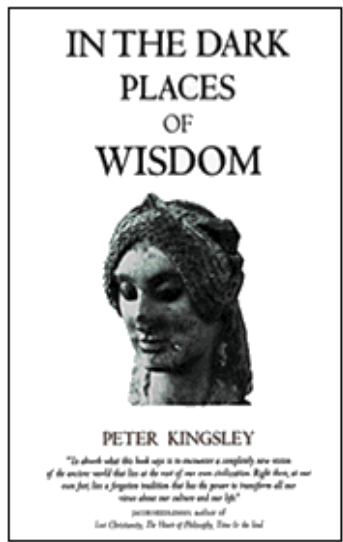


The Spiritual Tradition at the Roots of Western Civilization

Excerpts from *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* and *Reality* by Peter Kingsley¹
A compilation by Ulrich Mohrhoff



*In The Dark Places
of Wisdom*

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Reality

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1 Prologue

We are human beings, endowed with an incredible dignity; but there's nothing more undignified than forgetting our greatness and clutching at straws. (DPW 4)



So many of us today are concerned about the extinction of all the species that the western world is wiping out. But there's hardly anyone who notices the most extraordinary threat of all: the extinction of our knowledge of what we are. (DPW 9)



Perhaps the simplest way of describing the situation would be to say that, two and a half thousand years ago in the West, we were given a gift — and in our childishness we threw away the instructions for how to use it. We felt we knew what we were playing with. And, as a result, western civilization may soon be nothing but an experiment that failed. (R 20–21)

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Even in these modern times, what half-heartedly is described as mystical perception is always pushed to the periphery. When it's not denied it's held at arm's length — out there at the margins of society. But what we haven't been told is that a spiritual tradition lies at the very roots of western civilization. (DPW 6-7)

2 Parmenides

The real origins of western philosophy, of so many ideas that shaped the world we live in, lie in Velia. (DPW 31)



Parmenides [of Velia, a.k.a. Elea] wrote a poem.

It would be easy to imagine the father of philosophy producing very different things. But he just wrote a poem.

He wrote it in the metre of the great epic poems of the past — poetry created under divine inspiration, revealing what humans on their own can never see or know, describing the world of gods and the world of humans and the meetings between humans and gods.

And he wrote it in three parts. The first part describes his journey to the goddess who has no name. The second describes what she taught him about reality. Then the last part starts with the goddess saying, Now I'm going to deceive you; and she goes on to describe, in detail, the world we believe we live in.

Every single figure Parmenides encounters in his poem is a woman or a girl. Even the animals are female, and he's taught by a goddess. The universe he describes is a feminine one; and if this man's poem represents the starting point for western logic, then something very strange has happened for logic to end up the way it has.

The journey he describes is mythical, a journey to the divine with the help of the divine. It's not a journey like any other journey. But because it's mythical doesn't mean it isn't real. On the contrary, anyone who makes that journey discovers the journeys we're used to making are the ones that are unreal. Perhaps you've noticed it — that our awareness is completely motionless, never changes. When we walk down the road we're really not going anywhere. We can travel around the world and we're not going anywhere at all. We never go anywhere; if we think we do we're just caught in the web of appearances, caught in the web of our senses. (DPW 49-50)



The journey he describes himself as making, into another reality, is not some matter of theory. The evidence for him as a practising priest of Apollo has everything to do with practice; nothing with theory. The same applies to the mention in ancient Greek literature of something that all modern writers about Parmenides, with their basic assump-

tion that his teaching was just a matter of theorizing and argument, are completely at a loss to understand: the existence, thousands of years ago, of a 'Parmenidean way of life'.

And the same is even truer of one report about how Parmenides' successor and chief disciple, a man called Zeno, finally died.

It says that he was caught helping some people who lived between Italy and Sicily to protect themselves against invaders, and was tortured. But in spite of the pain he stayed silent; refused to give in or betray his friends. And, we are told, through his suffering 'he tested Parmenides' words in fire like gold that's pure and true'. (R 81-82)

3 Incubation

In describing his journey Parmenides is referring to something very specific. If we want to understand him we need to see what.

