

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications

Philosophy, Department of

1-1-2001

Review of *Plato's Reception of Parmenides* by John A. Palmer

Owen Goldin

Marquette University, owen.goldin@marquette.edu

Published version. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2001). [Permalink](#). © 1997 Bryn Mawr Commentaries. Used with permission.

John A. Palmer, *Plato's Reception of Parmenides*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. Pp. xiii, 294. ISBN 0-19-823800-2. \$65.00.

Reviewed by Owen Goldin, Department of Philosophy, Marquette University

Word count: 2049 words

There used to be general agreement about the metaphysical accounts given by Parmenides and Plato and the relationship between the two. The traditional story is that Parmenides was a numerical monist, employing an analysis of εἶναι to argue for the conclusion that there is only one being.¹ The story goes on to say that within the *Republic* Plato accepts a number of Parmenides' conclusions (that what is knowable is coextensive with that which is, something eternal, changeless, and not accepting of nonbeing) but that he rejected Parmenides' argument that from the impossibility of nonbeing numerical monism follows. Only in the *Sophist* does Plato recognize that his pluralism require a decisive break from Parmenidean logic; and in that dialogue he shows how we can say that one thing *is not* another: they *are different*.²

During the last several decades, a number of scholars have made the case that this story is to be revised: neither text nor doxography provide conclusive evidence for ascribing numerical monism to Parmenides.³ It is Melissus who employs Eleatic argumentation to argue for a unique being. In positing a multiplicity of beings (Forms) that (in some manner) exclude not being, Plato is a faithful follower of Parmenides.

Within the *Parmenides* and *Sophist* Plato portrays Parmenides as a numerical monist. On this new account, Plato either misunderstands the fundamental point made in a poem (the whole of which was presumably available to him) or misrepresents Parmenides' teaching because he thinks that Parmenides' logic commits him to such a monistic conclusion in spite of himself.⁴

The present book argues that Plato himself read Parmenides as a pluralist. Palmer suggests that Zeno's denial of a plurality of beings, presented in the beginning of the dialogues, represents not a development of Parmenidean thought but a sophistic deformation of it. Palmer takes seriously the fact that it is through the mouth of Parmenides that we hear many of the raw materials required for responding to the puzzles to which Parmenidean argumentation can lead. He suggests that we read the *Parmenides*, especially the second half, not as an aporetic web of contradictory conclusions, to be sorted out by Plato's or the reader's metaphysical and logical innovations, but as an intentional mix of Parmenidean and pseudo-Parmenidean arguments about being. The Eleatic Visitor of the *Sophist* is not a true parricide. Rather, Plato portrays him as a true Eleatic, employing what Plato takes to be truly Parmenidean lines of argumentation to respond to sophistic pseudo-Eleatic lines of argument which reject the distinction between image and reality.

Palmer employs two strategies to make his case. First, he closely analyses what Plato actually says about or attributes to Parmenides in order to show that Plato does not actually attribute the view that there is only one being to Parmenides as a matter of historical fact: he simply points to how such a view can be teased out of Parmenides' poem. Second, he employs the *Euthydemus* and non-Platonic sources to show that the difficulties concerning predication and appearance that Plato confronts have their historical source not in Parmenides but in various sophists.

The book is dense, and is packed with close textual and philosophical analysis which ranges throughout the Platonic corpus, and beyond. Palmer's account rests on a valuable and careful reading of the end of *Republic 5*. According to Palmer, Plato reads the goddess as having recognized three distinct paths: that it is, that it is not, and that it both is and is not. Plato follows Parmenides in realizing that there is a certain variety of being that is found in the case of the sort of thing that is knowable: whatever such a thing *is*, it is in a manner that is both stable and necessary. The path to knowledge is directed only towards such beings so, if there is such a thing as knowledge, there are such beings. Palmer emphasizes that for both Plato and Parmenides the existence of knowledge is a crucial unstated assumption. It is precisely this assumption that is denied by the lovers of sights and sounds of *Republic 5*. Palmer identifies these with certain sophists, especially Hippias and Gorgias, although it is not clear to me that they are to be understood as theorists at all, as opposed to ordinary people. Palmer identifies Hippias as a main representative of the lovers of sights and sounds on the basis of a reading of *Hippias Major* presented in unpublished lectures by M. Burnyeat. Palmer understands Gorgias' *On What-is-Not* as having as its main thesis not "that nothing is or exists *simpliciter* but that nothing is in the manner of the philosophers' fundamental entities." (p.70). On this basis, Palmer's Plato understands Gorgias to be denying the very possibility of knowledge. All that remains to Gorgias' ontology are sensibles, which are recognized as existent by Palmer's Plato and Palmer's Plato's Parmenides but are denied the status of being possible object of knowledge. Instead they are objects of *doxa* alone.

