
Parmenides' Poem: Riddle from B 5

Małgorzata Bogaczyk-Vormayr

(Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, bogaczyk@amu.edu.pl)

In this short essay I attempt to examine the poem of Parmenides from Elea – the text of unusual beauty which fascinates many scholars. The poem is full of unsolved mysteries and yet is capable of clarifying certain moments of Greek philosophical thought, or of enchanting us with a single piece in which we find something of utmost importance: a sentence, metaphor or an expression that becomes some kind of recurrent phrase when we reread the text. In my interpretation of the poem I give special attention to fragment B5.

On Nature is the first text which dwells on the philosophical concept of being in terms of a theoretical explanation of that which exists, which is the original aim of ontology. Parmenides was the first philosopher to address the topic of the issue of truth and ascribe the meaning to it which modern philosophy has sometimes interpreted as a postulate of genuineness and efficiency in stating judgments. It was Parmenides, however, who founded that constantly necessary philosophical attitude that uncovers itself as a kind of pattern and amounts to what we used to call “the Greekness” – the position we nevertheless assume as potentially given. I would like to reflect on what that attitude means and what kind of effort it demands from the poem's hero. The proper theme of the poem is the truth itself together with the way to which it leads – The Way of Truth (also Way of Light), which has a well-rounded nature (B 1,29; B 5; B 8,42-44) in contrast to the linear Way of Appearance/Opinion (*pistis alethes* – Way of Night, which lacks the true reliability). It illustrates the journey of a youth which begins with a poem announced by goddess Dike and ends with a return, which in my interpretation should be assigned to fragment B5 instead of the last part of the poem:

[...] ξυνὸν δέ μοί ἐστιν,
ὁππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἴξομαι αὖθις.

For me, where I am to begin from is the same for to there I will come back again (B 5)¹.

In its description or characteristics the idea of well-rounded truth does not merely amount to a representation of perfection and completeness of being. Any reference to mythical meaning of that roundedness is insufficient because even if it plays the key role for interpreting the poem, neither the fragments where Dike ties meaning to judgment by reason (B 7,5) rather than the habits of experience and sensational perception nor the person of Moira presuming the delimitation (*peras*) for any possible discourse can explain fragment B 5 as such. Only a number of questions posed by the poem before the picture of "all things" is announced by Dike might explain thereafter the meaning of these two concepts: delimitation and a circle.

As a result, the main subject is the source of true cognition together with the importance of the Way of Opinion and human cognition in general and as such it is equivalent to searching directly for the answer of the questions already posed by Milesian philosophers, Pythagoreans and Heraclitus. Parmenides entered philosophy when it had already recognized the duality of the world as some kind of cosmic divide which some understood as a source for establishing the highest principle. Some, such as Heraclitus, consider it as a source of intuition of unity which manifests itself in the form of *logos* but which does not answer the question of whether we can find any fixed element in the continuous flow of events or unending process of becoming and changing that takes place in cosmos. Others, such as Anaximander, believed that the first philosophical intuitions considered *apeiron* as the world principle and that philosophy is open to infinity. It was Parmenides who answered the question positively, hence developing for philosophy the proper notion of being together with its opposition: non-being. He understands philosophy as delimiting being (*to eon*) in the limits (*peras*) of the structures of logic.

The poem in the text stands for a mythical image of unveiling the truth. The following descriptions suggest the circumstances under which truth is discovered: maidens guiding the way push back veils from their heads, gates of the roads of Night and Day with "the bronze posts fastened with bolts and rivets" and a

¹ For the Greek text see Tarán 1965. Translations of the Fragments by Richard D. McKirahan 1994, cf. e.g. http://www.parmenides.com/about_parmenides/ParmenidesPoem.html (Accessed March 1, 2016); cf. e.g. translation by J. Burnet 1892 or C.F. Macdonald 1939.

“stone threshold”, Dike “holding the keys that fit them” and finally “making a gaping gap of the doors” (B1,10-18). Dividing Dike delimits truth from opinion, marking the moment of passage from darkness and from that what is unclear or obscure (*to apeiron*) to that what is uncovered – the truth conceived as *aletheia*. C. F. von Weizsäcker wrote about Parmenides:

He begins his seemingly abstract poem with a vivid image of his own journey to wide opened gates of wisdom, so the goddess Dike could order him to look carefully and after that he finally could see (Weizsäcker 2002, 477; translation mine).

Both Dike and Themis, or Moira, point at the limits of cognition and judgments about being which amount to rational reasoning (*noein*). Thus, they state the procedure of inquiry (method) characterizing the Way of Truth and having the nature of a sentence legitimized by law: “It is or it is not” (B 8,16).