It's all tied up with that clumsy word: incubation. The formal side to incubation was simple enough. Usually you'd lie down in a special place where you wouldn't be disturbed. Sometimes it was a room inside a house or temple; often it was a cave or other place considered a point of entry to the underworld.

And people didn't do this just when they were sick. There used to be experts at incubation — masters at the art of going into another state of consciousness or allowing themselves to go if they were drawn there. Sometimes they did this for the sake of healing others, but the main point of incubation really wasn't the healing at all. That's simply how it seemed. What was most important was the fact that the healing comes from another level of being, from somewhere else. For these were people who were able to enter another world, make contact with the divine, receive knowledge directly from the gods. (DPW 101-102)



If you look at the old accounts of incubation you can still read the amazement as people discovered that the state they'd entered continued regardless of whether they were asleep or awake, whether they opened their eyes or shut them. Often you find the mention of a state that's like being awake but different from being awake, that's like sleep but not sleep: that's neither sleep nor waking. It's not the waking state, it's not an ordinary dream and it's not dreamless sleep. It's something else, something in between. . .

A Iatromantis was someone who was a master of this state of awareness. (DPW 110-111)



We think now of East and West. But then there were no real lines to be drawn. The oneness experienced by the Iatromantis on another level of awareness left its mark in the physical world. Even to talk about influence is to limit the reality of what was one vast network of nomads, of travellers, of individuals who lived in time and space but also were in touch with something else.

The way so many of the stories and practices associated with the Iatromantis in Greece have their exact parallels among shamans, and the way they keep occurring in the traditions of Indian yoga as well: this is more than a coincidence. What would soon be covered over and rationalized in Greece was preserved and developed in India. What in the West had been an aspect of mystery, of initiation, became classified and formalized in the East. And there the state glimpsed or experienced by Greeks — the state that could be called a dream but isn't an ordinary dream, that's like being awake but isn't being awake, that's like being asleep but isn't — had its own names. Sometimes it was simply referred to as the 'fourth', *turiya*. It became better known by the title of *samādhi*. Nothing would be easier than to think these traditions never took root in the West, or to believe that even if they did they were never of any importance for the history of western culture. But that's not the case. Just one of the people whose poetry has repeatedly been mentioned over the past century — without anyone quite understanding the why or the how — as an example of shamanic poetry in the West is Parmenides. (DPW 114–115)

4 The Sound of Silence

There's one simple detail in Parmenides' account of his journey to the underworld that's so easy to miss. During the whole of his journey there's no mention at all of any noise — apart from one single sound. That's the sound the chariot makes as the daughters of the Sun draw him along: 'the sound of a pipe' . . .

After Parmenides mentions the sound of the pipe he uses the same word again to explain how the huge doors spin open, rotating in hollow tubes or 'pipes'. This use of the word is extraordinary. It's the only time in the whole Greek language that it's ever applied to doors or parts of doors, and scholars have pointed out that Parmenides must have chosen it for a particular reason: not simply to describe what the doors look like but also to give a sense of the sound they make. On his journey everything that moves has to do with the sound or the appearance of pipes. (DPW 126–127)



The word for 'pipe' that Parmenides keeps using is *syrix*. It had a very particular spread of meanings. *Syrinx* was the name either for a musical instrument or for the part of an instrument that makes a piping, whistling sound — the sound called *syrimos*. But there's one aspect of these words that you have to bear in mind: for Greeks this sound of piping and whistling was also the sound of the hissing made by snakes.

It would be so simple to dismiss as totally insignificant the fact that this piping, whistling, hissing noise is the only sound Parmenides associates with his journey to another world — except for one small matter.

Ancient Greek accounts of incubation repeatedly mention certain signs that mark the point of entry into another world: into another state of awareness that's neither waking nor sleep. One of the signs is that you become aware of a rapid spinning movement. An-

other is that you hear the powerful vibration produced by a piping, whistling, hissing sound.