But how many things are there that can be known? Plato says that there are many; these are the Forms. Palmer argues that Plato does not regard this as a decisive break with Parmenides. Palmer's Plato reads the poem in a manner that in key respects parallels that of contemporary scholars who understand Parmenides as a numerical pluralist.⁵ (It is not always easy to distinguish Palmer's arguments that Plato read the poem in a certain manner from his arguments that the poem is indeed to be read so.)

Palmer faces a major problem: the tradition of reading Parmenides as a numerical monist has its source, not in anything explicitly said in the fragments of Parmenides' poem but in the writings of Plato himself. Within the *Parmenides*, Zeno declares that his book, which argues that numerical pluralism is self-contradictory, was written to defend Parmenides from those who argue that Parmenides' hypothesis that one is leads to contradictions (128c-d). Palmer points out that Zeno never actually says that his book says the same thing as Parmenides and places great weight on Zeno's confession that the book was written in a youthful eristic spirit. He argues that Plato presents what he thinks is a more genuinely Parmenidean philosophy in the philosophical exercises of the second half of the dialogue, which are intended to show Socrates the way to a more mature pursuit of philosophy. These exercises include arguments which posit a plurality of

beings and are to be taken as more representative of the thought of Parmenides than of the numerical monism of Zeno.

Within the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* Plato confronts arguments against numerical monism and the possibility of falsehood. Palmer shows how these have their origin among the sophists who employ pseudo-Parmenidean fallacies that rest on the dropping of the qualifiers of $\epsilon\iota=\text{nai}$. According to Palmer, *Republic* 5 has already shown how such problems can be resolved by distinguishing from the path of knowledge the Parmenidean path of *doxa*, which has as its object that which both is and is not. But in the later dialogue this distinction is obscured in order to reexamine the Parmenidean account of being and put it on a firmer theoretical basis.

The puzzles of the *Parmenides* anticipate the *Sophist's* rejection of predicational monism in respect to the Forms. Building on work by Meinwald, Frede, and Schofield, Palmer points out that Plato recognizes that two divisions cut through the class of all predications: in virtue of the subject ($\kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}\ \tau\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omicron}\nu$) and not in virtue of the subject, and in relation to the subject ($\pi\rho\delta\varsigma\ \epsilon\acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$) and not in relation to the subject.⁶ Many of the arguments of the latter half of the *Parmenides* turn out to be sound when understood as having dropped the relevant qualifiers. In Palmer's view, Plato intends these arguments to be expressions of genuinely Parmenidean insights. The same is true of the *Sophist's* "miniature re-enactment" of these arguments (p.179), explicitly to the effect that, in some cases, Forms are to be predicated on each other. Palmer points to the fact that at 252a the Eleatic Visitor argues that predicational monism must be rejected if either the theory of the Eleatics or that of the friends of the Forms is to stand, since both must acknowledge Forms predicated of other Forms (p.180). Palmer concludes that neither, properly understood, is a predicational monist. The theory of Forms that Socrates proposes has as its basis not predicational monism but the principle that no Form can have contrary predicates predicated on it. The innovation of the *Sophist* is to show that such predicates can indeed have predicated on them contraries such as motion and rest and likeness and difference. This is due to a new conception of a complex intelligible reality that Plato comes to realize is contained in a properly Parmenidean account of being.

