

DEMETRIOS N. KOUTRAS

Essays on Ancient Greek and Byzantine Philosophy

ATHENS, 2002

THE PROBLEM OF THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE IN THE POEM OF PARMENIDES

The renowned 20th century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who was a keen scholar of ancient Greek philosophy – the Presocratics in particular – expresses as follows his admiration for the philosophical language of the giants of ancient philosophy as a revelation of Being: «...the Greek language is no mere language like the European languages known to us. The Greek language, and it alone is λόγος. We shall have to deal with this in greater detail in our discussions. For the time being let it be sufficient to suggest that in the Greek language what is said in it is at the same time in an excellent way what it is called. If we hear a Greek word with a Greek ear we follow its λέγειν [its speaking], its direct presentation. What is presents is what lies immediately before us. Through the audible Greek word we are directly in the presence of the thing itself, not first in the presence of a mere word sign»¹. These lines indicate Heidegger's profound familiarity with these philosophers through direct study and knowledge of the texts.

Λόγος, the great discovery of the Greeks, which is of such fundamental significance, is indeed closely bound up with language. By raising λόγος as an organ of logical method and interpretation to the level of knowledge and theory, the ancient Greeks discarded the reigning mythical image of the world and, taking refuge «εἰς τοὺς λόγους»², pursued the truth and essence of the cosmos. They turned their view away from the diversity and variety of the sensible world and with the inner sight of the soul – θεωρία – shaped a logical picture of the cosmos and of life which was more secure and abiding. With λόγος and with

1. Martin HEIDEGGER, *What is Philosophy*, New Haven, n.d., p. 45.

2. PLATO, *Phaedon* 99 e 5.

dialogue, through debate in the agora, they heralded the right path and roused their inclination for the investigation of truth.

Λόγος, as is known, has for the Greeks a variety of uses and meanings. Λόγος is logical principle and cause. Λόγος is the mathematical analogy between two or more quantities. The rhetorician delivers speeches, i.e., λόγους, in the agora or the court. Man is defined by Aristotle as «ζῷον λόγον ἔχον»³, i.e., an animal who has logic, a being endowed with both inner and articulated word, i.e., with reason. As opposed to other animals, man possesses «φωνὴν σημαντικὴν»⁴, i.e., a logically structured voice which expresses at the same time a totality of meanings.

Λόγος, therefore, as judgment, proposition and reason (*ratio*), is for the Greeks the manner in which the logical essence of things and the truth are revealed. Speech maintains and preserves the essence of things and their truth as they are grasped by reason (λόγος). Thus in the linguistically articulated sentence the logical essence of things manifests itself. Aristotle calls the expression and communication of the truth through word and speech «ἀπόφανσις», («judgment»)⁵ because as «κατάφασις» (affirmation)⁶ and «ἀπόφασις» («denial»)⁷ ἀπο-φαίνεται, i.e., it categorically discloses Being and the logical relations of beings through expressed judgments. The verb «λέγω» in ancient Greek means: a) to collect, b) disclose, manifest, not hide. Similarly, the Latin verb «dicere» is related to the Greek word δείκνυμι, as the German «sagen» to «zeigen». The original meaning of the verbs φημί and φάσκω is «manifest», «illuminate» (φαίνω, as the Latin *fari*).

Many figures of Presocratic philosophy emphasize the concept of λόγος. Λόγος is for them principle of the cosmos and of human reason; it is the logical and metaphysical principle of all things. Examining Greek philosophy in its totality we may remark as follows: Greek metaphysics, concerned with Being and «ὄντως ὄν», considered Being as the thought of being, perfected by the activity of mind. Νοεῖν, moreover, as the νόησις of

3. ARIST., Polit. I3, 1253 a 9-10.

4. ARIST., De Interpr. 16 b 26.

5. ARIST., De Interpr. 17 a 23-24.

6. ARIST., De Interpr. 17 a 25.

7. ARIST., De Interpr. 17 a 25-26.

being by νοῦς, grasps being contemplatively and articulates it through the word. Through language the spoken word also reveals Being as it is grasped by λόγος (διάνοια: reason). In this manner, according to the Greeks, the truth of things is revealed. Truth means for them precisely the presence of Being through the word in language. Truth is in fact precisely the presence of beings to man through word and language.

