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978-0-521-09357-6 - Plato's Thought in the Making: A Study of the  
Development of His Metaphysics

J. E. Raven

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

One of the more startling aspects of ancient Greek philosophy is the speed of its development from infancy to maturity. Thales, the so-called 'Father of Philosophy', can be dated with greater precision than most of his immediate successors by the fact that he foretold an eclipse of the sun which happened to coincide with a battle between the Medes and the Lydians. The eclipse, according to modern calculations, occurred on 28 May 585 B.C. Two centuries later Socrates was dead, Plato was at the height of his powers, the birth of Aristotle was imminent. In those two centuries philosophy changed out of all recognition. To understand the full extent of the collective achievement of Socrates and Plato, we need to know a little about their predecessors.

The whole of European philosophy evolved, by a sequence of sharp reactions, from purely physical speculations on the ultimate nature of matter. The Milesian pioneers, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, seem to have assumed without question that there was a single basic substance from which the world and everything in it was originally derived. For Thales 'all is water'; for Anaximander everything sprang, by a process of gradual separation, from a primeval unity which he called 'the Boundless'; for Anaximenes the primary form of matter is air, which by rarefaction becomes fire and by

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condensation becomes in succession wind, cloud, water, earth and stone. Socrates, we are told in the *Phaedo*, quickly tired of such speculation; Plato indulged in it rarely, and then, as the *Timaeus* shows, only for an ulterior motive. But fortunately for the future of philosophy it soon induced the first of the chain of reactions. The enigmatic utterances of the Ephesian Heraclitus, who had a profound if indirect influence on Plato, were provoked by his impatience with the materialism of the Milesians. And Heraclitus, unlike any of his three predecessors, can still speak for himself, since many of his opinions have been preserved in his own words. Here, in G. S. Kirk's translation, is a small selection of the most relevant fragments, which are worth quoting in full as an indication of the climate of thought prevailing at the time.

[Fr. 1] Of the Logos which is as I describe it men always prove to be uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have heard it. For, although all things happen according to this Logos, men are like people of no experience, even when they experience such words and deeds as I explain when I distinguish each thing according to its constitution and declare how it is; but the rest of men fail to notice what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do when asleep.

[Fr. 67] God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger; he undergoes alteration in the way that fire, when it is mixed with spices, is named according to the scent of each of them.

[Fr. 51] They do not understand how being at variance it agrees with itself: there is a back-stretched connexion, as in the bow and the lyre.

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[Fr. 53] War is the father of all and king of all. . . .

[Fr. 30] This world-order did none of the gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an everliving fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures.

And to this selection we should add, since Heraclitus himself may never have uttered the sentence most regularly ascribed to him to the effect that 'all things are in flux', the following brief extract from Plato's own dialogue, the *Cratylus* (402a8):

Heraclitus somewhere says that all things are in process and nothing stays still, and likening existing things to the stream of a river he says that you would not step twice into the same river.

The first of these fragments, despite its obscurity, makes one point abundantly clear. Heraclitus claims to have made a fundamental discovery which had eluded everybody else. The nature of that discovery can be dimly discerned in the other fragments quoted. The unity of the world, so far from residing in a single basic form of matter, consists in the incessant tension, strife or war between pairs of indissoluble opposites. This tension, which is regulated by the Logos, is the cause of all things, 'father of all and king of all'. As the result of it, everything is constantly changing: day changes into night, winter into summer, war into peace, satiety into hunger. The world is uncreated and eternal; the extinction of one thing means, and has always meant, the generation or 'kindling' of something else. The cessation of change would be the end of the world. Since the world is eternal, change

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cannot cease. And for Plato, who is said by Aristotle to have learnt the Heraclitean doctrine of universal flux from Cratylus, this incessant change disqualified the sensible world and everything in it from being the object of knowledge. That which is ceaselessly changing can be the object only of ceaselessly changing opinion.

In one of his fragments (129) Heraclitus speaks with contempt, and in the past tense, of another of the Pre-socratics who had a great influence on Plato:

Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchus, practised scientific enquiry beyond all other men and . . . claimed for his own a wisdom which was really diletantism and malpractice.

