

Parmenides and the Objects of Inquiry

(a) *Parmenides' journey*

Parmenides of Elea marks a turning-point in the history of philosophy: his investigations, supported and supplemented by those of his two followers, seemed to reveal deep logical flaws in the very foundations of earlier thought. Science, it appeared, was marred by subtle but profound contradictions; and the great enterprise undertaken by the Milesians, by Xenophanes and by Heraclitus, lacked all pith and moment. The age of innocence was ended, and when science was taken up again by the fifth-century philosophers, their first and most arduous task was to defend their discipline against the arguments of Elea. If their defence was often frail and unconvincing, and if it was Plato who first fully appreciated the strength and complexity of Parmenides' position, it remains true that Parmenides' influence on later Presocratic thought was all-pervasive. Historically, Parmenides is a giant figure; what is more, he introduced into Presocratic thought a number of issues belonging to the very heart of philosophy.

Parmenides' thoughts were divulged in a single hexameter poem (Diogenes Laertius, I.16 = 28 A 13) which survived intact to the time of Simplicius (A 21). Observing that copies of the poem were scarce, Simplicius transcribed extensive extracts; and thanks to his efforts we possess some 150 lines of the work, including two substantial passages. It is hard to excuse Parmenides' choice of verse as a medium for his philosophy. The exigencies of metre and poetical style regularly produce an almost impenetrable obscurity; and the difficulty of understanding his thought is not lightened by any literary joy: the case presents no adjunct to the Muse's diadem.¹

The poem began with a long allegorical prologue, the interpretation of which is for the most part of little philosophical importance. Its last four lines, however, call for comment; for they present one of the strangest features of Parmenides' work. The prologue is a speech to the poet from the goddess who leads him on his intellectual journey and describes his philosophy to him and to us. At the end of her speech she promises thus:

And you must ascertain everything—
both the unmoving heart of well-rounded truth,
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust (*pistis*).
But nevertheless you will learn these too (145: B 1.28–31).²

The words are echoed near the end of the long central fragment:

Here I stop the trustworthy (*pistos*) account and the thought
about truth; henceforth learn mortal opinions,
listening to the deceitful arrangement of my words (146: B 8.50–2).

The goddess has two stories to tell: the truth, and mortal opinions. And Parmenides' poem, after its exordium, falls into two corresponding parts, the first recounting the Way of Truth, and the second the Way of Opinion.

The Way of Opinion is paved with falsity: 'there is no true trust' along it, and its description is 'deceitful'. It could hardly be stated more plainly that the Way of Opinion is a Way of Falsity. Many scholars have found themselves incapable of believing that one half of Parmenides' work should have been devoted to the propagation of untruths; and they have accordingly advanced the palliative thesis that the Way of Opinion is a way of plausibility or verisimilitude or probability, and not exactly a way of falsehood. That conciliatory effort has origins in antiquity; and the dispute between its proponents and those sterner scholars who see no Truth in Opinion, is ancient (Plutarch, A 34; cf. Simplicius, A 34; *in Phys* 38.24–8). Yet Parmenides' own words decide the contest: he says unequivocally that the Way of Opinion is a path of falsehood and deceit; he says nothing of any probabilities lying on the road; and we are bound to take him at his word. Nor, after all, is it unusual for a philosopher to describe, at length, views with which he vehemently disagrees.

Moreover, the goddess tells us why she troubles to chart the Way of Opinion:

I tell you all this appropriate arrangement
in order that no thought of mortals may ever drive past you

The metaphor of 'driving past (*parelaunein*)' is not transparent. Some gloss it by 'outstrip', or the like, and explain that knowledge of the Way of Opinion will enable Parmenides to hold his own in argument with any old-fashioned cosmologists he may meet. A better gloss, perhaps, is 'get the better of' or 'convince': the goddess, by describing the Way of Opinion and thereby indicating its flaws, will ensure that Parmenides does not succumb to its meretricious temptations. However that may be, the Way of Opinion does not express Parmenides' own convictions. Only a few fragments of that Way survive: it seems to have paraded a full scale account of natural philosophy in the Ionian tradition; but the details are controversial and for the most part unexciting.³ In a later chapter I shall discuss one fragment from the Way of Opinion (below, p. 486); here I ignore that primrose path and struggle instead up the steep and rugged road of well-rounded Truth.

(b) *At the crossroads*

Before leading him up the Way of Truth, the goddess instructs Parmenides about the nature of the different ways that face the neophyte philosopher; and she provides him with a proof that the Way of Truth is alone passable. He not only should follow that Way—he must follow it; for no other way leads anywhere. The goddess's exposition and argument are difficult. I shall begin by setting out the relevant texts: if my English translation is in places barely intelligible, that is partly because Parmenides' Greek is desperately hard to understand.

Come then, I will tell you (and you must spread the story when
you have heard it)
what are the only roads of inquiry for thinking of:
one, both that it is and that it is not for not being,
is the path of Persuasion (for Truth accompanies it);
the other, both that it is not and that it is necessary for it
not to be 5

—*that*, I tell you, is a track beyond all tidings.
For neither would you recognize that which is not (for it is not
accomplishable),
nor mention it. (148: B 2).

