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Reality

By Peter Kingsley.
Golden Sufi Center, 2003.
pp.591, Paper, \$19.95. ISBN: 1-890350-08-7.

Reviewer: Brian Brewer, Brasília-DF, Brazil

Reality, by Cambridge educated scholar and author of international reputation, Peter Kingsley, is not a work of scholarship in the traditional sense and, therefore, should not and cannot be treated as so. It is instead an elaborate proof and argument that the standard view on Parmenides, considered the father of logic, and on Empedocles, formative in the development of the fields of philosophy, rhetoric, medicine, chemistry, biology, astronomy, cosmology and psychology is faulty, based on subjective, partial analysis of their extant writings, drawn from sometimes poor translations from the Greek which did not take into account contextual usage of the words chosen by these authors relative to the times in which they wrote. If the polemic generated by this book were only one of philology and interpretation, then, perhaps, it would be well to compare it to other philosophical studies on these two pre-Socratic greats, but this isn't the case, for beyond questions of interpretation, the author plunges the reader into a well opening unto the darkest depths of time in an almost-never ending spiral of emotionally charged and cunning rhetoric which whorls around and around and washes through the short stanzas of two poem fragments like a vortex bent on cleansing them of the bottom mud of millennia and blasting away the barnacles and crustacea of misunderstanding and misinterpretation to raise them, burnished and gleaming, once more to the sunlit surface of the present as a priceless treasure—veritable keys to understanding the cosmos and all things. This book is nothing less than a purposely crafted labyrinth immersed waters of dark memory and laid out to trap the mind

of the intrigued who proceeds past the warning on the first page that, “If you want to keep a grip on what you think you already know, you will have to dismiss what I say” (p.1). So let us fill our lungs with the world’s sweet air as we know it, for what may be a final time, and dive right in.

The first thing that one might notice when beginning this book, and an irritating one at that, especially for scholars, is that it speaks of Parmenides’ fragmentary poem, ‘On Nature,’ but it never reproduces the fragment in its entirety. Instead, the stanzas are metered out a line or two at a time in keeping with Kingsley’s discourse on them, which flows between them like a bubbling stream. This seems to be done intentionally for effect—to gradually unfold the poem, as the emotive discourse requires, using its lines as markers down the ever-turning oxbows through which Kingsley is steering us. This structure could be interpreted initially as scholastic oversight, but I don’t think this because, except in general terms, he doesn’t refer to the work of other scholars at all. He simply states repeatedly throughout the book that the traditional focus on Fragment Eight, the first historical mention of the structure of logical thought, without considering it in context with the rest of the poem is an oversight, which has led to serious misinterpretations of Parmenides’ overall message. Beyond this type of criticism, which isn’t accompanied by any specific citations of other academic findings, Kingsley is not putting the text to scholastic analysis at all. He is instead opening for us the worlds of his own mental journey and his own charged heart as he unfolds the meaning of the poem through his concentrated intent to know, seeming less like a modern researcher of ancient philosophy and much more like an old-time alchemist, bent over a copy of the “Emerald Tablet of Hermes,” examining it closely with every aspect of his being until the point of knowledge comes when he himself has evolved into a living, breathing example of what lay hidden in the text

of his endeavor. This may sound like a poetic exaggeration of the his struggles with the poem, but it is not as may be clearly seen when reading through the book and noting the significance Kingsley attaches to the word *Mêtis* which is constantly referred to throughout:

Mêtis was the Greek term for cunning, skillfulness, practical intelligence; and especially for trickery. It was what could make humans, at the most basic and down-to-earth level, equal to the gods...It meant a particular kind of awareness that always manages to stay focused on the whole: on the lookout for hints, however subtle, for guidance in whatever form it happens to take, for signs of the route to follow however quickly they might appear or disappear (p. 90).

It was with *Mêtis* that Kingsley must have struggled through solitary years using his vast background in scholarship and his budding intuitive insight to gain his conclusions from this ancient epigraphic fragment, and it is with *Mêtis* that he builds swells of strong argument meant to subtly and constantly erode the foundations on which, to him, were erroneously built the towers of Western thought. His argument is persuasive and amply serves to implant these conclusions into the minds of those capable of following him down these rivers from which they cannot return totally unchanged, unless, of course, they just dismiss his argument entirely. The problem in this lays in the fact that Kingsley was heralded as an innovative scholar and antiquities expert until he recently made this stand. His is a voice not easily dismissed.

In his thesis he explains how 'On nature,' far from being a fanciful lyric that sings an epic myth of a trip to the underworld to meet a Goddess, in which the only real gem of wisdom contained is a few lines dedicated to the value of logical thought, is instead a manual containing guidelines on awakening from the dream sleep of our own making so that we can view the world and our place in it for what it is. Kingsley presents this fragmentary poem as an initiation document written by a priest of Apollo Oulious—the god who destroys and makes whole and explains, "To be initiated into such a line demanded

total commitment; meant being introduced into a new family, starting one's life over again"

(295). The meat of the argument is as follows:

There is only one reality: the one all around us...Really to understand that we are trapped, held fast in bonds, that there is nowhere else to go, no possibility of transcendence, is devastating. It knocks the bottom out of everything we once knew...There is nothing else to look forward too. The endless search is over (288).

