A Constructivist Speculation about Parmenides

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► **Purpose** – An attempt to interpret the fragments of Parmenides as a first suggestion of a constructivist epistemology. Today, two and a half millennia later, no one can be sure of what exactly Parmenides had in mind. ► **Method** – Reviewing the varying translations of acknowledged experts and paying attention to what Plato said in his Parmenides dialog. ► **Findings** – We cannot be certain of any interpretation, but an epistemologically unbiased review of the translations shows that Parmenides may well have believed that experience is the domain accessible to human reason and the structure of the real world lies beyond it. ► **Implications** – Forerunners of constructivist ideas may have been overlooked because the interpreters of ancient texts were stuck in dogmatic views of "being." When studying classical texts written in languages that are no longer spoken, it is fruitful to consult many different translations.
► **Key words** – Epistemology, existence, experience, interpretation, translation.

There have been as many ways of looking at the Presocratics as there have been intellectual generations and changes of attitude in modern times. Prodigious amounts of exact philology and ingenious interpretation have been expended on them, and yet they remain today as mysterious, perhaps more mysterious, than they appeared in the Renaissance. For as our own awareness of history builds up, we cannot help realizing that it is those ancients who have dealt out all the ideas that Western thought has played with ever since – so enticingly near to us in one way, in another remote and incomprehensible beyond retrieve.
de Santillana (1968, p. 82)

Apology

I have frequently vented my profound mistrust of translators. This was prompted by their slovenliness and occasional incompetence, but more often by their more or less deliberate distortions of the original text's intent in order to make it fit with preconceived ideas. Yet, here I am, writing about an author, whose language I do not know and to whom I have no access except through other peoples' translations. A dismal situation. But, as I shall try to persuade you, in the case of Parmenides it is inescapable.

I could have taken courses in Greek, read Greek novels and plays, gone to Greece for a couple years, and done whatever else people do to acquire a deeper familiarity with a foreign language, but none of this would have got me close to what Parmenides, twenty-five centuries ago, tried to convey with the words as they were used in his day. It was not always clear even then. No less a sage than Socrates declared: "I am afraid we might not understand his words and still less follow the thought they express" (Plato, Theaetetus 184).

The arguments that abound in the literature about the Presocratics demonstrate that today, after centuries of studies, no one is certain what Parmenides intended to say in some important sections of his work. The reason, apart from inherent obscurities, is, as Vico stressed, that we inevitably interpret the past in terms of the concepts we have formed in the present. My disquisition, therefore, makes no claim to be correct; it merely hopes to achieve a degree of plausibility.

I thank the anonymous reviewers for the suggestions they made and I have followed them as far as I could. Two of the reviewers vigorously objected to the fact that someone who freely admitted that he had no knowledge of Greek would write about Parmenides. Have they ever considered how many professional philosophers have had the temerity to write about Kant without knowing German, or about Vico without speaking Italian?

Different translations

In the first of the fragments of his work that have come down to us, Parmenides presents a symbolic parable of how a goddess inducted him to the wisdom that humans as a rule do not attain. Here are three translations of the goddess' summary.

> "So it is necessary for you to be abreast of everything; on the one hand, the unshakable heart of well-rounded truth, and, on the other, the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true conviction. But, nevertheless, you will also learn this: how it might have been necessary that things that appear in opinions really existed, ranging over everything incessantly." (Cordero 2004, p. 191)
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> "Now you shall learn everything, the unshakable core of well-rounded truth as well as the appearance/opinion of mortals that lacks true certainty. Nevertheless you will also learn how what appears to them (mortals) would have to *be* tentative, probable, in a way that pervades everything." (Diels 1957, p. 44)
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> "Meet it is that thou shouldst learn all things, as well the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, as the opinions of mortals in which is no true belief at all. Yet none the less shalt thou learn these things also – how the things that seem, as they all pass through everything, must gain the semblance of being." (Kirk & Raven 1960, p. 267)

Néstor-Luis Cordero is perhaps the most persistent of Parmenides scholars. He has been at it since 1971 and his recent book, from which I took the quotation, is a summary of three decades of interpretation. Hermann Diels published his *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* at the beginning of the 20th century and

revised it several times. It is considered a classic and usually cited as an authoritative source. Kirk & Raven is a standard textbook on the Presocratics.

The differences between the three passages indicate the amount of leeway translators seem to have. One thing, however, comes out quite clearly. For Parmenides there are two kinds of knowledge: an absolute, certain truth; and tentative human knowledge, which lacks certainty as it is based on what is likely in experience.

