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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION to Ficino's *Parmenides*

MULTIFARIOUS are the introductions that could be written to the commentary made by Marsilio Ficino to Plato's *Parmenides*. The translator has chosen to focus on the two themes that particularly struck him as he read and re-read Ficino's text. The first is the care shown by Parmenides in the training he imparts to Socrates. The second is Ficino's presentation of Plato's text as a work of practical spirituality.

The care shown by Parmenides

IN HIS DEDICATION of the commentary to Niccolò Valori, Ficino remarks that 'Parmenides, though older, does not contradict Socrates'. In Chapter 15 some correction does occur in dealing with the doubts expressed by Socrates: 'Parmenides does not correct the first doubt, but he does correct the second.' It is the next chapter that clearly depicts the care evinced by the elder philosopher, whom Ficino here presents in the likeness of a midwife:

Just as Socrates, the son of a midwife, performs the office of a midwife in different places towards boys and youths and proclaims this before others, so the aged Parmenides, like a dutiful midwife, exhorts and helps the youthful Socrates to give birth to the wonderful, almost divine, opinions with which he is pregnant and which he is trying to bring forth.

Moreover, he does not reject or destroy the children that are born lacking beauty, but rather he takes them up and cherishes them in a wonderful way. He strengthens the weak, straightens the crooked, gives shape to the shapeless, and perfects the imperfect. No one, therefore, will think that Parmenides the Pythagorean, the friend of Ideas in the manner of his fellows, and the pursuer of Being, which is detached from sensory perception, and of the One Itself, which is above Being,

condemns opinions of this kind; but every follower of Plato will remember that Socrates is being very carefully trained by Parmenides in dialectic, in order that he may be much more heedful when considering the divine mysteries, that he may proceed with greater care, and that he may reach the end of his journey in greater safety.

The portrayal of Parmenides as a midwife appears again in Chapter 26, where he is also compared to a teacher:

That Parmenides does not pursue Socrates at every point like a disputant and rebuke him, but in the manner of a midwife encourages, assists, cherishes, guides and corrects him, is plain to observe, because this young man does not gradually wane but gains strength at every step, being led towards better things ... Therefore, being now guided by Parmenides as by a teacher, he puts forward a true and definite view of Ideas.

The third comparison of Parmenides to a midwife occurs in Chapter 34, where Ficino says:

When Parmenides pursues, in relation to Socrates, the dedicated function of midwife which he introduced at the beginning, stimulating the inner powers of the young man to a most precise consideration of Ideas and showing on numerous occasions that very serious errors arise from imprecise answers and responses, and that it is a difficult task, and one that requires an excellent mind, to prove that Ideas exist, to show how they exist, to truly resolve doubts as they arise, and to teach with clear reason the person who is listening, all of these things make Socrates very careful and precise.

In Chapter 18 Ficino portrays Parmenides as being a particularly careful tutor when Ideas are being considered:

When Parmenides, therefore, is going to instruct Socrates, or rather encourage him, to contemplate that true way of participation by which Ideas are perceived by what is below them, he rejects, one by one, the ways which are not lawful ... Thus Socrates is advised to consider a non-physical, indeed divine, way of understanding, for we are considering either the power of an Idea or the property of an Idea ... Moreover, in comparing an Idea to the light of day he speaks rightly, but in thinking that light spreads through air like heat and is like a sail spread over the heads of many men, and in thinking that this is how an Idea is present in many objects, he is refuted by Parmenides, who says that, if this were the case, an Idea would not be totally present in anything but would be present in some parts of the objects through some of its own parts; and in this way he compels the young man to answer with greater care.

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In the following chapter Ficino indicates that Socrates, for his part, is a ready student:

Step by step Socrates is instructed in these matters so that he may consider a partaking of the Ideas which is higher than any physical principle. To this instruction Socrates readily assents, being inclined towards it by nature.

The measured restraint practised by Parmenides throughout the training imparted to Socrates is clearly in evidence in Chapter 21 of Ficino's commentary:

As a Pythagorean with due regard for Ideas, Parmenides does not cross Socrates when the latter supposes that, on account of assemblages of items coming together within something definite in response to a cause related to form, type, nature, and perfection, there is a single Idea for each and every assemblage within a type.