Palmer takes seriously Plato's remark that both Xenophanes and Parmenides understood the cosmos as one. Noting the Parmenidean overtones of the language employed to describe the cosmos in the *Timaeus*, Palmer concludes that Plato reads Parmenides B. 8.5-6 as describing the cosmos in its intelligible aspect. It is not beings in general for which generation and destruction are denied but the intelligible aspects of those beings.⁷ *Doxa* is an account of another aspect of that same being, more readily accessible to human beings. Plato understands himself to share with Parmenides a concern with the all-pervasive character of being; Plato's innovative concern is with the all-pervasive character of difference.

Palmer's approach is to trace lines of influence not by comparing a certain historical position as we best understand it today with a later philosophical account but to try to uncover how the earlier philosopher was read by a later philosopher and then to see where and how the later philosopher responds. Although this approach is innovative in the case of ancient philosophers, it is, as Palmer says, a matter of common sense (p.13), and it is frequently employed in other areas of the history of philosophy: consider how medieval philosophers are to be understood as

commenting upon and responding to Aristotle, not as we read him, but as he would have been read via the commentaries, traditions, and translations current in medieval times.

Palmer presents detailed and convincing readings of some of the most difficult passages in the Platonic corpus. But much is unclear about the main thesis. What does it mean that Plato understood Parmenides to be saying such and such? Is it to say that Plato attributes to Parmenides a complex account of predication as a matter of historical fact, even though such views are absent from the text of Parmenides' poem? Although he is vague or misleading on this point, I believe that Palmer would agree that this goes too far. It would be reasonable to argue as follows: the evidence is clear that Plato holds Parmenides in the highest regard. Plato endorses the main lines of Parmenides' account of intelligible being. Hence Plato would believe that obfuscatory arguments that are based on fragments of Parmenides' argument would not have been endorsed by Parmenides himself. Plato believes that Parmenides' true account must rest on an account of predication that allows for numerical and predicational pluralism, and that, had he heard it, Parmenides would have been grateful for such an account as that given by his fellow Eleatic, the Visitor. This is a more modest claim than to say that Plato attributed to Parmenides the *Sophist's* distinctions between modes of predication. We are justified in attributing this sort of speculative history of philosophy to Plato, since the situation is parallel in the case of Plato's treatment of his other great intellectual hero, Socrates. In the middle dialogues, Plato attributes metaphysical and psychological views to Socrates that go well beyond anything that the historical Socrates could have possibly expressed. But Plato makes clear that in his view Socratic ethics must ultimately rest on such philosophical accounts, and he does not think that it does great conceptual violence to the philosophy of Socrates to present such views as Socrates' own.

Palmer has found a new angle from which to tell the story of the development of the metaphysics of the later dialogues. His analyses of Plato's arguments are careful and sober, and his tracing of their antecedents in Plato's reading of Parmenides is innovative and valuable.

Notes:

[1.](#) On the phrase "numerical monism" see P. Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.65-66.

[2.](#) See F. M. Cornford, "Parmenides' Two Ways," *Classical Quarterly* 49 (1933), pp.100-103, repr. in A. C. Bowen, ed. *Selected Papers of F. M. Cornford* (New York: Garland, 1987), pp.132-35; D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), p.83; R. Demos, *The Philosophy of Plato* (New York: Octagon, 1966), pp.130-53.

[3.](#) A.P.D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp.130-33, "Alternatives in Interpreting Parmenides," *The Monist* 62 (1979), pp.6-7; J. Barnes,

"Parmenides and the Eleatic One," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 61 (1979), 1-12; Curd, pp.64-97.

[4.](#) See Curd, p.240.

[5.](#) The important exception is that Palmer steers clear of attributing what Curd calls predicational monism to Plato's Parmenides, that is, the view that if something is x it is only x. This is so even in Palmer's reading of the Parmenidean line of argument of *Republic* 5, even though he thinks that the logical possibility of Parmenidean predicational pluralism is investigated only in the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist*.

[6.](#) Palmer finds the distinction explicitly made at *Republic* 4 436b8-9. This by itself is thin evidence for Plato's recognition of the distinction, but the true test of Palmer's thesis is the cogency of the interpretation of the *Parmenides* which it makes possible. In my view this is a pass.

[7.](#) Palmer therefore denies that Parmenides holds a "two worlds" metaphysics. It is unclear whether Palmer follows G. Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 60 (1978), pp.121-39, in denying that Plato distinguishes between being and becoming as two separate worlds.