Philosophical Examinations of Historical and Contemporary Problems

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By

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THE BACKSTORY: SPEAKING AS (JUST) A PHILOSOPHER

Academic philosophy publishers, and perhaps philosophers themselves, seem to be not much interested in collections of essays that are not about some important figure or about a single topic. The essays in this collection, however, sprawl across a number of philosophical topics. The only unity is imposed by the fact that they are the work of a single philosophical thinker and not a famous one at that.

While I realize that those aspiring to be philosophers are, these days, required to describe themselves much more narrowly in order to get into graduate school and then to begin professional philosophy, I, however, came to the profession at a time when we all wanted to be just philosophers. Of course, the practices of the profession caused most of us to conceive of ourselves more narrowly–to be a specialist in this or that issue, at least until we acquired tenure when then we might (if we hadn't been captured by our own success) spread our wings a bit and start conceiving of ourselves once again as philosophers. *Simpliciter*.

My problem, especially from a prudential point of view, is that I never was able to outgrow my youthful idea that I was a philosopher *simpliciter*. That meant that I could never find my way into thinking, writing and teaching about an extremely narrow range of topics. Of course, I hadn't the ability (I was no Aristotle) to take the entire field of philosophy as my playground–and I knew that. But nonetheless I was not able to do the approved thing and think of myself as a specialist within philosophy.

The change in how one conceives of oneself, from generalist to specialist, has taken place during my professorial career. Let me tell a story. Sometime in the early 2000's I had a very good student who wanted to go to graduate school in philosophy. So, he applied to quite a few places–and received no acceptances. He spent a year investigating and discovered why: I had encouraged him to describe himself as a philosopher interested in several things when what was wanted by graduate schools was a claim on his part that he was interested in problem X and wanted to study with Professor Y in pursuit of that interest. So, he re-wrote his applications and was promptly accepted at several very good schools around the country–and was awarded a prestigious Javits Fellowship, which led to many

departments actively pursuing him. The world had moved on from thinking that being a philosopher was good enough.

As a result of my failing to learn that lesson for my own career, I ended up being interested in many and diverse philosophical questions. So, I not only indulged myself in what I thought about, but I also taught a wide variety of courses and, within them, a wide variety of topics. And I did my professional writing about what, given the norm, is a wide variety of issues.

Given that, moreover, I was not inclined to affiliate myself with philosophical groups that focused on some particular matter, I certainly lost out on the benefits that a more specialized conception of a philosophical life gives its adherents.

As a result, I am not famous, say, for my work on Descartes or on knowledge or on analytic philosophy-or anything else. I am not recognized to be an expert in any philosophical field.

Nonetheless, I ended up writing some very good philosophy papers.

The essays collected here are not the full outcome of my philosophical writing. Even setting aside the ephemera–reviews, encyclopedia pieces, etc.–over the course of my professional life, I have worked on many other pieces than the ones at hand. Some of those are complete, but I am not certain enough of their quality to include here. However, most of those other writings are projects that grabbed my interest until something more juicy caught my attention. (Kierkegaard said that purity of heart is willing one thing–when it comes to philosophical writing I am very impure of heart.) It is in those partially completed pieces that the genuine breadth of my philosophical interests can be found.

What is printed here thus shows only a partial distribution of what, as a philosopher, I have found to be worthy of serious thought. Without those items not included here, a reader is forced to take my word for my claim that I have maintained a wide range of interests in philosophical topics over the years. However, I do hope (and think) that what is presented here does show me to be a philosopher and not a specialist in this or that area.

The first division in the present papers is between historical topics and essays on more current issues.

Within the historical sections there are pieces on ancient Greek philosophy, modern philosophy and twentieth century philosophy.

I should pause a moment to say something about writing on historical matters. I once had a colleague who declared that philosophy began with Frege–and I know another who will not read any philosopher who wrote earlier than the last 50 years (or perhaps he now must mean before 2000). Of course, I think those ideas are not representative of contemporary philosophy–however, they both were at home in an earlier period of

twentieth century philosophy. And they certainly are not the views that have informed my philosophical practice.

The history of philosophy as written about by philosophers is not highly thought of by historians. And the reason is clear: we who work in it see it in terms of philosophical issues, problems, topics still to be thought of philosophically and not as a historian would, as sets of ideas so situated in their time and place that there can be no point in thinking of them as having any current interest. But we philosophers find in those older texts, even if we have to brush aside historical contexts in certain ways, problems upon which our philosophical skills can be exercised and problems which have continuing philosophical interest. Those philosophers who have no interest in our past as a source of ideas and thoughts severely limit themselves as philosophers. (Even Wittgenstein, who wrote and thought as if the day were fresh, nonetheless knew much more of past philosophical ideas than he frequently let on.)

As far as the other set of present essays, the ones I cite as concerned with contemporary problems, they tend to cluster around a few large topics. For instance, only one of the items gathered here, and it is a short piece, has any connection to moral philosophy ("Dworkin On Abortion"). While I occasionally dabbled in that area, I have produced nothing I would regard as an interesting contribution to it (though the essay "Meaning and Deeds: Resurrecting Ascriptivism" counts as meta-ethics.)

I was a little surprised to find, when I looked over my work on contemporary matters, that there are a noticeable number of them having to do with (say) cognitive issues: knowledge, belief, truth. Although I would never consider myself an epistemologist, I turns out that I have apparently spent more time on certain epistemological problems than I realized. That was probably set in motion when I asked A.I. Melden for advice on what to write a dissertation about. He suggested that I work on kinaesthetic knowledge–which I did. In doing that, I had to think more about knowledge than I had previously done and I now suspect that the dissertation led me to continue the theme later without really intending to.

