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Plato's Parmenides and its Relationship to Parmenides' "The Way of Truth"

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Abstract

In this paper we first briefly discuss the five premises in "The Way of Truth," the philosopher Parmenides' poem. Parmenides concludes that there is only a One, Unique Sphere of Being. Since this Being does not correspond to the phenomena which we experience, Parmenides brushes off our experiences as being mere illusion. We then present Plato's theory of forms, which is an attempt to integrate the theory of Being with the phenomena which we experience. After discussing the difficulties with the Platonic theory of forms, we present a detailed analysis of how the second part of the Parmenides dialogue is answering all these difficulties.

Plato's Parmenides and its Relationship to Parmenides' "The Way of Truth"

1. Introduction

Hegel called Plato's Parmenides "that most famous masterpiece of Platonic dialectic"¹. P.H. Frye, however, feels that "...the Parmenides is one of the funniest things in philosophy..."². Most readers of the Parmenides will probably agree with Hegel, and conclude that Frye has, as Cornford puts it, "... an enviable sense of humor"³. The Parmenides is not a joke; it is one of the greatest metaphysical works of ancient Greece.

Before delving into the metaphysics of the Parmenides, which is contained in the second part of the dialogue, there are two important points to keep in mind. One, Plato's philosophical doctrine is built on the philosophy of Parmenides, the Greek philosopher who preceded him. This is important because Parmenides, whose philosophy Plato basically accepts, is the one who conducts the second part of the dialogue. Two, there are problems in Plato's own philosophy. This is relevant because the first part of the dialogue brings up the various problems in Plato's philosophy and implies that the second part of the dialogue answers them.

¹Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Part 2 Plato and the Platonists, Chapter III First Period, Third Division Plato and Aristotle, Section A Plato, Part 1 Dialectic, subpart a, translated by E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, published by K. Paul Trench, Trübner in 1894.

²Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1939, p.114, footnote 1.

³*Ibid.*, p.114

Section 2 presents a very brief discussion of the five premises in “The Way of Truth,” the philosopher Parmenides’ poem, and his conclusion about Being. Section 3 is a short discussion of Plato’s forms, which is Plato’s shift away from Parmenides’ philosophy. Section 4 presents the difficulties with the Platonic theory of forms as discussed in the first part of the Plato’s Parmenides. The final section presents a detailed analysis of how the second part of the Parmenides dialogue provides an answer to all the difficulties with the theory of forms.

2. Parmenides’ “The Way of Truth”

In his poem, “The Way of Truth,” the philosopher Parmenides has five premises:

- (1) That which is, is, and cannot not-be.
- (2) That which is not, is not, and cannot be.
- (3) That which is, can be known and uttered.
- (4) That which is not, cannot be known nor uttered.
- (5) That which is, is one, and cannot be many.

From these premises Parmenides deduces that there is only a One, Unique Sphere of Being. There are two striking aspects of Parmenides’ philosophy. One, his sharp distinction between Being and non-Being. Two, his lack of explanation for the phenomena which we experience, which he brushes off as being mere illusion.

3. Plato’s Shift Away from Parmenides’ Philosophy

Plato, in the first part of the dialogue, tries to avoid calling the sense world a mere illusion. He sets up a One, or Good, which is very much like Parmenides’ sphere of Being. From this One, or Good, we get Forms, which are still Being. At the lowest level we have the world of sense experience, which partakes of the Forms and is called the world of Becoming. This theory sets up a category, Becoming, which is neither Being nor non-Being. Thus, Plato rejects Parmenides fifth premise, that what is, must be one. This allows Plato to avoid calling our sense world mere illusion.

4. Difficulties with the Platonic Theory of Forms

In the first part of the dialogue Parmenides poses three major problems to the Platonic Theory of Forms.

The first objection is that each Form, which is supposed to be a One rather than a Many, is attributed to many objects. For instance, if we have many beautiful things, each thing contains either the whole Form Beauty or a part of the Form Beauty. In the former case, we are saying that there is more than one Form Beauty and in the latter case, we find that each Form is not really One, but is rather a sum of parts.

Parmenides’ second objection is that the way in which things partake or participate in Forms is left undefined.

