

Theory and History of Ontology ([www.ontology.co](http://www.ontology.co)) by Raul Corazzon | e-mail: [rc@ontology.co](mailto:rc@ontology.co)

## Plato's *Parmenides* and the Dilemma of Participation

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### Ancient interpretations of Plato's *Parmenides*

"Plato's *Parmenides* was probably written within the last two decades preceding the death of its author in 347 B.C. (1) Despite almost two millennia of documented commentary, however, scholars today are still struggling to make sense of the dialogue. Almost every major discussion of the *Parmenides* in this century has begun with some remark about its extraordinary difficulty; (2) and no line of interpretation has yet been offered that a majority of commentators find persuasive. The main problem of interpretation, most agree, is what to make of Plato's treatment of the several hypotheses that constitutes the second portion of the dialogue (Stephanus 137C-166C, referred to subsequently as "*Parmenides* II"). One source of perplexity is that this latter portion fails to exhibit any obvious continuity of subject matter with the first part of the dialogue ("*Parmenides* I"), making it difficult to determine what the dialogue as a whole is about. To make matters worse, the argumentation of the second part is so extremely condensed that it sometimes gives the appearance of being incoherent. As a result, not only are individual arguments often very hard to decipher, but moreover it is far from apparent what Plato was trying to accomplish with these arguments in the first place.

(...)

Two major lines of interpretation were already established by the time of Proclus' *Parmenides Commentary* in the fifth century A.D., (3) and both have prominent followers in the present century. As Proclus notes in the first book of his commentary, (4) some readers view the dialogue as an exercise in logic. Within this group, some read *Parmenides* II as a polemical tour-de-force in which methods of argument derived from Zeno are turned against their originator, in an effort by Plato to show that Zeno's own monistic views lead to absurdities of the very sort he purports to demonstrate against the champions of pluralism. Others within this group read the second part more or less at face value, as a demonstration of a logical method that will enable Socrates to avoid the pitfalls in his theory of Forms that are exposed by Parmenides in the first part of the dialogue. In either case, readers of this persuasion view the dialogue primarily as a dialectical exercise, devoid of any positive metaphysical content.

The second major line of interpretation identified by Proclus (5) assigns *Parmenides* II a definite metaphysical purpose. An early version of this approach (perhaps associated with Origen in the third century A.D. (6) identifies the topic of the dialogue as the Being of the historical Parmenides, with the consequence that the exclusively negative results of the first hypothesis come to be viewed as adding to the pluralistic list of features denied of the singular Being in Parmenides' poem. The tradition of interpretation with which Proclus himself joins forces, on the other hand, is that beginning with Plotinus and moving through Porphyry to Iamblichus and Syrianus. As Proclus puts it, (7) commentators of this group take the subject of the dialogue to be "all things that get their

reality from the One," which he later identifies with the Good of Plato's *Republic*. (8) Keying upon the conclusion at *Parmenides* 142A that the One can be neither expressed nor conceived, Proclus reads the results of the first hypothesis as a demonstration of the ineffable transcendence of this Supreme Principle. (9)" (pp. XI-XII)

## Notes

(1) See W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 5, p. 34. The most recent attempt to assign a date to the *Parmenides* is G. R. Ledger's *Re-Counting Plato*, which locates it between the *Republic* and the *Theaetetus* sometime before 369 B.C. My own view of the matter, defended in appendix B of *Plato's Late Ontology*, is that the second part of the dialogue at least was composed somewhat later, perhaps around the time of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*.

(2) Thus, for example, the opening comment of F. M. Cornford (*Plato and Parmenides*, p. V) that ancient and modern scholars alike have differed more widely about the second part of the *Parmenides* than about any of the other dialogues, that of M. Miller (*Plato's Parmenides*, p. 3) that the *Parmenides* is "the most enigmatic of all of Plato's dialogues," and R. S. Brumbaugh's opening remark in *Plato on the One* that no other work in the history of philosophy has retained the obscurity of this particular writing.

(3) A history of commentary on the *Parmenides* up to the time of Proclus is given in John Dillon's introduction to *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, translated in part by Glenn Morrow and completed by Dillon.

(4) Proclus' *Parmenides Commentary* 630.37-635.27.

(5) Ibid. 635.31-640.16.

(6) See Dillon in Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, p. 8.

(7) Proclus' *Parmenides Commentary* 638.18-19.

