

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

PARMENIDES: FRAGMENT THREE

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“...τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι”<sup>1</sup>  
- Parmenides

“...for the same thing is for conceiving as is for being.”<sup>2</sup>  
- A.H. Coxon

“...for thinking and being are the same.”<sup>3</sup>  
- E.D. Phillips

Fragment 3 (DK) of Parmenides’ poem postulates some type of relationship between “thinking” and “being”. It is difficult to understand what is meant by identifying thought with being. Guthrie notes, at first the statement seems to be mistaken, for it is obviously possible to speak and think of objects that do not exist, like unicorns.<sup>4</sup> The exact meaning of the text is allusive, perhaps contributing to the variance in translation of the Greek text. Guthrie remarks that finding an English equivalent is difficult.<sup>5</sup> The variance in translation suggests that philosophers and commentators of the Greek text read into Parmenides’ poem their own preconceptions and philosophical prejudices. Two distinct traditions, which attempt to interpret this relationship are evident: the Zeller-Burnet tradition, of which A.H. Coxon is a member, and the Karsten-Phillips tradition, which translates the text literally.

Donna Giancola, in her article “Toward a Radical Reinterpretation of Parmenides’ B3” from the *Journal of Philosophical Research*, critiques the interpretations of the Zeller-Burnet tradition. She contends that their modern reading of the fragment conflicts with its grammatical syntax and the context of the poem as a whole.<sup>6</sup> She classifies members of the Zeller-Burnet tradition as modern rationalists who hold Parmenides was first and foremost a rationalist.<sup>7</sup> As such, they tend to interpret fragment 3 as a statement about the potential existence of the object of thought, implying a subject-object relationship, and not as an assertion of the identity of knowing and Being.<sup>8</sup> She considers this

view to be incompatible with Parmenides' philosophy since it interjects multiplicity into Being.<sup>9</sup> Her view is that rather than a statement about epistemological relations, Parmenides' poem was originally understood as a religious assertion of metaphysical identity.<sup>10</sup> She contends Parmenides was a radical monist and as such he must be taken literally. Fragment 3 is therefore a metaphysical assertion that Being is intelligent.<sup>11</sup>

The distinction between the two groups seems to lie in the disagreement over Greek grammar and the meaning of the forms of the Greek verb εἶναι which lies at the heart of Parmenides' philosophy. In the history of philosophy, Parmenides represents a radical shift away from speculation about the origin and constitution of the universe. Whereas previous thinkers had taken the world as a datum, Parmenides asked himself, what, if anything, was it possible not to believe.<sup>12</sup> Guthrie states that Parmenides contribution to philosophy was to assert that what is, is and can be thought about and what is not, is not, and cannot be thought about; and to state and abide by the consequences of those assertions.<sup>13</sup> Yet, despite his trail-blazing advancement of philosophy he never seems to completely free himself from the thought patterns of his time. As Bowra comments, he "regarded the search for truth as something akin to the experience of mystics, and he wrote of it with symbols taken from religion because he felt that it was itself a religious activity."<sup>14</sup> Thus, he expounded his philosophy in poetic form, in the hexameter meter of Homer and Hesiod, writing not as a mere logician but as one who had consorted with the gods.<sup>15</sup> As a literary device, it was unsuited for the main content of his poem, and as he develops the logical argument he seems restrained by the language of his time.<sup>16</sup> The formulation of the tautology "what is, is" conveys the struggle to develop philosophical concepts for which the expression had not yet existed.<sup>17</sup>

Guthrie remarks that in claiming, "the verdict lies here: is it or is it not?" Parmenides was to a great extent the prisoner of language because anyone asked the question today would reply, "In

what sense are you using the verb ‘to be?’”<sup>18</sup> In fact this is the question Aristotle raises of Parmenides in the *Physics* (185a21-22): “For ‘is’ is used in many senses. Do they mean that all things ‘are’ substance or quantities or qualities?”<sup>19</sup> There are several grammatical meanings of the Greek verb εἶναι. ἔστι can serve as a linking verb, or to predicate as in “A is B”. With the accent marker, ἔστι asserts existence, “X exists.” ἔστι used with an infinitive verb can suggest possibility, as in “it is possible to see.” Guthrie notes that for Parmenides no grammatical or semantic work had yet been established to distinguish between the different senses of the same word, and there was a general tendency to assume that a single word had only one ‘proper’ meaning.<sup>20</sup> He contends that for Parmenides, the proper meaning for the verb “to be” was existential.

