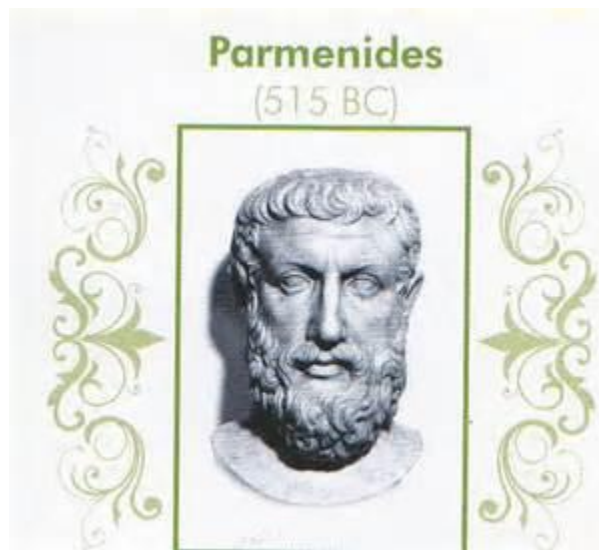


Parmenides Search for Truth

Diane Kerr



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*The goddess receives me with kind words;
Taking my right hand in hers, she addresses me:
“Youth, attended as you are by immortal ones,
Brought here by the mares to my dwelling place,
Welcome! No evil destiny has drawn you here,
So very far from human habitation.*

Immediately we understand that this is a journey. The youth Parmenides has travelled far and now he is welcomed by the goddess—the feminine principle, Savitri who appears throughout history as a guide to higher realms of being. In the second and third line:

*“As far as my desire can reach along the celebrated road,
That bears the one who knows throughout the broad world.”*

We see that it is the desire for truth that propels his journey and it is this same desire or calling that burns in the heart of every true seeker whether spiritual, scientific or philosophical.

In a world of fragmented ideas, spirituality and science have tragically been divorced from one another for a long time. Although truth is never stationary or finite, Parmenides discovers truths that are not only revolutionary for his time but contain threads of both spiritual inspiration and rational reasoning. These early philosophers, Heraclitus and Parmenides descended from a world of myth, of Gods and Goddesses whose precocious interactions explained the mysteries of life. Many of the great philosopher -scientists of antiquity were often theologians and spiritualists of one kind or another. Although the teachings of Parmenides greatly influenced both his immediate successors and subsequent thinkers, it is hard to know how much influence religion actually had on his thinking. To reach beyond mythological

explanations or other societal influences laid some of the foundation for the thinkers that followed such as Plato and Aristotle; however, by simply looking at Parmenides's question, what is being? it is evident that this question and therefore his answers, can be interpreted either mystically, metaphysically or a combination of both. While not ignoring the metaphysical aspect of his philosophy, this paper will use a mystical lens to understand his Proem.

The Search

In the compilation, *As Far As Longing Can Reach*, Ulrich Mohrhoff states "The journey Parmenides describes is the only real journey we can make—the journey to the divine with the help of the divine." In the second line of the first verse in the proem, Parmenides uses the word desire. It is this longing to know what exists beyond appearances that is the very same passionate desire that lies at the heart of every mystical search. John Palmer "Parmenides" in the following quotation describes Parmenides's proem as a "mystical journey to the halls of night."

Parmenides' proem is no epistemological allegory of enlightenment but a topographically specific description of a mystical journey to the halls of Night. In Hesiod, the "horrible dwelling of dark Night" (*Th.* 744) is where the goddesses Night and Day alternately reside as the other traverses the sky above the Earth. Both Parmenides' and Hesiod's conception of this place have their precedent in the Babylonian mythology of the sun god's abode. This abode also traditionally served as a place of judgment, and this fact tends to confirm that when Parmenides' goddess tells him that no ill fate has sent him ahead to this place, she is indicating that he has miraculously reached the place to which travel the souls of the dead.¹

