THE PARMENIDES AND THE ONE

Barry O'Donnell

...I recommend to those who want to hold the position of the analyst with what that involves in terms of knowledge not to run away from it, to bring themselves up to date with what of course for them can only be read by working on Parmenides.¹

Introduction

I am going to talk to you about a dialogue by Plato called Parmenides because both in Seminar XIX, "ou pire," and in the series of lectures entitled The knowledge of the psychoanalyst, Lacan indicates it as a text which will inform our attempts to grasp what he means by the Real. In particular, he suggests that the Platonic dialogue's account of the One is crucial to an understanding of the term: the Real. At this time in his work Lacan was emphasising the importance of the notion of the Real for our approach to the condition of the speaking subject, the subject constituted in a relation to language.

The Real is a very difficult and challenging term. Therefore, before speaking about Plato's text, itself a perplexity to centuries of readers, I will read a few of the statements Lacan makes about the Real in his Seminar to provide some kind of orientation. In the third week of the Seminar Lacan tells us that this Real 'ought to be privileged by us...because it shows in an exemplary way that it is the paradigm of what puts in question what can

* Talk given to the 10th Annual congress of the Association for Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in Ireland, 15th November 2003.
emerge from language.\textsuperscript{2} In other words, the Real is about the limit of language, the limit for language, and the limit belonging to language. In the previous week of the seminar he had spoken as follows:

The Real is what commands the whole function of significance. The Real is what you encounter precisely by not being able, in mathematics, to write just anything whatsoever. The Real is what involves the fact that in what is the most common function, you are bathed in significance, you cannot lay hold of all of the signifiers at the same time, huh? It is prohibited by their very structure. When you have some, a packet, you do not have others. They are repressed.... Everything that is psychoanalysis has no sense, is to be thrown in the wastepaper basket, or what I am saying to you here ought to be your primary truth.\textsuperscript{3}

In this endeavour to say something about the Real why does Lacan bring in the \textit{Parmenides}? First of all he advises us that if we are to work with the register of the Real we can approach it through a reading of the \textit{Parmenides}. In particular, he directs our attention to Plato’s presentation there of the notion of the One. We will be looking in more detail at this notion of the One in a few moments. Before doing so let us try to clarify something of Lacan’s advice. He is telling us that close consideration of the way in which the notion of the One is presented in the \textit{Parmenides} will help in our attempts to grasp, and thereby work with, the register of the Real. Indeed, Lacan says that it is this notion of the One that he is aiming

\textsuperscript{2} The references to Lacan’s texts in what follows are to Cormac Gallagher’s unpublished translations \textit{...ou pire / ...or worse}, \textit{The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX, 1971 – 1972} and \textit{The Psychoanalyst’s Knowledge, 1971 – 1972}. The date in brackets indicates the week of the seminar or lecture and the page number indicates the page in Cormac Gallagher’s translation. 12.1.1972, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{3} ibid, 15.12.1971, pp. 6-7.
at in this year’s Seminar.\(^4\) Let us now turn to Plato’s text bearing in mind that Lacan acknowledges it as ‘a difficult morsel to chew.’\(^5\)

**Reading the *Parmenides***

The *Parmenides*, like most of Plato’s writings, is a philosophical discussion dramatised as a chat that a number of men have on a day in Athens in or around the year 450 BC.\(^6\) The dramatisation is believed to be based on an actual historical meeting which brought together three giants of the tradition of ancient philosophy: Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates.\(^7\)

Parmenides (c.515 – 445 BC) of Elea (a city in what is now southern Italy) had an effect on the history of philosophy in the ancient world comparable to that of Descartes on modern philosophy. That is to say every subsequent philosopher could not avoid addressing Parmenides’ thinking on being and its relation to what can be said or thought, whether they agreed or disagreed with him. That is, in so far as they engaged with the questions of philosophy. Dramatically, Parmenides banishes the notion of not-being from the realm of being. In other words, he prohibits the consideration of something not being. He goes on to describe the attributes of what is: what is is without beginning or end; it is complete, whole, without gap or lack. The attribute that came to be most focussed on in the tradition (as is evident in Plato’s text) is the description of what is as single, or one.

