The Principles of Parmenides’ Cosmogony

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The significance claimed by Parmenides for the cosmogony which forms the second half of his poem continues to be highly controversial. The interpretations offered by Owen and Chalmers, to name two recent criticisms, are so widely divergent that one might despair of arriving at any measure of agreement. But since the significance of The Way of Truth must itself remain in some doubt until the status of the cosmogony is determined, further examinations of the evidence are justified. The purpose of this article is to discuss the passage throughout the poem which are concerned with mortal beliefs, and to suggest an interpretation of the fundamental lines 50-61 of B8. In this way the function of the cosmogony may, I believe, become clearer.

Of the solutions to the problem suggested by ancient and modern critics, four main trends can be discerned:

1. The cosmogony is not Parmenides’ own but a systematized account of contemporary beliefs.
2. The cosmogony is an extension of The Way of Truth.
3. The cosmogony has relative validity as a second-best explanation of the world.
4. Parmenides claims no truth for the cosmogony.

The first view, canvassed by Zeller and modified by Burnet to a “sketch of contemporary Pythagorean cosmology”, finds few adherents among modern scholars. It has never been explained, on this interpretation, why the goddess should be made to expound in detail a critique of fallacious theories. Bowra has taught us to see the poem as demonstrably apocalyptic, and Parmenides needed no goddess’s patronage to set forth his contemporaries’ cosmological systems. Moreover, there is nothing in the later part of the poem which can be explicitly attributed to any attested philosopher. The doxographers in general, from Aristotle, assign the cosmogony to Parmenides himself.

1 In revising this article I am much indebted to Professor T. B. L. Webster, Mr D. J. Furley and Mr W. R. Chalmers for valuable criticism and stimulus.
3 All fragments of Parmenides are quoted from Diels-Kranz, Fragmenta der Vorsokratiker, (Berlin 1951).
4 J. Burnet, Early Greek Philosophy, (London 1939) p. 185.
The second and third views above have received much support. It is argued, following Aristotle,¹ that Parmenides cannot have countenanced absolute denial of phenomena. Such an explanation, however, fails entirely to account for the later activity of the Eleatics, and is quite at variance with the evidence of the poem. It belittles the achievement of Parmenides, and fails to take into account the evidence in favour of 4., even when this is equivocal. I shall argue that the cosmogony gives a totally false picture of reality; that it is the detailed exposition of the false way mentioned in The Way of Truth (B6. 4-9) and promised by the goddess in the proem (B1. 30-32); that it takes its starting point from the premise of that false way, the admission of Not-being alongside Being, not from the introduction of two opposites, Fire and Night; and finally, that its function is entirely ancillary to the Way of Truth, in the sense of offering the exemplar, par excellence, of all erroneous systems, as a criterion for future measurement.

MORTAL OPINIONS IN THE PROEM

At the outset of the Proem we encounter, in symbolical language, a broad general division between truth and error. The Light and Dark of this section need have no connexion with their namesakes in the cosmogony (B8. 56ff), but as Fränkel² shows, they represent enlightenment on the one hand, and benightedness on the other. Moreover, before the conclusion to the proem (B1. 27), the path to revelation on which Parmenides is sent is set in implicit contrast with another path travelled by ordinary men. The parallelism between divine insight and truth, and between human belief and error is made explicit in the next two lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{μεν } & \text{ Ἀληθείας εὐχυκλέος ἀτρεμές ἦτορ} \\
\text{οδὲ } & \text{ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθῆς.}
\end{align*}
\]

(B1. 29-30)

The next couplet is difficult owing to the uncertain state of the text³; but its general drift can be discerned:

¹ Cf. Aristotle, Met. A 5 986b 18; ἀναγνακτιζόμενος δ΄ ἀκολουθεῖν τοῖς φαινομένοις.
³ The stability of truth, ἀτρεμές ἦτορ, is in telling contrast with B6. 4-9 where the want of permanence and unchangeableness in mortal opinions is stressed. To emphasise that mortal opinions lack πίστις ἀληθῆς because they rely on sense-perception, Parmenides uses the very same term (B8. 28) as the justification for rejection of γένεσις καὶ διάλεξιν. cf. G. Jameson, "Well-rounded Truth and circular thought in Parmenides", Phronesis iii (1958), pp. 26-29.
⁴ For a full discussion of the textual difficulties of this passage v. Owen, op. cit. pp. 85-89.