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The Legacy of Parmenides

Curd, Patricia, 1949-, *The legacy of Parmenides : Eleatic monism and later presocratic thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. x, 280 pages ; 24 cm. ISBN 9780691011820 \$45.00.

Review by

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If you are primarily interested in the Presocratics as analytical cosmologists, logicians, epistemologists, and scientific methodologists, then this book will be of great interest to you. If you are primarily interested in the Presocratics as enigmatic poets, prophets, healers, and law-givers, then it won't.

As should be obvious from the title, *The Legacy of Parmenides* is a very ambitious book. Curd undertakes a thorough exposition of Parmenidean philosophy, from his influences to his immediate successors, while dealing with most of the relevant post-war secondary literature (especially Owen, Barnes, Coxon, Taran, Kahn, Mourelatos, and Robinson). The book reads somewhat like a commentary, quoting, translating, and commenting on the Greek text, according to the traditional ordering of the fragments. (The secondary sources are for the most part treated in the very extensive footnotes). In addition to the exegesis of Parmenides' poem, Curd provides interpretations (as well as relevant texts and translations) of the Ionians, the Pluralists, Zeno, the Atomists, Melissus, Philolaus of Croton, and Diogenes of Apollonia. Specialists with an interest in any of these figures and movements will need to deal with Curd's positions and will benefit from her survey of the contemporary literature. On the other hand, the book is probably too technical (and expensive) to serve students looking for an overview of the philosophical activity of Socrates' predecessors.

Throughout the book, Curd seeks to situate Parmenides firmly in the debates about cosmology that occurred in Greece from the sixth through the fourth centuries BC (p. 4, 27, 64, 95, 127-8, 217, 241). According to Curd, the standard interpretation of Parmenides portrays him as an isolated figure, largely unprecedented and more or less ignored by his successors, at least until Plato's 'later' dialogues (p. 3, 10-11, 27). This interpretation, whether or not it is standard, is an extreme one and Curd's is at the opposite end. She portrays the Pre-Socratic philosophers as a tight-knit bunch with ample access to each other's positions, engaged in a continuous dialectic, the results of which were invariably cumulative and progressive. There is something productive about this methodological assumption: the texts mutually illuminate one another when their arguments are cast as entries into a huge metaphysical debate spanning multiple centuries and continents. But historical concerns threaten to undermine such an endeavor, and so Curd asks the reader to accept her chronological assumptions in exchange for the results of her interpretations (p. 15-18, 129, 19). The results are indeed impressive, and I try to summarize some of the more important of these after stating my main complaint with the book.

Curd's outlook assumes that cosmologists are Parmenides' only opponents and audience. His writing is exclusively 'philosophical' in the sense that it addresses only cosmological and scientific concerns, and scientists and cosmologists are the only people for whom he is writing. Is it not possible that Parmenides was also concerned to address other poets, politicians, sophists, doctors, laymen, and priests, as well? Of course Parmenides and his fellow 'Presocratics' were philosophers, but they were not part of an organized or exclusive discipline. What is fascinating to many of us about the Presocratic period is the total lack of consensus on what constituted philosophy, its ends, means, limits, possibilities, relation to other cultural spheres, etc. A central question for Presocratic studies in general, and Parmenidean studies in particular, is: what were they doing when they do what we now call 'philosophy'? In other words, what is philosophy? Curd's approach seems to preclude any discussion of this issue. For she comes to the table with a preconception of what philosophy is and uses that preconception to determine what is important in Parmenides and his predecessors and successors.

The most obvious influence on Parmenides is epic poetry. Parmenides wrote his poem in the style of Homer, Hesiod and would have expected his audience to have been educated primarily by means of their poems. If he was writing exclusively in response to, and for, other cosmologists, then why did he not write in their prose style? Xenophanes, who is often regarded as an influence on Parmenides, was a traveling bard and a performer of epic poetry as well as his own cosmological verses. There is strong reason to think that the epic poets, especially Hesiod, were Parmenides' target, and that people versed as much in epic poetry as in Ionian science were Parmenides' intended audience. Heraclitus, whom Curd claims Parmenides probably read, explicitly inveighed against the poets (fragments 40, 104, & 106). If Parmenides was in fact making a radical break with the poetic tradition in favor of the newly developing philosophical one, then it seems likely that his arguments would have been directed at the former at least as much as the latter. Curd abruptly dismisses this suggestion, which was originally Fraenkel's, in a footnote on page 117. But this is certainly too hasty. Consider the following lines of Hesiod:

“the ready-voiced daughters of Great Zeus breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be (τὰ ἐσσόμενα) and things that were aforetime (τὰ ἐόντα)” (29, 31-32).

“let us begin with the Muses telling of things that are (τὰ ἐόντα) and that shall be (τὰ ἐσσόμενα) and that were aforetime (πρὸ ἐόντα)” (36, 38).

Compare Parmenides:

“what-is (ἐόν) is ungenerated and unperishable. Nor was it once (ἦν), nor will it be (ἔσται), since it is now (νῦν ἔστιν), all together” (fragment 8.3-5).