\(^4\) ibid, 8.3.1972, p. 12.

\(^5\) ibid, 17.5.1972, p. 7.

\(^6\) This is the year most scholars propose for the dramatic setting of the dialogue. The *Parmenides* is considered to be one of Plato’s later writings thought to have been composed around 360 BC. The date around which it is set, 450 BC, was the highpoint of Athenian power in the ancient Greek world. During this period Athens was the centre of artistic and intellectual activity as well as being the foremost military power.

\(^7\) The meeting is thought to have actually taken place in or around 450 BC. At this time Parmenides would have been 65, Zeno 40, Socrates 20. Plato (c. 427 – 347 BC) is reconstructing a discussion that took place more than twenty years before his own birth.
Parmenides, therefore, grappling with the question of being, found himself having to take the radical decision to exclude not-being from the discourse of being:

Never allow what is not to be.
But direct your thought away from this path of investigation.\(^8\)

This action, in effect sets up as a necessary condition for being the ejection of something, namely not being. And that, from a logical point of view, should perhaps interest us.\(^9\)

Some, by this stage, have decided that they cannot follow a word of all this. Is this not another instance of the kind of high-sounding verbiage that occupies those poor benighted creatures called philosophers? How can such a statement – what is is and cannot not be – deserve our attention? Have we not got better things to be doing than listening to an account of the tautological nonsense of some old Greek wind-bag? Maybe we do. Maybe we think we do. But for the next few minutes let us submit to the advice of Lacan, not react dismissively and attend, in particular, to Plato’s response to the Parmenidean position. Once we have done that then we can decide whether we are bothered or not.

The *Parmenides* constitutes Plato’s response to what had become the standard interpretation of Parmenides’ position, namely that what is is one. Parmenides was understood to be claiming that being is synonymous

---

\(^8\) These lines are translated from Plato’s *Sophist* (*Soph. 237a*) where this statement of Parmenides’ position is quoted from the section of his famous poem called *The Way of Truth*.

\(^9\) Lacan quotes these very lines in his Seminar *The Logic of Phantasy*, 24.4.1967. There also he tells us that the logic at work in psychoanalysis is to be discovered in Parmenides’ statement and Plato’s response to it in the *Sophist*. For Lacan, logic is not a matter of a meta-language but a matter of extracting from language ‘...the loci and the points where...language speaks of itself.’ He adds that the logic “opened up” by the *Sophist* is required in psychoanalysis for it to know what it is dealing with. (*The Logic of Phantasy, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV, 1966 – 1967* translated by Cormac Gallagher, for private circulation.) See footnote 4.
with, or, to be perhaps more precise, co-incident with the One. What is this One with its capital O and definite article? And if we are asking this question we are doing nothing more than what Plato has Parmenides himself do in the dialogue. It is Parmenides himself who makes explicit the difficulties with the notion of the One, which is so central to his position on being. Our consideration of the text may be helped by noting that it has seriously perplexed the tradition of philosophical scholarship. What is Parmenides doing raising so many dizzying difficulties with his own theory? At this point we would be best advised to familiarise ourselves with the text.

Preliminary discussions

In the opening lines we meet Cephalus who is asking Adiemantus and Glaucon about their half-brother Antiphon. Antiphon is reputed to have learnt from Pythodoros the account of the famous exchange between Parmenides and Socrates. They seek out Antiphon but he is reluctant to be drawn on this story from his younger days. He is now occupied with his horses. Eventually, however, he consents and tells the following story.

The account of the meeting of Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates begins with an exchange between the latter two. A gathering of philosophers has listened to Zeno reading his book of arguments in which he shows the absurd consequences of the hypothesis that there are many things. Socrates preens himself on recognising that Zeno’s ridiculing of the hypothesis that there are many things stands as an indirect support for Parmenides’ thesis that there is one thing, namely the One. Zeno tells him that he does not disguise the fact that it is a defence of Parmenides’ position against those who lampoon that position by showing that the hypothesis "if one is..." has many absolutely ridiculous consequences.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) At the risk of spoiling the suspense it is worth noting that when Parmenides explores the consequences of his own thesis in the main body of the dialogue it would be hard to say whose side he himself is on, given that he manages to generate endless contradictions out of the hypothesis ‘if the one is’...
Zeno’s presentation has all the tone of sophistic cut and thrust – the exhibition of clever argumentation in order to be seen to be the victor. This is not what we might have expected from a philosopher of Zeno’s calibre. Zeno himself acknowledges this when he dismisses his own book as written by a young man fond of controversy (128e)11. Indeed Zeno suggests that monism is to be preferred to pluralism for no other reason than because it is that bit less ridiculous (128d). 12