Zeller understood εστίν as signifying possible existence. He wrote of fragment 3, “it does not mean: ‘thinking and being are the same’; instead the context shows that εστίν is to be read, and the translation should stand thus: ‘for the same thing can be thought and can be’.”<sup>21</sup> Giancola suggests that, by reading the εστίν as not asserting the actual existence of its subject but only its possible existence, Zeller presumes Parmenides to have anticipated Aristotle’s distinction between actual and possible being and introduced a distinction incompatible with Parmenides’ central teaching.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the translation renders a passive meaning, “can be known” from the active infinitive νοεῖν. Giancola criticizes Zeller for not providing evidence to substantiate the passive translation.

Burnet explained Zeller’s passive meaning by appealing to an ancient Greek grammatical usage of the primitive infinitive-dative.<sup>23</sup> He held that the infinitives of fragment 3 were equivalent to datives, ‘for thinking’ and ‘for being’, and could not serve as predicate nominatives because the use of the infinitive as a subject was not possible before the development of the articular infinitive.<sup>24</sup> Reading εστίν existentially like Zeller, Burnet translated fragment 3 as “for it is the same thing that

can be for thinking and that can be for being.”<sup>25</sup> Giancola’s main criticism of Burnet is that he argues the infinitives can be passive but he gives no reason why they must be so.<sup>26</sup> She states, “Burnet attributed to Parmenides a grammatical form no longer in use, and then declared this form to carry a passive meaning without citing any evidence.”<sup>27</sup> Further, she dismisses Burnet’s claim, that the infinitive cannot serve as a predicate nominative because of the lack of the articular infinitive construction, citing Heidel’s comment that “any good grammar will supply abundant examples of the substantive use of the infinitive, with or without the article, earlier than the date of Parmenides.”<sup>28</sup>

Giancola notes two “grave difficulties” with understanding the active infinitives as passive in meaning. First, there are very few instances in the classical texts where an active infinitive has a passive meaning. She notes that the grammarians Kühner and Gerth, allow for such a “peculiarity of the Greek language” but at the same time consider such a usage “rare”.<sup>29</sup> In addition, in early Ionic, the dialect of Parmenides’ poem, the passive infinitive would be used in such instances.<sup>30</sup> Since the grammatical structure is seldom used, it contradicts customary usage, and she questions if the normal audience would anticipate such abnormal usage.<sup>31</sup> The second difficulty, which she considers “insurmountable” is based on the fact that the syntax of fragment 3 presents the infinitives  $\nu\omicron\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$  and  $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$  as coordinates, which should agree in voice, but  $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$  cannot be passive.<sup>32</sup>

A.H. Coxon, agreeing with Zeller’s passive-dative translation, observed that there are other Greek texts<sup>33</sup> containing an active infinitive with passive meaning. He identifies a grammatical  $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu\dots\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$  structure where the object of the transitive infinitive is the subject of the finite verb.<sup>34</sup> This idiom is used throughout Parmenides poem in fragments 3,5.1,8.7-9,8.15-17,8.34-37. However, Coxon drops Zeller’s reading of possibility into the verbs and translated the verse as “for the same thing is for thinking as for being.”<sup>35</sup> Giancola’s complaint is that again the presumption

is that since there are extant instances of an active infinitive with a passive meaning, however few they may be, not only is the passive meaning possible in fragment 3, but it is decidedly so.<sup>36</sup>