In looking over the topics in the present collection, I notice one further pattern: in recent years, criticism of the idea that science ought to play a major role in philosophical practice has come to occupy more and more of my attention. The explanation is not difficult to find: the rise of (so-called) experimental philosophy, the idea that philosophical claims in each and every area of philosophy must be based on scientific research. (I say "each and every area" although such an outlook is more plausible in some areas than others–for example, normative ethics may well need to incorporate scientific findings, though I think that not at all true of say meta-ethics.)

Philosophers today who argue about issues without making any reference to empirical research may (and sometimes are) denied any legitimacy in making those claims by adherents of experimental philosophy. What I find amusing is the belief by such proponents that those who continue to do philosophy without regard to scientific research have not a leg to stand on. For what has been forgotten is that the same issue was raised in the late 1950's in the debate between Benson Mates and Stanley Cavell with Richard Hare having made a major contribution to Cavell's position. The outcome was a clear victory (at least on the topics raised) for the Cavell-Hare defense of "arm-chair" philosophy. That episode, however, has not been noticed by the revival of Mates' position by experimental philosophy.

None of the papers published here which are critical of the scientistic bent of contemporary philosophy are written specifically in opposition to that new version of scientific philosophy. Such a paper remains one of the items on my philosophical bucket list and will thus escape being enrolled in this collection.

What does unite them are not the topics but the philosophical outlook. I am what is known as a Wittgensteinian. That is, I have thoroughly absorbed some of the outlook on philosophy that was developed by the later Wittgenstein. I bring that outlook and that understanding to bear on whatever topic I happen to be willing to commit some time and effort to investigate.

Notice that it is the later Wittgenstein who produces Wittgensteinians. One of the major differences between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is that in the former there is no sense of inducing philosophers to follow in the author's footsteps: the *Tractatus* provides the final word on the issues discussed therein and thus no provision for *doing* philosophy with those insights and ideas. On the other hand, the *Investigations* is an encouragement to do philosophy in the manner of its author. And there are philosophers, myself included, who accept that encouragement and philosophize in that manner.

In some of the essays published here, I do Wittgenstein' scholarship– that is, I try to explicate some parts of the text of the *Investigations*. However, that is not the same thing as being a Wittgensteinian philosopher, one who falls into that tradition of philosophical thought about a variety of topics.

When I came into philosophy in the late 1950's, philosophy (well at least analytic philosophy) was dominated by Russell's logic, by the *Tractatus* and by Logical Positivism. However, what caught my mind was the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* (and also Ryle, Austin and the Ordinary Language philosophers). What shaped my thinking from early on was a

distinction between the emphasis on logic and science and the notion that philosophical issues were to be understood as embedded in the conceptual world of non-technical human thinking.

While a Wittgensteinian outlook was hot property for a while, it could not continue to be dominant in a world in which science (and not, say, poetry or history) held the intellectual high ground. So, (analytic) philosophy soon reverted to new forms of past ways of thinking,

That development further isolated me over most of my philosophical career. I was committed to a mode of philosophizing that definitely became unfashionable as the decades went by. In fact, it has so far vanished that standard works of the history of analytic philosophy tend not to even see that episode as part of the history of analytic philosophy.

One further thought concerning my philosophical practice must be mentioned. Of the papers collected here, roughly half have been previously published, overwhelmingly in journals. On the other hand, of the other half most have not ever been submitted for publication, in journals or elsewhere. There are two explanations for those non-submissions. First, some are too long or too short (too short to count as discussion pieces in journal publishing) to be considered by journals. But, equally, many were written after I had achieved tenure and promotion and I simply decided that it was not worth the hassle of attempting journal publication.

Let me tell another story–though it is not typical of journal adventures. Once upon a time, a respected journal with a respected editor rejected a piece of mine, the one published here entitled "Descartes' Intentions" (later published in a different journal). A senior colleague of mine, who thought the paper good and who knew the editor well enough, called him to see why. There were two reasons given: the paper was too well written and it went against the long accepted standard account of what Descartes' project was.

Now the innocent might well believe that those were two reasons in favor of publication, not objections to doing so! The editor had forgotten what the point of publishing is.

That, and other more typical encounters with editors and reviewers, led me to suggest to the APA that what it needs to do is conduct a survey of philosophers to determine what are broadly shared criticisms of standard journal practices and to develop a set of best practices to guide journals in response to those criticisms. That suggestion has come to nothing.

It should further be noted here that my philosophical work has also included two books. One, titled *Beginning with the Pre-Socratics*, is for the general reader, including philosophers who are not specialists in ancient philosophy and also including students. It was born of my taking over the department's course in Greek Philosophy while the usual teachers were

away. It is a good and useful introduction, although only the chapter (published here as the opening essay on Parmenides) has any claim to a philosophical achievement.

The second book, much more recent, *On Being True or False: Sentences, Propositions and What is Said*, is a thorough investigation of the issues involved in saying that truth-bearers are such-and-such sort of thing. I (immodestly) think it to be a very original contribution to philosophical thought.

Those papers collected in this volume perhaps show that I have been a good philosopher. For those who are still inclined to think of themselves as just a philosopher and who remain interested in a modestly broad set of issues, reading the papers published in this volume might be a valuable reminder that it is possible to do good and interesting work without tying oneself down in unnecessary (but prudential) ways.

This collection is intended to be an invitation to read some philosophical works and appreciate them simply because you are a philosopher and not a specialist in this or that branch of philosophy.

HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

PARMENIDES:
THE ANALYSIS OF BEING

My book Beginning With the Pre-Socratics*, which was written for both introductory students and broader interested audiences, was not intended to be original (except in the clarity of the writing and the omission of many scholarly debates). It turned out, however, that there was one exception to that: my account of what Parmenides was up to in The Way of Truth. So far as I know, what I had to say about his thought on a variety of topics in that part of his poem has not otherwise been noticed in the standard scholarly literature.*

In consequence, I pulled that material out of the context of the book and created the following essay. I did not completely write it anew, so the essay bears signs of its origin as a particular chapter in a particular book, one written for a non-professional audience. Despite those signs of its place of origin, this is an important essay for our understanding of Parmenides.