He does, however, temper Socrates' enthusiasm, in order to avoid the possible inference that any collection of items has to be related to a specific Idea, even if these items seem to come together by some accidental or passing circumstance, by some deficiency, artificiality, or name; for if this were the case, there would be an unnatural number of causes for many of the occurrences within nature, and the number of Ideas would be infinite ... This is how Socrates is advised not to imagine a new Idea for every apparent combination.

The restraint continues to be evident in the following chapter, where Ficino, after comparing Socrates to 'a young man without sufficient training', says:

Finally, Parmenides does not in fact reprove Socrates for seeking refuge in such notions, but he does reprove him for appearing to stay there. He therefore takes pains, through this reference to new notions which relates to the naturally implanted types, to call him back next not only to these types but also to the divine types.

However, from this point onwards the training of the young man's mind does seem to become somewhat stricter:

For this reason Parmenides, intending to lead Socrates on to a fuller explanation of these things, will henceforth insist upon many reasonings. (Chapter 26)

... when Socrates was being tested by Parmenides. (Chapter 27)

Parmenides advises the young man ... to proceed more carefully henceforth. (Chapter 27)

Parmenides therefore advises Socrates, in relation to the divine Ideas, to acknowledge both the pre-eminence of their nature and their ability to impart their power. (Chapter 28)

In brief, Socrates had to answer Parmenides by saying that the ideal lordship and the ideal service are not related to us but to each other, I mean through their first indissoluble relationship. (Chapter 30)

For this reason Socrates is now carefully trained, so that he learns to resolve doubts about Ideas, which, if unresolved, would detract from divine providence. (Chapter 32)

Even in the later chapters of the commentary Ficino reminds us of the unremitting dedication shown by Parmenides in his instruction of Socrates. In Chapter 87 he says that ‘Parmenides hones the young man’s mind ever more keenly’, and in Chapter 90 we find:

Parmenides, when preparing to train the mind of the noble young man along these lines, obliges him repeatedly, by means of the tightest constraints, either to withdraw from the false or else to make use of these abstractions, in which, as the man whom you know also says, there is no falsehood ... Parmenides tacitly reminds us of these things, partly instructing the mind of the young man by means of some logical stratagem and partly sowing some hidden teaching here and there.

Finally, in Chapter 93, Ficino again draws our attention to the same theme:

Notice how Parmenides, at times when philosophic tenets are being torn to shreds, trains the young man to be careful in his replies and judicious in his discrimination.

What effect did this training at the hands of Parmenides have upon Socrates? Ficino gives the answer in Chapter 37 by referring to a response given by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*:

In the *Theaetetus*, when Socrates was asked to refute those who posited a single motionless being, he did not undertake to do so himself but gave this answer: Although I honour Melissus and others, who say that there is one self-consistent totality, for it may seem immodest of me to cross them, yet I honour them less than I do Parmenides alone, for Parmenides, to use Homer’s words, strikes me as one who is gacious

and worthy of great honour. I once conversed with him when he was advanced in years and I was but a youth, and he struck me as having a wisdom that was profound and noble in all respects. This is why I fear that we do not have the slightest understanding of his sayings and expressions, and what he himself implied by his words is, I fear, even more of a closed book to us.

Practical Spirituality

FICINO SEES MAN as made in the image of God, and he recognises that the full realisation of human nature is nothing less than to become God. In his commentary to Parmenides, the dialogue which he says embraces all theology, Ficino presents this realisation as an ascending movement, which starts from the material forms of the universe, rises through the hierarchy of creation, and ends in God. In Chapter 41 Ficino tells us that 'Plato rises to the Supreme by two paths: by the path of analogies in the *Republic* and by the path of negations in *Parmenides*.' This is a process that is available to every human being. In Chapter 31 Ficino says:

But we do at times cognise, through the forms which are objects for us or which are innate in us, the intellectual Ideas which shine clearly in our minds subsequent to the first Idea and through which, being illumined particularly by the higher minds, we finally ascend, as far as we may, after the expiation described in the *Phaedrus*, to the first Ideas, which are rightly named the intelligible types, ourselves being raised above the human condition.