Pythagoras is unfortunately one of those historical figures who become legendary almost as soon as they are dead. Socrates of course is another. All that we know of Pythagoras can be very briefly recited. An emigrant from the island of Samos, he founded at Croton, in southern Italy, a school of scientific philosophy which was at the same time a sort of religious fraternity. His cosmology seems to have differed radically from that of the Milesians in that it was concerned more with the form or structure of the world than with its mere matter. His intellectual pursuits included mathematics, harmonics and astronomy. The inspiration of Pythagoreanism was the belief that by studying and assimilating the orderliness of the universe man can himself become orderly. So the quest for scientific truth is no mere intellectual exercise; it is also a moral obligation. Moreover the soul of man is immortal, it has fallen from a primal state of innocence and bliss,

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but it may return thither, after a cycle of transmigrations, by regaining through contemplation its original purity. In Pythagoras science and religion, the mind and the spirit, were for once united. They were united again in Plato. That is the chief reason why Aristotle, in whom the mind always predominated, could write of Plato's philosophy, as he did in chapter VI of the first book of the *Metaphysics*, that 'in most respects it followed the Pythagoreans' but contained also 'certain peculiar features' derived from Heraclitus.

The next in the chain of reactions is that of Parmenides of Elea, who wrote, probably, during the first quarter of the fifth century B.C. and who reacted, like Heraclitus, against all his predecessors alike, but especially against the Pythagoreans. Although a relatively large proportion of his writings has survived, Parmenides, again like Heraclitus, is by no means easy to interpret. Not only did he write in uncouth hexameter verse, he also attempted to compress into that medium a subject-matter which is usually prosaic and sometimes also exceedingly obscure. Two quotations must suffice to convey something of the feeling and the objective of his extraordinary poem:

[Fr. 2] Come now, and I will tell thee—and do thou hearken and carry my word away—the only ways of enquiry that can be thought of: the one way, that it *is* and cannot not-be, is the path of Persuasion, for it attends upon Truth; the other, that it *is-not* and needs must not-be, that I tell thee is a path altogether unthinkable. For thou couldst not know that which is-not (that is impossible) nor utter it; for the same thing can be thought as can be.

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[Fr. 8] One way only is left to be spoken of, that it *is*; and on this way are full many signs that what *is* is uncreated and imperishable, for it is entire, immovable and without end. It *was* not in the past, nor *shall* it be, since it *is* now, all at once, one, continuous; for what creation wilt thou seek for it? How and whence did it grow? . . . It must either completely be or be not. . . . And how could what *is* thereafter perish, and how could it come into being? For if it came into being, it *is* not, nor if it is going to be in the future. So coming into being is extinguished and perishing unimaginable. . . . But motionless within the limits of mighty bonds, it *is* without beginning or end, since coming into being and perishing have been driven far away, cast out by true belief. Abiding the same and in the same place, it rests by itself and so abides firm where it is. . . .

On the basis of such passages as these, which introduce an unprecedented form of supposedly irrefutable logic, Parmenides' own conclusions can be baldly summarized as follows. Our reason tells us that reality is one, homogeneous, eternal, changeless, motionless. If our senses seem to belie this, so much the worse for our senses. As there are two 'ways of enquiry', so there are two worlds. The world of reality or truth can be apprehended only by the reason from the premise 'It is'. The world of seeming or appearance, the unreal world apparently revealed to us by our senses, involves the combination of the true premise 'It is' with the untrue premise 'It is not'. The premise on which the opinions of mortals are based, or, as Parmenides himself puts it in Fragment 6, the 'way . . . on which mortals wander knowing nothing, two-headed' is the logically indefensible premise 'It is and it is not'.

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Although Aristotle omits to mention Parmenides in his summary accounts of Plato's debts to earlier thinkers, this particular debt, especially when coupled with that to Heraclitus, is a large one. As Plato digested the doctrines of his predecessors he came to believe, as had Parmenides, in two separate or separable worlds. The world of seeming, which is itself, like everything in it, in constant flux, can never admit of more than opinion. If knowledge is to be possible at all, it must be knowledge of quite a different world, a world no less eternal, changeless and motionless than that revealed to Parmenides by the way of truth. Plato himself, unlike Aristotle, often, if obliquely, acknowledges his debt to Parmenides, not least in the dialogue named after him. And Plato is by no means the only philosopher who is thus indebted.

