

I My Thesis

1

Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* sets the stage for criticism within the Academy.¹ In the first section, Plato suggests that certain objections to his theory of ideas are based on an inappropriate understanding of the matter, having been built on a reificative form of consciousness. The acumen of this diagnosis is demonstrated in the second section of the dialogue. There Plato turns the tables on his critics by using this mode of thought against their own conceptions. Speusippus's theory of principles – more precisely, his understanding of unity – is dashed to pieces.

The currency of the topic of reification of abstract constructs, and the fact that Speusippus treated unity as a principle also explain why Plato chose to hide behind the figure of Parmenides. The language of this philosopher – “... being closely abuts being” (DK 28 B 8,25) – evokes a thing-like conception of all reality. Furthermore, Parmenides must have developed his monism during the ongoing debates over the point-atomism of Pythagorean provenance² and this mode of thought is also the basis of Speusippus's approach (see below).

- 1 Earlier papers in this direction include ‘Wie über Ideen sprechen? Parmenides,’ in: *Platon. Seine Dialoge in der Sicht neuerer Forschungen*, ed. by T. Kobusch and B. Mojsisch, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1996, pp. 146–166, ‘Platons *Parmenides* in neuem Licht,’ *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 149 (1997) pp. 12–29; ‘Parmenides in Plato's *Parmenides*,’ *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 5 (2000) pp. 1–15. Parts date back to studies that appeared in the series *Berner Reihe philosophischer Studien*, vol. 25, or in *Museum Helveticum* 59 (2002). See also ‘Plato and Speusippus: An Exchange on the Status of Principles,’ in: *Aristotle on Plato: The Metaphysical Question*. Proceedings of the Symposium Philosophiae Antiquae Secundum Thersense (Santorini, June 30th–July 7th, 2002), ed. by A. L. Pierris, Patras: Institute for Philosophical Research 2004. I first expressed partial doubts about the traditional interpretation of the dialogue in my study, ‘Kritische Retraktionen zur esoterischen Platon-Interpretation,’ *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 54 (1974).
- 2 It is clear that here we are walking on very uncertain terrain, especially since the assumption, formerly counting as the *communis opinio*, that Zeno destroyed the Pythagorean theses, is now largely deemed obsolete (see C. H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. A Brief History*, Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett 2001, pp. 35–36). Nevertheless the issue of pre- and post-Parmenidian Pythagoreanism – Parmenides has been drawn in relation with the Pythagorean School – still appears to remain a desideratum of the first order. G. Vlastos's attack on J. E. Raven (*Pythagoreans and Eleatics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1948) in: *Gnomon* 25 (1953) pp. 29–35 (see *Studies in Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1: *The Presocratics*, ed. by D. W. Graham, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press 1995, pp. 180–188) is by no means the last word on the matter (see i. a. W. Röd, *Die Philosophie der Antike* 1 [*Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. I], Munich: Beck 2009 [1st ed. 1975], p. 139 with note 5 there [p. 242]). At the same time, one should realize that the ‘new’ point of view is another casualty of F. M. Cornford's theses (see *Selected Papers*, ed. with an introduction by A. C. Bowen, New York: Garland 1987 [*Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. by L. Tarán, vol. 10]). Its redesignation is signaled by the political

One aspect of this use of a historical figure deserves special remark. In the exercise (γυμνάσια) Parmenides articulates negations of existence. He thereby goes against the very stipulations he set in his didactic poem. According to the dialogue *Sophistes*, Parmenides remained true to the posit 'not-is/not-being is not' (237a4–5) throughout his life, so this exercise cannot be a specimen of Parmenidian philosophizing; it is rather designed as a guide to Parmenidian philosophy. This agrees with the fictional Parmenides speaking as if the last time he had gone through the exercises had been during his youth. By dating these exercises to Parmenides's younger years, Plato could semi-convincingly pretend that at the time of this fictitious debate Parmenides was not yet an ontological monist. The context in the middle section – concerning truth as the goal of the exercise – suggests that this literary Parmenides expected to be able to convert Socrates to monism. This interpretation draws together two considerations. Firstly, in Plato's eyes, the philosopher Parmenides does not tower over Socrates as minister of a higher truth, in the light of which real or supposed defects in the manner of approaching ideas could find constructive therapy.³ Secondly, Plato clearly wants the reader to believe that Socrates, for his part, will also adhere to the theory of forms. This vantage point reveals that Plato himself did not find his assailants particularly impressive.

