

Thinking and Being
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The presocratic philosopher Parmenides formulated a perplexing problem about the very possibility of falsehood, of thinking something that is not true. The puzzle starts with the natural idea that whenever a thinker thinks, there is *something* that she is thinking. There is no such thing as an act of thinking in the course of which nothing is thought. But what exactly does a thinker think, when she thinks? Answering this with respect to true thoughts appears straightforward enough. If I think that Neptune is blue – which is true – the world furnishes me with what I am thinking, namely the fact that Neptune is blue. But what if I think, falsely now, that Neptune is red? In this case, the world comes up short: there is no fact for me to think. So it looks as though I think nothing. And to think nothing is to fail to think at all.

Parmenides' challenge forces the following question on us: what explains the fact that thoughts, as it were, "say" something? What explains the fact that a thought is always a thought *that* something is the case? The puzzle of falsehood emerges with reflection on the fact that although false thoughts say something (for example, "that Neptune is red") no less than true ones, it's quite unclear what there is for them to say.

This puzzle convinced Parmenides that thinking falsely is unintelligible. This is an odd conclusion, one might think, for the progenitor of metaphysics to have arrived at. After all, no amount of philosophy should allow us to conclude, absurdly, that something we do all the time is impossible. The problem is, though, that absurdity notwithstanding, we do seem to have reasoned our way to that conclusion. And if, parting from Parmenides, we refuse to accept it, the burden is on us to find the flaw that led to it.

Discharging that obligation is one of Irad Kimhi's central aims in his highly original new book. It's unusual these days for a philosopher to worry about Parmenides' argument. From the perspective of contemporary analytic philosophy, diagnosing its flaw is almost immediate. This fact is testament to the continued influence of the German logician Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), whose work on the nature of thought provides the resources to reveal Parmenides' inference as fallacious. Specifically, Parmenides' puzzle appears to call for Frege's notion of a "proposition", which holds the promise of rendering falsehood intelligible. So why does Kimhi concern himself with an argument that has been all but ignored for centuries? Because Kimhi thinks that Frege's profound influence has been nothing short of disastrous.

It's hard to overstate quite how widely accepted Frege's fundamental views are among mainstream Anglo-American analytic philosophers. An education in that field begins almost invariably with propositions, and thinking in terms of them eventually becomes so engrained that one ceases to view the notion

as the kind of thing to which there might be alternatives. Indeed, with this kind of training in place, it can be very hard for Parmenides' paradox to find a grip at all. Confronted with the puzzle, one's reaction is likely to be not that its solution is obvious, but that there *is* nothing to solve.

According to Frege, to think is to stand in a relation to a proposition: a distinctive kind of entity that is introduced to play the role of what one thinks when one thinks. Propositions are true or false depending on how the world is, and, crucially, do not depend for their existence either on actually being thought or on being true. Propositions thereby comprise a veil of intermediaries that stand between thinkers and the world, and which are what they are independently of how the world is configured. From this perspective, Parmenides' mistake was to think of the world as furnishing thinkers with things to think: to think falsely that Neptune is red is not, impossibly, to stand in some relation to a non-existent element of the world, but rather to bear a relation to a proposition whose availability to be thought is unimpaired by being false.

Frege's account of thinking therefore leaves little room for Parmenidean anxieties. But note that propositions only appear suited to the task of dissolving the puzzle of falsehood because they do not themselves "say" anything. Rather, propositions are what thoughts say. If that were not the case – if propositions said things no less than thoughts – introducing them would only push the problem back a stage. If we responded to the question "How is it possible for the thought that Neptune is red to say anything?" with the answer "Because we stand in a relation to a proposition that says that Neptune is red", we would then be confronted by the further question "How is it possible for that proposition to say anything?". So if propositions are supposed to help with the puzzle, they must be able to answer the first question without giving rise to the second. The thought that Neptune is red says something – namely a particular proposition – which does not itself say anything.

There are therefore two aspects of propositions that make them appear suited to the task of solving the puzzle: they don't themselves "say" anything, and their availability to be thought in no way depends on their being true.

Now we can get a feel for the essence of Kimhi's critique of Frege. For how can something that does not itself "say" anything be the kind of thing that can be true or false? It is surely a platitude to say that something can only be true or false if it says something against which its claim to truth can be assessed. Accordingly, the standard view in logic and philosophy is that something is true when it says that things are a certain way, and things are that way. What is more, how can the fact that a thought says something consist in the fact that it stands in a relation to something that for its own part says nothing? To put it succinctly: if propositions *needn't* be true, it's unclear how they *can* be true; and if propositions don't *make* claims, it's unclear how they can *be* claims. Precisely that which we thought they had to be renders them ill-equipped to solve the puzzle.

Kimhi's doubts about propositions are not the usual complaints about whether they can be incorporated into a scientific world view. His concern is with questioning the very

coherence of the notion. In doing so, he re-establishes the urgency of Parmenides' puzzle.

Kimhi's arguments are convincing, and the effect on the philosopher steeped in the analytic tradition ought to be one of utter destabilization. After all, Kimhi's targets are assumptions that most philosophers widely regard as both innocent and compulsory. But for my own part, the feeling of destruction that I was left with was accompanied by a heady sense of unanticipated possibility. For as well as challenging their innocence, Kimhi shows how far from compulsory those assumptions actually are. Indeed, it is one of Kimhi's greatest achievements to have made vivid quite how much is presupposed by the notion of a proposition, a notion which, for many philosophers, is beyond dispute.

The puzzle of falsehood is but one of the topics addressed in this rich and erudite book, which as well Parmenides and Frege, engages with interrelated themes in Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. It is immensely thought-provoking; it is also difficult. Kimhi demands a lot of his reader, and is seemingly unapologetic about the fact that reading the book takes considerable work and patience. His style is alien (to say the least), but it's hard to shake the feeling that this might, in the end, be what's required of an attempt to bring about a complete change of perspective. That's not to say that there aren't parts that leave you unsatisfied. It would have been nice, for instance, to see more engagement with "Critical Fregeanism", Kimhi's label for the existing, albeit fringe, views, most strongly associated with Gareth Evans and John McDowell, which attempt to incorporate some ideas similar to those in this book into a Fregean framework. Such views receive frustratingly little discussion, and the short section in which they're addressed (and rejected) is one of the weakest.

Part of the vertiginous sensation that comes from reading the book is due to the fact that Kimhi's own position on the problem of falsehood, and the question of thinking in general, is decidedly elusive. But such is the force of the book's destructive elements that work must be put into grappling with it. *Thinking and Being* has the potential to devastate an entire way of thinking that has become near philosophical orthodoxy. This is a book that philosophers cannot afford to ignore.