Our capability is portrayed in Chapter 34:

With this process of reasoning and with very many others given in the *Theology*, we have shown conclusively that the patterns and models of all things are naturally implanted within our mind ... This is why, as Parmenides says, we shall find no true substance to which we may properly turn the eye of the mind, for it is not right to move towards higher things, except through the world within, or to hold the contents of the inner world as worthy of respect when they are taken from the worthless outer world ... Man himself, however, as universally defined, should embrace each and every thing totally.

In Chapter 35 Ficino re-states the aim and gives directions for achieving it:

Since the hierarchy of creation strives, step by step, towards perfection, and since the order of the universe takes its origin from the most perfect principle, we must finally reach the most perfect forms, that is, the ideal and intelligible types, which are totally devoid of all the limitations of material forms ... For anyone who would consider matter is obliged to lay aside every form, and this runs counter, of course, to the usual operation of consciousness; and anyone who would contemplate Ideas is compelled to discard all the mists and wisps of material forms, an action quite contrary to the normal mode of human consciousness. In this way, Ideas are finally attained by the simple gaze of steady intelligence, a gaze utterly dissociated from all considerations of material things.

In Chapter 44 Ficino continues his words of practical guidance in the process of contemplation:

Being about to perceive the single best principle of the universe, we are obliged, first of all, to lay aside whatever is most at variance with it, that is, evil and multiplicity, and to use all our powers to be called back to our unparalleled and best quality, back to the simple and peaceful contemplation of sublime intelligence.

And so, according to the measure of the divine light shining within the first intellect and within Ideas, we look up to that in exactly the same way as we look up on a clear night to the stars in the firmament, employing all our powers to contemplate that intellect through our own intelligence and to contemplate Ideas through the ideal forms innate within our own intelligence ... If we progress by long perseverance in such contemplation, the new and incredibly wonderful light of the Good itself at last flashes upon us from on high, just as the radiance of the sun illumines astronomers who have been observing the stars until daybreak, the radiance which miraculously removes the stars at once from their eyes, just as the light of the Good itself, if it is to be perceived, obliges us to put in second place its intelligence as forms, as well as the intellect itself and Ideas and all intelligible things.

Just as we look up at the sun with half-closed eyes, so we look up at, or rather worship, the light of the Good with half-closed intelligence. For it is not permissible or right ever to direct the gaze of the intelligence upon that which is above the intelligible ... Finally, if it can in any way be right to describe the Good itself, look around at all the perfections in the creation, which are to be sought for their own sakes. Their well-spring is therefore the Good itself, which resides as the centre in all

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things that are sought, in part producing perfections to be sought after within desirable things, and in part, with these perfections as baits, enticing all that seek to come to itself.

In Chapter 45 we are told that 'mind, perfected through the Good, now possesses truth, joy, and fulfilment.'

For Ficino the whole process is a live reality, and to dispel any thought that it might be otherwise he exclaims in Chapter 50, 'This One, therefore, is not a name invented by some logician, but it is the very principle of the universe.' And in Chapter 53 he continues to describe a movement which he has clearly followed himself:

But shall we, in the manner of Proclus, rise from the intelligible which is within the intellect to the intelligible which is outside the intellect? Indeed, wherever the intelligible resides within any intellect – not the intelligible in all respects, but some intelligible, and not, in fact, identical with the substance of mind – there we shall search for a more exalted intelligible.

But after we have reached the first intellect, where the intelligible is so complete and so deep within the intellect as to be the very essence of this intellect, we shall yearn for no intelligible beyond this.

However, since the unity here is not simple unity itself, but a unity which is essential, intellectual, and intelligible, and which has formal number as its companion, we shall proceed from here to the simple One Itself, from which, as from a watchtower, we shall contemplate the divine unities, the gods, flowing forth in their hierarchy.