Although the exact immediate context of fragment 3 is not known, Coxon believes fragment 3 is the completion of fragment 2 citing the “contextual and metrical aptness” between the two.<sup>37</sup> He finds support for his hypothesis in the fact that both Proclus and Simplicius break their citation of fragment 2 which he remarks would be the natural consequence of a general Neo-Platonic misunderstanding of fragment 3.<sup>38</sup> In his view, such a misunderstanding obscures the relevance of fragment 3 to fragment 2, as an unbroken whole describing the two ways of inquiry, in favor of a faulty metaphysical assertion of the identity of Being. The context, as he understands it, is the presentation of a method of discovering reality. The two ways of inquiry in fragment 2, ‘that a thing is and that it is not for not being’ and ‘that a thing is not and this needs not be’ establish a general logical rule that can be followed to deduce what is real.<sup>39</sup> For Coxon, fragment 3 forms part of the argument for rejecting the second way of inquiry proposed in fragment 2. His translation of the fragment as “for the same thing is for conceiving as is for being,” asserts that only what is, such as to have essential being, has an identity which can be apprehended by reason.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, what does not have essential being can not be apprehended by reason. Thus the second way of inquiry leads nowhere, it cannot lead to apprehension and must be rejected.<sup>41</sup> Rejecting the second way leaves the first way of inquiry as the only way to knowledge of reality. He translates fragment 2.3, ὅπως ἐστὶν τε καὶ ὡς οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι, which has a similar ἐστὶν...εἶναι structure, as “that a thing is and that it is not for not being.”<sup>42</sup> He remarks that the, “introduction of ‘is’ and ‘is not’ in isolation from either subject or further predicate does not mark an ‘absolute’ use of the verb...but an intention to consider its intrinsic sense, of whatever subject and with whatever qualification it may be used.”<sup>43</sup> The proposition that a thing ‘is, and is not for not being’ means that its subject is something, and that

being this precludes it from not being what it is, and consequently from not being anything at all.<sup>44</sup> The omission of the indefinite pronoun signifies, not that the unexpressed agent is ‘undefined’, but rather ‘the thing in question’.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the verse takes on an almost equation like form, independent of the subject itself, that can be used to test for the reality of any desired subject.

Coxon reads the poem as the revelation of a purely formal method of inquiry into reality. The disjunction ‘is or is not’ is a test to be applied to determine what is real. Fragment 3 is not a metaphysical assertion of the identity of Being, but rather to be regarded as part of the previous fragment’s argument to eliminate the disjunct ‘is not.’ Only things with essential being are capable of being asserted and apprehended by reason. The remaining path, considers the intrinsic sense of the thing in question. Knowledge can be attained by discovering what assertions are necessarily true or ‘real’. Applying this method to τὸ ἕν, leads in fragment 8 to the elucidation of Being as unchanging, ungenerated, imperishable, unique, unmoved et cetera.

Giancola contends that the most appropriate translation of fragment 3 is a natural-literal interpretation. She alleges that a strict literal translation is a stumbling block to the modern rationalists of the Zeller-Burnet tradition whom she believes, having found monism personally unacceptable, attempt to ‘save’ Parmenides from what is implied by a literal reading of fragment 3.<sup>46</sup> She suggests that the poem is precisely what it presents itself to be, a vision of the revelation of the way to the One, the Truth, that lies hidden behind the veil of appearances.<sup>47</sup> In her estimation, a religious-mystical view that translates the text relying on the prima facie, natural meaning, better accords with the literary form of an epic poem.<sup>48</sup>

Giancola’s argument is that since the authors of the ancient testimonia regarding the interpretation of fragment 3 were closer to the historical context, uniform in their understanding, and had greater access to the entirety of the poem their interpretation is closer to the authentic meaning

of the text.<sup>49</sup> Although Clement, Plotinus and Proclus had access to the complete poem of Parmenides, today only 154 lines are extant. Diels estimates that approximately 90% of the first part of the poem has survived, and as little as 10% of the second part.<sup>50</sup> Since the fragments are only known in isolation and all the early commentators of fragment 3 agree on the literal interpretation, Giancola considers it presumptuous for modern philosophers to alter the meaning.

The earliest extant record of fragment 3 is in the late second century *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria.<sup>51</sup> Clement believed that the Greek philosophers had indeed attained some portion of divine truth, but he regarded them as “thieves and robbers” who stole and borrowed their ideas from others. To illustrate this point he cites two texts that explicitly reference Parmenides’ fragment 3:

And Herodotus, again, having said, in his discourse about Glaucus the Spartan, that the Pythian said, "In the case of the Deity, to say and to do are equivalent," Aristophanes said : "For to think and to do are equivalent." And before him, Parmenides of Elea said: "For thinking and being are the same." (*Stromata* VI.I)

Giancola remarks that in both quotations the infinitives, active in form, are active in meaning and denote activities that are equivalent.<sup>52</sup> Thus, for Clement, fragment 3 clearly equates “to be” and “to think” indicating a natural-literal interpretation of the verse.