The two crucial Fragments

In Fragment 2, which seems to connect directly to the first, the goddess explains the two ways of thinking. One is the way of the conviction (which follows truth) that what is *is* and what is not *is not*. The other is to think that what is not *is*, and that this non-being is necessary. This path, she says, is wholly unfathomable because it is not possible for you to know what is not, or to speak about it.

To understand this it would be necessary to make clear what the verb "to be" is intended to mean. Although by now I have read a good many of the Parmenides commentators I still have not found one who felt obliged to explain what they actually mean when they use that verb.[1]

It is clearly ambiguous and I shall try to unravel the three meanings I see.

(1) The verb serves as "copula," i.e. as connective between an item and a predicate (attribution); e.g. "the book is red," "drawing is an art," "John is leaving." This is not the meaning that is relevant in discussing Parmenides' theory. In the expression "what is *is*" neither the first nor the second "is" functions as copula. Both instances of "is" are intended to function as verb, as in "what hurts *hurts*."

(2) The second use of "to be" establishes something as an item in the domain of your experience and thus attributes to it a location in your framework of space and time.

This is the use that generates existence. Here is a simple illustration: You are looking out the window because something moving caught your eye. As you focus your attention, you see a squirrel. You have no doubt about it, you are quite sure that you are not mistaken. But you don't say: "I see a squirrel," which is all you can be sure of – and which would be true, even if the squirrel were a hallucination. Instead you say: "There is a squirrel," implying that the squirrel *is there* even if you are not looking. In other words, you are generating its existence by positing it as a permanent object.[2] Your way of speaking is quite normal. Our languages constantly bestow a form of existence on the things we talk about. But where is this "existing" supposed to take place? The answer is, I think, very simple: the squirrel may exist in the domain of your experience. That is where you saw it, and therefore it is the only kind of existence you can attribute to it. But, as Plato later elaborated in his famous parable of the cave, this experiential reality is shadowy, an untrustworthy image, and therefore not a truthful representation of reality. In the dialogue that he dedicated to Parmenides, Plato differentiated between "to exist" and "to be." The first referred to the partial being of appearances, the second to the indivisible being of the real. (Cornford 1939, pp. 230–231). And so we come to the third meaning of "to be."[3]

(3) The third use – "to be" as an intransitive verb – is the tricky one. As I said, "what is *is*" resembles "what hurts *hurts*" and constitutes a tautology. The trouble is that while we can define hurting as causing pain, an experience we are familiar with, we are quite unable to produce a definition of the intransitive use of "to be."

If you apply this analysis to what the goddess said in fragment 2, you get a tentative interpretation. Her first way of thinking springs from the conviction that things *are*, and as we cannot produce an experiential explanation of this intransitive being, the conviction is metaphysical, that is to say, it is a mystical belief. Her second way of thinking focuses on things that *are not*, that is things to which you cannot attribute ontological being. Though she clearly takes the perspective of a metaphysician, she admits that the metaphysically sterile way of thinking is also necessary (see the last sentence in the translations of fragment 1, above).

This leads directly to fragment 3, a single sentence that has forever mystified scholars. It consists of a cryptic statement that can be interpreted in many ways. Kirk & Raven (1960, p. 269) render it as: "for the same thing can be thought as can be." This is word for word the same translation as that given by Zeller (quoted in Untersteiner 1958, p. civ) in the 1920s. Cornford accepts this translation and adds in a footnote: "I cannot believe that Parmenides meant: 'To think is the same thing as to be.'" Which suggests that Cornford, though he did not choose this interpretation, considered it possible. Indeed, Hermann Diels (1957, p. 45) understood the sentence to mean: "denn dasselbe ist Denken und Sein"; in English: "for thinking and being are the same." He is not the only one who took this view. Wheelright (1966, p. 98), too, translated fragment 3 as: "Thought and being are the same." In fact the particular interpretation goes back to Plotinus in the 3rd century, and the German historian Stenzel (1925, pp. 249–250) saw in it a forerunner of Kant's form of idealism. For a constructivist, clearly, this is the more attractive reading.

Given the fact that the Western philosophical tradition has almost without exception taken the intransitive "being" to refer to ontological existence, it is not surprising that Parmenides was declared to be the father of idealism and consequently a pioneer of solipsism. But is it necessary to interpret Parmenides' cryptic statement in this way? The Goddess, after all, has explicitly referred to two ways of thinking about knowledge, and if you relate fragment 3 to the second way given in the goddess' instructions, the being that is here equated with thinking would refer to existence in the domain of experience, the domain that is structured by the experiencer's mental operations.

