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HISTORY AND AN INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT OF
PLATO'S PARMENIDES

ABSTRACT. The present study aims at giving factual support to the thesis that the Parmenides is serious in intention, rigorous in logical demonstration, and stylistically meticulous in its original composition. While this consideration may be tedious, still it is useful. Against a past history which has claimed to find the tone hilarious, the logic fallacious, the work inauthentic, the text in need of bracketing by divination, the whole incoherent--against these eccentricities a certain firm sobriety seems called for. I hope that my conclusions find support and persist through fluctuations of philosophic and philological styles.

The main difficulty with my thesis is that the text as we now have it (in Burnet's and Dies' editions) shows exceptions to every rule that might apply to style and even to logical structure. Thus it is almost but not quite uniformly true that each theorem opens with a theorem statement; that each is marked by a "questioning" response; that each deduction is valid when formalized in propositional calculus; and so on. Are the exceptions the result of careless composition; are they deliberate warnings not to take the proofs too seriously; or are they the result of errors in transmission? One way to test this is to reconstruct early versions of the text: if these show more logical rigor than the later versions the notion of a wholly valid original is supported; if they do not, the result may point toward the need for a less serious interpretation. A second thing to look for is the possibility that, here and there, parts of a coherent original text are uniquely conserved in sources other than the principal mss, B, T, and W. This assumes, of course, that the "original" text in question is the one with the best logical form, and that assumption seems justified. As a matter of fact, later copyings almost universally show deterioration, not improvement in style and logic.

My textual findings are more compatible with some lines of interpretation than with others. Thus I offer some reasons for not accepting treatments of the work as a joke, mystical revelation, or abrupt metaphysical revision. The structure of the dialogue is best explained, I think, by reading it as an indirect proof that some non-Platonic interpretations of the theory of forms are unsatisfactory. In particular, these are the Megarian versions (represented in the first part of the dialogue by Zeno, in the second by the First Hypothesis), and the Anaxagorean version put forward by Eudoxus (represented in the first part by Cephalus and his friends from Clazomenae, in the second by the Second Hypothesis). At the same time, the dialogue shows

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the need for a philosophic method other than the "hypothetical--deductive" way of dianoia; presumably this other method is the "dialectic" discussed in Republic VII. It also follows that any interpretation of the Phaedo which falls into either the Eudoxian or Megarian difficulties was not--at least at the date of Parmenides--Plato's intended reading.

Findings concerning the relations and reliability of the manuscripts of this dialogue also apply to the texts of the other Platonic dialogues which these mss contain.

Further, the Parmenides is such an important work both historically and intrinsically that any insight which textual study can bring to its interpretation is a contribution to Western philosophy.

2. Paul K. Moser, Vanderbilt University
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3. Michael Palmer, Marquette University
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