CHAPTER 1

The Parmenides

The dialogue *Parmenides* has some claim to be the most problematic item in the Platonic corpus. We have from the beginning a radical change in dramatic framework and in the portrayal of Socrates. In contrast to his master role as exponent of fundamental doctrine in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Socrates appears here as a promising young man with a sketchy theory of Forms – a theory that will be exposed to withering criticism at the hands of Parmenides. The name of Parmenides had been barely mentioned in any previous dialogue; and his historical role belongs in fact to an earlier generation.[1]

The visit of Parmenides and Zeno to Athens, as represented in this dialogue, is clearly an invention of Plato, who is prepared here to ignore chronological possibilities. He has chosen Parmenides as the only philosopher deemed worthy to refute Socrates in dialectical exchange, but who, at the same time, will guarantee a fundamental commitment to a stable ontology. And such a commitment will be expressly reasserted here.

Nevertheless, the first part of the dialogue presents the singular spectacle of Plato, in the person of Parmenides, formulating a set of penetrating objections to his favorite theory, without any hint of how these objections are to be answered. The second, much longer part of the dialogue presents an object that is equally perplexing: a set of eight or nine deductions from a single hypothesis and its denial, with formally contradictory conclusions. Just as Part One leaves the reader without any response to the objections, so Part Two leaves us without any sign of how these apparent contradictions are to be resolved. The relation between the two parts of the dialogue is also mysterious. The deductions of Part Two are presented as a training exercise

[1] Contrast the isolated poetic quotation from Parmenides in *Symposium* 178b, with an echo at 195c. The exact dates of Parmenides are unknown, but his traditional "acme" (504–501 BC) is at least credible. Parmenides' influence is strongly marked on the following generation, represented by Anaxagoras and Empedocles in the middle of the fifth century. We note that in the *Phaedo* Socrates was not reported to have been in personal contact even with Anaxagoras, much less with Parmenides.

designed to prepare a philosopher like the Young Socrates to deal with the criticisms formulated in Part One. But it is not immediately clear how the arguments of Part Two are intended to bear on the problems raised in Part One.

The absence here of any direct answer to the criticisms of Part One has led some scholars to conclude that Plato was ready to abandon the theory of Forms, or that he was uncertain how to proceed. (A "record of honest perplexity" was Vlastos' diagnosis.)[2] But the text itself points in a more positive direction. Parmenides, who formulates the objections, never suggests that the theory should be given up. On the contrary, if the theory is reduced to its central thesis, the distinction between the changing objects of sense perception and stable forms "that one can best grasp in *logos*," Parmenides indicates that giving up such forms would be equivalent to giving up on philosophy itself. (Hence the pressing question at 135c5: "What will you do about philosophy?") Without permanent, self-identical forms, Parmenides says to Socrates, "you will have nowhere to turn your thought to, . . . and you will utterly destroy the power of rational discourse (*dialegesthai*)."[3] What Socrates needs, according to Parmenides, is not so much a different theory but more philosophical training, so that he will be able to confront the problems raised in the objections. The second part of the dialogue offers to provide the requisite training.

Part Two of the *Parmenides* is notoriously enigmatic. I suggest, however, that the arguments of this Part will seem less bewildering if we consider them not in isolation but in the larger context provided by the group of late dialogues studied here, beginning with the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* and continuing with *Philebus* and *Timaeus*. Thus, I propose to regard the *Parmenides* as a philosophical introduction to Plato's later work. Between the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* there is a definite mark of literary continuity, and both dialogues refer back to the fictional meeting between Socrates and Parmenides that takes place only in the *Parmenides*.[4] Thus, there is a sense in which the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* are both presented as a sequel to the *Parmenides*. The *Philebus* is linked to the *Parmenides* in a different way, by allusion to several specific arguments, including an accurate summary of Parmenides' objections to participation (*Philebus* 15b; cf. *Parm.* 131a–e). Substantial portions of both the *Sophist* and *Philebus* can thus be seen as

[2] Vlastos (1954) 254.
[3] For the broad notion of "dialectic" here as the general method of rational inquiry, see *Phaedrus* 266b, echoed at *Philebus* 16b5–c3. The basic contrast between the objects of sense perception and those of λόγος is introduced at *Parmenides* 130a1 and repeated at 135e1–3.
[4] *Theaetetus* 183e7–184a1; *Sophist* 217c5–6.

responses to, or developments of, problems explored in the *Parmenides*. And the same will turn out to be true for the theories of flux and Receptacle in the *Timaeus*.