He goes on to describe how Parmenides "casts himself in the role of an initiate into the kind of mysteries that were during his day part of the religious milieu of Magna Gracia." In this light it would seem that Parmenides creates a bridge between mythological explanations and rational thought. The ambiance of the proem is laden with mystical symbology; the goddess, the

¹ Palmer, John, "Parmenides", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/parmenides/>>

journey, the helpers along the way—all reflect the milieu he comes from historically while the actual heart or content of what he proposes is also metaphysical and based on his logic: At least that is what his stance is as he eloquently disavows the duality of ordinary, mortal thought.

“Consider carefully and bar your thought from the ordinary way that mortals take: of two minds, knowing nothing, wandering aimlessly in thought, swept along, as deaf as blind, dazed, an unwitting herd.” He continues *“Never allow the sightless eye to rule, the sound-congested ear, the chattering tongue, but let highest **Reason** judge the oft-contested proof I here provide to you... and yet, behind all of his ‘reasoning’ is the distinctive flavor of a soul’s journey. He is not only provided with guides and helpers but the goddess reassures him that “no evil destiny has drawn you here, so very far from human habitation.”* That it is preordained by *“divine command”* and *“right.”*!

The Journey

Parmenides chooses three paths of inquiry: the first path or way of truth has two branches; one that recognizes Being and the other that rejects non-Being.

*First know that it Is, and it is not possible
for Is not to be. This is the way of Persuasion,
Who dwells with Truth. Next, the other, that it is Not,
Cannot be. That is a path not to tread upon.
You cannot know what is Not, nor speak about it.*

The third path “the way of seeming”², describes, duality, and ignorance where mere mortals foolishly trust what their senses tell them. He illustrates this repeatedly in the goddess’s admonitions to avoid thinking that is “common to the *“unwitting herd.”*” She continues, *“Never follow this way of seeking after truth, nor let ordinary habits compel your chosen path.”* In

² Wikipedia-http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parmenides#The_Way_of_Opinion_.28doxa.29

effect, he makes this path and the path of non-Being dead-ends and as a result his only option is the recognition of Being.

Further on when the goddess says “*therefore all things that mortals have set forth, believing them all to be true, are merely names.*” It is as if she is now referring to divine illusion or Maya: In fact, the juxtaposition between the illusion and the oneness of being throughout this poem are very reminiscent of the dance between Brahman and Shiva. It is quite feasible that Parmenides was influenced by Hinduism. Those implications would shift our understanding and give a completely different insight resolving centuries of misguided debate about his work. Parmenides who claimed to rely on his capacity of reason for discerning the truth of *What-Is*, saw the universe or reality as one thing: unchanging, eternal, whole and continuous.

The fragments of Parmenides run in direct contrast to that of Heraclitus with his philosophy of universal flux and change and as a result, we see between these two the tension that exists between polarities of understanding. However, if Parmenides is really describing a mystical experience of enlightenment as opposed to a purely intellectual exercise in reasoning, as many would suggest, then his descriptions of *the One*, the *It Is*, are of a spiritual reality.

His statement “*Mortals established the custom of dividing things in two. As opposite in form...*” could be interpreted as a denouncement of the trap of being lost in paradox; this does not necessarily mean that he denied the diversity of being. Where Parmenides changes into prose the goddess says “*I describe this world-order to you as it seems to be, with all its phenomena, so that no clever mortal can out-think you.*” and then seemingly proceeds to describe the yin and yang of the universe using the metaphors of light and night. Although this is from the “*way of opinion*”, it is a necessary part in order to understand the totality of his concept as predicted by

the goddess in the beginning. “*Even so you will learn opinion as well, to move through those things that merely seem, to learn to test them.*” A quote from Sri Aurobindo in lecture four given by professor Geldard not only provides a meeting place for both philosophers but instigates a comprehension of how Parmenides himself may be understood both in his concept of “indivisible unity” and the frailty of his philosophical “construction.”