The same thing is both for thinking of and for being (149: B 3).⁴

What is for saying and for thinking of must be;⁵ for it is for being,
 but nothing is not: those things I bid you hold in mind;
 for from this first road of inquiry I restrain you.
 And then from that one, along which mortals, knowing nothing,
 wander, two-headed; for helplessness in their
 breasts directs a wandering mind; and they are carried about
 deaf alike and blind, gawping, creatures of no judgment,
 by whom both to be and not be are thought the same
 and not the same; and the path of all is backward turning (150: B
 6).

For never will this be proved, that things that are not are.
 But do you restrain your thought from this road of inquiry (151: B
 7. 1–2).

(Note that my translations of 149 and 150.1 are not universally accepted. 150. 8–9 is also controversial: see below, p. 168.)

Let us begin with 148: what are 'the only roads of inquiry'? and what does the goddess mean when she says that they 'are for thinking of'?

The phrase 'are . . . for thinking of' (line 2) renders '*esti noêsai*'. The verb '*noein*', of which '*noêsai*' is the aorist infinitive, plays a central role in Parmenides' subsequent argument, where it is standardly translated as 'think of' or 'conceive'. Some scholars, however, prefer the very different translation 'know', and thereby change the whole character of Parmenidean thought.⁶ I think that the standard translation makes better sense of Parmenides' argument; and I doubt if the heterodox translation is linguistically correct. It is true that in certain celebrated Platonic and Aristotelian passages, the noun '*nous*' is used to denote the highest of cognitive faculties; and there are passages in those philosophers, and in earlier writers, where 'intuit', 'grasp', or even 'know' is a plausible translation of '*noein*'. But against those occurrences (which are fairly uncommon and usually highflown) we can set a host of passages where '*noein*' simply means 'think (of)': '*noein*' is the ordinary Greek verb for 'think (of)', and 'think (of)' is usually its proper English equivalent. Moreover, the linguistic context in which the verb occurs in Parmenides favours (indeed, to my mind requires) the translation 'think (of)'. For '*noein*' is thrice conjoined with a verb of saying: with '*legein*' at 150.1; and with '*phasthai*' twice in B 8.8 (cf. '*anônumon*' at B 8.17). '*Legein*' and '*phasthai*' mean 'say', not 'say truly' or 'say successfully' (the Greek for which is '*alêtheuein*'); and the contexts of

important logical feature: they both stand in the same relation to 'being'. In this respect it is 'think that *P*' and 'think of *X*', rather than 'know that *P*' and 'know *X*', which parallel 'say that *P*' and 'mention *X*'; and that fact, I think, establishes the traditional translation of '*noein*'.

So much for the meaning of '*noêsai*'. All, however, is not yet plain; for the syntax of '*esti noêsai*' is disputed. Phrases of the form '*esti* + infinitive' recur later in the poem, and their presence is indicated in my translation by phrases of the rebarbative form 'is (are) for ϕ ing'. The usage, which is not uncommon in Greek, has connexions with the 'potential' use of '*esti*'. (*Esti* with infinitive often means 'it is possible to . . .'. In that case '*esti*' is 'impersonal', whereas in our locution it always has a subject, explicit or implicit.) Indeed, it seems to me reasonable to gloss '*a* is for ϕ ing' either by '*a* can ϕ ' or by '*a* can be ϕ ed'—the context will determine whether active or passive is appropriate. Thus in 148.2 'are for thinking of' means 'can be thought of'.⁷ Observe that the gloss differs from its original in one important feature. The grammatical form of the phrase '*a* is for ϕ ing' may seduce us into making a fallacious deduction: from '*a* is for ϕ ing' it is easy to infer '*a* is'. The grammatical form of the gloss does not provide the same temptation. The point may assume significance later.

Then what roads of enquiry can be thought of? 148 mentions two roads: Road (A) is described in line 3, and proved by line 4 to be the Way of Truth; Road (B) is the 'track beyond all tidings', delineated in line 5. 150. 3–4 also mentions two roads: Road (C), described in lines 4–9, is that 'along which mortals . . . wander', and it is therefore the Way of Opinion. The 'first road' of line 3 also has pitfalls (for the goddess 'restrains' Parmenides from it); and it cannot therefore be identical with Road (A), the Way of Truth. Now lines 1–2 contain the end of an argument concerned with this 'first road'; and, as I shall show, it is plausible to find the beginning of the argument in 148. 7–8, which starts to recount the horrors of the 'track beyond all tidings'. If that is so, then the 'first road' of 150 is identical with Road (B); and in consequence Road (B), the 'track beyond all tidings', is not the Way of Opinion.

148 and 150 show Parmenides at a crossroads, faced by three possible paths of inquiry: (A) the Way of Truth; (B) the 'track beyond all tidings' and (C) the Way of Opinion.⁸ The first duty of the goddess is to characterize those three roads in a logically perspicuous fashion. Road (A) maintains 'both that it is (*esti*) and that it is not for not being' (148. 3);⁹ Road (B) maintains 'both that it is not and that it is necessary for it not to be' (148. 5). Road (C) is not