I propose, then, to see the *Parmenides* as the first, provocative step in Plato's enterprise of revising and expanding the doctrine of Forms in his later dialogues. This project will require him to clarify or correct some of the references to Forms in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, passages that can lead to inconsistency or misunderstanding. And, it will turn out, there is above all a need to develop the theory to include an account of the natural world – an account that has been systematically neglected in earlier expositions, which focused on the moral and mathematical Forms. (The final argument of the *Phaedo* can be seen as a brief and unsuccessful attempt to extend the theory to notions like fire and fever.) Part One of the *Parmenides* has the function of raising difficulties and calling for clarification. Part Two responds with a constructive set of arguments, opening up new perspectives in preparation for a richer, more comprehensive theory. But the eight deductions by themselves raise more problems than they solve. For the development of a positive theory we must look to later dialogues, and above all to the *Sophist*, *Philebus* and *Timaeus*.

Since the arguments of the *Parmenides* raise many baffling problems, both for an analysis of the arguments and for the substantive interpretation of Plato's theory, I preface to each Part a summary of the problems raised and my proposed solutions. (For the summary of Part Two, see my comments below, pp. 18–21.) These summaries are designed to make it possible for a reader to pass on directly to the interpretation of the *Theaetetus* and the other dialogues, with the option of returning later to confront the nitty-gritty details of the *Parmenides*.

1.1 Part One: the six *aporias*

Socrates responds to Zeno's paradoxes by claiming that contrary properties, such as like and unlike, one and many, apply only to sensible things like sticks and stones and people, but not to the form of Similarity itself or to the One itself (129a). More generally, Socrates would be quite amazed if anyone could show that the Forms themselves (Similarity and Dissimilarity, One and Many, Rest and Motion and all such) "were capable of being mixed together in themselves and being divided apart (*diakrinesthai*)" (129e). What is ruled out, then, according to Socrates' exposition, is not only the Forms possessing contrary properties but also the division of a Form into parts and the combination of several Forms with one another. As every reader of the

Sophist knows, all three of these restrictions will be violated in Plato's later version of the theory.

Now it is not clear that such restrictions are actually implied in the *Phaedo* or *Republic*. But there are certainly passages that lend themselves to be so understood. Thus, the emphasis on the Forms as uniform (*monoeidēs*) and indivisible (*asuntheton, adialuton*) in the *Phaedo* (78c7, d5, 80b2), or on their being *one* rather than many, suggest a conception of Forms as simple and non-composite.[5] And the contrast with particulars as "rolling about" between opposites may seem to imply that Forms do not have contrary attributes (*Rep*. V, 479d). Whether or not such restrictions are intended in the earlier statements of the theory, they are clearly principles that Plato will renounce in his later dialogues. We may reasonably infer that, if these three restrictions are so explicitly emphasized in *Parmenides* 129a–e, it is because this text has been designed to flag them for rejection.[6]

A similar intention is evident in Parmenides' restatement of the theory in his interrogation of Socrates. The term *chōris*, "separately," plays no role in presentations of the theory of Forms in earlier dialogues.[7] In his exposition here Socrates had used the term just once, when he insists that one "distinguishes the Forms themselves by themselves separately" (*diairētai chōris auta kath' hauta* 129d7[8]). It is not clear whether Socrates means "separately from one another" or "separately from their participants," but Parmenides will take him in the latter sense. Furthermore, Parmenides seizes on this term; he uses *chōris* five times in the immediate sequel and several more in the text that follows. The first two occurrences echo and extend Socrates' own remark: not only are the Forms themselves separate; "separate also are the things that participate in them" (130b3). The next three uses of *chōris* are even more insidious: "And do you think there is Similarity itself apart from the similarity that we have? . . . And a Form of Human Being apart from us and from all those who are like us?" (130b4–c2). Socrates does not see the trap; he answers "Yes" to the first question and hesitates in the second case only because he is not sure whether he wants to attribute Forms to natural kinds. In the third case Socrates is disgusted by the examples of hair, mud and filth, and responds only with contempt to the question "Is there a

[5] For μονοειδής see also *Symposium* 211b1.

[6] This flagging is echoed in the account of the Dream Theory in the *Theaetetus*, in references to ἀμέριστον, ἀσύνθετον, and μονοειδής at 205c2–d2. See below, p. 84.

[7] Thus in the *Phaedo*, χωρίς is used for the separation of the soul from the body (64c5, 67a1) but not for the distinction between Forms and sensible participants. Contrast the quite different formulation at *Phaedo* 74a11, where the Equal itself is παρὰ ταῦτα πάντα ἕτερόν τι. Being other need not imply being separate.