2

The way Plato brandishes the theory of ideas as a tool or weapon to make the common-sense world plausible certainly does not permit any conclusions about its true genesis. By introducing the theory as a plausible explanation of the real world, the author of the dialogue forges a means of characterizing the criticism and its underlying modes of thought. In the process, the supposed problems raised are exposed as inessential, grounded instead in the language used. In this sense Plato uses the veil of literary license to present and criticize the form of consciousness (in Hegel's idiom: *Bewußtseinsgestalt*) behind particular misunderstandings.

If the first section of the dialogue seems discreet and restrained in this regard, the second section offers, as it were, an anamnesis of the mode of thought under discussion: Whatever may otherwise be Plato's message, the crucial thing is his enunciation of a number of elements of the *Bewußtseinsgestalt*, laid out in clear display before the reader. In this sense, we could say that virtually nothing is omitted or neglected that might lend tangible features to Plato's picture. This strategy certainly is successful. The more so since there is, often enough, a tinge of parody.⁴

decision to eliminate J. E. Raven's contribution to G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1966, specifically chapter IX.

3 Thus the interpretation by Samuel C. Dickless, 'How Parmenides saved the Forms,' *The Philosophical Review* 107 (1998) pp. 501–554 also seems to me unacceptable. This essay is nevertheless an extremely important contribution to the discussion.

4 Cf. H. F. Cherniss, 'Parmenides and the *Parmenides* of Plato,' *American Journal of Philology* 53 (1932) pp. 122–138, reprinted in: *idem*, *Selected Papers*, ed. by L. Tarán, Leyden: Brill 1977, pp. 281–297.

On the other hand, Plato holds up contrasting alternatives against manifestly criticizable elements,⁵ to help the reader shake off the constraints of a reificative *Bewußtseinsgestalt*.

There are other aspects to this strategy as well. (i) The exercise that in Plato's fiction Parmenides had performed as a young man and retrospectively assessed as the way to truth, is teeming with partially contradictory and even problematic assumptions. The closing summary to the dialogue allows virtually no other conclusion than that – in Plato's view – the young philosopher must have solved the matter radically for his day, smiting a Gordian knot asunder and opting for the way of being, thereby ascribing to monism. For a philosopher of ideas this solution is not tractable, of course. For, it remains within the reificative mode of thought and perpetuates the claim of that approach as such. Thus we see, at the same time, why Socrates cannot get any real help from this quarter. Put in extreme terms, Socrates would, at best, still recognize the validity of the objections launched in the first section (als specimens of a reificative form of consciousness). He could only hope for help inasmuch as he himself recognizes the mode of thought as an unsuitable approach and draws the attendant conclusions. That – as the fiction goes – he did so is evident from the fact that the Socrates in *Phaedo* advocates the very theory of forms under attack here in the *Parmenides*. So there can be no doubt about Plato's own assessment of the situation.

This is the more cogent if we regard the currentness of the debate and aspects of the internal debate among the Academicians. (ii) The exercise proves to be a documentation of a controversy with Speusippus (see above, p. 15). More precisely put, Plato applies the *Bewußtseinsgestalt* of reification to Speusippus's conception of unity as a monad. This he does in a way that reveals Speusippus's inability to formulate his own conceptions of the *monas* coherently as a principle of the first being, namely, as a number, at least within the framework of his own posits. Thus Plato guides his readers to the view that his criticism of the ideal forms must rebound on Speusippus. This finding naturally also has an interesting side-effect. For, Speusippus was known as a critic not just of the theory of ideas but also of Plato's theory of principles. His attack drove the line that Plato's approach was fundamentally incoherent and could not achieve what it was designed to achieve (see X 2 below). By turning the basic philosophical assumptions of the critique of the ideal forms against Speusippus's own theory of principles, Plato articulates an effective reply and it would be interesting to know whether and how Speusippus responded, in turn, to this criticism.

