρετῆς (Smp. 212a4). Claudia Mársico traces the Eleatic influence on Euclid in order to dissipate recent skepticism on the matter. Fabián Mié attempts to connect Plato's theory of negation, as presented in the Sophist (257b-259d), with Parmenides' conception of Non-Being. In a hommage to Cordero, Lucas Soares offers a Borgesian reading of Cordero's treatment of Parmenides in his By Being, It Is (Parmenides Publishing 2004). The collection ends with a fruitful discussion, by Pilar Spangenberg, of Aristotle's criticism of Parmenides' denial of the multiplicity of Being as, in fact, a denial of the categories.

I was tempted, I confess, to organize the presentation of the papers in this review by the themes which surface in the volume. But striving for objectivity, I decided that such grouping would distort the original flavor of the volume. Let me, in conclusion, state my preference for thematic order and conceptual linkage by...
summarizing, without specific attribution, the themes that surface in the volume. The predominant topic turns out to be Parmenides’ scientific interest, followed by the thematic division of the poem, ontology, thought, and translation. The frustration occasioned in the present reviewer by the thematic meandering of the papers will inevitably also be felt by other readers. The papers are unequal in quality and execution; while some of them are stellar, offering book-length material in a nutshell, others do not outgrow the confinements of oral delivery, with no textual references, footnotes, or bibliography. If one enjoys hard detective work and patiently ploughs through all 24 contributions, one’s perseverance will be greatly rewarded by separating the wheat from the chaff.

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