Dike guides the youth on the possible paths of inquiry. Consequently, the main question regarding the poem is: how far the youth follows Dike (in my opinion *dikan epherein* as meaning *to follow somebody*, should be emphasized here), i.e. to what extent he “was being brought” and to what extent Dike reveals to him what he has been looking for? In other words: how far has the young hero of the poem made the decision about the journey by himself and then chosen the Way and passed along it? What could he himself have seen using his own cognitive faculties? Fragment B 1 reads:

ἵπποι ταί με φέρουσιν, ὅσον τ’ ἐπὶ θυμὸς ἰκάνοι,
πέμπον, ἐπεὶ μ’ ἐς ὁδὸν βῆσαν πολύφημον ἄγουσαι
δαίμονος, ἣ κατὰ πάντ’ ἄσθη φέρει εἰδῶτα φῶτα·
τῆ φερόμην· τῆ γάρ με πολύφραστοι φέρον ἵπποι
ἄρμα τιταίνουσαι, κοῦραι δ’ ὁδὸν ἡγεμόνευον.

The mares which carry me as far as my spirit ever aspired were
escorting me,
when they brought me and proceeded along the renowned road
of the goddess,
which brings a knowing mortal to all cities one by one.
On this path I was being brought, on it wise mares were bringing me,
straining the chariot, and maidens were guiding the way.

(B 1, 1-5)

In Greek imagination the mares, chariot and guides are a prototype of a journey to face Helios or Zeus and it is bound with the intent of presenting some kind of revelation or awakening. However, “the mares which carry me” are for one

restrained by the end of the journey that is “the renowned road” and for another they carry the youth as his “spirit ever aspired”. How should we understand the spirit (*thymos*) of the youth and the wisdom of the mares? I assume that the correct interpretation of fragment B1,4-5 should be as follows: *I proceeded there, for on this path wise mares straining the chariot were bringing me and maidens were guiding the way*. The mares stand for a symbol of “a knowing mortal’s” cognitive faculties – “he man who knows” and can be carried “through all places” (B1,3).

The Greek notion *thymos* can designate *courage, heart, will* and also *spirit (soul) or mind*. In the latter case, it is conceived as a location of thoughts and an origin of memory in terms of what can be evoked (a meaning similar to *thymos pherein*). Interpreted as such, *thymos* is a condition for searching and becomes a characteristic of what we call the unity of philosophical attitude. Only the authentic attitude of one who questions and inquires can be rewarded with some kind of mystical initiation. As the Pythagorean Archytas of Tarentum has put it:

To become knowledgeable about things one does not know, one must either learn from others or find out for oneself. Now learning derives from someone else and is foreign, whereas finding out is of and by oneself. Finding out without seeking is difficult and rare, but with seeking it is manageable and easy, though someone who does not know how to seek cannot find.

(DK 47 B 83)²

That approach stands in opposition to the attitude of “equally deaf and blind, amazed, hordes without judgment”, led by “their wandering mind” (*plankton noon*) and who, because of not seeing the difference between being and non-being, are neither able to examine that what is nor to judge the nature of being (B 6,1-9). The only justified way assumes that what is definitely embodied in the structures of a rational discourse and held fast by Dike (B 8,13-15). The truth announced by the goddess does not entail that some state of being is from now on definite, as cognition does not mean any mystical initiation but some kind of **return to oneself** -- that what is should be recognized by one’s own mind. The Way of Truth has yet to be “far from the beaten path of humans”. Weizsäcker explains it in his analysis of the poem:

Adopting a new idea, a scholar experienced some kind of enlightenment and he has seen something that nobody could have seen before.

² DK 47 B 83, quoted in J. J. O’Connor and E. F. Robertson, *Archytas of Tarentum*: <http://www-groups.dcs.st-and.ac.uk> (Accessed March 1, 2016).

Nevertheless he is not justified to refer to the enlightenment neither for his own use, nor to convince others. He has to be certain whether he really had seen it and that he could do following the consequences of his new idea and testing them by means of an already acknowledged experiment or a freshly designed one. He is the one obliged to make an attempt of falsifying his discovery. If it is true it will stand up the falsification and as a result it makes clear that what was not properly understood until then. Any discovery is justified like the light brought to darkness – it enables us to see (Weizsäcker 2002, 475).

Such intuition has come to our mind when we recognize that *ektos* meaning *from afar* or *beyond something*, and not just *outside*. Then it is no longer about going along the road conceived as linear which is “far from the beaten path of humans” but going along an inner way of human cognitive faculties. The way of absolute truth is an affirmation of complete positiveness and a negation of non-being. In Parmenides’ language, the verb “be” means “be something” (*einai – einai ti*), and similarly, “to think” means “to think something”. Being, held fast by Dike and definite, is the only thing which can be thought and articulated. In that way it is characterized as follows:

ἡ μὲν ὅπως ἔστιν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι [...]

The One, that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be
(B 2,3)

οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔδν – οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν –
οὔτε φράσαις.

For neither may you know that which is not (for it is not to be accomplished) nor may you declare it.

(B 2,7-8)

The main goal then is to judge something *esti tauta* – that it is true, so in that sense we can assess the veritative directions for the use of *einai*. Even *einai ti*, meaning “to be something” (something definite), relates to the Greek meaning of “being” in a certain way of **being truly**.³ The truth means what can be stated, and that is why *noein* refers to what Parmenides articulates by *phrasthai* in B 2,8, but also in the following fragments:

³ It is not my intention here to perform language analysis for interpreting Parmenides’ meanings and usages of *einai*. In that fragment veritative meaning seems to be uncontroversial. Cf. Ch. Kahn (1966).