Presocratic philosophy ended as it had begun in physical speculation. The atomic theory of Leucippus and Democritus was its brilliant culmination. For the time being no further progress along that road was conceivable. Although he is regularly and rightly classed as a Presocratic, because almost all of his theories are physical, Democritus seems from our inconclusive evidence to have been some ten years younger than Socrates himself, who was born in 469 B.C. Anyhow, the period between Parmenides and Democritus had witnessed the next in the sequence of major reactions, the initiation and the spread of what is called the 'Sophistic Movement'. And even if the importance of this latest reaction has often been exaggerated, anybody who has read even a small fraction of Plato's dialogues will agree that, for him at least, the

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sophists were of greater significance than the atomists. They stimulated Socrates into a struggle to the death.

The chief problem concerning the Sophistic Movement is to determine whether it was a movement at all. In the latter half of the fifth century several individual sophists were earning their living as itinerant lecturers, eager to instruct their pupils, for an appropriate fee, in anything from politics or rhetoric to higher mathematics or literary criticism. Plato himself has left us portraits, lifelike but not on that account necessarily accurate, of a few of them, ranging from their most distinguished representatives, Protagoras and Gorgias, to the blindly self-satisfied polymath Hippias. Whether or not these individual sophists ever convened in conference to determine the basis of their creed, Socrates and Plato react towards them as if they had. Plato and the Socrates of his dialogues are together the most reliable of our witnesses on the sophists collectively, and what they tell us about the attitude to life which the sophists imparted, for a price, to their usually youthful pupils amounts in brief to this. Live according to the dictates of nature rather than convention. Convention is merely a contract into which the weak enter in the hope of depriving the strong of their natural rights. The principal right of the strong is pleasure; and rhetoric, the art of making the weaker case appear the stronger, is a useful instrument towards attaining that end. Pleasure indeed, or self-gratification, is the only criterion by which to regulate life. 'Man', as Protagoras said, 'is the measure of all things.' Good and evil, right and wrong, have no universal meaning; all our sensations and opinions can



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never be more than subjective; what point can there be, therefore, in pursuing anything else but our own personal pleasures?

Such was the amalgam of teaching which Socrates and Plato set out to combat. Socrates, the most single-minded of men, lived his life in deliberate and determined opposition to the sophistic ideals or lack of them. He knew, as the *Apology* tells us, that the only ideal of any value in life was 'to make your soul as good as possible'. He knew from his own experience that goodness is the only source of happiness as opposed to pleasure. He knew by instinct that there are eternally and universally valid ethical standards. Debarred from taking part in politics by his 'divine sign', whose orders were invariably negative, he passed his time in an incessant attempt to define those standards. His life was in every sense profoundly simple, because he lived for a single objective. Everything else but the quest for goodness was indifferent to him.

With Plato, as we shall see, the situation was radically different. Although in the end his devoted admiration of Socrates became the ruling influence in his life, it did so only after a long and painful struggle. For of all men who ever lived Plato must have been one of the most versatile. Even when politics and poetry had alike been renounced in favour of philosophy, the versatility is still self-evident. Plato's readers approach him to this day from different angles and with different purposes. A mass of modern literature is concerned exclusively with one or other of the many separable strands which he wove into his philosophy: his logic, his epistemology, his dialectic, his ethics,

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his psychology, his religion, his metaphysics, and even his political theory. His very versatility must have made life much harder for him than it had been for Socrates, whose single-mindedness was difficult to follow. His decision to set down his wide-ranging thoughts in dialogue form has teased his admirers with many problems. First, where does Socrates end and Plato begin? And even if we settle that question to our own satisfaction, then which of Plato's numerous interests was the one that led him on beyond the position of his master?

This book is, in part, yet another attempt to answer these two familiar questions. The crucial stage in Plato's philosophical development seems to fall in the period, which is of unknown duration, in which he wrote the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias* and the *Meno*. In these three dialogues, if anywhere, we can watch Plato beginning to move away from the Socratic moorings: certain aspects of the three are therefore discussed in some detail in chapters 4 and 5. In the passage of *Metaphysics A* which has already been twice cited, Aristotle records first Plato's debt to the Pythagoreans, next his debt, through Cratylus, to Heraclitus, and then continues as follows (987 b 1, tr. H. Tredennick):

And when Socrates, disregarding the physical universe and confining his study to moral questions, sought in this sphere for the universal and was the first to concentrate upon definition, Plato followed him and assumed that the problem of definition is concerned not with any sensible thing but with entities of another kind; for the reason that there can be no general definition of sensible things which are always chang-