Parts of Forms
An Essay concerning Plato's Parmenides*

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Among Plato's dialogues the *Parmenides* is perhaps the most difficult; this is true in particular of its second part: the dialectical exercise of Parmenides. This exercise is supposed to teach young Socrates the skills that are necessary for coming to terms with the problems of the theory of ideal forms that were pointed out in the first part of the dialogue. However, since the exercise consists in a tightly knitted net of contradictions, which moreover are often derived by absurd arguments, it is not at all clear how the exercise can fulfill its professed purpose.

The reader is at a loss, and this is mirrored in the plethora of divergent interpretations that have been advanced since the time of antiquity. According to these interpretations, the exercise is either a mere joke, or a caricature of Eleatic arguments, or a formulation of serious problems of the theory of forms for which Plato himself had no solution, or it is said to be an anticipation of Neo-Platonic thought or of Hegelian dialectics, or, finally, the exercise is said to be an only superficially paradoxical but, if correctly interpreted, consistent exposition of deep philosophical insights, which however, are looked for in widely differing directions.

Thus the prospects of a convincing interpretation of the dialogue are not bright. However, since it occupies a central position among the works of Plato, we cannot be satisfied with an *ignorabimus*. Both in the *Theaitetus* (183e-184a) and in the *Sophistes* (217c) Plato refers to the *Parmenides*, and in the *Theaitetus* Socrates says that Parmenides had impressed him on the occasion of their meeting as being a man of rare depth of thought, and that he, Parmenides, had advanced very good arguments. Also in the *Philebus*, the passage 15b-c reminds us of the central problem of our dialogue; Socrates says there that the problem of the unity and plurality of forms is the cause of all *aporia* if incorrectly conceived, but also the cause of all *euporia* – an abundance of insights – if correctly conceived. This and the many thematical references to the *Parmenides* in the mentioned dialogues show how important its subject-matter was to Plato himself.

1 The Structure of the Dialogue

The dialogue consists of two parts. The first part (127d6-137c3) has the function of an introduction; it begins after the initial scene that sets the stage

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(126a1-127d5). We learn that a memorable discourse between old Parmenides, Zenon and young Socrates is to be related (which – given the information in the text – would have had to have taken place in Athens around 450 B.C.). The report of this discourse starts with Zenon having ended the recitation of his book. Socrates asserts that Zenon's paradoxes can easily be resolved if one assumes the existence of forms and distinguishes them from their empirical instances. Parmenides then points out difficulties in Socrates' conception of forms and in his conception of the participation of empirical objects in them.

I mention only the first of his objections (130e4-131c7) because it is of central importance according to my interpretation of the second part. Parmenides says *that if an object* X *participates in a form* F, *then* X *must contain a part of* F *or the whole of* F. In the latter case the same form would be at once in all of its spatially separated instances, which is impossible. If, however, only a part of F were in each instance of F, then, according to Parmenides, the following absurdities result: (1) Since there are many large objects, each of them would have but a small part of largeness in them, hence would be large by virtue of something small. (2) If one adds a part of smallness to an object, it thereby becomes larger, not smaller, for the whole is larger than its proper parts. (3) There are many things that are equal. Hence they each have only a part of equality in them. But if two equal objects have less than the whole equality in them, then they are less than equal, hence not equal.

This and the further objections of Parmenides – for example, the Third Man Argument – leave young Socrates at a loss. For Parmenides, however, they are not refutations of the theory of forms, but merely pose difficulties for it. He himself regards the assumption of ideal forms as indispensable. Therefore he gives Socrates the advice first of all to train himself thoroughly in philosophy; this is the transition (135c5-137c3) to the second part of the dialogue. As an appropriate exercise Parmenides suggests the procedure that Zenon used in his book: testing hypotheses by deducing consequences from them. Parmenides draws up the general schema of such an exercise that has a form F for its subject:

(A) Assumption: F *is*. What does follow from this
(a) for F considered in itself (πρὸς ἑαυτό),
(b) for F considered in relation to others (πρὸς ἄλλον),
(c) for the others considered in themselves,
(d) for the others considered in relation to F?

(B) Assumption: F *is not*. What does follow from this
in the cases (a) – (d) distinguished above?

Since young Socrates – like the reader – has no idea of what to make of this schema, he asks Parmenides for an example of its application. After some hesitation Parmenides agrees to play the "arduous game," and as an example he chooses the One. He fixes on young Aristotle – who belonged to the thirty oligarchs in 404 – 403 B.C. – to be his respondent, because Aristotle is likely to raise the fewest difficulties, and indeed Aristotle will be seen to swallow all arguments and results of Parmenides without protest.