

BOOK REVIEWS

ARNOLD HERMANN: *To Think Like God: Pythagoras and Parmenides: The Origins of Philosophy*. Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing (distributed by the University of Chicago Press), 2004; pp. xxx + 374.

To Think Like God has little to offer students of ancient philosophy who wish to explore the cultic and religious elements of ancient thought. Rather, it presents such elements only as the mud out of which Parmenides' logic flowered. Hermann's avowed aim is to set Parmenides apart from — and by implication above — religion, cult, and superstition. However, the book offers a good deal to the general reader of ancient philosophy, and Hermann takes pains to make his arguments comprehensible to such a reader.

My other general caveat would be that Hermann's prose is at its worst amateurish. The "editor" who let stand the phrase "his ideas literally begged to be disproved" (9–10) ought to have his or her neck wrung, possibly by me. Such sloppiness can only vitiate Hermann's arguments, which are in themselves cogent and exhaustively researched, and contribute significantly to a purely logical and epistemological reading of Parmenides' "being" (or "IS," the expression Hermann uses to soft-pedal the metaphysical and ontological associations of *einai* and *to eon*).

For the reader whose primary interest is just this — Hermann's reading of the Parmenidean fragments — the book begins in a seemingly tangential fashion, exploring the frustratingly late and contradictory reports of Pythagoras' political and cultic activities in Magna Graeca. Hermann's Pythagoras, in contrast to Guthrie's for example (*HGP* 1) is neither a philosopher nor in any admirable sense a mystic. He emerges as a despotic and manipulative figure. This is of course a supportable reading of the poor extant reports for this period, but the real interest that this portion of the book affords is as a foil. As we follow through the argument of the book we find that Pythagoras is being used by Hermann to set off more brilliantly the achievement of Parmenides.

It seems to me that in the process of setting Parmenides against Pythagoras, certain unfair implicit deductions are left for the reader to make, even if they are unintended by Hermann. For example, in making the connexion (discussed below) between archaic Greek jurisprudence and forensics and philosophy, we are left with the portrait of Pythagoras as politically manipulative and reprehensibly anti-democratic, while Parmenides emerges as proverbially just, the framer of laws on behalf of the state of Elea that long outlived their maker. The point is that, according to Hermann's argument, it would only be a true student of juridical proof and legal probity who would be impelled to investigate truth claims *per se*. But this point is not made explicit by Hermann, and it would be possible on a simplistic reading of the book to produce the argument that bad people make bad philosophers. It is perhaps a little dangerous for Hermann to have so liberally left clues that such a reading might be acceptable. Pythagoras is described as waging holy wars (70), using "public relations" stunts (42), and the savage and utter destruction of Sybaris is attributed to his puritanical fervour. Without careful framing of these arguments we may be more confused than enlightened as to why Pythagoras represents a false start and Parmenides a true way. In turn the

Pythagoreans are described as “a political conspiracy” (49, 50 *passim*), a “police state” (58) (the impression is rather of the awful “honour” system perpetrated at Donald Maclean’s alma mater, Gresham), a dictatorship (60), and “fiercely anti-democratic” (60). My point of course is that even democracy as practiced in the Greek world in this period could probably be presented as clubbish, snobbish, sectarian and sinister. It is a vexed question as to how we regard pro- or anti-democratic tendencies among the ancients, and it is probably a vexation that could have been avoided here, introducing extraneous confusions to an already difficult topic. While the contrast between these two early thinkers is thus not without its snares and traps, it is on the whole expertly handled and casts illumination over philosophy’s beginnings.

The argument that Parmenides’ logical and epistemological efforts arose not out of what we tend to think of as natural science, but out of the requirements of juridical reasoning and proof is not new. But Hermann contends additionally that Parmenides is the first philosopher worthy of the name, and we are therefore left to ponder the fascinating hypothesis that the western philosophical tradition has its roots not in Milesian “science,” but in the juridical and constitutional exigencies of the city-state.

And this leads us to the heart of the book, Hermann’s wonderfully accessible epistemological reading of the fragments. In contrast to Patricia Curd, Hermann is chary of linking Parmenides’ investigations into being or IS-ness with the cosmological investigations of his contemporaries. In fact, as the work progresses, it emerges that he is chary even of associating “being for thought” with any non- or super-discursive element. That is, *to eon* (being), *einai* (to be) and *esti* (it is) are simply signifiers used by Parmenides to indicate that a level of coherence and robustness has been achieved in a logical account of an object. This is very far from the monadic universe that has been associated with Parmenides from the earliest times, and is an approach that delivers Parmenides from numerous paradoxes. Most notably, by Hermann’s reading it is not the physical universe that is changeless and uniform, but the truth of a set of thinkable propositions. Indeed at the book’s conclusion Hermann argues that Parmenides’ IS, so far from being tied to a perceptible universe, is independent of it and in fact *valid to the extent that it does not have a correlate in the physical world*. In short, it is useful simply as a test and determinant of correct inference. It is for this reason that *doxa* or opinion comes to play such a sizable role in Parmenides’ poem, being as it is a provisional and plausible account that *does* deal in the messy and *in toto* unverifiable universe — of which portions, when subjected to sufficiently rigorous investigation, can be granted verification.

By the conclusion of the book Hermann had satisfied me on almost all counts that his reading of Parmenides, if not the only tenable one, is coherent, thorough and lucid. I have some lingering problems and reservations regarding Hermann’s reading of fr.8.42–49 (227). It is this passage of fr.8, with its description of something looking very much like an ontological monad, that is perhaps hardest to reconcile with a pre- or anti-metaphysical reading of the poem, but I admit that this may simply be my inability to throw off long-standing preconceptions.

Hermann’s book, though taking a particular line, can be easily recommended to a relative newcomer. Very little is left implicit, and Hermann is enthusiastic to demonstrate the power and continuing relevance of Parmenides’ fragments. The book is well laid out, with all relevant ancient passages rendered in clear English, including Hermann’s translation of the fragments in their entirety, and the bibliography is astonishingly thorough.

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