That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be, but not possible for nothing to be. I bid you consider this.

Χρὴ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἔὸν ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι,
μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν· τὰ σ' ἐγὼ φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα.

(B 6, 1)

[...] οὐτ' ἐκ μὴ ἐόντος ἐάσω
φάσθαι σ' οὐδὲ νοεῖν.

I will not permit you to say or to think from what is not.

(B 8,7-8)

Parmenides appointed the concept of non-being as irrational and illogical (*alogon*) – of that what we can call non-reasonable, unjustified, meaningless and dumb. Also, because it would imply that it is somehow related to non-being, it is not conceivable that being could have appeared or perish. According to fragment B8, wandering mortals admit that being perishes, so they acknowledge non-being – changing places with that which is “whole and unchanging” and shackled by Fate (Moira). What for the mortals has two forms: being and non-being, for Parmenides should be treated as one, so it does not undermine the world ordering (*diakosmos*). Because mortals think about “light” and “night” (B 9) as the divide of being and non-being, they split the necessary principle of the unity of being together with analogically conceived (in accordance to *eiokonta*; B 8,60) “all the ordering as it appears”, represented by a perfect well-rounded structure which is a complete implementation of *peras*.

The following opposition should amount for an accurate model:

The Way of Truth	The Way of Appearance/Opinion
Announced by the goddess = recognized what was not available to all, subject to falsification.	Admitted by the mortals = assumed as certain, but neither verified nor falsified.
Presumed = analogous; “the ordering as it appears”	Admitted belief = treated as true; an assumption that non-being is speakable.
Being and its delimitation interpreted in terms of necessary unity.	Distinction and opposition between two forms of things.

Only the Way of Truth enacts the postulate of the beginning and end of the road

stated in fragment B 5: **from anywhere to there**. That relationship which is basic for Parmenides, reminds us of the illustrious statement of Heraclitus:

Ξυνὸν γὰρ ἀρχὴ καὶ πέρασ ἐπὶ κύκλου περιφερείας

The beginning of a circle is also its end.

(DK 22 B 103)⁴

In that sense, the beginning and the end are the same. It means that the only possible way is that in which *peras* represents the return, making it impossible to be passed over or questioned. Like B 2 and B 3, fragment B 5 can also be easily and unambiguously assigned to the Way of Truth – the order of, in other words, *aletheia*, thus excluding its linear representation. Solely the Way of Appearance leads from any point that “mortals posited convinced that it is true” (B 8, 39). While the “anywhere” indeed seems to refer to any point, it has to remain within the closed structure of a circle. People experiencing reliable truth by appointing any principle or law to it, so as to lend it to inner examination or reflection by those people, play the key role here.

It seems plausible that the correct interpretation of Parmenides’ poem should be taken from the perspective provided by the thesis of fragment B 5, so we could intuitively capture “all things” announced in a presumed whole as referring to the circular, **inner** Way of Truth.⁵ It is from this way that the reliable verification of discovery begins and so also begins the reflection upon any human experience.

References:

- Bodnár, I. 1985. “Contrasting Image. Notes On Parmenides B5“, *Apeiron* 19 (1985): 52-59.
- Kahn, Ch. 1966. “The Greek Verb 'To Be' and the Concept of Being.” *Foundation of Language* 2 (3), 1966: 244-265.
- Kahn, Ch. 1973. *The Verb 'Be' In Ancient Greek*, Reidel: Dordrecht/Boston.
- McKirahan, R. D. 1994. *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction With Text And Commentary*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.
- Tarán, L. 1965. *Parmenides. A Text with Translation. Commentary and Critical Essays*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Weizsäcker v., C. F. 2002. *Die Einheit der Natur*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.

⁴ Cf. I. Bodnar 1985, 59.

⁵ Hermann Diels seems to present the interpretation which is the closest (cf. Bodnar 1985, 58-59).

Małgorzata Bogaczyk-Vormayr

(Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, bogaczyk@amu.edu.pl)

Parmenides' Poem: Riddle from B5

Abstract: The paper constitutes a short analysis of the poem of Parmenides from Elea "On Nature". The author posits that this text is the original aim of ontology. In the author's opinion, the most important thesis of the poem is to be found in the fragment B 5, in which she recognizes the ancient motive of the self-knowledge ("the inner Way of Truth"). The primary purpose of the analysis is to interpret the mythological language and to reconsider terminology, e.g. Way of Day and Way of Night, Dike and Moira, *thymos*, *plankton noon*. Furthermore, the thinking of Parmenides is briefly interpreted in comparison with Heraclitus, Anaximander, and Archytas.

Keywords: Parmenides, ontology, Way of Truth, *pistis alethes*, *thymos*, *peras*

Ethics in Progress (ISSN 2084-9257). Vol. 2 (2016). No. 2, Art. #7, pp. 95-103.

Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0

Doi: 10.14746/eip.2016.2.6