Thales, traditionally the first of the Pre-Socratics, was born about 624 BCE, Parmenides about 515. Thus, between them was roughly a full century in the development of philosophical and scientific thought.

Parmenides, however, represents vastly more than the beginning of a second century of philosophy. Everyone agrees that he is *philosophically* the most important Pre-Socratic, that he undermined previous cosmological work, that his conclusions extensively redirected the scientific movement, and that he not only had original things to say, but also argued in an original manner for those views.

To grasp the nature of Parmenides' achievement, we must look beyond the impact he had on his own time. He has, for instance, an effect on twentieth-century readers unlike that of any other Pre-Socratic. Even introductory students want to *argue* with Parmenides, in ways and to an extent that they would not respond to the views of other Pre-Socratics. The reaction of modern philosophers is the same. Thus, the *type* of intellectual activity engaged in by Parmenides was something new, of a kind that makes him more alive to us than are the other historically important early philosophers.

It is easier to note the uniqueness of Parmenides among the Pre-Socratics than to adequately characterize what makes him unique. Let me settle for naming the situation. With significant apologies to Heraclitus, let me say that Parmenides was the first metaphysician.

One of Plato's most important and difficult dialogues is known as the *Parmenides*. In it he "reports" on the meeting of the young Socrates with the famous Parmenides, then aged about 65, who has come to Athens, along with his disciple Zeno, for a festival. From Plato's remarks, such a meeting would have occurred shortly after 450 BCE, making Parmenides' birth about 515. When he died is unknown–sometime after 450.

He was a native and resident of the *polis* of Elea on the western coast of Italy. Like many of his fellow philosophers, he was probably active in the political life of his city. There are rumors that he had some connection with Xenophanes, who spent many years in that part of the Greek world. More important are the reports of his having been a Pythagorean while young. Elea was close to Croton and the other centers of Pythagorean influence in southern Italy. Moreover, internal evidence in his writing shows that Parmenides did know Pythagorean ideas. If that is true, his work would be, in part, a dissent from Pythagoreanism.

Parmenides' Poem

Parmenides' philosophical writing took the form of a poem. About 160 lines, including a few fragmentary ones, of that poem still exist. The introduction or prologue has survived complete. Scholars estimate that we possess about 90 percent of the most important section of the poem, conventionally known as the Way of Truth, but perhaps only 10 percent of the less important section called the Way of Appearance. What does remain of the entire poem gives us today a higher percentage of Parmenides' total work than of any other Pre-Socratic.

The poem, presumably written before Parmenides acquired fame and disciples, is in hexameters, the versification scheme employed by writers of epics (Homer, Hesiod, and others). He is thus to be located, in literary terms, within the epic tradition, which distinguished him (1) from the Ionians, who rejected the poetic past in their invention of the prose treatise, and (2) from Heraclitus, whose affinities were with oracular and aphoristic literature. It is a very debated question as to how bad a poet Parmenides was. It is agreed that his poem is not a success poetically, that it is not a classic of Greek literature (although it is now recognized that Parmenides had a good ear for language and relished Heraclitean' word play).

Its large poetic failures are certainly due, in part, to Parmenides' shortcomings as a writer of verse. More significantly, though, the poem does not succeed as poetry because the new, and very intellectual, wine he attempted to put into the epic bottle was not suitable for that type of container. What is proper for storytelling does not work for presenting abstract deductive argument.

The Prologue. The bulk of the poem, including its philosophical matter, consists of a speech by an unnamed goddess. That speech is prefaced by the following passage:

> *The mares which carry me to what I desire brought me to the Sun's path, that famous highway which carries the man who knows above every city. Along that road I was carried by the wise horses, drawing at full speed the chariot, driven by the daughters of the Sun. The axle, whirled round by the wheels, blazed and sang in the sockets as the goddesses, pulling the veils from their faces, left the house of Night and hastened me toward the light.*
>
> *The paths of Night and Day are blocked by gates, extending high into the air and framed by a lintel and a stone threshold. The great doors with their double bolts are controlled by avenging Justice. The maidens plied her with gentle words and skillfully persuaded her to release the bolts without delay. Pivoting on bronze pins, the doors flew open to create a wide entry-way. Straight through and along the broad road the maidens guided the horses and chariot. The goddess kindly received me, took my right hand in hers and spoke these words to me: "Young man who has been escorted to my house by immortal charioteers, I welcome you. It is not evil that has set you to travel this way, far from the beaten track of men, but both right and justice. It is proper for you to learn all things, both the unchanging heart of complete truth and also how things seem to mortals, in which there is no truth. Despite that lack of truth, you must learn how what seems to be must be because it is accepted."* (Fragment 1)

Then the goddess immediately begins her account of "the unchanging heart of complete truth".

By putting his philosophical views in the mouth of a goddess, Parmenides is claiming for them the status of divine revelation. In doing that he is partially following Homer and Hesiod who begin their epic tales by invoking the assistance of the Muses. Nonetheless, by having the goddess directly speak the words, Parmenides claims considerably more than mere divine *inspiration*.

How did these matters come to be revealed to him? It was the result of a journey "far from the beaten track of men". He had journeyed from darkness ("the house of Night") to light ("the Sun's path"), an allegory or

metaphor (we would say) meaning, then as now, an advance from ignorance to enlightenment. In following the route of "the man who knows", he was given divine assistance, and both justice and the goddess who receives him confirm his right to be there, to learn the truth.