[8] διαιρῆται χωρὶς αὐτὰ καθ' αὑτά.

separate Form for each of these, different from the things we are in contact with?" (130d1).[9]

By his focus here on the notion of separation, Parmenides opens up the gap between Forms and participants that will prove disastrous in the conception of two distinct worlds, as formulated in the final and "greatest" objection to the Forms (Aporia 6, below). The fatal step is the acceptance of "forms in us" distinct from the Forms themselves. (The phrase in question occurs repeatedly in the *Phaedo*.) Thus, despite the fact that the *Phaedo* explicitly suspends judgment on the nature of the relationship between Forms and participants (100d), it nevertheless implies the existence of immanent forms, as a version of the Form that is present "in us." This opens the way for the fatal separation between the Forms themselves and the forms-in-us that will be exploited in the final *aporia*.

Looking ahead, we may note that Plato will later hesitate to describe phenomenal properties as forms-in-us, distinct from the Forms themselves. As Aporia 6 will show, structures of this kind, immanent in the phenomenal world, tend to point in the direction of Aristotelian forms, and thus to make Plato's Forms superfluous. On the other hand, in later dialogues Plato will recognize a substitute for "forms-in-us" in formal structures corresponding to Aristotelian species-forms, structures described in the *Philebus* as "being-that-has-become" and which in the *Timaeus* will be conceived in the language of mathematics. But such conceptions lie in the future. Before the *Parmenides*, references to "forms in us" are limited to the *Phaedo*. In the *Republic* Plato is more careful to describe phenomenal properties only as images or appearances of Forms – not as "similarity in us" but only as an image or appearance of Similarity. We must wait until the *Timaeus* for this talk of images and imitation to receive a non-metaphorical interpretation. For a coherent ontology of images Plato will need the theory of the Receptacle, in which images are interpreted as mathematical modifications of the Receptacle, determined by their relation to a corresponding Form.

The first Aporia introduces us to the fundamental problem of applying the theory of Forms to the natural world: should we posit Forms for the elements, or for natural kinds like Human Being? But no solution is proposed here, and none will be forthcoming before the *Timaeus*. Aporia 2 shows that the metaphor of participation does not offer a coherent account of the relation between sensible homonyms and the

[9] In the following text, the term χωρίς occurs four more times, in different applications: 131a5, b1, b2, and b5.

corresponding Form. Aporia 3 is the notorious Third Man objection, which claims to show that (on any interpretation of the Form-homonym relation) the one-over-many principle that serves to posit a Form for a given homonymous many will generate an infinite regress. The regress follows if a new many can always be produced by adding the original Form to the previous homonymous group, and then applying the one-over-many principle once again. Plato's device for blocking this regress will be to distinguish two ways of *being F* (namely, *being F* for the Form F and *being F* for anything else), so that there is no uniform group of *things that are F* that includes both the Forms and its participants. This distinction (identified by Michael Frede as is_1 and is_2, designated here as "being *per se*" and "being *per aliud*") will be introduced implicitly in Part Two, and explicitly later in the *Sophist*.

Aporia 4 is an attempt to block this regress by a psychological-conceptual interpretation of the Forms as thoughts (*noēmata*) in the soul. This proposal is equivalent to abandoning the theory as an account of objective reality, and it is not regarded by Plato as a serious alternative. By contrast, Aporia 5 results from taking the notion of likeness or imitation quite literally and showing that it implies similarity between Form and participant. But if two similar things must have a form in common, a regress will be generated just as in the Third Man argument, thus producing not a unique Form but an unlimited number of Forms. This regress can be blocked by showing that in a case of imitation the notion of similarity need not be reciprocal. But in any case the objection succeeds in exposing the limitations of the notion of image or imitation as an explanatory concept.

Aporia 6 presents the most serious problem of all, the separation between Forms and sensible phenomena. This separation is presented here by two parallel and independent pairings between knowledge and the objects known: on the one hand, the Form of Knowledge taking other Forms as its object; on the other hand, human knowledge taking sensible phenomena as its object. By insisting on a complete independence between these two pairings, the argument calls attention to the fact that no account has been given of the link connecting Forms to their sensible homonyms.

We consider now the six objections in detail. Our analysis will be two-fold, both formal and substantial. Formally, we try to see in each case how the objection might be blocked. The more important issue, however, is to identify the underlying problem to which Plato is calling our attention.