This interpretation of fragment 3 seems to be confirmed by the fact that in fragments 4 and 5 the goddess urges the disciple to use his mind to grasp the unity of all being and to realize that this unity must not be considered a composite of discrete things. It is an indivisible whole. In fragment 6 she launches a diatribe against the ignorant mortals who see no difference between being and not being.

The mystic's approach

It is difficult not to see this as a plug for the view that there is a solid unchanging reality that we can grasp only if we cease to dwell in the "lightless night" in which we focus on misleading appearances. And this, indeed, she says quite explicitly towards the end of fragment 8.

Giorgio de Santillana (1968, p. 104), one of the most perceptive historians of ideas, paraphrases this in his "Prologue to Parmenides":

"Men, caught in the flux of time, themselves part of phenomena, cannot set their life in timeless Truth which is beyond them."

Yet this is what the goddess exhorts Parmenides to do. Avoid the human preoccupation with the world of phenomena, she says, and be faithful to the conviction that truth can be found only in what *is* on the level of the underlying reality. Phenomena, one has to remember, are appearances and have no life of their own – there is no phenomenon without an observer.

It is worth noting that nowhere in the fragments does Parmenides suggest that the knowledge humans can attain in the domain of their experience should be considered a blurred representation of an ontic reality. This was naively taken for granted by later thinkers and then ridiculed by Plato's fable of the cave, where humans get, in the form of shadows, a fuzzy black and white copy of what goes on in a puppet show.

Yet Western philosophical tradition has almost unquestioningly accepted the assumption that experience in some way reflects an ontic reality. It practically excluded the possibility that the reality we build up on the basis of experience may be just one of many viable ones.

The goddess' advice to Parmenides seems to suggest this, and it is not unlike the teachings of some schools of Buddhism. In the Mahayana doctrine, for instance, empirical truth – what is experienced by the senses – is relative to the experiencer; absolute truth can be realized only by transcending the self and its habitual concepts with the help of intuitive revelation.

Socrates, in Plato's Theaetetus (183E), describes Parmenides as a venerable and awesome figure. He refuses to discuss him because he seems to consider him a prophet rather than a philosopher. De Santillana (1968, p. 85) picks this up and says, "Parmenides is first and last a mythographer of the 'orphic' kind." This view is shared by Bertrand Russell (1918, pp. 16–17)) and seems strongly supported by the fact that the truth is revealed to Parmenides by a goddess whom he visits on a miraculous journey into a region beyond the gates of night and day (cf. Cornford 1939, p. 29).

Erwin Schrödinger dedicated no less than six pages in his small volume "Die Natur und die Griechen" to Parmenides.[4] He takes fragment 3 seriously and accepts the statement that thinking and being are the same; but he neglects to consider that "to be" may have different meanings. Thus, when he says: "The external world is a product of sensory perception, a picture that is created by the perception of a thinking subject," (Schrödinger 1956, p. 40) he realizes that this is in sharp contrast with what the Goddess has described as the indivisible wholeness of the real *being*. He leaves it at that and comments that there remain unanswerable questions.

I am therefore encouraged to suggest that Parmenides' maneuver with "is" and "is not" may be an early instance of the method employed by Zen masters to show that the real reality is not comprehensible within the bounds of reason and logic (a position with which Schrödinger was in full agreement, cf. Schrödinger 1956, pp. 124ff). For the rest I can only say that, to a constructivist, fragment 3, which *can* be interpreted as saying that "being" and "to be thought" are equivalent, presents an irresistible temptation to speculate.

Notes

1. With one exception: a fire has destroyed nearly all my papers but among the salvage there are two pages of abstracts from what I believe was a meeting of the American Philological Association and they refer to paper #1 by June W. Allison, year unknown. She proposes as prerequisite for the translation of fragment 3 "that we avoid using the equivalent of a nominalized infinitive or participle or any other inflectional form of what is grammatically an inflectional entity…" This suggests that she had serious doubts about the meaning of the verb "to be."
2. Piaget, who has been steadfastly ignored by philosophers, minutely demonstrated how children achieve this task.
3. This distinction has been largely disregarded by later philosophers and "being" has been used almost exclusively for ontic reality; the interpretation of fragment 3, which I am presenting here, may therefore seem unacceptable.
4. For a full discussion of Schrödinger's view of Parmenides see Phillips (1955).

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