Socrates, famed in the history of philosophy as the relentless questioner, here in this characterisation of him as a young man, has the answer. He can solve Zeno’s difficulties with the theory of forms. Zeno has concluded that there cannot be many things because then each thing will be both like and unlike itself and others and this is impossible. Socrates replies that there can be many things and that they can have contradictory attributes but only because each thing shares in the form of, say, likeness and in the form of unlikeness. This is how Socrates proposes we understand how the things of the world can have contradictory attributes. However, he cannot tolerate the forms themselves having contradictory attributes. Each of the forms must be each themselves and themselves alone. He uses himself as an example: he has many parts – front, back, upper, lower but is just one person – Socrates - among the seven philosophers gathered. This young confident Socrates presents the theory of Forms as the solution to the debate between the monists and the pluralists. It is significant that the discussion in the Parmenides opens with the assured argument of Zeno and the equally assured response of Socrates. The Parmenides is situated somewhere between the Parmenidean discourse represented by his loyal followers’ defence of that position and

11 References such as ‘(128e)’ refer to the page number in the Stephanus edition of Plato’s works, which is the standard way of referencing Plato and is practised in all the different translations of his texts.
12 At the risk of over-generalisation, monism is the thesis that there is only one thing, namely that which is; and pluralism is the thesis that there are many things.
the Platonic discourse of the theory of Forms, represented by an enthusiastic, youthful Socrates.\textsuperscript{13}

**Parmenides**

At this point Parmenides steps in. Others think he will be furious with this young upstart Socrates. But he is not. He is kind, if a little condescending. He suggests that Socrates is playing to the crowd. He asks the young man about his precious forms: whether along with the usual candidates - beauty, good, justice - there are forms for man and fire. Whether indeed there are forms for hair, mud and filth. Socrates admits a certain perplexity concerning the question of forms of man and fire but has no difficulty dismissing hair mud and filth from that realm 'for fear of tumbling utterly lost into the depths of nonsense' (130d7). Shortly afterwards Parmenides will indicate to Socrates that it is exactly into these 'depths of nonsense' that he will have to tumble to train properly as a philosopher.

Parmenides goes on to question him about the relation between the forms and the things which partake of the form. Without going into the detail of this part of the discussion it is enough to say that Parmenides brings Socrates to see that there are fundamental problems with this relation of participation in forms. However many difficulties Parmenides has raised for the theory of forms he is not proposing forms be rejected. Whatever the difficulties we still need forms to fix our thoughts, he says. Without some sense of identity through time, significance and discourse itself would be utterly destroyed (135c).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Lacan tells us that Plato was a Lacanian: 'Naturally he could not have known it. And moreover he was a little handicapped (d\'ebile)... I call mental handicap the fact of being a speaking being who is not solidly installed in a discourse. This is what gives his value to the handicapped person. There is no other definition that one could give except that of being a little off beam, namely, waverer between two discourses.' ibid, 1971-1972, 15.3.1972, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{14} What is extraordinary about this comment is that in what follows Parmenides will consider an account of the One which rejects the attributes of sameness to itself through time.
It is at this point that Parmenides tells Socrates that he needs to be properly trained: referring to his exclusive consideration of forms such a beauty, just and good, the older philosopher says ‘...drag yourself through what is considered useless and condemned by the masses as idle talk. Otherwise the truth will escape you.’ (135d).

In response Socrates requests a demonstration in this training. And Parmenides, somewhat reluctantly obliges. He says that the training involves taking a hypothesis that something is and examining its consequences relative to itself and to each of the other things. And this is what he proceeds to do for the remainder of the dialogue, taking as the hypothesis to be examined “if the one is”. If the one is, what are the consequences for itself and for the others, i.e. the things which are not one? He asks for the youngest there to be his interlocutor and that turns out to be a young man called Aristoteles.