Heraclitus, as is well known, was the first to speak of the significance of λόγος, which as principle⁸ and law of the cosmos governs the universe with stability and harmony, beyond the conflicting contradictions of becoming. The λόγος of man must, according to the philosopher of Ephesus, through an inner wakefulness coincide with the λόγος of the universe. Man, however, since he lives in a condition of sleepfulness, forgets the λόγος and falls into forgetfulness. Because he is distracted by the ἔπεα and the pointless chatter of the crowd, he removes himself from the λόγος which rules the cosmos. In order to grasp the meaning of the λόγος of the cosmos, man must find harmony with the «ξυνόν»⁹, the cosmic law.

The λόγος is, according to Heraclitus, something permanent and universal, whereas the ἔπεα of humans are without direction, since they are not in harmony with the inner λόγος of the cosmos, but belong to the realm of contradictions. For Heraclitus language is something natural (φύσει). Indeed the followers of Heraclitus were preoccupied almost to excess with the question of language. The disputes which took place in Athens during the 5th century B.C., whether language is a result of nature (φύσει) or convention (θέσει), are well known. Precisely at that time the Sophists developed their eristic method which was devoted to the dispute concerning the natural or conventional relation between language and reality.

In contrast to the dynamic system of Heraclitus, who taught the stability of the λόγος within the permanent movement and becoming of all things, Parmenides of Elea proclaims the permanent and eternal nature of Being, which abides unchanged in the world of pure thought.

Let us now examine the relation between thought and language in the

8. Diels-Kranz, 22, B1, 3-11.

9. 22 B2, 1-4.

work of Parmenides. It is the spirit of Parmenides which first opens the path towards panlogism. The thought of this philosopher is not rooted in nature, as with the Ionians, or in the concept of God, as with Xenophanes, but entirely in the nature of truth. This concept dominates his philosophical work. His great achievement was to discover the world of thought, beyond the world of sense appearances and the personal opinions of the mass of mortals. Truth derives from pure thought alone. For this reason it is not by chance that in Parmenides' poem «On Nature», it is the goddess of truth who proclaims to him the new concept of Being, i.e., of unique and eternal Being. The One (ἓν), on which is focused the entire philosophy of Parmenides, is the expression of a single unique truth. For him there exists only the One, hence truth is one. Neither Being, nor the truth about the One, i.e., thought, may be found in the multiplicity of sense experience. One need be no longer concerned with the many sense objects, to ascertain what they are, or how many, and whether we may attribute to them the characteristic of Being. Parmenides calls upon thought to judge: to distinguish between that which exists and that which does not exist. Thought must decide between Being and Non-being.

Parmenides' poem is inspired by his profound respect for reason, i.e., by his conviction that logical judgment alone can separate that-which-is (ἔόν) from non-being: the eternal One from the corruptible many. The argument contained in Fragment 2, 7-8 forms the basis of Parmenides' theory. This assertion excludes non-being¹⁰; it thus guarantees the refutation of generation and corruption¹¹, and likewise functions as the premiss which leads to the conclusion that being is homogenous¹². Every interpretation which contradicts one of these points must be excluded from the outset.

Parmenides' argumentation is thus governed by the following premiss: «You can neither know nor utter non-being»¹³. Being holds primacy in the relation of Being, thought and language. Νοῦς, according to the philosopher, must turn towards Being as its object. This turn has a twofold significance: a) thought is determined by Being, and b) thought itself

10. 28 B2, 5.

11. 28 B8, 6-21.

12. 28 B8, 22-25, 44-48.

13. 28 B2, 7-8.

receives its determination from the determination of Being. The philosopher declares: «Τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι»¹⁴. This fragment of Parmenides has been wrongly interpreted by many. Some have tried to interpret it in an idealistic sense, such as those Neokantians who regarded Being as something created by νοῦς. On the other hand, K. von Fritz¹⁵ has pointed out that thinking (νοεῖν) embraces not only discursive thinking, but also the intuitive element in comprehending a state of affairs, which is the essence of knowledge. Correct also on this topic is the philological interpretation of J. Burnet, who translates the above fragment as follows: «For it is the same thing that can be thought and can be»¹⁶. «To think» for Parmenides is to think *something*, i.e., to think *being*. Thought and Being constitute an unbreakable unity. As opposed to the Cartesian «*Cogito, ergo sum*», Parmenides proposes as an axiom «*Cogito, ergo est quod cogito*»¹⁷. For him, as later for Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, thinking signifies an encounter with being.