He then goes on to qualify this initially shocking and desperate revelation as a good thing, something that has the potential to liberate and to empower by stating:

Our greatest problem as humans is that we are at the mercy of reality. We keep getting lost inside it; have forgotten how to finish what has been started, how to link the beginning to the end...(but) it only takes the slightest shift in consciousness, the subtlest movement of awareness, and instead of being bound and helpless we are binding the binder. We have completed the circle, inside and outside ourselves. Then the bonds and boundaries of existence are not in some far-off place any more, at the illusory edges of the cosmos. They are wherever we happen to be. And we are absolutely free—not because we are free from something but because we contain everything, every perception and thought, inside ourselves...This is the experience of utter stillness: more exquisite, more full, than anything under the sun (289).

The second part of the book is a similar description of the extant writing of Parmenides' near contemporary, Empedocles which Kingsley analyzes in the same vein and of which he reaches the same conclusion: Empedocles' poem to his disciple, Pausanias, was an initiatory treatise written as a guide for the younger man's entry into the ranks of adeptship. Kingsley explains that in the opening address, Empedocles underlined that the poem was of an esoteric nature, "Its teaching is only for the rare individual who has the capacity to approach it rightly: who is ready to make the necessary effort, is desperate enough to be willing to be changed by it. Others can waste their time as they choose—not yet aware that they are nothing but those rare individuals in disguise" (325). In effect, he is stating that all men and woman will eventually reach the stage in which its teaching will have value, and that they too will become transformed and awakened to the

realization of what the world is and what their place is in it. He then goes on to lay out his multi-layered and complex proof, much of which dealing with that fact that a good portion of what Empedocles' wrote is opposite of what he really meant because he was using the ancient literary device of reflection, common at the time, a device in which the author states exactly what he doesn't mean. At the end of this involved study he concludes that the weight of Empedocles' teaching is very much in keeping with that of Parmenides, and that the key to discovery of the true nature of reality lies in *Mêtis*, in remaining still in thought while yet maintaining full awareness of the world around you, which is a technique basic to most genuinely transformative practices both ancient and modern. The cosmology described by Kingsley as what was meant by Empedocles is strikingly similar to the Perennial Philosophy discussed by Huxley and elaborated in great detail by Manly P. Hall in his *Secret Teachings of all Ages*. Empedocles states, "In the whole of existence there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that is not divine"(348). Kingsley then shows him describing the cosmos as a duality of a one and of a many in which all creation springs from a primordial source to which it eventually returns. This theme is common to many of the modern mysteries including Rosicrucianism as described by Paul Foster Case in *The True and Invisible Rosicrucian Order*, the Kabbalah as described in varied works such as those of Aryeh Kaplan and Dion Fortune, Christian Hermeticism as detailed by Valentine Tomberg in *Meditations on the Tarot*, in modern Gnosticism as described in *Gnosis of the Cosmic Christ* by Tau Malachi and most notably as attested to by the Golden Sufi Center which published this book. This does not even take into account obvious parallels to Eastern Religions. In fact all of these mystic paths contain certain basic tenets described by Kingsley as being the true meaning of Parmenides' and Empedocles' initiatory poems:

- 1) All that is and was and will ever be is eternal in the here and the now,
- 2) The intelligence

behind all things is wholly resident within each of us and equally resident in all other things, making each of us a virtual cosmos encompassing all else, 3) Awakening to this fact frees us from the delusion of normal living and enables us to begin walking a path of return within ourselves toward true self knowledge, 4) The realization of the oneness of all being is empowering and raises our capacity for compassion to encompass all within the infinite bounds of our beingness.

It might seem from the above that I am marginalizing Kingsley's findings and showing them to be nothing more than yet another entry in a growing lineup of largely marginalized mystical teachings, but this is absolutely not the case, and, in fact, it is because of this that Kingsley's book begins to weigh heavy with the potential of tipping the balance to the point of enabling a cultural shift which has been waiting silent in the wings for at least two thousand years. I am speaking of a reevaluation of philosophy based on serious discourse and further discovery relative to the verity and merit of this work, which could one day lead to a rapprochement between Philosophy and Religion, bringing them back full circle to where Kingsley claims they were when Parmenides and Empedocles first put kalamos to papyrus. This, of course, is a question for scholars of philosophy, philologists and now, perhaps, for theologians engaged in Pre-Socratic research. A line has been clearly drawn in these ancient sands. One can only hope that this challenge will be taken and met with a heavy onslaught of objective consideration and detailed study. *Reality* seems important both because an eminent scholar had the courage to write it and because of the stir that it is causing in the academic world. Further, though extremely dense, it is accessible to the general public, which also weighs in to fuel this discussion. I encourage all of those interested in metaphysics and mysticism to read it, because it delves down to the taproots of many of these belief systems, and I encourage all of those interested

in societal change to consider giving it a read as well. If it were to become as popular as some other recent journeys into metaphysics and the arcane, it could conceivably change the way that Western culture views itself and hence the world.

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