Reiner Schürmann's Parmenides: Of Unbroken Non-Hegemonies

DREW A. HYLAND
Trinity College

Shortly before his death, Reiner Schürmann brought to completion his remarkable magnum opus, Des Hégémonies brisées, "Broken Hegemonies." This monumental book, almost 800 pages long in French, is bound to have an important impact on contemporary French philosophy, and after its forthcoming translation, on English-speaking Continental philosophy as well. The book as a whole addresses a number of the "hegemonies" in the history of philosophy, including the Greek hegemony of the "One," the Latin hegemony of "nature," and the modern hegemony of "consciousness." In addressing these, Schürmann presents remarkable interpretations of Parmenides, Plotinus, Eckhart, Kant (with Luther), and Heidegger. In this essay, I wish to introduce English-speaking readers to the richness of this work by examining only the first part of Schürmann's book, which addresses the thought of Parmenides. That section is the initial one of part I of this book, entitled "Au nom de l'un: Le fantasme hégémonique grec," and the section to which I will devote myself is entitled "Son institution: De l'un qui tient (Parménide)." Because the book is only recently published, as yet only in French, and because it is almost 800 pages long, I shall take rather more time than usual in setting out as accurately as I can the fundaments of Schürmann's interpretation of Parmenides before turning to some remarks on the philosophic issues raised by that interpretation. Accordingly, the structure of this article will be as
follows: after some introductory remarks, I shall, in part I, set out as best I can Schürmann's interpretation of Parmenides. I shall from time to time make comments on very specific textual issues as they arise, but I shall limit my comments to the specifics of those texts. Then, in part II, I shall raise and discuss some of the broader philosophic issues raised by Schürmann's thought-provoking interpretation.

I might best prepare the reader for the striking originality of Schürmann's interpretation of Parmenides by beginning with a word of clarification about my title. If we were to take as our standard some version of the orthodox interpretation of Parmenides (Parmenides as advocating a changeless, eternal, perfect, one Being and that alone, thereby denying all change, becoming, motion, or time; thus the father of the notion of a changeless, eternal Being of some sort), then indeed, Parmenides may have established a hegemony which has been, or perhaps still needs to be, broken. Or perhaps, Schürmann himself breaks that hegemony through his radical deconstruction of that orthodox interpretation. For in any case, the Parmenides that Schürmann reads is certainly no broken hegemony, because it is not a hegemony at all, at least not in the sense of establishing a single, exclusive, dominant and domineering law. As a final prefatory remark, let me indicate in advance how much I appreciate the originality of Schürmann's interpretation. Unorthodox interpretations of a thinker that leave that thinker far behind by straying again and again from the text or by focusing only on a few lines of the text, those that suit one's interpretation, are easy; unorthodox interpretations such as Schürmann's that are accomplished by the most faithful adherence to the text as a whole and its spirit are always the most thought-provoking and challenging.

Part I.

Schürmann begins by reminding us of the standard reading of Parmenides in order to undercut it in the most plausible way. Parmenides is the father of philosophy in that he gives to philosophy its one guiding question, the question of Being. But his position on the question of Being is the most extreme: Being is one, changeless, eternal, and all there is. Hence there can be no real change, becoming, or time, all of which must therefore be illusory, despite what our senses present us. Although such a view of completely implausible on the face of it, we have nonetheless been encouraged to accept it as Parmenides' view because that was what his reasoning supposedly led him to hold, despite the contrary evidence of his and our senses.

Schürmann begins his undercutting of this standard interpretation...