The second part of the philosophical poem of Parmenides, «On Nature», refers to the problem of nature and the opinions (δόξα)¹⁸ of mortals. For him the physical world belongs to the realm of non-being. He speaks of it in order to clarify the question of truth. The distinctions which he makes do not sever natural Being, but indicate the two opposing paths of philosophical inquiry. The world of truth and the world of opinion are not two distinct worlds in the real sense, but rather two ways of interpretation. Truth in its essence is a transcendent appearance, while the appearance of opinion is a dereliction of truth.

Parmenides turns away from the path of nature towards the path of logic and pure reason. Of course, the paths of ontology and logic are not yet distinguished in the philosophy of Parmenides. We are at the archaic period of the logic of the Presocratic philosophers, according to which Being cannot be considered in isolation from thought. Ontology, how-

14. 28 B3, 1.

15. K. von FRITZ, «Die Rolle des Nous», in *Um die Begriffswelt der Vorsokratiker*, ed., H.-G. Gadamer, Darmstadt 1968, 304-315.

16. J. BURNET, *Early Greek Philosophy*, London, 1990⁴, p. 173.

17. Cf. W. K. C. GUTHRIE, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2, Cambridge, 1969, p. 20.

18. 28 B1, 30, 8, 51.

ever, is not the same thing as philosophy of nature.

Truth, according to Parmenides, is one; hence Being must be one, have absolute unity and constitute a totality (οὐλον)¹⁹. Just as truth is not subject to temporal decay, and is not fragmented into the endless opinions of the multitude, thus Being does not change and is not divided into many parts. Since truth does not allow increase or decrease²⁰, neither does Being admit of these determinations which derive from the sensible world.

Many have attempted to interpret Parmenides' theory on the basis of later philosophical theories. This is however a distortion of his teaching. By such a misinterpretation some consider Parmenides to be the founder of idealism, while others regard him as the father of realism. Plato indeed preserves Parmenides' distinction between the world of perception and the world of thought; he identifies the world of pure Being with his own theory of ideas.

Parmenides is unaware of the distinction between idealism and realism. For him the identity of Being and thinking means that there can be no thinking without Being. The division which he makes is between the sensible and the intelligible; he does not separate what is thought from νοῦς. A common characteristic of both – of that which is thought and of thinking itself – is totality. Truth and Being either exist absolutely or do not exist. There is either absolute affirmation or absolute negation. We may remark *en passant* that Parmenides is the founder of the principle of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle.

The real must for Parmenides, as for Plato, be logical or intelligible. Knowledge of the real is not a product of sense experience, but of thought alone. Thus, we cannot grasp Being by any means other than νοῦς.

Parmenides is also the founder of the correspondence theory of truth, since he establishes a close relation between Being, thinking and speaking. Thus for him knowledge is founded upon Being, while knowledge and logic are grounded in ontology. Likewise, according to his philosophy, thought does not impose its structures upon Being, but receives them from the object of knowledge, i.e., Being. Thought discovers Being through

19. 28 B8, 38.

20. 28 B8, 23-24.

reflection (φρονέειν) and, makes it manifest through saying (speech) (λέγειν, φατίζειν, φράζειν)²¹. The philosopher declares: «One and the same are thinking and the thought that Being is. For you will not find thinking without Being, which is uttered in it»²².

Word and thought, according to Parmenides, are grounded upon the absolute presence of Being, i.e., on the complete absence of non-being («It is necessary to say and to think that Being is, for Being is and non-being is not»)²³. The absence of Being, i.e., non-being, renders impossible the work of thought and language. «Nor shall I allow you to say or think that it arose out of non-being, for it cannot be uttered or thought that non-being is»²⁴.