Aporia 1. The population problem (130b–d)

In this case there is no argument to be blocked, but rather a question to be answered: How far does the theory extend? How many kinds of things require Forms? The youthful Socrates is happy to acknowledge Forms for logico-mathematical concepts (one, many, similarity) and for the fundamental moral notions (the just, the noble and the good). The problem is to identify Forms corresponding to the structure and content of the natural world. Socrates hesitates to admit Forms for natural kinds such as human being, fire and water; and he indignantly rejects the suggestion of Forms for hair, mud and filth. (In Socrates' hesitation here there is a reminder of the *Phaedo* 96c and following, where Socrates reports abandoning natural philosophy because of a lack of talent for this subject.) Parmenides responds that Socrates' reluctance to generalize the theory is due to his youth and his unphilosophical fear of ridicule. The Socrates of other dialogues had been less inhibited. Thus, Socrates recognizes Forms for artifacts in the *Cratylus* (the shuttle) and again in *Republic* X (the bed). But only later, in the *Philebus* and *Timaeus*, will Plato undertake to apply his theory to the philosophy of nature.

Aporia 2. The problem of participation (130e4–131e7)

The *Phaedo* (100c–102b) made frequent use of the metaphor of participation (*metechein, metalambanein*) but left open how this relation was to be understood. The present objection takes participation literally as *possessing a share* of the Form in question, with the consequence that some aspect of the Form comes to be *present in* the participant. Some commentators assume that this physical interpretation of *metechein* preserves an archaic notion of participation as the sharing of elemental stuff, as illustrated in the fragments of Anaxagoras (e.g. DK 59B.6). On the other hand, the verb *metechein* (and to a lesser extent *metalambanein*) is frequently used metaphorically for possessing any quality or relationship, without the notion of physical sharing.[10] Hence it is possible (but certainly not necessary) to interpret Plato's use of *metechein* in the *Phaedo* in terms of literal sharing or having a part of, as is done in the present objection.

The argument divides into two subsections, depending on whether the Form is supposed to be present in its homonym as a whole or as a part. On

[10] See an example at *Symposium* 211a7: The Beautiful itself will not appear like a face or hands or like any other of "the things of which body has a share," ὧν σῶμα μετέχει.

the one hand, if the Form is present as a whole in many separate things, it will be separate from itself (131b1). (This objection, which Plato formulates again at *Philebus* 15b5–7, anticipates a problem that will reappear in the modern theory of universals: how can an item be one and the same and yet present in many places at the same time?) On the other hand, if each participant possesses only a fraction of a Form, other absurdities follow.

The consequence of these objections is to show that the metaphor of participation does not offer a coherent account of the homonym-Form relation. Hence (despite its popularity with Aristotle and later Platonists) *metechein* is rarely employed by Plato to express this relation in any dialogue other than the *Phaedo*. (The metaphor of sharing occurs once in the *Symposium* and once in the *Republic*, but frequently in the present context, and again in Aporia 6, 133d2.)[11]

The deeper consequence is that being F for a Form (designated as "the F itself") must be interpreted differently from being F for its homonyms. The Large itself is not another large thing. That is the point of the fundamental distinction between predication *per se* and *per aliud* (between being the Large itself and being something large), which will be introduced here in Part Two and developed in the *Sophist*. This distinction becomes more directly relevant to the following Aporia 3.

We note that in the *Sophist* the vocabulary of participation (*metechein*, *methexis*, *metalambanein*) will be transferred to a new use, to express a relation *between* Forms (251e9, 255b3, d4, e5, 256a1, a7, b1, b6, 256e3, 259a6–b1). The later use of *metechein* for a Form-Form relation will be anticipated here in Part Two (see 137e1, 138a6, and *passim* from 142b6, c1 ff).

Aporia 3. The Third Man (132a1–b2)

Since Gregory Vlastos' famous 1954 article, this is the most frequently discussed objection; and it was already much discussed in antiquity.[12] A single Form of Largeness is first posited by the one-over-many principle: "when many things seem to you to be large, there seems to be some one form, the same as you look at all of them." But the uniqueness of this Form is immediately threatened by a regress that generates an unlimited plurality of Forms of Largeness. If at every step we add the Form itself to the group of

[11] For μετέχειν in the thing-Form relation outside the *Phaedo* see *Symposium* 211b2 and *Republic* V, 476d1–2 (which might almost count as a quotation from the *Symposium*). By contrast, in the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus*, Plato prefers the terminology of image and likeness to express the homonym-Form relation.

[12] See references in Owen (1957) and Fine (1993) 203 ff.

many large things, the one-over-many principle will then introduce a new Form of Largeness at each step.