Parmenides begins. He is examining the consequences of the hypothesis: “if one is...”:

Parmenides: If one is, is one many?
Aristoteles: No.
Parmenides: So it must have no parts, nor itself be a whole.
Aristoteles: Why?
Parmenides: Part, I take it, is part of a whole.
Aristoteles: Yes.
Parmenides: What about whole? Is not a whole that from which no part is absent?
Aristoteles: Of course.

---

15 He describes himself as an old man being forced into the lists of love against his will (137a).
16 This, of course, is not the famous philosopher of that name but the choice of this name for the character responding to Parmenides would most likely have been made at the time of Plato’s composing of the dialogue when Aristotle would have already come to his teacher’s attention as one who was going to make something of an impression. The dialogue therefore, brings together, if only in name, Parmenides, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.
Parmenides: So if one were a whole and had parts, on both grounds it would be composed of parts.
Aristoteles: Necessarily.
Parmenides: So, on both grounds one would be many but not one.
Aristoteles: True.
Parmenides: But it must be, not many, but just one.
Aristoteles: Yes.
Parmenides: So if one is to be one, it will neither be a whole nor have parts. Then if one has no part, it would have neither beginning, middle nor end; for such things would forthwith be parts of it.
Aristoteles: Correct.
Parmenides: Moreover, beginning and end are limits of each thing.
Aristoteles: Of course.
Parmenides: So, one is unlimited, if it has neither beginning nor end.
Aristoteles: Yes.
Parmenides: So, it is without shape: for it has a share of neither straight nor round.
Aristoteles: How so?
Parmenides: A thing would be round, I take it, whose extremes are everywhere equally distant from its middle.
Aristoteles: Yes.
Parmenides: But straight if its middle is in front of both extremes.
Aristoteles: True.
Then one would have parts and be many, if it had a share of straight or round.
Aristoteles: Of course.
Parmenides: So, it is neither straight nor round, since it has no parts.
Aristoteles: Correct.17

17 This translation has been adapted from R.E. Allen's translation, Plato's Parmenides, Yale University Press, 1998.
We could read on. Lacan tells us we *should* read on but for the moment we will have to make do with an overview. Parmenides continues in this vein for a number of pages indicating the consequences of the one having the relation to being implicated in a consideration of the hypothesis ‘if one is, …’. In addition to the One not being whole, nor having parts, having no beginning, middle or end, being without limits, having no shape, not being anywhere (neither in itself nor in another)...he finds that if one is, it is neither in motion or at rest, neither the same as itself or another nor different from itself or another, neither like nor unlike itself or another, neither equal nor unequal to itself nor another, neither greater than itself or another nor lesser than itself or another, not older or younger or the same age as itself or another, neither in nor not in time.

His conclusion of this first consideration of the hypothesis at 141e is that “if one is, one in no way is.” And this implies that it can have no name or account, nor can it be known, perceived or thought about.

By this argument the One refuses contact with every attribute, with every conceivable co-ordinate of Being. Parmenides asks whether these things could be true of the One and Aristoteles wonderfully replies: “I don’t think so.” So what do they do? They begin again. And this is what they will do another seven times: they go through the consequences for the one and for things that are not one when the hypotheses ‘if the one is, …’ and ‘if the one is not, …’ are interrogated. And each of these exercises produces contradictory results: The outcome of the examination of “if one is...” for a second time produces the result that the One can be described with all the attributes gone through in the preceding argument: it is a part and a whole, it is limited and unlimited, it is both one and many, it has number and causes numbers to be generated; it is and becomes both younger and older than itself and the others and neither is nor becomes older or younger than itself or others; it is therefore in time, it has a name and an account and can be known, perceived and thought about!

In other words Parmenides lets a description of the One appear which contradicts the description that immediately precedes it. He does it
without any indication that he is unsettled by this. He does not express any surprise, dismay or perplexity at what is being produced. He carries on unfazed, relentlessly. He finds the same set of characteristics either being or not being attached to the one whether the one is or whether the one is not.