The Hesiodic lines come in the proem of *Theogony*, which contains at least three distinct preludes (beginning lines 1, 36, and 104). By comparison, the 32 lines of proem in Parmenides' poem comprise at least a fifth of the extant lines. The proem(s) in the *Theogony* serve to establish the purpose of the poem and the poet's sense of his own authority and relationship to the truth. For Parmenides, concerned as he is with epistemological issues, this is a fortiori so. But although Curd's exegesis of the Parmenidean poem itself spans more than 100 pages, fewer than 6 are devoted to the proem (except for a single footnote on p. 103). Curd admits "pessimism concerning the allegorical significance of the *kouros*'s journey" (p. 20), but is confident that the rest of the poem can be interpreted nonetheless because, "unlike other surviving pre-Parmenidean appeals to the Muses or representations of divine inspiration, Parmenides' inspired poem is a work of philosophy" (p. 20). What philosophy is, at this point, is made explicit neither by Parmenides nor by Curd.

There is something wrong with using one's own conception of philosophy as a justification for eliminating a substantial part of another philosopher's text. Other commentators have advanced much more thoughtful interpretations of the proem, even in far less extensive studies. This is because the proem itself, and not just the 'rest of the poem', is philosophical. Sextus Empiricus saw it that way; he offered a detailed allegorical interpretation of the poem as the best encapsulation of Parmenides' entire philosophy (*M.* VII.111ff.). More recently, commentators have used the evidence of the proem in arguments against certain interpretations of Parmenidean metaphysical or epistemological doctrines. A good example at hand is R. Waterfield's review of Vlastos (BMCR 95.06.17); Waterfield refers to a number of studies of the proem that conclude that the *kouros*'s journey is from light into darkness, in order to show that Parmenides could not have simply associated Night with ignorance. Another example is P. Kingsley's recent book on Parmenides, which largely focuses on the proem (*In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, Inverness, CA, 1999). So, despite her otherwise comprehensive survey of the contemporary literature, Curd all but ignores this important part of the debate about Parmenides. The result is that we are left wondering whether or not Curd could possibly be right about Parmenides' objectives, target, and audience.

But, if we take science and cosmology to be Parmenides' exclusive concern, then Curd offers a very compelling reading of the rest of Parmenides' poem (fragment 2 and following). Instead of rejecting the inquiry into nature as he has often been thought to do, Parmenides seeks to "make it legitimate" (p. 27); thus his concern is "as much methodological as metaphysical" (p. 35). A legitimate cosmology is one that proposes "theoretically basic entities" or "natures" (p. 81, 97) which meet certain metaphysical and epistemological criteria (p. 35, 62, 67). These criteria are outlined in the *aletheia* as a series of tests. Cosmologies whose basic entities do not pass these tests are deceptive, examples include those of Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and the one proposed by the goddess herself in the *doxa*. Examples of cosmologies that might pass the tests are those of the pluralists (Anaximenes, Empedocles, the Atomists, and Plato's theory of forms as presented in the early and middle dialogues). It might seem shocking that the material monists fail to pass Parmenides' test, while those of the pluralists do. This is where Curd's interpretation is most original and radical. She holds that Parmenides' branch of monism is neither material (there is only one underlying matter) nor numerical (exactly one thing exists) nor predicational (each thing is only one thing). Thus pluralism is, in theory, compatible with Parmenides' branch of (predicational) monism, because "it is possible for there to be a numerical plurality of entities each of which is predicationally one" (p. 5).

In fragment 2, Parmenides observes that there is a fundamental crisis between is (ἔστι) and is-not (οὐκ ἔστι) and argues these designate two 'routes' that can be followed. The former is legitimate, the latter is not. According to Curd, there is no third or intermediate route; any attempt to think what is-not puts one on the

negative route. The two questions that have most puzzled commentators are: (1) What is the subject of the $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$? (2) What is the sense of the $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$? The standard interpretation holds that the subject is ‘whatever can be spoken or thought’, and the sense is existential; thus ‘whatever can be thought or spoken of exists’.

Curd criticizes this solution, and offers her own interpretation. She suggests that the subject of the $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$ is “what it is to be the genuine nature of something” (p. 4). The sense of the $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$ is predicational. Whatever a cosmology proposes as a basic entity can be inserted as the subject of the $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$. The point is then to determine if the subject meets the criteria required by monistic implications of the predicational $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$. If not, then the cosmology is metaphysically and epistemologically unsound. The criteria stem from the nature of what is. What is is neither mutable (generable, perishable, or divisible) nor incomplete. A basic entity is predicationally monistic, and is cosmologically legitimate, only when it is immutable and complete. Thales’ basic entity, water, fails, because it is generated and destroyed (p. 70-71) and, more fundamentally, because it changes from water into not water (because, on Thales’ account, the fundamental entity changes from water into some phenomenal thing, p. 74). Anaximander’s *apeiron* gives rise to something that is both hot and cold, and so fails the test by changing into both what is (hot) and what is not (hot). All dualistic cosmologies fail the test, because they assume that a fundamental entity can change into opposite things. The most explicit example of this is in Heraclitus’ doctrine of the unity of opposites. (I leave aside the question of whether we should actually interpret Heraclitus as having advanced such a doctrine. Some have argued that he did not, and that he is actually very close to Parmenides on this very issue. But Curd presents a plausible, and in fact standard, interpretation of Heraclitus as one that serves as a perfect foil for her Parmenides.) Finally, the cosmology presented by Parmenides himself, the *doxa* is the epitome of a deceptive dualism. The basic entities or principles of the *doxa*, light and night, are dualistic opposites (as Curd argues, “enantiomorphic” opposites). Thus the *doxa* serves as a pedagogical tool. Applying the criteria of the *aletheia*, one can determine the reason why this sort of explanation of the world, as it is presented to the senses, is false.

