Foreword: The Legacy of the *Parmenides*

by Douglas Hedley

... frequently all things appear little... the universe itself—what but an immense heap of little things? ... My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know something great—something one & indivisible.1

—S. T. Coleridge

Why should we read Plato’s *Parmenides* today? It does not possess the dramatic charm of the *Symposium* or the *Phaedrus*, the somber power of the *Phaedo* or the *Apology*, or the evident relevance to contemporary concerns of the *Theaetetus* or the *Republic*. It is, furthermore, a deeply puzzling and aporetic dialogue—a reductio ad absurdum of Eleatic thought in which some of the most paradigmatic Platonic tenets are challenged and problems are left unresolved. The twentieth-century interpretations of Ryle, Owen, and Vlastos have reinforced an ancient view of the dialogue as a set of logical exercises in dialectic or a “dialectical business” (negotium dialecticum).2 In this essay, however, I wish to reflect upon that most vigorous strand in occidental culture that has maintained that the *Parmenides* of Plato is perhaps the pivotal document of Western metaphysics. The legacy of Parmenides of Elea as interpreted by Plato is of momentous significance for the history of thought, even if we accept the merits of the exercise theory as a reading of the text.

The questions of the *Parmenides*, which deal with the central issues of Platonic metaphysics such as the one and the many, parts and wholes,

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the scope of ideas, the idea of participation, and the exact relation between material items and immaterial forms, present a *locus classicus* of metaphysical speculation. The question of unity is one of the core metaphysical questions. Is the universe primarily a unity or a plurality? (It is significant that we use the language of a *universe*.)

Science operates with fundamental constants that remain identical throughout time and space (for example, the atomic mass of oxygen). We presuppose uniformity in order to explain the universe, a fact that is puzzling when we assume that the cosmos is a radical *plurality*. If the universe evolves and declines, is about 14 billion years old and is subject to entropy up to its future demise, it is puzzling that scientific laws should be thought of as eternal verities. Perhaps such ‘laws’ are in reality approximations of laws which help us to operate in the world but not grasp its real nature. It is striking that David Hume’s radical empiricism and agnosticism regarding our capacity to perceive real connections in nature led to his profound skepticism on such basic issues as causation or induction. Perhaps the moral of Hume’s untenable skepticism is that without presupposing an underlying metaphysical *unity* in the universe, we have no noncircular empirical reasons to expect uniformity or law-like structures. The relation of the One and the Many is lying behind some of the most fundamental questions concerning the mind and the world and the structure of the physical world.

Astrophysicists since the sixties of the last century have reflected upon the vast improbability of the emergence of intelligent life and the ‘fine tuning’ of the universe for life. The astronomer Fred Hoyle strikingly asserted that the statistical chance of the emergence of life was less than the fluke construction of a Boeing 747 by a hurricane passing through a scrap-yard! He was referring to the very narrow parameters within which life can emerge. The initial conditions required to produce carbon in order for life to be possible; the remarkable coincidence of factors that permitted life to evolve seems *prima facie* highly improbable. Why has the universe turned out to be so harmonious and opportune for life? The British Astronomer Royal, Sir Martin Rees invokes the idea of a ‘multiverse,’ an infinite number of possible universes, as an explanation of why this world has exactly the highly improbable features conducive to life, to avoid invoking the idea of a unifying transcendent creator. But many thinkers have been impressed by the idea of a supreme source of unity and harmony—the idea expressed beautifully by Dante as the unifying force of the Divine Intellect unfolding its goodness “multiplied through the stars, itself wheeling on its own unity”:
Consider evolutionary biology. Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould uses Darwin against Plato in insisting upon “unpredictability and contingency.” He observes, “in Plato’s world, variation is accidental, while essences record a higher reality; in Darwin’s reversal, we value variation as a defining (and concrete earthly) reality, while averages (our closest operational approach to ‘essences’) become mental abstractions.” Across the Atlantic, Simon Conway Morris, professor of evolutionary paleobiology at Cambridge, argues that it is a convergence of different paths toward intelligence, rather than contingency, that distinguishes the evolutionary evidence. Conway Morris and Gould are working in the same domain of paleobiology, yet Conway Morris emphasizes the simplicity of the basic materials and laws as well as the elegance and “sensitivity” of the complex processes that generate sentient life. He sees inevitability in this evolutionary process. Atheism, in his view, commits us to completely improbable coincidences that conflict with “life’s almost eerie ability to navigate to the correct solution, repeatedly.” The disagreement between these distinguished paleobiologists is a debate about data and theology. But it is also a debate about the One and the Many.

This debate concerning the One and the Many is rooted in Eleatic thought, predating both Plato and Aristotle. It is a part of the tradition of those Presocratic philosophers who present theology in the Greek sense as an attempt to explain reality in terms of a supreme principle. Parmenides and Heraclitus were founding figures of European metaphysics, but they were also demythologizers of the brute plurality of warring and scheming deities of Greek mythology and popular piety. The poem of Parmenides presents an opposition between truth and appearance. Language and the senses are presented as inadequate to obtain knowledge of true Being. This Eleatic monism presents Being in opposition to Becoming. Motion, time, and plurality are contrasted with the reality of Unitary being. Plato was clearly deeply impressed by Parmenides, and in Theaetetus

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183 we have a reference to Parmenides as “venerable and awesome.” In contemporary thought, Richard Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature criticizes the Parmenidean-Platonic ideal of moving beyond appearances to the intrinsic reality of the world of Being. In the wake of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Rorty sees the contrast between the realm of appearances and true being as a baneful legacy. The transcendental and foundational drive of Platonism savaged by Nietzsche is diagnosed by Heidegger as the source of mankind’s forgetfulness of Being and the insatiable and destructive obsession with technological mastery. Being was reified as a result of Plato’s ocular image of knowledge as the perception of form (eidos). This fateful construal of knowledge as vision ushered in the metaphysics of the Christian era that identified the supreme object of Being as God: esse ipsum.

The Eleatic Legacy within Platonism

The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the transmission of Greek manuscripts to Western libraries, both preceding and in the wake of the Turkish conquest, triggered a rediscovery of Plato in Greek. Marsilio Ficino recognized the Platonic core of much of the scholastic inheritance, and views St. Thomas as an ally for, not as an enemy to, his own Platonic cause. Indeed, the tradition of Neoplatonism remained continuous, and the influence of the Platonic Parmenides was greatest in the early medieval period from John Scot Eriugena (810–877 AD) to Meister Eckhart (1260–1327 AD) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464 AD). Plato’s Parmenides had an enormous influence through the (supposed) pupil of St. Paul, Denys the Areopagite, until it became directly known through the medieval translation of Proclus’ commentary on Plato’s dialogue by William of Moerbeke. Raymond Klibansky, for example, discovered in Bernkastel-Kues Nicholas of Cusa’s copy of Proclus’ commentary on Plato’s Parmenides, which included the following remark by the Cardinal:

How important is the notion of the transformation of the rational approach into a notion which recognizes the limits of reason and the coincidences of contraries in the One, the supreme principle.6

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6 Wayne Hankey, One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 219.