(8) Ibid. 1097.10, *passim*.

(9) Ibid. 46K ff., from the Latin translation. The manner in which this reading anticipates, and to some extent inspires, the "negative theology" of the Middle Ages is noted by Cornford (*Plato and Parmenides*, p. VI) and by R. Klibansky (*Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, pp. 286, 309).

From: Kenneth M. Sayre, *Parmenides' Lesson*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1996.

## Brief outline of the *Parmenides*

"0. Stage-setting (126a-127d)

1. The *elicitation* of Socrates' theory of forms by Zeno's contradictions (127d-130a)
2. Parmenides' *refutations* of Socrates' theory (130a-134e)

1) Inquiry into the range of the forms (130b-130e)

2) The exposure of how participation appears to contradict the unity of the form (130e-133a)

(i) Against the unity (to be understood as the integrity) of the participated form, the dilemma of participation by whole or by part of the form (130e-131e)

(ii) Against the unity (to be understood as the singularity) of the participated form, the regress arguments (131e-133a)

3) The exposure of how, if the forms and their participants belong to separate domains, forms are unknowable (133a-134e)

3. Parmenides' reorienting help: the method of "gymnastic" (135a-137c)

#### 4. Parmenides' return to Zenonian contradiction: the four pairs of apparently antithetical hypotheses (137d-166b)

(1) If the One is, it both has none of the possible characters, including being and unity, (hypothesis I, 137d-142a) and has all of the possible characters (hypothesis II, 142b-155e) and transits between them (hypothesis Ha, 155e-157b).

(2) If the One is, "the others" both participate in it and as a result have all the possible characters (hypothesis III, 157b-159b) and do not participate in it and as a result have no characters at all (hypothesis IV, 159b-160d).

(3) If the One is not, it both is, as referent of speech and knowledge, different from "the others" and participates in greatness, equality, and smallness and participates in being in some sense, transiting between being and not-being, (hypothesis V, 160b-163b) *and* -- since it does not participate in being in any sense -- cannot have any characters at all (hypothesis VI, 163b-164b).

(4) If the One is not, "the others" *both* will not "truly" have, but will "seem" and "appear" to have, all the possible characters (hypothesis VII, 164b-165e) *and* -- since they cannot participate in anything that is not -- cannot even "seem" and "appear" to have any of the possible characters (hypothesis VIII, 165e-166b)." (pp. 185-186)

From: Mitchell H. Miller, Jr., *Plato's Parmenides. The Conversion of the Soul*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1986.

#### A survey of contemporary interpretations (under construction)

"The sheer magnitude of the scholarly literature on Plato makes its assessment difficult. Even if we leave aside editions and translations, the study of Plato is carried on in many languages other than the more familiar English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish and by scholars in an astonishing diversity of fields: anthropology, archeology, art history, classical philology, city planning, drama, education, geography, history, law, literature, mathematics, medicine, music, penology, philosophy, politics, psychology, religious studies, rhetoric, and sociology. At least partly for this reason, there has been no really comprehensive review of the literature recently and it is questionable whether such a thing is even possible. The problem can be reduced to more manageable proportions by distinguishing among the diverse purposes for which scholars study Plato's dialogues. For a substantial amount of the Plato literature is essentially concerned with discovering Plato's answers to the questions of concern to contemporary scholars and researchers, or, more plainly, 'the enterprise of mining Plato for the purposes of one's own philosophizing' [cited from Rudolph Weingartner]. Guthrie is correct that there is nothing intrinsically better about what he calls, on the other hand, 'the historical approach' or 'a scholar's approach,' but the difference is often overlooked. The historical and scholarly approach has its own aims and uses, and is the concern here. Of that still substantial Plato literature which is left, there is a further distinction to be made between the study of Platonism, which involves study of the dialogues along with many other factors, texts, and influences, and the study and interpretation of the dialogues in and for themselves. That is to say, the subject of these pages is the state of the question about how to understand and interpret the dialogues of Plato, to discover their meaning in their own context, in terms of their own aims, functions, structures, and principles." (p. 309)

Gerald Press, "The State of the Question in the Study of Plato", *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 34, 1996, pp. 507-532. Reprinted in: Nicholas D. Smith (ed.), *Plato. Critical Assessments*, Volume I: *General Issues of Interpretation*, London: Routledge 1998, pp. 309-332.