In her introductory remarks, the goddess tells Parmenides that "learning all things" consists in studying two different subject matters. First, he must learn the truth. He must also learn "how things seem to mortals in which there is no truth". I have mentioned that the body of the poem divides into two parts, conventionally called the Way of Truth and the Way of Appearance (or Seeming). Those parts correspond to the two lessons the goddess promises. She begins, as we must, with the Way of Truth.

The Structure and Outcome of the Way of Truth. Having tried to make sense of the earlier pre-Socratics when so little of their writing has survived may make it seem a pure blessing to have so much of the central part of Parmenides' poem to work with. And, of course, the extensive fragments are welcome. However, having more presents its own problems. Translating and understanding Parmenides' poem, especially in its details, is extremely difficult. Scholarly consensus is no greater on deciding the fine points in Parmenides than it is on interpreting his predecessors.

Yet the broad outlines of what Parmenides was doing, at least in the Way of Truth, are very clear. That section of the poem consists of two projects. First Parmenides argues for a thesis. Then he makes clear a set of shocking consequences of accepting that thesis.

This is not a detective story, so it is appropriate to reveal at the start the conclusions he came to. (Knowing where he is going may well help the reader better follow the twists of the argument.) Parmenides first argues that we human beings are wrong in thinking that there is any such thing as *possibility* in the world. What is, *has* to be, and what is not, *cannot* be. But even that won't do: he argues that it makes no sense to talk about what is not. All that we can intelligibly think and say is that things are. That is the outcome of his first project. The second aim is to derive the consequences of that initial conclusion. There are many consequences, all intellectually disturbing. The chief ones are that the world consists of only one object, that that one item of worldly furniture has no properties, and that it cannot have come into being or pass away or change in any other respect. Lastly and obviously, there is no prospect for conducting scientific inquiries, given the nature of what is.

Parmenides does not pronounce those things–he is not in the slightest a mystic or a prophet. He rigorously *argues* that that is how things are. To

understand Parmenides, it is necessary to grasp *why* he holds the views that he does.

The Text

It is necessary to begin the study of the Way of Truth with the first leg of his program, the proof of his fundamental truth. I have combined four separate fragments that compose most of what remains of the first half of the Way of Truth. Fragment 2 certainly came immediately after the prologue and is thus the opening of the account of Truth. Fragment 3 most likely is the final clause of what we call Fragment 2. Again, Fragments 6 and 7 probably form a single unit. I have made them continuous with the other two pieces, though that may not be where they occurred in the original poem.

The following version of these fragments papers over a number of disagreements concerning the proper translation, at least some of which must be discussed later. The reader should attempt to obtain a general grasp of the passage this time through, leaving the ensuing discussion to settle questions of precise meaning.

> *Come now, I will tell you-and you must tell others-the only conceivable ways of thinking. The first, that it is and it must be, is the persuasive way for it goes with truth. The other way of thinking, that it is not and it cannot be, is wholly impossible. That is impossible because you cannot know what is not nor can you express it [Fragment 2], for it is the same thing which can be thought and which can be. [Fragment 3] What you can speak of and think of has to be, since it can be wI hold you back. I also hold you back from that way on which mortals, knowing nothing, wander two-headed, helplessness guiding their wandering minds. They go along, both deaf and blind, in a daze, creatures without judgment, who think that to be and not to be are the same and yet not the same and that the way of all things turns upon itself. [Fragment 6.] For this shall never be proved: that things that are not are. So, do not take that way of thinking. Do not let your habits, born of long experience, force your thoughts in that direction, to travel with an aimless eye, a droning ear and tongue. Rather judge by your reason the contentious refutation I have spoken. [Fragment 7.]*

Interpretive problems arise immediately with that passage. The core of the poem begins with a reference to what is literally translatable as “ways of seeking/of searching”. Most translators render that into English as “ways of inquiry”, replying on a connection between seeking for something and inquiring into something. The consequence of that translation (probably its

intent) is that Parmenides is immediately assimilated to his predecessors through the idea of inquiry.

Yet he did not use their word, *historie*, as he could have had he wanted to align himself with their concerns and outlook. As he went so far as to invent a new word for what he is talking about, it is safest not to think of him as concerned with inquiry, at least not after we have appropriated that word for his predecessors' activities.

What he does seem to have in mind are ways of thinking about things, the ways in which we ordinary people conceive of and talk about things. Hence my translation "ways of thinking".

Parmenides says that he will point out the *conceivable* ways of thinking. Whereas Fragment 2 gives the distinct impression that only two such ways exist, Fragment 6 makes it clear that there is yet another. He thus holds that there are three possible ways of thinking about things.

His initial aim in the Way of Truth can now be more precisely specified. He wants to establish a major thesis: though there are, formally speaking, three conceivable ways to think about things, on investigation two of those will actually turn out to be impossible. Hence Parmenides believes that one and only one possible way exists of thinking of things. That one survivor functions as the premise for conclusions drawn in the second of the two projects that constitute the Way of Truth.

The three ways are (1) the one that will survive the process of elimination is "it is and it must be"; (2) a way that will turn out to be "wholly impossible" is "it is not and cannot be"; and (3) a third way (also impossible), belatedly mentioned and rejected in Fragment 6 without ever being as clearly stated as the first two. One central task of the following commentary will be to provide much more detailed characterization of that somewhat mysterious third way.

"**It**". Anyone who has not worked through Parmenides before will be asking some highly reasonable questions by now, the most important of which is "What in the world is going on?" What, despite the hints, is "a way of thinking"? What is meant by that talk about "it is" and "it is not" and so on? The next step must be a clarification of some of these troubles. Let us begin with the subject pronoun.

