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Parmenides (Early 5th Century B.C.)

Parmenides s widely considered the most serious 'technical philosopher' of early Greece, a prelude to the greatness of thoughts of Plato (one of whose dialogues is entitled 'Parmenides,') and Aristotle. What we know of the philosophy of Parmenides is embodied in a single long poem. That poem, later entitled 'On Nature,' was 800 lines long and of it some 160 lines have survived in fragmentary form, permitting a tentative reconstruction of the whole. We can in capsule form indicate the nature and argument of that poem, but first a word on the kinds of material we are including in this ebook. We have already met philosophy in poetry—Solon, Theognis, Heraclitus—and we are aware that poetry was older than prose as a vehicle of expression in archaic Greece. That is part of the explanation of our inclusion of philosophy as 'literature' in this ebook on Greek literature. But it is not the only explanation. Ancient Greek philosophy is consistently 'poetic' in its inquiries, as distinct, say, from varieties of analytical philosophy practiced today. Parmenides is the stellar example of the blending of the poetic with the speculative.

In his long poem the narrator opens with a chariot ascent to the 'home of a goddess.' This is a kind of 'mystical ascent,' and its goal is the Gates of Night, that mysterious region Hesiod too addressed as the home of the 'truth'—for like Plato, later, Parmenides addresses the truth as a reality of the way things are, an objective presence. In the presence of the goddess the narrator is given the power to see the 'logical structure of Being,' which is to say, in this case, the kind of interplay that exists between plurality and oneness. Stages of an argument unfold in which it is made clear that there is in fact no plurality, that the appearances of multiplicity in things are illusory.

We can speak and think only of what exists. And what exists is uncreated and imperishable for it is whole and unchanging and complete. It was not nor shall be different since it is now, all at once, one and continuous...

In developing this central point, Parmenides works with the same kind of concern Heraclitus centered on, in his presentations of the dialectic between the changeless and the ever changing; an opposition resolved by Parmenides in favor of the unchanging.