

John Palmer: *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP 2009. XII, 428 S. 60 £.

This is an important book, which serves a double revisionist intention: the re-evaluation of the content and the significance of Parmenidean philosophy and the reassessment of its position and role within the history of early Greek philosophy. The two aspirations are not necessarily interconnected, and they can be evaluated independently; but the author expands on them in a coherent and interrelated manner.

In the first of his eight chapters, the author determines the historiographic coordinates that have fixed Parmenides' position in the history of Greek philosophy, with particular attention to the narrative schemes of Aristotle and Guthrie. The second chapter deals with the proem, and then turns to fr. 2 and deploys Palmer's central position: the *modal interpretation* of the two «ways of inquiry». Chapter 3 focuses on other central fragments of the part on Truth (especially frs. 3, 6, and 7), while chapter 4 takes up the extensive fr. 8 and then the cosmology, trying to show how a «co-presence» of Being and world could be explicated and justified. The following chapters touch upon the relation of Parmenides to the so-called Eleatics (ch. 5), to Anaxagoras (ch. 6) and to Empedocles (ch. 7), while the concluding chapter 8 summarizes the whole interpretation and attempts to make a new, fresh start in posing the question on the place of «Parmenides in Presocratic Philosophy».

Palmer presents his hermeneutic scheme as an 'anti-Guthrie' version. This lends the monograph a sharp profile, although the author sometimes attaches too much importance to the reading Guthrie offered some 50 years ago (which has already been accused of various hyperbolic schematizations and simplifications). Guthrie's reading of Parmenides is summarized by Palmer (19) in the following two positions:

(T₁) Parmenides was a proponent of strict monism, the metaphysical position that exactly one thing exists, and he held this unique entity to be both spatially and temporally undifferentiated.

(T₂) Parmenides believed the world of our ordinary experience a non-existent illusion and the sensory evidence for its existence radically deceptive.

These positions may indeed dominate philosophical handbooks or encyclopaedias, but in fact they do not any longer control scientific research on Parmenides. The hermeneutic shift (at least within Anglo-American research) has been made possible by the «meta-principle» interpretations – i.e. basically by the extremely important monograph by Mourelatos (1970, ²2008), whose position has recently been espoused and further developed by Curd (1998, ²2004).

What exactly is the problem with the positions (T₁) and (T₂)? The problem is that they remain (especially T₁) phenomenologically inconceivable («wildly paradoxical», 49), while at the same time they (especially T₂) prove irreconcilable with the content of the longest part of the poem: *Doxa*. We face thus once more the pivotal issue of the research on Parmenides in the last decades: the character of Parmenides' cosmology. (To this we shall return later.) Was Parmenides then not a monist? Against Guthrie's scheme, Palmer puts forward Plato's and Aristotle's perception of Parmenides, which shows how simplistic (if not naïve) the conception of monism as a doctrine that 'all things are one thing' is. Much closer

to Mouralatos/Curd than he occasionally admits,¹ the author calls Parmenides a «generous monist»: in opposition to Melissus' strict monism, Parmenides does not believe that there exists «a single substance» or «just one thing», but only «a single kind of substance», which allows «for the non-substantial existence of other entities» (38).

The meaning of «substantial» is then expounded in Palmer's interpretation of fr. 2, which delivers the core of the book's thesis. Let us recall that the goddess discerns there two «ways of inquiry»:

«that [it] is and that [it] is not to be» (the «path of conviction»)

«that [it] is not and that [it] must not be» (the path «without report»)

In view of this fragment and the notorious quest for the subject of the affirmative «is» and the negative «is not», Palmer rightly rejects Owen's proposal («whatever can be thought or talked about»), but also Russell's apparently more influential treatment of Parmenides as occupied with the problem of negative existential statements. Palmer's critique is not altogether original, yet it is clear, synoptic and persuasive in showing the shortcomings of these approaches that simply reflect (in a bad kind of anachronism) the need to discover in Parmenides the kind of problems «that played an important role in the early history of analytic philosophy» (76).