What the 'it" in Parmenides' formulas refers to has been *the* scholarly question about this part of the poem. The text provides no obvious antecedent for the pronoun (no wonder readers lose their bearings). Consequently, differences of opinion arise as to how to understand what Parmenides is talking about.

Of the several options offered by the history of thought about Parmenides (which includes the idea that "it" lacks an object as in "it is raining"), the most popular has become "what is". That does have some virtues and so cannot be lightly dismissed. But it has even more serious flaws. There is no textual evidence that Parmenides intended that, or any other, *definite* reading of the pronoun's reference. Furthermore, if he had meant that he could easily have said so, could in fact have very powerfully asserted the first two ways of thought to be "what is, is" and 'what is not, is not". Yet he didn't. Lastly, so interpreted, the "it" requires a different subject in each of the two ways – "what is" in the first and "what is not" in the other. Yet those "ways" seem to be options concerning one and the same thing, something picked out by "it".

There is a better way to consider Parmenides' use of the pronoun "it". He used the word "it" from the beginning and continues to do so throughout the Way of Truth. He does not attempt to fill in the blank. Yet he must have known that the question "What is the 'it' that is and so on?" is askable and would surely be asked. We must conclude that the openness is produced by his use of the pronoun (or the equivalent device in his Greek), his "failure" to be more specific, was intended. He said "it" because he meant *it*.

It is possible to make sense of his practice only if we regard the correct answer to "What is the it?" as "*Whatever*". That is, Parmenides did not further specify the object of the pronoun because it refers to *anything that can be thought of or mentioned.* He did not have in mind some particular thing or things. Rather, he was talking about anything whatsoever.

What Parmenides needed was the notion of a variable. In the algebraic formula "2x = y", the symbols "x" and "y" are variables: they don't specify particular numbers as does "2". At the time no one, not even mathematicians, had a clear-cut understanding of what a variable is. What he was trying to say, in the terminology of modern logic, is that "x is and x must be", "x is not and x cannot be" where the variable x ranges over whatever objects can be thought of, spoken of.

"Is". In the process of clarifying what Parmenides meant in calling "it is" a "way of thought", one item requiring clarification is the *verb*. In fact, the meaning of the verb in his formulas is very important.

The verb *to be* is central to Parmenides' philosophical investigations–he talks about "it *is* and it must *be*", "it *is* not and it cannot *be*" and, in his account of the third ways, says "*to be* and not *to be* are the same yet not the same".

In light of his concern with the verb *to be*, it is possible to describe Parmenides as inquiring into Being. His "ways of thought" can then be thought of as possible ways in which we can think of Being.

Philosophers today say that there are three ways in which the word *is* (and other forms of *to be*) are used. It can be used as equivalent to "exists". Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be?" is certainly a question about existence. The question "Do dinosaurs exist?" is more naturally phrased in terms of the verb *to be* (namely as "*Are* there dinosaurs?") and the answer "There *aren't* any" denies their existence.

The second "is" is today called the "is" of *predication*. We say not only "Socrates is" but also "Socrates is wise" ("is fascinating, pudgy, tough" and so on), and we thus use "is" as a copula, as a connector, hooking up a subject term with a predicate. So too denials are linguistically possible with this "is": "She is not very cheerful", "Snails are not good companions".

The final use of the word "is" is usually referred to by contemporary philosophers as the "is" of *identity*. We can use the word "is" not only to assert existence or the possession of a property, but also to indicate the *sameness* or *difference* of things. We say things such as "Clark Kent is Superman" and mean that the person called by the one name is *identical with* the person called by the other name. We also deny identity: "That man is not (the same person as) the one who robbed me." We use the "is" of identity to hold that one thing is or is not the same as something named or described or identified differently.

As Parmenides was concerned with Being, with the verb "to be", which of those different uses of "is" did he have in mind? The correct answer is "All of them". Parmenides himself would not have been in a position to say that there are different uses of "is" covered by his arguments and views. He no doubt realized that "is" occurs in different linguistic contexts, but it would not have occurred to *anyone* at that time that there are significant differences in the meaning of "is" as it occurs in different contexts. Yet if we are to make sense of Parmenides' conclusions, we must hold him to have known that we make existence statements and predications and claims about identity with the word "is".

Most interpreters have treated Parmenides as concerned with *existence* claims. That is, when he lays out the conceivable modes of thought, he is take to be asserting that, with respect to its existence, we might say three things of an object, namely that it exists (and must) or that it does not exist (and cannot), or something that amounts to saying that its existing and not existing are the same yet not the same.

More recent scholarship has made it clear that Parmenides saw his formulas as applicable to the "is" of predication. I will go even further and

set out his argument in such a way that the "is" of identity becomes crucial. Nonetheless, the best way to begin working through Parmenides' position and through his arguments in support of it, is to interpret the various occurrences of "to be" in the Way of Truth to mean "to exist". However, in the long run the verb must also be interpreted in other ways if we are to understand him fully. The "is" in "Socrates is ill" and that in "The teacher of Plato is Socrates" (neither of which can be paraphrased as "exists") are as much subject to Parmenides' arguments as is the "is" of "Socrates is (exists)".

Consequently, we shall initially regard those first two ways of thinking as "it exists and it must exist" and "it does not exist and it cannot exist". The third way will also be specifiable in terms of existence. Later, having worked through the relevant parts of the poem with that interpretation in mind, we will have to extend our attention to other uses of the verb "to be".

Modality and the Ways of Thinking. Given the additional understanding we have now gained, let us return to the topic of "ways of thinking" and try to grasp what Parmenides was up to. This time the inquiry can be best conducted by looking into what Parmenides himself says about them.

He says that the first two ways consist of two clauses apiece: "it is *and* it must be" and "It is not *and* it cannot be." Most explanations of his meaning concentrate overwhelmingly on the first clauses and largely, if not wholly, ignore the second. Yet the second conjuncts are the keys to understanding Parmenides.