Ficino's use of the language of the mystics intensifies as the commentary proceeds:

Indeed, a movement of change within the soul occurs when the soul, as if now changed, undergoes the emotion, the life, the form, and the action of things that are higher or of things that are lower. There is a direct, inward, rational movement from the higher to the lower, an outward change of place, and a quickening of the body. (Chapter 63)

The language used by Ficino reaches a new pitch of intensity in Chapter 78:

If it is not perceived by knowledge and intelligence, much less will it be perceived by the lower faculties of imagination, belief, and the senses. This is what Plato maintains in his Epistle to the Syracusans, where he says that the Self can in no way be taught or declared, but that at length the light of the One suddenly flashes on those minds that are fully

turned towards the One Itself through unity and silence, that is, through the absence of the usual activity ... And so, by this marvellous sense and yearning, all things are turned towards the First, even though they do not cognise the First; and the soul likewise, even prior to a clear notion and choice made by her own counsel, seeks the One Itself by her natural sense and inclination through a single impression made by it upon her ... Parmenides thinks that the One Itself is not directly attainable even by intelligence, the guide of knowledge, since intelligence takes many forms and it is through forms that it is conveyed to beings. But after the clarity and the flash of intelligence, another light now shines from above – the light by which our own unity is miraculously united with the One Itself ... Finally, in his Epistle to the distinguished Hermias and his companions, Plato gives evidence that the supreme God can in some way be perceived, for he says that if, through the right practice of philosophy, we seek God, the Guide and Father of all, we shall eventually cognise Him clearly, as it is given to the blessed to cognise Him ... The words of Proclus are very satisfying: By the name of the One it is not the One within itself that is being expressed but that which is deep within us from the One, the one hidden concept of the One; for within all beings there is an innate yearning for the first principle as the end of all. And so, before the yearning there is a hidden sense (if I may call it that) of That.

The following chapter (79) focuses on the need for inner silence and trust in God:

We therefore ask: ‘Where in Plato’s writings does the process of dialectic rise step by step through all negations and up to the first cause of all beings and intelligibles?’ For if it is not in this dialogue it is definitely nowhere ... For this reason Parmenides is right to advise us to put our trust not in negations so much as in a silence that is peaceful, divine, and loving ... The prophet David, too, says, ‘Silence praises Thee, O God.’ ... We have travelled thus far along these roads, indeed through places where there are no roads, with Proclus and Syrianus as our guides or at least as sign-posts for us. But beyond this, where there is no one to guide us, we must move forward with God as our guide and trust henceforth in inspiration alone.

Since it would be difficult to find better guides for our own spiritual journey, let us joyfully move forward with Proclus and Syrianus, with Parmenides and Socrates, and, of course, with Plato and Ficino.

The subject matter of *Parmenides*:
On the one Principle of all things.
Written by Marsilio Ficino of Florence
and dedicated to Niccolò Valori,
that wise and excellent citizen

ALTHOUGH PLATO has sown the seeds of all wisdom throughout all his dialogues, he has gathered all the institutes of moral philosophy within the books of the *Republic*; he has embraced all knowledge of natural phenomena within the *Timaeus*, and all theology within *Parmenides* (a feat which, as Proclus says, might seem incredible to everybody else but which is indisputable to those who know Plato), and although in other matters he thus anticipated all other philosophers by a long period of time, in this last matter he seems to have surpassed himself and to have drawn this celestial work, in a divine way, from the deep recesses of the divine mind and from the innermost sanctuary of philosophy.

Anyone approaching his sacred writings should prepare himself with sobriety of soul and freedom of mind before daring to handle the mysteries of the celestial work. For here the divine Plato, speaking of the One Itself, discusses with great subtlety how the One Itself is the principle of all things, which is above all and from which come all; how it is outside all and within all; and how all come out of it, through it, and to it.

Step by step Plato rises above the intelligence of the One, towards that which is above essence. The One, indeed, is found in a triple order: in those things which flow and are subject to the senses and are named the perceptible; in those things, too, which are always the same and which are called the intelligible, perceptible no longer by the senses but by mind alone; not in those things only, but also above the senses and the perceptible, above the intellect and the intelligible, the One itself exists.

And so, in this dialogue, Zeno of Elea, a disciple of Parmenides the Pythagorean, first demonstrates that the One is in the perceptible,

showing that if there were many, not in any way partaking of the nature of the One, very many errors would follow. Secondly, Socrates, without refuting Zeno, but simply lifting him higher, takes him to the consideration of the One and of the unities which are inherent in the intelligible, to avoid delaying in this one which is inherent in the perceptible. From this, therefore, they come to the investigation of Ideas, in which the unities of all things consist.