In India exactly the same signs are described as the prelude to entering *samādhi*, the state beyond sleep and waking. And they're directly related to the process known as the awakening of *kundalinī* — of the 'serpent power' that's the basic energy in all creation but that's almost completely asleep in human beings. When it starts waking up it makes a hissing sound.

The parallels between standard Indian accounts of the process and Parmenides' account of his journey are obvious enough; specialists in Indian traditions have written about them and discussed them. But what hasn't been noticed is that the particular sound mentioned by Parmenides also happens to be the sound made by a hissing snake. . .

[T]he sound of a syrinx was a call for silence. This is something that makes sense even on a very obvious level when you consider how hissing or whistling at people is still a way of silencing them. To ancient mystics and magicians the journey into a greater reality was a journey made through silence, in silence and into silence. The noise of a syrinx is the ultimate password. It's the sound of silence. (DPW 128–130)

5 Plato, Athens, and the Scholars

We can still trace out how, well over two thousand years ago, the schools of Plato and Aristotle put the seal on what was to become the most enduring Athenian contribution to intellectual history in the West: instead of the love of wisdom, philosophy turned into the love of talking and arguing about the love of wisdom. Since then the talking and arguing have pushed everything else out of the picture-until now we no longer know of anything else or can even imagine that there could be. (DPW 31-32)



The oldest descriptions of Parmenides are strange ones. . .

Plato wrote a dialogue about him. It's called *Parmenides*. . .

The whole of the *Parmenides* is a deliberate fiction. It has Parmenides debate abstract Platonic theories in a way he never could have or would have. . .

From beginning to end the setting of the *Parmenides* is skilfully designed with one purpose in mind. That's to present Socrates and Plato — not Zeno or anyone else — as the legitimate heirs to Parmenides' teaching. (DPW 39–40)



In a third dialogue Plato chooses his speakers with care. His concern is still very clear. It's to present his teaching, once again, as the legitimate successor to the tradition of philosophy that began in Velia. And there's one point where he makes his characters see just what has to be done to establish the line of succession. The main speaker says: we're going to have to resort to violence against our 'father' Parmenides. We're going to

have to kill the father.

Plato deliberately steps around the issue, states it without really stating it; makes it sound casual, almost a joke. But we have to understand one thing. For Plato jokes are hardly ever just jokes. What for him is most serious appears as a game, and when he treats something with humour is often when there's most at stake. That's a part of what makes him engaging: it was appreciated very well in the ancient world, and it was appreciated in the Renaissance. He loved trying to catch his readers out by stating the most serious things in the most lighthearted ways.

And there's something else as well. In the ancient world you never joked about patricide. The whole of Greek society revolved around the relationship between father and son. Any act of violence at all against your father was the greatest crime there was — not to mention killing him. Patricide was about the most appalling crime that could be imagined. Even the word 'patricide' was a word best never pronounced at all. Gods could kill their fathers; but when humans were involved it became a crime of mythological dimensions.

What is it that Plato killed? That's what we'll begin to discover in this book. And to see what Parmenides was is to see why Plato had to kill him. For if he hadn't done what he did, the West as we know it would never have existed.

Plato had to commit patricide, get Parmenides out of the way. And the murder was so complete that now we don't even know it ever happened, or what was killed.

The only way we can suspect what happened is when we feel something missing inside. For what Parmenides represented: no one can ever get that out of the way. It will always find its way back. We can do without it for a while, but only for a while. (DPW 44–45)



Plato doesn't say Parmenides was his own father. He's more subtle and precise than that. Carefully he puts the reference to 'father Parmenides', along with the talk about patricide, into the mouth of one of the imaginary speakers in his dialogue. He doesn't even give the speaker a proper name but simply presents him as a citizen of Velia — or Elea, as Plato preferred to say. And he quaintly refers to him as the 'Eleatic stranger'.

Having someone from Velia bring up the issue of killing Parmenides is an extremely elegant idea: just as elegant as the way Plato makes Zeno discredit himself in that other dialogue known as the *Parmenides*. This was one of the wonders of writing fictitious literature. You could create your own reality, make the characters do all the work for you. . .