Indeed in the sixth hypothesis it is argued by Parmenides, who, we recall, famously banished not-being from the realm of being, that the one needs being in order not to be. The eighth hypothesis concludes that if there is not one, nothing is and very suddenly, without any assessment of their extraordinary findings, Parmenides finishes the discussion:

Then let this be said, and also that, as it seems, whether the one is or is not, both it and the others are and are not, and appear and do not appear to be all things in all ways, relative both to themselves and to each other.

All Aristoteles can say is “Most true”.

Lacan and the Parmenides

When Lacan says he is aiming at the One in that year’s seminar he adds that there is nothing as slippery as this One. And do we not now know this from even this cursory account of Parmenides?

For all that, Lacan nonetheless suggests that what Parmenides achieves in this extraordinary exposition is that he makes the One speak. And what does the One speak? The One says ‘all that is only chatter’ (135d5). The word is adoleschia. Lacan quotes a word used by Parmenides in his preliminary conversation with Socrates, which we referred to above: the younger man must ‘drag himself through the useless, what is called chatter...that otherwise the truth will escape him.’ Lacan implies that what Parmenides goes on to do in the presentation of the eight hypotheses

---

concerning the One and its relation to Being is to have the One produce chatter.

Why? Lacan tells us: ‘It assuredly is the case that Being, for its part, is One...but that the One does not know how to be as being...’ This, he says, is ‘what is perfectly demonstrated in Parmenides.’\(^{19}\) For this reason all the One can produce is chatter: inconclusive, contradictory, prattling speech.

Later Lacan says something more about this curious relationship between the One and being. The One, he says, disclaims any relationship with being. That is the nature of their relationship. Nonetheless, the One makes Being.\(^{20}\)

I began by saying that Lacan indicates the Parmenides as a text that will inform our grasp of the notion of the Real. It is time to propose a relation between our reading of the One and Lacan’s register of the Real. Both the One and the Real defy representation and signification and by so doing are instrumental in the functioning of signification. Lacan says that,

[t]he Real is what commands the whole function of significance. The Real is what you encounter precisely by not being able, in mathematics, to write just anything whatsoever. The Real is what involves the fact that in what is the most common function, you are bathed in significance, you cannot lay hold of all of the signifiers at the same time, huh? It is prohibited by their very structure. When you have some, a packet, you do not have others. They are repressed....\(^{21}\)

In the same week of the Seminar Lacan has said that the Real introduces an ‘irreducible gap’ into discourse and logic. It upsets

\(^{19}\) ibid, 15.3.1972, p. 13.
\(^{20}\) ibid, 21.6.1972, p. 2. He adds, provocatively: “The One makes Being as the hysteric makes the man.”
\(^{21}\) ibid, 15.12.1972, pp. 6-7.
discourse's or logic's claim to say it all. The Real is what opposes, makes impossible, logic's pretension to embrace everything. He says that this Real 'affirms itself by an effect which is in no way the least, by affirming itself in the impasses of logic.' The *Parmenides* is a text about logic that lets these impasses be encountered, that lets logic founder.\(^{22}\)

I am going to finish up at this point today, perhaps hardly having begun. It is an understatement to say that more needs to be said here. I realise that all I have been able to do is indicate something of the effect of the *Parmenides* and point to some of the things that Lacan says about it in his Seminar. Meagre fare, I fear. I hope, however, that enough has been said to encourage some to follow Lacan's instruction regarding this extraordinary text of Plato: '...go and clean yourself up a little in it.'\(^{23}\)

---

22 Lacan suggests that this is why it has upset the tradition of scholarship on ancient philosophy which tends to avoid its problematic nature by describing the discussion as simply a series of exercises. The *Parmenides* is “considered to be a particularly brilliant exercise. But after this salutation, you will be told that not much can be made of it…” (ibid, 8.3.1972, p. 2). Contrary to the view in the scholarly literature Lacan says that it is not “a purely gratuitous sort of exercise, a ballet.” (ibid, 19.4.1972, p. 3.)

23 ibid, 8.3.1972, p.2.