Finally, Parmenides himself, though older, does not contradict Socrates, but ends the contemplation which he has begun and unfolds the whole principle of Ideas. He introduces four questions about Ideas. The first is whether they exist. The second is to whom the Ideas belong and to whom they do not belong. The third is what kind of Ideas they are and what power they have. The fourth is how those things which are below partake of them.

From here he himself now arises to the One, which exists above the intelligible and above the Ideas, and he introduces nine hypotheses about this, five on the basis that the One exists and four on the basis that the One does not exist, asking what follows from each of these standpoints. But these hypotheses arise from the three-fold division of the One and from the two-fold division of non-being. Indeed, the three-fold One is found above being, within being, and beneath being. But non-being itself is subject to a double consideration: for some think either that it does not exist at all, or that it partly exists and partly does not exist.

Thus the first hypothesis is: if the One exists above being, what follows around it in relation to itself and to other things? The second: if the One is with being, that is, the one being, what is its relationship to itself and to other things? The third: if the One is placed beneath being, what happens to it in relation to itself and to other things? The fourth: if the One stands above being, how are other things related to themselves and to the One? The fifth: if there is that One which is located with being, what happens to other things in relation to themselves and to that One? The sixth: if there is not one being which partly is and partly is not, how is it related to itself and to other things? The seventh: if there is not one being which in no way exists, how is it related to itself and to other things? The eighth: if there is not that one which partly is and partly is not, what happens to other things in relation to themselves and to it? The ninth: if this one is not, so that it does not exist at all, what do other things suffer in relation to themselves and, finally, in relation to it?

In all these hypotheses the general intention of Parmenides is to affirm this above all: there is a single principle of all things, and if that is in place everything is in place, but if it be removed everything perishes. Thus in the first five hypotheses he conveys five steps of creation in a single assumed order of creation. However, in the following four hypotheses he examines how many absurdities and errors and evils follow if the One itself be removed.

Of the five earlier hypotheses the first discusses the one supreme God, how He creates and arranges the orders of the divinities that follow. The second discusses the individual orders of the divinities and how they proceed from God Himself. The third discusses divine souls; the fourth discusses those which come into being in the region which surrounds matter and how they are produced by the highest causes. The fifth discusses primal matter, how it is free from differentiation by its own nature, and how it is dependent on the original One. It should also be noted that when One is mentioned in this dialogue it can, as in the system of the Pythagoreans, indicate any single substance that is totally detached from matter, such as God, mind, and soul. But when the terms *other* and *other things* are used, they may be understood both as matter and as those things which come into being within matter.

Having, therefore, stated and heeded these things first, let us move to the dialogue itself.



The Preface of Marsilio Ficino to his Commentary on *Parmenides*

The subject matter of *Parmenides* is intensely theological,
but its form is dialectical.

IT WAS the custom of Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato to cover the divine mysteries with figures and veils in all their works; to modestly cloak their wisdom, in contrast to the ostentation of the Sophists; to jest seriously and to play most zealously.

And so in *Parmenides*, under the guise of a dialectical and, as it were, logical game aimed at training the intelligence, Plato points towards

divine teachings and many aspects of theology. It was also the custom of the Pythagoreans and of Plato to harmoniously blend many substances together, partly through the law of nature and partly through grace. In the *Phaedrus* he combines oratory and poetry with theology, and in the *Timaeus* he mixes mathematics with natural science, and he often joins the art of discussing with the divine or even with the moral. In the same way he joins the analytical art and the definitive art with the divine in the *Philebus* and *Politicus* and the *Sophist*; and in *Parmenides* he joins demonstrative art with the divine.

In order to avoid seeming like a pedagogue teaching boys, as he could appear to be if he transmitted only the bare logical rudiments, he thinks that, just as the demonstrative art excels the analytical art and the definitive art as their end, so it is transmitted in a more divine substance. So Aristotle, indeed, mixed the highest dialectic – for I prefer to say dialectic rather than dialection – with the divine, imitating Plato as I think, who in the *Republic* calls theology by the name of dialectic. Therefore the subject matter of this *Parmenides* is particularly theological and its form particularly logical.

