

The Microcosm of Parmenides' Proem

The proem of Parmenides' so-called *Peri physeos* has been studied in relation to Homer and Hesiod (e.g. Havelock [1958], Pelikaan-Engel [1974], Mourelatos [2008], etc.); through his choice of the medium of *epos*, the philosopher positions himself vis-à-vis his predecessors and highlights both his continuity and his divergence from them. The present discussion, however, does not look so much back at that tradition, as forward by examining the proem in light of Parmenides' teaching as it anticipates and pre-figures his double argument encompassing the two paths of inquiry: both the eternal circularity of Being and the multiple and deceptive opinions of mortals.

As has been noted, the proem (fr. B 1 DK) is constructed as a series of echoing rings. The description of the *kouros*' journey to the goddess abounds in repetitions, especially forms of *phero*, compound *polu-* words, and verbal pairs where the same or a similar word denotes very different things (e.g. *αἰθόμενος* means "burning" in line 30, but *αἰθέρια* (36) means reaching to the *aither*). There are also material pairs everywhere: two wheels, two doors, lintels and doorjambs, the gates of Night and Day. Indeed, the goddess describes "men who know nothing" as wandering around in circles and calls them "two headed" (*δίκερνοι*, fr. B 6.5 DK). But Being too is circular, "the unshakable well-rounded heart of truth" (fr. B 1.52; cf. fr. 28. 10-43-49 DK). As the goddess herself says, it does not matter where she begins; she will end up in the same place (fr. B 5 DK, cf. Osborne [1998] on the circular shape of Parmenides' teaching).

The proem's dizzying exuberance of sensory detail sensory and verbal repetitions confound the simple signification of names for things and prefigure Parmenides' teaching concerning mortal *doxa* and their error in assigning names for things (fr. B 8.53-56 DK).

But amid the whirling and screeching of the journey's sensory overload is the "man who knows" (εἰδότες φῶτα), the one who can travel on the road of *aletheia* whenever he wishes, and moreover travel on it as far as his *thumos* desires. He too has the capability of seeing not only with his senses, but also with his *nous*, a *nous* that can grasp what is absent as well as what is present (fr. 4.1 DK), the unshakable heart of truth. The strange concatenation of present, imperfect, and aorist tenses in the proem's opening lines most closely parallels the opening of the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* and the *Theogony* in which divine time intersects with mortal time (cf. Erler [2002]). Far from being a poetic adornment, the proem reveals itself to be a microcosm – or *mis-en-abîme* – embracing both the deceptive polyphonic world of human *doxa* and the transcendent and timeless, but always available, Being

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