Palmer refuses to present the two ways in the oversimplified form of «Is/Is-not»: «Taken in their entirety, each line appears to demarcate a distinct modality or way of being [...] the modality of necessary being and the modality of necessary non-being or impossibility» (83). The substantial mode of Being we are looking for on these pathways is thus not any given object of thought or discourse, but the *mode* of those beings permeated by *necessity*. The conviction that «follows truth» is evoked only by this necessity, the further features of which will be displayed in fr. 8. On Palmer's reading, necessity and impossibility, as thematic axes of the first and the second ways, have not a semantic, but an ontological function: they do not denote statements but rather «ways of entities to be», or «modes of being» (93). The modalities of the two ways are not epexegetic, as the vast majority of interpreters seem to believe; these modalities alone establish Parmenidean ontology and determine its subject-matter.

Palmer's interpretation of Being *qua* modality (necessity) is ingenious,² and it has many happy side-effects:

¹ And in a happy coincidence with my own interpretation: Die erste 'zweite Fahrt'. Sein des Seienden und Erscheinen der Welt bei Parmenides. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1997. (Cf. also Parmenides, Cosmos, and Being. A Philosophical Interpretation. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 2007). The coincidence ranges over many other points of Palmer's book, but I see no benefit in exploring this here. It should only be noted that the author often seems to neglect much of the non-English speaking literature on Parmenides.

² It would also be unreservedly original if Loenen had not insisted 50 years ago that *esti* denotes a Being *sensu stricto*, i.e. necessity as a «particular mode of being» (J.H.M.M. Loenen: Parmenides, Melissus, Gorgias. A Reinterpretation of Eleatic Philosophy. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959, p. 14 and passim). Cf. also Loenen's insistence that «Parmenides [...] does not deny the (relative) reality of the world of change» (p. 32). Loenen is mentioned by Palmer only in the Bibliography.

1. It shows that Parmenides was not a logician, and it unfetters him from the «wild conclusions» attributed to his poem in the last few decades by «certain Anglo-American philosophers» (93);
2. it reminds us again that the sense of the Parmenidean «to be» cannot be reduced to a specific meaning (be it existential, be it predicative or veridical; 94–7)
3. it establishes a complete semantic equivalence, a correspondence and functional analogy between the verb *esti* and the participle *eon*, as well as between *ouk esti* and *me eon* (103–5);
4. it makes clear (against the recent insistence of Cordero and others) that the «third way» of frs. 6 and 7 does not contradict the claim of «only two ways» in fr. 2 (69–73).¹

But this innovative interpretation has a certain weakness: it presents Parmenidean ontology in a very meagre form. This becomes clear when we pose the question: what are finally the objects, or the points of reference, of the first way of inquiry? The second way searches, according to Palmer, for round squares, i.e. for beings that cannot possibly exist. The third way is supposed to deal with «the present king of France» (101) or, as we might equally say, with the present president of France, i.e. with something contingent. But what about the first one? Palmer seems very hesitant to offer examples. We might assume that round circles or right-angled squares should belong here – but what else? Can this first metaphysics finally get reduced to a kind of meta-geometry or meta-mathematics, simply stressing the necessity inherent in this science?

Nobody can dispute the position that, «according to Parmenides, genuine conviction [...] comes only from focusing on what is not subject to change. This is a powerful idea, which [...] has had a long and important history in philosophy» (118). But I would insist that the immutable on which Parmenides focuses is not (ontically) a specific class of things (i.e. mathematical objects), but (ontologically) the *Being* of all things: the ‘fact’ that, irrespective of their present, past or future condition, they altogether *are*. It is embarrassing how straightforwardly Palmer misses the textual basis for such an understanding when he dismisses the better attested reading *per onta* in 1.32 as a *lectio* that does not «merit serious consideration» (352).

Palmer’s discussion of fr. 8 is sound and lucid; he also reinforces an old important proposal by Ebert to transpose lines 8.34–41 to the end of the part on Truth, which gives fr. 8 a coherent character as an argumentation in favour of the four signs announced in 8.3–4 (although I personally believe that the original place of 8.34–41 was not, as Ebert and Palmer claim, after 8.52, but after 8.49). A certain deficiency in the author’s interpretation of fr. 8 might be spotted in his insistence that the fragment refers to «spatio-temporally extended entities»; this is consistent with his overall reading, but leads back to older views of *eon* as literally a sphere (155–8). The question emerges here again: what are the things that exist necessarily and are spherical?