We have explained in the beginning that this is certainly how Proclus and his followers considered the arrangement and order of the book, but I shall show step by step in what follows what I myself think about this and how far I follow them.



Chapter 1: Setting the scene for the dialogue

CEPHALUS and his companions ask Adeimantus and Glaucon, the brothers of Plato, born to the same father and mother, to persuade Antiphon, their brother – born to their mother but not to their father – to relate to them that discussion which he had received from Pythodorus, who had previously been present when the Pythagoreans, Parmenides and Zeno, were reasoning together with Socrates.



Chapter 2: How the whole of being is one, but the One Itself is above being

WITH VERY many arguments Parmenides confirmed in his poem that the universe, or the whole of being, is one, but the universe, or the all, is appreciated in these three ways: individually, collectively, as a whole.

Thus, according to the first way, any being whatsoever – this one by itself, as well as that one, and that one yonder – is something that is one within itself, distinct from all others by its particular quality. Now, according to the second way, the whole expanse of beings, taken together, is one, so that in all possible respects all things come together in being, having been brought forth from the same beginning and having finally been brought back to the same common end, and harmonising with each other in movement, in actions performed, and in actions suffered. Finally, according to the third way, the first among beings is both one and all: it is one because just as natural beings are ascribed to one nature, and bodily phenomena to one body, so all beings, in the end, are simply ascribed to a single being; and it is all because, just as the powers of all natures and of all bodies are contained in the first nature and the first body, so all beings are comprehended within the one primal being, which we call the intelligible world.

But the false statements of certain Aristotelians are not to be accepted, whereby we might mistrust Parmenides when he says that the whole of being is one, and that the whole brings forth multiplicity from the universal, for otherwise when Plato speaks in the *Theaetetus* of the one unmoving being, he would not be honouring Parmenides, but rather attacking him.

For Plato, together with the Pythagoreans, places multiplicity – the variety of opposing types and ideas, and the complete origin of numbers – in the primal being, but he maintains that at the same time that primal being, together with number, is so fully one that no further one beyond the first can be contemplated. Thus far Parmenides understands the One through participation, naming the One three times. In the first way and the second way the participation in unity is imperfect, but in the third way it is perfect. However, beyond that unity which partakes perfectly of the intelligible world he postulates a supreme unity higher than the one universal being, for the nature of

being is different from the nature of unity, since multiplicity and composition are not opposed to the nature of being but are opposed to the nature of unity. Moreover, non-being is opposed to the former, while the non-One is opposed to the latter. But to say non-being is not the same as saying non-One, since the non-One does not necessarily signify nothing but signifies diverse multiplicity. Therefore the one being is not the simple One Itself, but is in all respects a composite mixed with multiplicity.

Just as from heat mixed with cold or from light mixed with darkness reason and nature teach that heat in its purity is to be attained and light in its purity is to be attained, and from incorporeal substance conjoined to the body incorporeal substance divorced from the body is to be attained; again, from temporal being which in some way is mixed with non-being eternal being is to be attained; in the same way, from unity conjoined with essence unity totally liberated from essence is to be attained. Indeed, whatever is simpler than essence for any reason is necessarily superior to it. This is the name Parmenides gives to the beginning and end of all things on account of its supreme simplicity and power signified by unity.



Chapter 3: All multiplicity partakes of unity

THE PROPOSITION of Parmenides, whereby it is asserted that the whole of being is one, that is, partakes of the One, is confirmed by his disciple Zeno with another proposition, whereby he shows that beings are not many, that is, not only many, but beyond their multiplicity they partake of unity. For unless there were some participation in unity within such a great number of diverse beings, they would be totally dissimilar one to another, nor would they agree with each other in order or in any other way, which everyone can clearly see is untrue. Again, they would be dissimilar one to another, and for the same reason they would also be similar, which is a foolish thing to say, since they would have this in common, that just as *this* is totally different from *that*, so in turn *that* is totally different from *this*, both returning like for like, as the saying goes.