The final major objection Parmenides poses is that because there is such a radical dichotomy between the World of Being and the World of Becoming, it is very logical to conclude that we, creatures of the world of Becoming, can’t know the World of Being, and God, a creature of the World of Being, can’t know the World of Becoming.

Parmenides then suggests that one can answer these questions only after being trained in dialectic. This ends the first part of the dialogue.

5. Solutions to the Three Problems

At first blush, the second part of the dialogue seems to have no relationship the first part. However, upon closer analysis we find hints to the solutions to all the three problems posed in the first part of the dialogue. By its universality, the second part of the dialogue bridges the gap between the World of Being and the World of Becoming. By intimating that there are certain concepts which are basic to philosophy and thus can’t be defined, the eight hypotheses in the second part of the dialogue allow us to leave participation undefined. Finally, the conclusions which one gets from the hypotheses allow a very easy proof that a Form is, in reality, a sum of parts. These solutions will become clearer after we analyze the whole dialogue.

All eight hypotheses in the second part of the *Parmenides* deal with a One. It is of great import to stress that Plato constantly refers to **a** One rather than **the** One. This is because Plato is speaking about the principle of Unity, rather than about One Form or One object. The conclusions he reaches can thus be applied to **any** unit.

Another principle one should be aware of in trying to understand the hypotheses, is that the three pairs of contraries that Plato always mentions, namely, 1) same, other, 2) like, unlike, 3) equal, unequal, are just representatives of **all** possible qualities and their contraries⁴.

In Hypothesis I, Plato starts out with a One that is to be considered solely qua One. To clothe this One with any attribute would be to make it not-One. So not even existence can be predicated of this One. Hence, the Hypothesis concludes that this One is not even knowable.

The outcome of this hypothesis is that if Plato's Form of Unity and *Parmenides'* One were both pure One, they could neither have Being nor be known. This, of course, is a conclusion that neither Plato nor *Parmenides* can accept.

Lynch carries Plato's point further and goes on to say that "Nothing that is purely simple or single is the object of the human mind."⁵ This point is very well taken, and we shall later see that it is one of the basic points in Hypothesis II.

We saw in Hypothesis I that the One can't even have Being. However, we want a One which **is** One, so, in Hypothesis II Plato sets up a One that has Being.

Now, this One is made up of Unity + Being, so, it is made up of parts. The One is also One. So, we see that the One is **both one** and **many**.

We just said that One=One + Being and that every One we are talking about has Being. This means that the One on the right-hand side of the equation is also equal to One + Being. The One (on the left-hand side) will thus have three Parts: One= (One + Being) + Being. Furthermore, this division can be continued ad infinitum. So, we see that the One has an unlimited number of Parts. Also, we see that the idea of an unlimited multitude follows rationally from a One Being.

At this point it is relevant to point out that a Form, which would be a One Being, would have an unlimited number of parts that could be Parceled out to an unlimited number of objects.

Plato, having shown that the One is made up of parts, goes on to say that the One must be limited, since its limit is the sum of its parts.

From the fact that the One is limited, Plato concludes six things.

- (1) The One has a beginning, a middle and an end.
- (2) The One is straight or round or a mixture of both.
- (3) The One is in itself.
- (4) The One is in another.
- (5) The One is at rest.
- (6) The One is in motion.

Cornford interprets these six things as physical phenomena. In his opinion Plato is not saying that the One Being **must** be these things. Plato is merely saying that it is not irrational for the One Being to be these six things. He feels that Plato is showing how one can get to physical solids from a One Being.

The most obvious difficulty with Cornford's interpretation is that he is arbitrarily saying that for six proofs Plato means "can be", when Plato says, "must be".

⁴William F. Lynch, S.J., *An Approach to the Metaphysics of Plato through the Parmenides*, Georgetown University Press, 1959, p.62.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.88.

A close analysis of the arguments reveals an alternate explanation to that of Cornford.

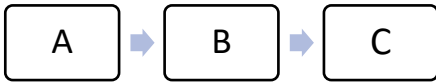
(1) The One has a beginning, a middle and an end.