The second source of fragment 3 is Plotinus who cites it four times in his *Enneads* in support of his doctrine that Being is intelligent.<sup>53</sup>

Earlier, Parmenides made some approach to the doctrine in identifying Being with

Intellectual-Principle while separating Real Being from the realm of sense. Knowing and Being are one thing he says, and this unity is to him motionless in spite of the intellection he attributes to it: to preserve its unchanging identity he excludes all bodily movement from it; and he compares it to a huge sphere in that it holds and envelops all existence and that its intellection is not an outgoing act but internal. (Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 1, 8)

Fragment 3 is referenced as well in *Ennead* I 4, *Ennead* III 8, and *Ennead* V 9.<sup>54</sup> Giancola remarks that there is no doubt that Plotinus, like Clement before him, interpreted the fragment to assert the identity of Being and thinking, and expected his Greek-speaking audience to find the same meaning in the words.<sup>55</sup>

The fifth century Neo-Platonist, Proclus in his commentary on Plato's *Parmenides* gives a variation of fragment 3 which he connects with fragment 4.<sup>56</sup> Giancola believes that Proclus was aware of the context of the fragment within the poem, having the complete manuscript available to him as master of Plato's Academy in Athens (436-485).<sup>57</sup> He attributed to the fragment the same meaning as did Clement and Plotinus before him explicitly stating that fragment 4 and the verses with which it is grouped connects Being with intellection.<sup>58</sup>

Giancola notes that although the interpretations of the Zeller-Burnet tradition are pervasive the ancient and natural rendering has continued to find support in modern times.<sup>59</sup> She remarks that the first modern redactors of Parmenides poem gave no hint that fragment 3 was anything but a simple statement about the identity of knowing and Being.<sup>60</sup> She notes Simon Karsten whose Latin translation reproduced the Greek word for word agreeing in case and form: *idem est enim cogitare et esse*.<sup>61</sup> Hermann Diels who published what is considered the standard edition of Parmenides'

poem also translated fragment 3 literally.<sup>62</sup> In addition, she lists Jaap Mansfeld, E.D. Phillips, and Kurt Riezler.

In summary, fragment 3 of Parmenides' poem postulates some type of relationship between "thinking" and "being". It is difficult to understand what is meant by identifying thought with being and the exact meaning of the text is allusive. Translations of the text vary according to disagreement over the Greek grammar and meaning of the verb εἶναι which lies at the heart of Parmenides' tautology, "what is, is." Donna Giancola is critical of the modern interpretations of the Zeller-Burnet tradition. She contends that their modern rationalist reading of the fragment conflicts with its grammatical syntax and the context of the poem as a whole. Proponents of Zeller's interpretation introduce passive meaning to the text and tend to interpret fragment 3 as a statement about the potential existence of the object of thought and not as an assertion of the identity of knowing and Being. In contrast, Giancola's position is that fragment 3 was originally understood as a religious assertion of metaphysical identity. She contends Parmenides must be taken literally.

Personally, I find Giancola's argument convincing. The various attempts to ascribe passive meaning to the active infinitives, either with Burnet's passive-dative infinitive or Coxon's identification of a Greek idiom that attributes passive meaning, seem excessive. I agree with her criticism that although there are extant instances of an active infinitives with a passive meaning proponents of Zeller never give any reason why the verbs must be translated as such. Additionally, the rare usage makes the argument in support of their translation suspect. It seems obvious that the sources of the fragment, Clement, Plotinus and Proclus, do indeed interpret the verse differently than the modern commentators. Since they were closer to the historical context, uniform in their understanding and had access to the complete manuscript, I would agree with Giancola that their interpretation is closer to the authentic meaning of the text. The variance in translation suggests that

philosophers and commentators of the Greek text read into Parmenides' poem their own preconceptions and philosophical prejudices. Anything more than a literal translation seems to speak more of the translator than of Parmenides' actual philosophy. If given the option between a literal translation and an alternative that is justified by a complex and deliberate appeal to archaic and infrequently used grammar I would personally choose the simpler more reasonable natural rendering.

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## NOTES

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