The notion of «generous monism» makes clear that the existence of necessary entities does not exclude the possibility of other, contingent entities. But Palmer leaves «generous monism» finally underdetermined; he makes within it a distinc-

¹ For similar or further argumentation on the same points, cf. also the reference in note 1 of the previous page.

tion between «numerical»/«aspectual» and «generic substance monism» (38, 185 and *passim*). Both versions acknowledge the reality of ontic multiplicity; the first was favoured in the readings of Plato and Aristotle, the second by the «meta-principle» interpretations.¹ Palmer rejects both versions, but he remains rather silent in explicating his own version of generous monism; he simply claims, at a later point, that Parmenides' «ontology has room for only one entity that must be (what it is)» (323). But is this «entity» a single entity existing necessarily (which one?), or is it the necessity itself? This question should not remain unanswered in a monograph that displays so many other achievements.

One of these important achievements is that Palmer 'saves' the phenomena – in contrast to all those strict-monism readings that finally lead to the well-known contemptuous approaches to Doxa. Indeed, reading the text in a way that makes this largest part of the poem intelligible and understandable remains the *crux* of any Parmenides-interpretation since Reinhardt (1916) – even if the vast majority of interpreters has neglected this demand. Palmer is on the right track when he insists that Parmenides develops there his *own* cosmogony and cosmology, in which he describes the undeniably existing «familiar objects of our everyday experience», which «are what they are only temporarily, mutably, or contingently» (166). But then why is this cosmology «deceptive» (8.52)?

Palmer's most powerful defence of Doxa's meaningfulness cannot finally avoid attributing to Parmenides another fallacy: Doxa is «deceptive» because its objects are mutable; or, as previously stated, because Parmenides «seems to think of cognitive states as subject to the same degree of variance as their objects» (117). But if the problem with the moon is that «it is not the same in so far as it changes from full to waning and is thus no longer what it was before» (117), if, in other words, the moon (as every other physical object) undergoes change, why does this exclude any form of positive knowledge of the moon? And if change excludes knowledge, what remains as the positive content of Doxa? Its final identification with the third way, which is «tantamount to know nothing» (117), might have been prevented, had the author evoked the alternative of distinguishing between a deceptive Doxa (of Light and Night in isolation) and a positive one (conceding the mingling of both forms). It is not *that* humans specify the two forms but *how* they have done so in their search for understanding that the goddess criticizes.²

If contingent things cannot be an «object of understanding» (172 and *passim*), then ultimately the whole project of Doxa becomes redundant. Palmer's interpretation at this point has the merit of showing how deeply rooted the presuppositions concerning the second part of the poem are. The author argues against strict monism; he stresses that phenomena are absolutely real; he accepts not only the possibility, but also the necessity of a Parmenidean cosmology; yet, he finally

¹ In addition to Mourelatos and Curd, one could also mention Cordero and Rapp; see on this also my text on 'Parmenidean Dualisms', in: «Parmenides, Venerable and Awesome» (Proceedings of the International Symposium; ed. N.-L. Cordero). Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing 2011.

² This is the inversion of a key position of the book: «It is not *how* they specify the two forms but *that* they have done so in their search for understanding that the goddess criticizes» (169).

slips into reading Doxa as a fundamentally irresolute entertainment, which he then tries to rescue by appealing to a different kind of «necessity governing natural phenomena» (176). This «kind of necessity» is not explicated; and I think that it endangers the author's main point on Truth, which was that «Parmenides' metaphysics and epistemology are founded upon his demarcation of the modalities of necessary and contingent being» (180). If the way of Being/conviction consists exclusively in acknowledging necessity, where exactly is the difference between this necessity and the cosmological necessity that *somehow* underlies contingency?

In criticizing anew the «meta-principle» interpretations, Palmer observes that, following them, «one would naturally expect the cosmology that follows to deploy principles that meet Parmenides' own requirements», and he declares that «advocates of the meta-principle interpretation have proved unsuccessful in addressing this expectation» (181). But this does not mean that the expectation cannot be fulfilled at all. Indeed, the goddess' assertion in fr. 9.4 that «Nothing partakes in neither» form (an assertion rather neglected in Palmer's own interpretation) is meant to establish explicitly that the cosmological system of Light and Night remains uncontaminated by the presence of Non-Being – and to make this system compatible with the truth of the first part. Contingency of phenomena does not always lead to error or deception. Palmer has come very close to this breakthrough, but he has not spelt it out.