This need not refer to a physical beginning, end and middle but can rather be, as Brumbaugh says⁶, an ordered set of parts.

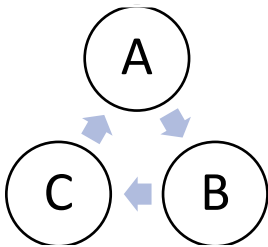
(2)The one is straight or round or a mixture of both.

This refers to a series of things that are dependent on one another.

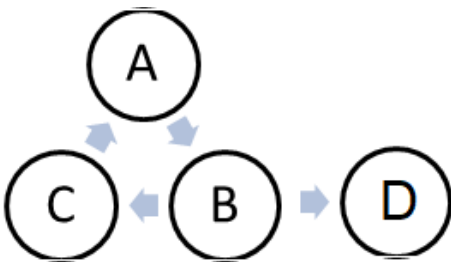
For instance, straight can refer to the following relationship:



Round can refer to the following:



And a mixture of both is:



Cornford, however, does not deal with the problem of how a round physical object, i.e., a sphere, can have a beginning and an end (things which we established as a prerequisite for giving the One a shape.)

(3)The One is in itself.

On this everyone agrees that the One as the sum of its parts is subsumed under the One as a whole.

(4)The One is in another.

The One as a whole can't be in the One as sum of its parts and therefore it must be in another. Both Cornford⁷ and Brumbaugh⁸ introduce the axiom that whatever is nowhere, is nothing, and say that Plato held this as an unrestricted a priori principle.

This, however, is problematic. If Plato held this as an unrestricted principle, in Hypothesis I when he proved that the One was nowhere, he should have said, "and therefore the One is Nothing," and ended the argument right there. But we see that Plato did not apply that principle there. Therefore, it seems that Plato did not subscribe to that axiom at all. The only reason we use that principle in our case is because the One we are discussing is a limited thing. A limited thing must be contained in itself +what is outside its limit. Thus the One must have been contained by the set of itself, plus what is outside itself. If the One did not exist in that set, it meant that the One was nothing. It is important to stress, that Plato allowed for a thing to be nowhere, as long as it was unlimited, and did not utilize this as an axiom that everything must be somewhere, but rather as a conclusion from the logical analysis of a limited thing.

(5)The One is at rest.

⁶Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Plato on the One*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1961, p.104.

⁷Cornford, *op. cit.*, p.148.

⁸Brumbaugh, *op. cit.*, p.107.

Plato says that, “It (the One Being) is at rest, since it is in itself.” According to Cornford, who takes this to mean “it can be at rest, since is in itself,” the statement is at best obscure. The fact that the One is in itself, has no relationship to whether the One can be at rest. If the One is in another it can still be at rest.

(6)The One is in motion.

Plato says, “What is always in another...must be in motion.” Cornford takes this to mean, “can be in motion.” The question is, why does Plato have to say, that what is in another can be in motion? Something in itself can also be in motion by rotating.

It seems plausible that Plato is not just saying that one can attribute motion and rest to physical objects. What is rest? Rest means that the place of an object is defined. Thus, the One in itself is in the One, a well-defined place, and must therefore be at rest. What is motion? Motion means that the place of an object is undefined. The One is in in another, but that another is undefined, since all we can say about it, is that it is not the One. Therefore, if the One is in another, it must be in motion by definition.

The remainder of Hypothesis II consists of ascribing other pairs of contraries to the One. This feature, the ascribing of the contrary of every characteristic ascribed to the One, is one of the most important features of the hypotheses. We touched on this before when we said that something which is purely single can't be comprehended by man. This truth is obvious to anyone who tries to visualize a world where, for instance, there is no motion. Would such a world recognize that they are living in a world of perpetual rest? Or visualize a world where everything is one color. Would the philosophers of that world have a Form of Color?

But Plato goes further than this by showing that the Forms themselves are intertwined. Could there be a Form Cold without a Form Hot? This is similar to the way Hypothesis I showed that a One without a Many doesn't even have Being.

The hypotheses bring out clearly that the complexity of the relationships between the Forms. This, the apex of Platonic metaphysics, is an amazing sublimation of Parmenides' poem “The Way of Truth.”

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