The rest of Curd’s book considers the influence Parmenides’ poem had on his philosophical successors. The focus here is on the pluralists. In Anaxagoras, the *chremata* show themselves to be entities that meet Parmenides’ criteria: they are neither generated nor destroyed, they are complete and unified, and they have a stable and immutable nature (p. 154). Empedocles’ roots are Parmenidean entities, each with its own unchanging nature, not subject to generation or destruction, even if the account of phenomenal change in terms of mixture and separation (and the dualism of love and strife) follows Parmenides’ model in the *doxa*. Now, Anaxagoras and Empedocles argue for a plurality of basic entities, but do not make explicit arguments for a pluralistic cosmology as such. For Curd, this counts as evidence for her interpretation of Parmenides as a predicational but not numerical monist. If Parmenides had been a numerical monist, then these later philosophers would have had to justify their pluralism. But their silence on this issue, and their adherence to predicational monism with respect to the basic entities, is for Curd positive evidence that Parmenides did not mean to argue that ‘exactly one thing exists’.

We might pause to consider if this is sound methodology: does lack of a response in a subsequent thinker imply that the thinker accepts a predecessor’s argument? This is a particularly questionable inference when the subsequent thinker’s work survives only in fragments. At any rate, Curd argues that, for Parmenides’ successors, at least, it does. See pages 8, 128, 171, 242.

Some of the most interesting results turn up in Curd’s treatment of Zeno and the Atomists. Zeno’s paradox of divisibility applies to any corporeal entity. It threatens the pluralistic accounts not because they posit a numerical plurality of entities, but because they posit corporeal entities as really existing. Curd has already

argued that a plurality of corporeal entities is consistent with Parmenides' arguments so long as they are predicational monads. Curd argues that Zeno's arguments could actually be used against Parmenides' account insofar as it allows for the real existence of corporeal entities (p. 177). So, on Curd's account, the pluralists (who are traditionally assumed to be in direct opposition to Eleaticism) seem to advance fundamentally Parmenidean positions, while Zeno (traditionally taken to be the 'faithful servant of Parmenides' views' — p. 171-2) might be a critic of the whole lot! Consequently, we need to revise our concept of Eleaticism to make room for critical developments within the school (p. 179). Curd's account of the Atomists is more or less standard, since it serves her story well that a major motivation for Atomism was evidently to posit entities that avoid Zeno's divisibility paradoxes and meet Parmenidean criteria for what-is. With respect to the void she argues that the Atomists endeavored to show that it is real and exists, despite having no character of its own, and so tried to revise the Parmenidean criteria for what-is (p. 197ff.).

Melissus is a more radical monist than Parmenides, Curd argues, because he takes both numerical and predicational monism to be a consequence of the rejection of generation and destruction (p. 209-11). Thus the traditional interpretation of Parmenides applies rather to Melissus, and a comparison of the differences between the two is further evidence that Parmenides himself was not committed to numerical monism. Curd next deals with Philolaus of Croton and Diogenes of Apollonia. Here again Curd's intention is to demonstrate their concern to abide by the Parmenidean criteria for what is.

Finally, Curd argues that Plato was "the last presocratic" (p. 228ff.) insofar as the theory of forms as presented in the early and middle period dialogues conforms to Parmenidean criteria. This is most evident in the account of the form of beauty in the *Symposium* (210e6-211b5, Curd, p. 229). In a provocative, but severely underdeveloped argument, Curd claims that Plato's criticisms of Parmenides in later dialogues, such as *Sophist* and *Parmenides*, mistakenly assume that Parmenides' monism is numerical, and that this assumption had a pernicious influence on all subsequent Parmenidean interpretation (p. 240). This argument is asserted but not developed, and Curd unfortunately does not deal with Plato's arguments from the later dialogues in any detail. Although it is reasonable for the author to circumscribe her own area of concentration, the book seems incomplete without some reference to *Timaeus*. The speech of Timaeus is effectively a *Peri Physeos*, complete with an invocation of the relevant gods, methodological prologue, theory of elements, cosmology, astronomy, psychology, human physiology, and embryology. All of these are topics with which Parmenides dealt in the second (presumably longer) philosophical poem.

This summary is intended to give readers of this journal a glimpse of the daring interpretations and far-reaching implications of Curd's work. The reviewer only wishes that Curd would have also advanced an interpretation of the poetic, religious, medical, and rhetorical aspects of Parmenides' 'philosophical poem', for these too constitute no small part of Parmenides' legacy.