Those second clauses have been translated here as "It must be" (or "It has to be") and "It cannot be". However, we all know that what must be (what has to be) is the same as what is *necessary* and talk of what cannot be is talk of what is *impossible*. Hence the translations of the second conjuncts could equally have been "It is necessary for it to be" and "It is impossible for it to be."

Let me introduce some technical terminology. In philosophy today, the (perfectly ordinary and everyday) concepts of *necessity* and *impossibility* are called *modal* concepts. A third important modal notion is related to those two: that of *possibility*. Possibility covers such phrases as "it is possible", "it can be", "maybe", "perhaps", "probably".

Parmenides, then, partially characterized each of the first two ways of thinking in terms of modal concepts: the first way involves the notion of necessity, the second the concept of impossibility. Moreover, I shall be maintaining that the third of his ways of thinking is best seen as involving the third modal notion, that of possibility. There are exactly three

conceivable modes of thought in Parmenides' scheme just because there are exactly three modal concepts.

Parmenides as Logician

If one looks carefully at the fragments translated earlier, it is striking how frequently modal ideas turn up in them. Noticing that feature of Parmenides' thought leads to an understanding of the kind of philosophical activity he was engaged in. His first and fundamental interest, however strange this may seem to non-philosophers, was in those modal concepts, in the logical relationships they have, both to each other and to other notions.

That interest marks Parmenides off decisively from his predecessors. They were fundamentally interested in the structure and history of the universe, although some were even more concerned with the religious and human lessons to be learned from that scientific endeavor. Parmenides' point of departure, however, is not cosmology, nor does he worry about the implications of cosmology for the conduct of human life. Rather, his problems–what he thinks about–have to do with certain *concepts* and their *logical implications and relationships*. If the other Pre-Socratics are the prototypes of today's scientists and of those who discuss the human implications of science, then Parmenides is the proto-*logician*.

In taking up the investigation of certain conceptual questions, Parmenides became the ultimate ancestor what has come to be one of the central types of philosophical activity. Although it is striking to discover the originator of a wholly new type of intellectual interest, it is not surprising that Parmenides engaged in that new style of inquiry in connection with the modal concepts. If, as there is good evidence for, he did begin his intellectual career among the Pythagoreans, he was there exposed to sophisticated mathematical thought. One clear and obvious feature of mathematical discussion is frequent use of various modal notions. For instance, an early mathematical discovery was that the result of multiplying any integer by 2 *has to be* an even number. A more complicated realization was that it is *impossible* to construct a right triangle whose hypotenuse is shorter than either of the other two sides. Even possibility is easily spotted in mathematicians' talk: "*Can* (say) 2,372 be divided by 3 without remainder?"

Very probably, Parmenides' interest in modal concepts arose from his exposure to the frequent use of those notions in the mathematical work of the Pythagoreans. The conceptual investigations into which that interest led him not only comprise the core of his philosophical thought but were also the first such investigations in what turned out to be a central form of philosophical enterprise.

What Modal Statements Entail

Parmenides' philosophical thought began in an interest in modality and in logical relationships entered into by the modal concepts. In particular, he inquired into what follows about how the world is from a modal statement and, conversely, what follows modally from a statement about how the world is. Let us start with the first topic, what modal statements entail, because Parmenides' conclusions about that are clear.

Suppose first that it is necessary that there is a man named Socrates. What follows about Socrates' existence? Clearly, if it is necessary for him to exist, then it logically follows that he does exist. To generalize, if something *has to be* so, then it *is* so. (Example: if the keys *have to be* here, then they *are* here.)

Turn now to the concept of impossibility. What logical connection exists between (1) the impossibility of something and (2) whether or not that thing is so? Suppose, for example, that Socrates *cannot* exist. Clearly, then he *does not* exist. (If the keys truly c*annot be* on the table, then they *are not* there.) That is, the impossibility of something requires that the thing is not so.

What about the analogous implications of the third modal concept, possibility? Here the story is quite different, for there is no analog. From the possibility that Socrates exists, it cannot legitimately be inferred either that he does exist or that he does not exist. For of course, the possibility of his existing leaves open the possibility of his not existing. To generalize, that something is possible (such as that the Angels will win the pennant) does not logically require either that it is so or that it is not so (that they will win or not win).

In sum, knowing how the world must be, or how it cannot be, tells you how it is, but knowing how it *might* be does not settle questions of how it is.

What Entails Modal Statements

The preceding claims concern what inferences can legitimately be made from modal assertions to assertions about how the world is. Those relationships, being straightforward, were worked out and recognized by Parmenides once he had begun reflecting on the modal concepts.

In attempting to explain his stating the first two ways of thinking as compound propositions ("It is *and* it must be", "It is not *and* it cannot be"), we must conclude that he also tried to determine what the logical connections are in the opposite direction. That is, he wanted to see what

modal assertions can be inferred from assertions about how the world is. Not only did he certainly make the attempt, but he also thereby arrived at views that are absolutely at the heart of his philosophical system.

In contrast to the investigation just recorded, Parmenides started this phase of the inquiry from assertions about how things are and then looked to discover, what, if any, modal implications those have. Broadly speaking, three sorts of things can be said about how things are. For instance, what are the ways in which we can think about Socrates' existence? We can think first that there is such a person ("It is") or, second, that there is not ("It is not"). Over and above those primary ways of thinking, those types of assertion, a third, somewhat heterogeneous class of things we can and do say when faced with issues of how things are, that in different ways hedge our bets or otherwise qualify our assertion. For example, we might say, "I don't know" ("have no idea", and so on) "whether (say) Socrates exists". Or we can say "Well, he doesn't exist, but he used to". At one time in Socrates' life it could have been said "he exists, be he won't tomorrow". For reasons to be seen later, I am lumping this somewhat diverse group of ways of talking together as a third way of responding to questions about how things are.