5 This factor is best argued in the commentary by R. E. Allen: *Plato's Parmenides. Translation and Analysis*, Oxford: Blackwell 1983. His translation serves here as the source for direct quotations from that dialogue.

3

The *Parmenides* is not fixated on Speusippus. The Parmenides figure in the second section of the dialogue can hardly be regarded as the mouthpiece of a single position. – Plato equips Parmenides with an arsenal of disparate considerations to demonstrate his decision in favor of monism as a step as well-founded at the time as Socrates's later decision was against monism. Nor are Plato's reactions to the criticism of ideal forms any more identifiable as attacks on a single position. Here as elsewhere, for Plato the crux of the matter was ways of thinking and their initial assumptions.⁶ If this is so, it has particular consequences on our interpretation of the *Parmenides*. The immediate consequence is taking into account or adopting different levels of understanding. Accordingly, it would mean reading statements specifically by the dialogue character Parmenides on two levels, on an Eleatic or proto-Eleatic level, and on a contemporaneous one, e.g., a Speusippian one. One good example of what is meant might be the concluding statement of the first deduction: “[Assuming that one is one,] unity neither is one nor is.” This statement could refer to an issue that Zeno had addressed: If one is indivisible, it is nothing (Aristotle, *Metaph.* III 4, 1001b7–8). As Aristotle explained, Zeno considered this assumption legitimate, because whatever is has spatial extension (DK 29 A 21). In any event, the attack draws us within the context of a physical approach. Nevertheless, this statement could just as well regard conceptual entities like the Platonic idea or the Speusippian *monas*, deemed the smallest quantity. Another example might be the statement: “Therefore, unity is unlimited, if it has neither beginning nor end” (137d7–8). This statement also suggests a thematic ambiguity. It could lead a metaphysically oriented reader to believe that an absolute beyond space and time were at issue here.⁷ Yet one could just as well think that a piece of argumentation by the Eleatic Melissus were being brought into play: “Nothing that has a beginning and an end is eternal or infinite” (DK 30 B 4).

Taking into consideration what has been said about the Parmenides character in Plato's dialogue bearing his name, it would seem that Plato purposefully inserted statements of this type to create two levels of discourse. They correspond to the different interests and expectations of his readership; but they also respond to Plato's philosophical agenda. This only underscores the importance of reading the thematic elements used, such as ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ (i. e., ‘something

6 I have attempted to explicate this, taking the *Republic* V as an example. See *Issues in the Philosophy of Language. Past and Present*, Berne: Lang 1999, chap. 3; see also A. Graeser, *Interpretationen. Hauptwerke der Philosophie. Antike*. Stuttgart: Reclam 1992, pp. 81–100. Mary Margaret McCabe examines Plato's later work with the positions of his forerunners in view: *Plato and His Predecessors*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000. Although the *Parmenides* is not included, the author had already otherwise illuminated this dialogue as an analysis of various conceptions of individuality; see *Plato's Individuals*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press 1994.

7 Cf. H. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Platonismus zwischen Platon und Plotin*, Amsterdam: Grüner-Publ. 1967, p. 363; J. Halfwassen, ‘Speusipp und die Unendlichkeit des Einen,’ *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 74 (1992) p. 50.

is in something' or 'something is separate from something,' resp.) throughout, in view of these differing orientations, and to keep in mind whether a proposition is 'Presocratically' or 'Platonically' possible. The degree to which specific arguments or argumentational steps cannot reflect Plato's opinion exposes the degree to which conceptual posits were potential subjects of controversy within the Academy.