Being and Becoming are to his clean-cutting confidently trenchant mind two opposite categories, of which one or the other must be denied, or made a temporary construction or a sum, or sicklied over with the pale hue of illusion, and not Becoming accepted as an eternal display of Being. These conceptions of the sense-guided or the intellectual reason still pursue us, but a considering wisdom comes more and more to perceive that conclusive and satisfying as they may seem and helpful though they may be for action of life, action of mind, action of spirit, they are yet, as we now put them, constructions. There is a truth behind them, but a truth which does not really permit of these isolations. Our classifications set up too rigid walls; all borders are borders only and not impassable gulfs. The one infinitely variable Spirit in things carries over all of himself into each form of his omnipresence; the self, the Being is at once unique in each, common in our collectivities and one in all beings. God moves in many ways at once in his own indivisible unity. — Sri Aurobindo³

The Destination

Parmenides of Elea represents a turning point in the history of Western philosophy in his separation of the intellect and the senses. His allegorical proem describing the paths of thought represents the earliest attempt, as far as we know, of dealing with the issues of the philosophical method. His distinction between the illusory world of daily experience and the reality of logical reasoning proved to be of significant influence. Although true, the most striking and more important to my mind, are the descriptions he uses of his *It Is*. For instance, “*Being is uncreated, Eternal, Whole, of only one substance, unmoved and without end....*” or “*Nor can Being be divided, since it is all One...*” Again these phrases could be descriptions of much more than a

³ (Sri Aurobindo)

<http://www.sriurobindoashram.info/Content.aspx?ContentURL= StaticContent/SriAurobindoAshram/-09%20E-Library/-01%20Works%20of>

physical reality and indicate that Parmenides could be describing a vision; one that had allowed him to catch a glimpse of a higher reality running counter to the thinking of the time. Was Parmenides's experience a mystical or spiritual one? Some would disagree as professor Dr. William Large does in the following quotation.

Even though Parmenides's conclusion runs counter to common sense beliefs about reality, it is up to us to refute them logically, and if we cannot then we must accept their evidence as against the evidence of the senses. In other words, even though Parmenides presents the Way of Truth do not confuse it with divine revelation, It is presented through rigorous deductive reasoning that we need to think through ourselves and not as an instantaneous miraculous insight given as a gift from a higher divine power.⁴

I also don't know that I would call it a 'divine revelation' but I am prone to believe that this was in fact a mystical experience that led him to his conclusions. I tend to think that the following by Kingsley reviewed by Shapero is a more accurate description of the process.

But how does this visionary consciousness relate to the Parmenidean logic and explorations of Being - the way of truth and the way of illusion? Here is where Kingsley prefers to hint at, rather than openly proclaim, the deeper teachings of Parmenides. The hints point to the possibility that Parmenides' vision of Being as one complete, immobile, unified singularity is a result of a direct mystical experience of the world as it really is - a vision beyond all description which would in later days, in other cultures, be referred to as the "apophatic way" or the "way of silence and darkness." And perhaps it also reflects, whether through indirect transmission from India to Greece, or independent discovery, the non-dualistic, monistic Indian philosophy of Advaita, which became the doctrine of the Hindu Vedanta.⁵

To conclude, Sri Aurobindo once again, summarizes the experience.

The first of the three stages is a movement within, away from the surface of life, to the depths, culminating in the discovery of his Psychic Being (the evolving soul). From that experience, he sees the oneness and unity of creation, and the harmony of all opposites experienced in life. As a result, he begins to shed his essential Ignorance born of creation...⁶

⁴ (dr. W. Large) <http://www.arasite.org/wlpage.html>

⁵ (Kingsley @ Shapero,1999), <http://southerncrossreview.org/kingsley.html>

⁶ (Sri Aurobindo) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_and_Spiritualism_of_Sri_Aurobindo