Now, given those three possible starting places, Parmenides came to the following conclusions. It logically follows from a proposition that something is, such as that Socrates exists, that it *must* be, that (say) Socrates must exist. Furthermore, if something is not, then it is logically necessary that it *cannot* be: if Socrates does not exit, then it is logically necessary that he cannot be: if Socrates does not exist, there cannot be such a person.

Here it is worth observing that precisely those two conclusions cause the radically unorthodox views Parmenides came to hold. Put another way, to reject Parmenides' ultimate theses about what is, and about what it is like, and about change, requires rejecting just those two conclusions. We do not ordinary think that if something is that it therefore must be, or that what is not cannot be. Any critical inquiry into Parmenides' philosophical views must attempt to understand why he thought that he was right (and we are wrong) about those particular logical relationships.

Why did he reach those conclusions? No words of his own on the topic have been preserved. I presume that Parmenides argued as follows: suppose we start with the thought that "it is", for example, that Socrates exists. This surely means (Parmenides thought) "He has to exist," for if an existing thing does not *have* to exist, it might be non-existent; but being both an existing thing and yet nonexistent is contradictory and so impossible. Hence, Socrates' existence is incompatible with the possibility of his not exiting. If something exists, it must exist.

One can fashion a parallel argument about the second alternative: that Socrates does not exist. Suppose that he does not exist. If so, that *must be* how things are. Otherwise, something nonexistent might nonetheless exist, but that cannot be. So, what does *not* exist cannot exist. To say "Socrates doesn't exist but he might exist" is contradictory. If something does not exist, it cannot possibly exist.

Something like those arguments (misguided though they are) must have been behind Parmenides' conclusions that what is must be and what is not cannot be.

To pick up the thread of the discussion: So far nothing has been said of that third group of ways of commenting on the existence of something. In response to "Does Socrates exist?" one can say not only "He does" or "He does not" but also, for instance, "I don't know". The important thing to notice here–and Parmenides must have been well aware of it–is that the "I don't know" answer, and others of this group, commit the speaker to the belief that it is *possible* Socrates exists and *also possible* that he does not. Parmenides was probably less interested in the "I don't know" answers than in others of the group; for example, "He used to but no longer does," "He does but will cease to someday". All those items also assume that it is possible for a thing to be and possible for it not to be. In short, members of this third group of responses all connect up with the concept of possibility.

Preliminary Summary

So far the results of reconstructing Parmenides' thinking are these: he found that "It is necessary that it is" entails "It is" and that "It is" entails "It is necessary for it to be". That is, how things are and how they must be came to be thought of by Parmenides as *equivalent*. And so we get his first way of thinking: "It is and it must be." Even "It is" by itself will do since one who says that *must mean* "it must be".

Similarly, the arguments seem to establish an equivalence between "it is not" and "it is impossible for it to be". Thus, he arrives at his second way of thought: "it is not and cannot be" or just "it is not."

The third modal concept, possibility, does not entail any assertion about how things are, and conversely, any assertion such as "I have no idea" or "Things were different" or "Things will be different" leads back to the concept of possibility.

Parmenides' first aim in the Way of Truth was to establish the following: for any object that can be thought of, imagined, there are three conceivable ways of thinking of it with respect to whether it is (taken for now as meaning whether it exists). We must either say that it is, it exists, and to say *that*

(Parmenides has been held to argue) is the same as saying it must exist; or we can maintain that it does not exist and that (he holds) commits us to thinking of it as something that cannot exist. Or we may offer a range of answers that commit us to regarding the thing not as a necessary or impossible existent but as a possible existent.

From Cataloging to Criticism

We have now followed Parmenides through the first phase of his first project. He takes himself as having given a complete inventory of the conceivable responses to a question that can be asked of any object we can think of, namely "Is it?" (which we are presently interpreting as "Does it exist?"). Moreover, in compiling that inventory, he has argued that each of the potential responses has very distinctive connections to one or another of the three modal concepts.

In the second stage of his project, Parmenides will examine the three conceivable responses to determine whether they are legitimate. We will see that Parmenides finds only one of the three a genuine possibility, an intelligible way of thinking of the existence of anything. He will provide arguments designed to eliminate two of the candidates.

Before taking up those arguments, it is important to reflect on this new direction of Parmenides' inquiry. So far, his aim has been *descriptive*, merely to catalog the possible ways of thinking of a thing's existence and the relations between those and the modal concepts. But now Parmenides, in going on to characterize some of those possibilities as illegitimate, as unintelligible, will no longer be describing. In attempting to eliminate some and commend others, he will be taking sides, *prescribing* how we must think if we are to think intelligibly and truly. And since we humans accept one of those ways of thought that he brands illegitimate, he will be *criticizing* how we think.

The Third Way

In his own ordering of the arguments, Parmenides disposes of the second way before he even mentions the other unacceptable way of regarding the existence of things. For our purposes, it will be best to reverse that order of criticism and to examine first his rejection of the third way. Everything he has to say on that topic is given in the following words:

> *I also hold you back from that way on which mortals, knowing nothing, wander two-headed, helplessness guiding their wandering minds. They go*

> *along, both deaf and blind, in a daze, creatures without judgment, who think that to be and not to be are the same yet not the same and that the way of all things turns upon itself. [Fragment 6] For this shall never be proved: that things that are not are. So do not take that way of thinking. Do not let your habits, born of long experience, force your thought in that direction, to travel with an aimless eye, a droning ear and tongue. Rather judge by your reason the contentious refutation I have spoken. [Fragment 7]*

Compared with the manner in which Parmenides eliminates the second way, this passage is notable both for its length and for the scorn he heaps on this way of regarding existence. Two different reasons explain those features of the passage: first, he genuinely believes this to be an absurd way to think; yet, second, it is precisely how we "mortals" do talk and think about the existence of objects.