The following chapters examine the position of Parmenides within the broader framework of Presocratic philosophy. Chapter 5 offers an excellent study on the relation of Zeno and Melissus to their so-called 'master'. The outcome of this analysis is not always as original as the author thinks, but it is persuasive: it shows that Zeno was rather a Proto-Sophist, and Melissus rather a vulgar epitomizer of Parmenidean ontology, responsible for transforming generous monism to a «strict» one and for abandoning the cosmological project of his alleged 'master'. The notion of an «Eleatic School» collapses, which naturally has considerable consequences for the reconstruction of what has followed since.

As the author claims, if Anaxagoras responds to a specific challenge to cosmology, this challenge emerged out of Zeno, and not out of Parmenides, to whom the relation of Anaxagoras is better described not in terms of an opposition, but rather of a structural correspondence: *Nous* is the *analogon* of Parmenidean Being, while the «opposites» are the analogues of Light and Night. Palmer's arguments here (ch. 6) are perceptive and insightful, and the same is the case with the next chapter on Empedocles. The author claims that the need to depict the four elements as replicates of «Being» has prevented the acknowledgment that these roots are not eternal, but rather «undergo their transformations like virtually everything else in his [Empedocles'] system» (279). The four «roots», but also Love and Strife, have their analogues once again in Parmenidean Light and Night, and only the unified Sphere under Love is modelled upon Being.

In this manner, Palmer deconstructs the typical narrative of the late Presocratics as pluralists who oppose Parmenidean monism, and he makes the claim of a «more basic continuity in Greek philosophy's early development than heretofore recognized» (319). Not only do the later Presocratics remain within a Parmenide-

an tradition rather than interrupting it; Parmenides himself seems not to «interrupt, divide, or spark any sort of paradigm shift in the early Greek metaphysical and cosmological speculation», but «his innovations need to be understood as operating within» that tradition (335 f). In this way, Palmer opens up the whole issue of the evolution that actually took place among the Presocratics. This issue has been overshadowed by a series of presumptions, many of which are contested in this book. The insistence on continuity, however, seems to underestimate the revolutionary role Parmenides has exercised. It is true that Parmenidean Being has certain analogies with Anaximander's *apeiron* or Anaximenes' *aer*. But the very fact that it is the ontological entity of *eon* that fills the place of the «most perfect entity», and not some physical (or at least phenomenologically ostensible) entity like «the boundless» (horizon?) or «air», denotes a deep philosophical upheaval – irrespective of the fact that, as the author rightly emphasizes, the early Presocratics cannot be regarded as crude «material monists».

Throughout his book, Palmer refers to theology and to metaphysics as quasi-synonyms. It is the lack of their differentiation that motivates him to seek an unusually tight connection between Parmenides and his predecessors, thus disregarding the evidently a-theological stance of the Eleatic philosopher (who presented his «goddess» free of all traditionally divine characteristics). The book's concluding words present Parmenides as a forerunner of Anselm's demonstrations of God as «simple, eternal, omnipresent, and immutable. Parmenides himself, though, at once belongs firmly to the Presocratic tradition of speculation on the divine and its relation to the rest of the cosmos, even as the rigorous meditation he undertakes in this portion of his poem sets him apart as more of a pure metaphysician» (349). The reader wishes that this «setting apart» became clearer throughout the study.

To conclude: despite its various shortcomings, this is one of the most important books written on Parmenides in the last decades.¹ It makes any reading of Parmenides as an annihilator of the world's phenomena and their multiplicity, in the sense of a strict monism, rather obsolete; it engages in a productive critical dialogue with the «meta-principle» readings of Mourelatos or Curd; it reminds us of the long forgotten «aspectual» readings of Parmenides offered by Plato and Aristotle; and it demonstrates again how important the need is for an integration of *Doxa* in any interpretation of the poem. Parmenides remains a challenge for all those ready to seriously enter into a philosophical exchange with him. Although his reading is probably not the only (or the best) alternative to Guthrie's scheme, Palmer's book is a genuine, significant contribution to such an exchange.

Thessaloniki

Panagiotis Thanassas

¹ The book is also nicely produced. I detected only two typos: «general monist» on p. 47 should apparently be corrected into 'generous', and the accentuation of *archai* on p. 129 should also be corrected.