Pure Being reveals and manifests itself, according to Parmenides, in the copula «is» of the judgment, which joins the subject and predicate of the proposition. This «is» is logically atemporal and constitutes the very essence of the predicate; it preserves the immutability and timelessness of Being. The judgment affirms either that something is or is not: that it shares in the unity of Being, or does not share in it. Increase or decrease with respect to Being are impossible. In the copula of the judgment is thus contained the complete truth, which Parmenides describes as «well-rounded» in order to convey its fullness²⁵. Thus he speaks of the unshaken heart²⁶ of well-rounded truth. To the well-rounded truth corresponds in turn the well-rounded sphere of Being²⁷.

The kind of judgment which according to Parmenides expresses pure Being is «A is A». The judgment «A is B» does not express pure Being, but rather a mixture of Being and non-being; it presents in fragmentary fashion a portion of it.

The ontological and logical monism of Parmenides is governed by the principle of identity, a judgment of the form: «A is A», and nothing more. Relative and absolute negations are, he maintains, impossible. The proposition «He thinks that X does not exist» is tantamount,

21. 28 B2: 1, 2, 6, 8, 35, 60.

22. 28 B8, 34-36.

23. 28 B6, 1-2.

24. 28 B8, 7-9.

25. 28 B8, 29.

26. 28 B8, 29.

27. 28 B8, 43.

Parmenides believes, to the proposition «He does not think anything», which is in turn equivalent to the proposition «He is not thinking». In contrast to Plato, Parmenides does not accept otherness, just as he does not accept non-being.

Parmenides does not accept division, either in Being or in thought. A fundamental characteristic of each is that it is complete and undivided: the totality of Being, and the fullness of truth²⁸. Characteristically he says «One (common and connected) is that from which I start, and to which I shall return again»²⁹. Being is not divisible, because it is of one kind and its homogeneity is never sundered³⁰. Consequently, absolute truth is found exclusively in the judgment: «A is A», i.e., «Being is Being.»

The second part of Parmenides' poem refers exclusively to the world of becoming, of nature, as it is conceived in the philosophy of the Ionians. Referring in the first part to Being and the truth, he argues that there is no otherness, generation and decay, and that the world of sense experience belongs to the realm of non-being. In the second part he concedes to it a certain existence. Whereas he had previously attained a logical negation of the sense world, here he goes so far as to explain it, albeit by reference to other philosophers. However, he is motivated here by his tendency to criticize previous philosophy and to expose the errors of his predecessors. Parmenides defends in this way his own teaching on Being and truth.

In this second part of the poem Parmenides demolishes the world of sense impression, as well as the empirical, scientific, interpretation of the cosmos. The question of the relation of truth to the opinions (δόξα) of mortals is raised precisely in the relation between Being and becoming, i.e., between Being and non-being. As known, Plato later resolved the opposition between Being and non-being by his doctrine of the sense world as an ontological category of otherness³¹. Thus Plato locates opinion and belief between knowledge and ignorance³². For Parmenides, however,

28. 28 B8, 22.

29. 28 B5, 1-2.

30. 28 B8, 3-5, 38.

31. PLATO, *Sophist*, 239 d - 241 d.

32. PLATO, *Republic*, 477 ab, 479 d.

there was no third way. The sense world and nature consist of the opposition between Being and non-being, light and night³³. The opinions of mortals are erroneous, as is also their arbitrary naming of things through signs (σήματα)³⁴ with which to indicate and distinguish them³⁵. Words (ῥεα), cut off from λόγος, the proposition, express a part whereas the sentence expresses the whole. Through its binding power the proposition unites Being with thinking and the word, and so reveals the mind's true knowledge. Opinion, on the other hand, directed towards diversity and the deception of sense experience, gives rise to false opinions and invalid judgments. Being and the logically atemporal «is» of every judgment constitute an unbreakable wholeness (οὔλον) as a totality. Words, on the contrary, are arbitrary denominations³⁶, derived from the opinions of mortals and lead man to the darkness of deceit and error. In this way Parmenides – despite his true discovery of the unity of Being, thought and language – inevitably becomes the father of nominalism, which the sophists later championed to excess, taking the doctrine to the other extreme with their assertion that whoever knows the name also knows the reality*.

* Translated by Dr Fran O'Rourke.

33. 28 B9, 1-4.

34. 28 B8, 53-55.

35. 28 B19, 3.

36. 28 B8, 38-41.