

VISHWA ADLURI, *Parmenides, Plato and Mortal Philosophy: Return from Transcendence*. London: Continuum Books, 2010. Pp. 212. ISBN 978-0-826-45753-0. £65.

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As a field of interpretation, Parmenides' poem has been sown and cropped often enough that natural originality is a scarce affair. To this reader's delight, this book by Adluri (henceforth A) manages to coax from the poem a transformative take on the philosopher's vision by redirecting attention to the mythic and phenomenal material which encircles the goddess' *logos* and grounding the work in the journey of mortality.

After an opening section arguing for the philosophical significance of the metaphor of the journey and its connection to time, A moves on to his first purpose of putting to rest an enduring sacred cow in Parmenidean scholarship, according to which Parmenides is the father of metaphysics and the goddess' logical exposition of timeless, universal being the central and unchallenged message of the poem. This only stands if one conveniently lobotomises the proem and cosmology, two sections which are crucial in A's analysis as he seeks to restore the poem's unity. Both the proem and the cosmology acknowledge the lived reality of human temporality as one voyages from birth to death in a nature distinguished by the flux of becoming. A attempts to show that the goddess' metaphysical *logos*, far from standing unqualified for Parmenides' own views, is shown to be fundamentally deficient in failing to allow temporality and individuality into its world. Though it is characterised as a way marked by signs, this *logos* is in actuality only a denatured *noetic* journey that fails to account for *phusis* and the singular mortal human being. Frame's etymological connection of *noos* and *nostos*, missing from A's analysis, complicates this assertion (Douglas Frame, *The Myth of the Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven and London, 1978). I would prefer to say that the noetic journey is not a misrepresentation but a sublimation of the mythic journey. This problem aside, the *logos* remains, from the perspective of the mortal philosopher, crucially incomplete. It exemplifies the reifying tendencies of language: by the mechanism of nominalisation, language distills verbal, phenomenal reality into atemporal categories.

Even the mannerisms of logic deployed by the goddess are misleading. Only mortals can properly articulate the law of non-contradiction because they are temporal beings and the law itself is constrained by a temporal qualification that is often dropped: P and not P cannot both hold *at the same time*. *Phusis*, due to its temporal flux, can therefore contain apparent contradiction in a way that a metaphysical *logos* cannot. This

result bears on the different interpretive approaches to the poem. Those who attempt to contain the poem within a metaphysical interpretation are in the end confounded by the incompatible accounts of *alētheia* and *doxa*, while A's attempt to subsume the *logos* in *phusis* purports to let the contradictions stand by temporalising them as a reflection of the contradictions of becoming. It is an existential fact that the *kouros* must return from the transcendent realm of metaphysics to the phenomenal world in which he finds himself, and this is the reason for the poem's third part.

A's second purpose is to reread Plato's *Phaedrus* in light of his reading of Parmenides. Plato is found to be responding to, and in an important sense reiterating, Parmenides' thematic concern with mortal philosophy. A's reading is insightful and nuanced, and a welcome *pharmakon* against Derrida's distortions. Taking the anti-mouthpiece interpretation of Plato's characters to the next level, A argues that the dialogues' dramatic elements, especially in the *Phaedrus*, present the interlocutors in their radical individuality. Like the *kouros* who has journeyed outside the beaten path of men, Socrates and Phaedrus have moved beyond the limits of the city and its universalising institutions of Law, History, Science etc. When instantiated as the atemporal text, Socrates finds writing philosophically dangerous because, like the goddess' metaphysical *logos*, it forecloses the possibility of the temporal encounter between individuals and embodied dialectic. The truth of the encounter therefore falls outside this writing's net, and philosophy as the temporalised practice of death falls into oblivion.

I have given just the nuts-and-bolts of A's thesis. He has much that is interesting to say concerning other outstanding problems caught by the current of his argument, and also provides a complete translation of the fragments and textual notes in a handy appendix. It may be wondered whether in endeavouring to make Parmenides and Plato speak to an (ostensibly) post-metaphysical era, A has in certain respects alienated Parmenides from himself and his time. He is heavily influenced by Heidegger and his destruction of onto-theology, and even ends the book with a sketch of how Heidegger himself fell prey to a generic conception of mortality which must be corrected if we are, as he urged, to return to Parmenides in good faith. For the most part he avoids the pitfall of simply inverting received wisdom (e.g. Parmenides is actually a philosopher of becoming, not being, and Plato a philosopher of phenomenal, not formal, reality) by retaining the philosophical allure of metaphysics and refusing to reject it entirely. The soul longs for transcendence of death and phenomenal reality, and metaphysics poses as the philosopher's cure for these ailments. (Could the *kouros*' journey even have taken place if there weren't this other world to travel to?) Nor for A is it correct to say that reality is purely temporal. It has an atemporal as well as a temporal aspect, and this duality constitutes what he calls the temporal *aporia* of

nature. Rather, the wholesale reduction of the latter to the former negates the mortal condition which gives birth to philosophy in the first place. The principal difficulty I have with A's reading is as follows. Is man *essentially* immortal or mortal? I think Plato would agree to the former more or less to the exclusion of the latter. Aristotle, according to many, immortalises the soul's highest component, *nous*, as a depersonalised self-thinking mind. Can we then so easily assert that philosophy, on the generic ancient view, is a mortal activity rather than the activity of an immortal element tied to a mortal body? Every discourse shares to some degree in the mortality of its human exponents. Yet to differentiate itself from mere opinion and other discourses philosophy must in some sense move beyond the merely phenomenal. The phenomenon must become for it a problem. Granted, the *kouros* must, barring death, "return from transcendence". But upon his return the phenomenal world and human opinion will no longer present to him in the way they used to. In other words, metaphysics, by which I mean the proposal of a rational reality lying behind the phenomenon, is a *differentia* of philosophy. Accordingly, interpretations of Parmenides and Plato which valorise metaphysics have, I think, ammunition left to fire.

typos: p. 132 *ta autos* should be *ta h[e]autou*