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CLAS161 – The Divine Plato

Bailly

Summary of G.E.L. Owens’ “Notes on Ryle’s Plato”

Gilbert Ryle finds in *Parmenides* a “systematic collection of antimonies,” or contradictions, that are nevertheless philosophically beneficial despite espousing no sort of positive doctrine. This is so, Ryle claims, by means of a systematic *reductio ad absurdum* argument, by which the falsity of a premise is determined through demonstrating that its logical consequences are contradictory. The aim of this argument is to demonstrate the difference between formal and proper concepts. Owen seeks determine the extent to which Ryle’s reading is corroborated by the dialogue itself. Ultimately he will argue that, while the seeds of Ryle’s reading are indeed present, *Parmenides* is not strictly amenable to Ryle’s thesis.

Owen then claims that the question of *oneness* central to Parmenides is something that must be grappled with if one wants to establish a comprehensive theory of forms. For Plato the form of oneness must itself be radically *one*, as it were. But this assertion opens up a whole can of worms: “how can one be another number of anything? But then how can it even be defined by any conjunction of properties?” (300). For Owen, IA represents the necessary starting point for any theory of forms, and it is something that Plato has, up until this point, ignored.

Now, Ryle’s claim, per Owen, is that the deductions in *Parmenides* were designed by Plato in order to differentiate between formal and proper concepts, the former referring to things such as oneness and being, the latter, squareness, largeness, etc. Ryle cites Russell in claiming that we err when we conflate formal and proper concepts. For Ryle, formal concepts are not mere “subject or predicate terms” (301) but rather something more universal: “the modes of combining terms” (301). Because of this, Ryle claims that it is fundamentally mistaken to predicate oneness/unity (specifically as existing or as not existing). Of course these two premises are what drive the whole of the second half of *Parmenides*—what to make of that?

Ryle finds evidence of this claim firstly in that the hypotheses of “one is” and “one is not” necessarily beget the contradictions that result from their being posited. Owen finds that Ryle doesn’t provide sufficient evidence of this. For Owen, it is not clear that Plato’s antimonies must follow from these premises.

Ryle also does not sufficiently demonstrate the way in which the antimonies are generated by way of predicating oneness/unity, a formal concept supposedly unamenable to such propositions. As far as “unity exists” is concerned, Owen says Ryle’s criticism—that it “couples exists with what is a supposed to be a proper name” (302) does not get at the heart of this matter and is more linguistic than anything (ex. it is concerned with the word “exists” itself and the nature of abstract nouns rather than the nature of formal concepts). “Unity is unitary” is supposedly mistaken because it is self-predicating, but Owen isn’t sure why this is made to be an issue; Ryle doesn’t let us know.

That said, Owen doesn’t entirely dismiss Ryle’s argument on this basis: he think there are parts of *Parmenides* that evince a concern for the nature of concepts but thinks that Plato doesn’t efface the level of interest in proving distinctions that Ryle would like for him to. Owen maps the dialogue and claims that there are four main stages that comprise this section, each with two parts. The first and second stages jump off from the assertion that One *is,* that it, in other words, has being, while the third and fourth stages reason from its negation: One *is not.*

1. One *is*

Subject: One

1. Negative conclusions drawn—what does not exist can have nothing related to it, and so one cannot be named, known, perceived, conceptualized.
2. Positive conclusions drawn—there is no time in which *S* can be neither *P* nor not-*P*. Thus, any change from *P* to not-*P* is instantaneous. (156c: “There is no time when something can, simultaneously, be neither in motion nor at rest”)
3. One *is*

Subject: Everything other to one.

1. Positive conclusions drawn—if anything is related to the one neither by identity nor by a whole/part relationship, it must be mere unlimited multiplicity. (E.g. things that get a share of the one are unlimited in multitude.)
2. Negative conclusions drawn—any multiplicity is a multiplicity of units, so these things other than the one are not plural in themselves.
3. One *is not*

Subject: One

1. Positive conclusions drawn—Even a non-existent one can be determinate, but it is necessarily unequal to anything. But, from an extension of this, the “one must exist if only to *be* non-existent” (312). From this fact it is deduced one’s tendency to change.
2. Negative conclusions drawn—what does not exist cannot also exist in some sense. Nothing can be said or known of the one.
3. One *is not*

Subject: Everything other to one.

1. Positive conclusions drawn—If others are other, they cannot be other to the one, so they are other to each other. But in this it is supposed they have plurality, and then have “number, unity, and the dimensional properties inferred from these in IB” (e.g. any part of a plurality is one) (313).
   1. Essentially claims that even if one does not properly exist as such, it “must figure in discourse and conjecture.”
2. Negative conclusions drawn—any multiplicity is a class of units, and any unit must partake in the one. But, per the conclusion of IA, *what does not exist can have nothing related to it,* it becomes clear that nothing can be said of others full stop. Thus, nothing exists.

The many details of the map which I have omitted are necessary for me to properly demonstrate Owen’s claims. One of his key takeaways in mapping out the arguments is that the claims and arguments of a given stage often depend on consequences borrowed from other stages, that the same premises turn up in contradictory movements, and that the same premises are often both “used and challenged in the same movement” (314). In other words, the logic of the antimonies is highly suspect for many, and it is for this reason *Parmenides* had historically come under attack. Owen casts Ryle as someone who tries to rescue Plato from itself, in reading the dialogue as an extended *reductio ad absurdum* of both its hypothesis and its contradictory opposite. And yet Owen’s map demonstrates that Plato was less straightforward in aim that Ryle might wish.

Owen then seems to claim that the contradictions are serious and cannot be swept under the rug with a single genius maneuver like Ryle attempts. Rather, one of the main points of *Parmenides* is to set up a plethora of conflicts that would be answered in later dialogues like the *Sophist.* But this begs the question: why try to bring all of these distinct issues together here? One possibility Owen turns to is Zeno. Parmenides claimed that the dialectic we’ve been discussing would apply Zeno’s methods. I may have missed some of the importance of this part. I don’t think it’s as eye opening as Owen does; essentially, I think he can be reduced to saying that it serves as a sort of criticism of Zeno’s method(?)

Lastly, Owen asks if Plato is nonetheless able to force some sort of distinction between oneness (formal) and properties like size and color (proper). He offers two explanations. The first fails. The second explanation looks to the infinite regress of universals when they are instances of themselves (ex. when largeness is large). Owen finds a similar regress among formal concepts like oneness and being. (Both unity and being have the parts of unity and being, which in turn have these parts, and so on.) But, says Owen, if we suppose Plato to have recognized, out of the first regress, that “the common run of a thing’s properties are not to be assigned to themselves,” (319) then we reach a dilemma. The two options are to a) say that “unity and being cannot be component properties of anything” (319) or b) to say that oneness cannot be *one*, being cannot *be.* But even if we choose the second option, oneness and being will not, for Plato, resume being component parts, because for Plato a part is a *single* part that *is.* Thus, what is established is a cordoning off of some formal concepts, like oneness and being, on the basis that they must be “reintroduced in describing their own behavior as in talking about anything else,” (319). Ex. in *Theaetetus is* and *is not* are approached through talking about perception/bodily instruments.