As Vlastos pointed out, this inference depends upon two unspoken assumptions, which he named Self-predication (SP) and Non-identity (NI). The assumption of self-predication, namely, that the Form Largeness is itself large, is needed for the Form to be included among the group of many large things; while non-identity (or some equivalent principle) is needed to guarantee that the Form generated by the *second* application of one-over-many is different from the first Form posited. Without some version of non-identity, no regress will follow; the one-over-many principle will, at each step, simply repeat the original introduction of a Form. As reconstructed by Vlastos, these two premises were mutually inconsistent, and hence, so formulated, they offered no prospect of a valid objection to the theory of Forms. But this inconsistency has often been regarded as a mere technicality. Alternative versions of Vlastos' NI were soon proposed that are compatible with SP and suffice to generate the regress.[13] We will return to the principle of non-identity, which may be regarded as a feature peculiar to this argument. Self-predication, on the other hand, represents a principle more deeply imbedded in Plato's theory.

It is essential to distinguish the formula for self-predication (*The Form Largeness is large* or *The Large itself is large*) from the interpretation given to this by Vlastos and others. There is no doubt that this formula represents a principle to which Plato is committed, for example in the *Phaedo* ("if anything is beautiful other than the Beautiful itself" 100c4), and much later in the *Sophist*: "just as the Large was large and the Beautiful was Beautiful. . ., so likewise the Not-Being was and is not-being" (258b10).[14]

Interpreting these claims as ordinary predications, Vlastos thought this principle could be defended only in special cases, where the predicate was a formal or categorial feature of all Forms, as in "the One is one" or "The Beautiful is beautiful." But in a case like "The Large is large," and hence for self-predication generally, Vlastos and others thought Plato was guilty of a logical confusion between being an attribute (largeness) and having that same attribute (being a large thing). Furthermore, as evidence that Plato's theory was committed to such a confusion, Vlastos claimed that Plato's

[13] The first proposal was by Colin Strang (1963) 193–94. For later versions, see the reference to Sandra Peterson and David Sedley, below.

[14] In this passage (*Sophist* 258b) the Eleatic Stranger is deliberately quoting (and reaffirming) self-predications both from the *Symposium-Phaedo* (the Beautiful) and also from the Third Man argument (the Large).

doctrine of love required the Form of Beauty to be beautiful in the same way as beautiful bodies and souls, only superlatively beautiful.

There are other interpretations of the self-predication formula that avoid this logical confusion by explaining how the Form of Beauty can be said to be beautiful without becoming another beautiful thing. Thus, Sandra Peterson proposed the notion of "Pauline predication" (named after Paul's *First Epistle to the Corinthians*), citing phrases like "Charity suffereth long and is kind" to illustrate the figure of speech in which statements about a property apply literally only to the things that possess this property.[15] On Peterson's account, "Justice is just" means (roughly) that participating in Justice is the reason why any act, person or institution is just: Justice itself is just because it is the source of, and the explanation for, whatever justice there is in the world. Peterson's proposal can be regarded as an explication of the passage at *Phaedo* 100c: if anything is beautiful other than the Beautiful itself, it can only be so by participating in this Form.

This notion of Pauline predication offers a non-trivial meaning for Plato's formula in *Phaedo* 100c and again in the *Sophist*. But a philosophically more significant interpretation of self-predication follows from the distinction between two kinds of predication that was introduced by Michael Frede and applied to the *Parmenides* by Constance Meinwald – the distinction that I refer to as predication *per se* and predication *per aliud*.[16] Self-predication can be seen as the default case of *per se* predications, predications that are true of the subject in virtue of its own nature. So understood, self-predication functions as a kind of shorthand substitute for a definition or statement of the nature, saying *what a thing is* in virtue of itself, as contrasted with *per aliud* predication, saying what attributes it has.

(Plato thus anticipates the Aristotelian distinction between essential and accidental predication. But the Platonic distinction applies only to Forms, whereas Aristotle will allow individual substances as subjects for both kinds of predication.)

This use of "is" (in "The Large itself is large," "the Form of Beauty is beautiful"), understood as the minimal statement of a nature, corresponds to the definitional "is" of the "what is X?" formula in earlier dialogues. It is

[15] Peterson (1973) 458.

[16] Frede identified the distinction in *Sophist* 255c12–13, expounding it first in his German dissertation (1967) 12–36, then, much later, in the English restatement (1992) 401–2. Meinwald used the distinction to ground her interpretation of the *Parmenides* (1991) and then applied these results specifically to the Third Man *aporia* (1992). An application to self-predication had been suggested also by Nehamas (1979 and 1982). The Frede distinction between "is_1" and "is_2" will be illustrated and discussed at length in section 2, below pp. 24–26.