Recall that Parmenides never characterizes this mode of thought as precisely as he does the other two. The reason for that omission is fairly clear: since he is here discussing how we all think, there seems no special need to describe it in detail–he thinks we are perfectly familiar with it. However, even though we do know it full well, our understanding of Parmenides' position will be enormously assisted by reminding ourselves of just what we say and think about the existence of things. So, I will set out those features of our ordinary thought and talk about existence with which Parmenides was concerned.

Of some things (say, polar bears and mountains), we think and say that they exist. Of others, we deny that they exist: there is no free lunch and no Santa Claus. About still others, we don't know whether they exist or not (such as the ski mittens I lost three years ago, Howard Hughes's final will, an inhabited planet in the next galaxy). We think it possible such things exist, but we also think it possible that they do not.

Yet another group of ideas must be noticed. We think that, of those things that do exist, it is possible for them not to exist. For example, each of us might never have existed. In fact, every (?) object that does exist came into existence at some time and will later pass out of existence. Conversely, those things that do not exist (except contradictory objects such as round squares) might have existed (such as Santa Claus) or might come to exist (such as my tenth child). Moreover, many things that do not exist have done so in the past although they no longer do so (such as our great-great grandparents, or George Washington's toothbrush).

Lastly, we mortals think that questions of whether a particular thing exists or not is settled by experience. Just because we can imagine a volcano in the middle of New York City, it does not follow that there is one. We learn that there is (or is not) such a thing by experience, by employing our

senses, by making inferences from what we observe of this world. Ultimately, observation shows us what there is.

This constellation of ideas Parmenides thinks of as the third way, and thinks it absurd.

Parmenides' Criticism of Our Way of Thought

That goddess who is supposedly instructing Parmenides says she wants to "hold him back from that way" on which "mortals" travel. What is that route? We humans, we mortals, regard the existence of things within a framework in which the notion of possibility occupies a central position. For the most part, we do not think that things we can conceive of must exist or cannot exist. It is possible for flying elephants to exist, but it is also conceivable that no such creatures exist. Whether or not such things exist is a *contingent* feature of the world, not something that can be settled by reason alone.

Furthermore, of things that do exist, we do not (with perhaps rare exceptions) hold that they must exist. It is quite possible that they will not exist. In fact, at least most things that exist were not in existence at some previous time, and (we hold) a time will come when they will again no longer exist. So too for things that do not exist. Many (at least) could exist; many non-existents did formerly exist; and others will do so in the future.

That group of beliefs, resting on the concepts of possibility and contingency, Parmenides holds to be wholly absurd. Of that group, the present argument is directed particularly against our idea that it is possible (and in fact happens) that things come into being and pass away. That that is the specific object of attack here comes out in the other pieces of argument we have not yet examined. He says that we think that "the way of all things turns upon itself"–that is, we think things do come into existence and then turn again and pass on. (Incidentally, Parmenides' way of putting that point, his talk of "turning upon itself" may be an allusion to Heraclitus, who *insisted* on the transience of all things.) Again, notice Parmenides' other criticism: "For this shall never be proved: that things that are not are." He implies that humans believe what cannot be proved, namely that things that do not exist might nonetheless (come to) be.

Parmenides, then, found human thoughts about existence complete nonsense. Why? What convinced him of that? Precisely those conclusions reached in the first phase of the inquiry. He had been persuaded by his analysis of the concepts of existence and necessity that to regard a thing as existing is equivalent to thinking that it must exist. Yet when we mortals say, "It is, it exists," we assume, contrary to his analysis, that it is possible

for the thing not to be. But if a thing that exists must exist, then our ordinary idea that its non-being is *possible* must be wholly confused.

So too for the case of nonexistence. We humans think that, for instance, "It does not exist" is compatible with "But someday it might exist." Yet Parmenides' argument has convinced him that for a thing not to be is identical with the impossibility of its existence. Once again, our human way of thought is illegitimate, because it conflicts with the outcome of Parmenides' investigation into the relation between the modal concepts and the concept of existence.

Parmenides' conclusion is that we cannot intelligibly talk and think as we do about existence. We "go along, both deaf and blind, in a daze, creatures without judgment".

Reason and the Senses

Parmenides has argued (1) that nothing new can come into being, nor can things that exist cease existing and (2) that our everyday ideas to the contrary are mad.

A likely response may be made to those contentions, as Parmenides knew full well: "What a silly thing to say, that birth and death, creation and destruction, are not possible. Just open your eyes and ears. You can see the flowers popping out where there were none, watch the cake come into being when before there had been only ingredients, see the house rising in the vacant lot. Or toss a paper into the fire and watch it be destroyed–see the leaves wither and fall and turn to dust. Questions about existence are settled by the senses, by observing the world around us. And what we observe is things coming into being and things passing away."

Parmenides anticipated that objection, for he knew that one component of our ideas about existence is that existential issues are to be settled by resort to the experience and observation. He anticipated the criticism and replied to it at the end of what is now Fragment 7: "So do not take that way of thinking. Do not let your habits, born of long experience, force your thoughts in that direction, to travel with an aimless eye, a droning ear and tongue. Rather judge by your reason the contentious refutation I have spoken."

His reply is, essentially, "Don't reject what I have held just because it conflicts with what your senses tell you. That you trust your senses over my argument is just a matter of habit, with no rational basis. Exercise your reason. You will find that my arguments against coming into being and passing away are impeccable and that therefore the senses must be mistaken in telling us the opposite."