Plato's purposes are still very clear. Behind everything else, he wanted to be seen as Parmenides' heir. With any of the other philosophers who lived before him, he really didn't care. But with Parmenides the situation was different. Plato wanted the succession to his teaching not for Zeno or anyone else, but for himself.

In a sense you could say he succeeded. The fantasy came true. Nowadays there's hardly anyone who doubts that he was Parmenides' rightful successor: that he took his teaching a stage further, improved it. He succeeded so well that no one really suspects any more how vast the chasm is separating Plato's idea of philosophy from Parmenides' — or suspects just how much has been left behind. (DPW 158–159)



Times had changed. In the West the focus of interest had started shifting to other things instead. The love of wisdom had been replaced by philosophy, been made appealing and accessible to the curious mind. And what once demanded everything you are was gradually being turned into a pastime for people who love playing with toys.

Parmenides' own teaching had been torn away from the background and context that had given it its meaning and life. What originally had been intended to involve every fibre of one's being was converted into a dry logic that's only good for complicating and torturing our minds. . .

This all served its purpose — the way things always do. And there's no right, or wrong. People just do what's needed at the time. You could say that Plato and Aristotle, in particular, simply did their job: they made it possible for us to develop our intelligence in certain directions, to explore aspects of ourselves that we hadn't known before. But then the time comes to be moving on. (DPW 196–197)



Often it's said how much we owe to ancient Athens. This is true-but not in quite the way we've been led to believe.

Athens used to be a major centre of culture in the Mediterranean. It was only one of them; there were others, too. But it became an important centre for people who were so clever and ambitious that they led the West to believe it owes almost everything to them. We still believe them, and histories of the ancient world are still based on Athenian propaganda.

It was people at Athens who invented the fiction of a united Greece. But really there never was a united Greece, because so many Greeks wanted very little to do with Athens. A few talented Athenians perfected a bizarre game called 'democracy'. They offered other Greek states and cities the opportunity to play — in return for their submission. If they refused to accept, they destroyed them. Many Greek centres of culture preferred to side with the Persians rather than with Athens. They considered them more civilized. (DPW 197–198)



There were a few who understood the real significance of Parmenides' teaching and kept it alive, for a while, at Velia. Then they allowed it to go underground while aspects of it were transmitted through to Egypt and into the Islamic world. Others followed the inevitable route of taking what they imagined he had taught and turning it to their own

uses. Then they transformed it into what was to become that extremely successful religion — the cult of reason.

Nowadays we like to think of rationality as completely distinct from mysticism, of science as something utterly separate from the knowledge of another reality. But that's just an optical illusion. Really there can only be one kind of knowledge. And rationality is simply mysticism misunderstood. (R 148)

6 The Longing

[Y]ou can see it with people who love the divine, or God — who miss what doesn't even exist for anyone else. With people who want this or that, there's always the risk that their wanting will be fulfilled. But when you want what's so much greater than yourself there's never a chance of being finally fulfilled. And yet something very strange happens. When you want that and refuse to settle for anything else, it comes to you. People who love the divine go around with holes in their hearts, and inside the hole is the universe. It's people like them that this book is about. (DPW 34)



It needs a tremendous focus, an immense intensity, to break through the wall of appearances that surround us and that we think of as reality. Most people paint their wall in different colours and then imagine they're free. But what's extraordinary is that the crucial thing we need for breaking free is already inside us: our longing. . . (DPW 124)



And for Parmenides it all starts not with thinking, or scratching our heads, but like this:

The mares that carry me as far as longing can reach rode on. . . (R 26–27)



Already at the start of his poem Parmenides mentions the essential thing for making the journey — the longing, the passion or desire. He's taken to where he goes, but he's only taken 'as far as longing can reach'. We usually think of a hero as a warrior, a fighter. And yet what gets Parmenides where he goes isn't willpower; it isn't struggle or effort. He doesn't have to do anything. He's just taken, taken straight where he needs to go. And the longing isn't what gets him there, either: the strength of his longing simply determines how far he can go. (DPW 66)



Always we want to learn from outside, from absorbing other people's knowledge. It's safer that way. The trouble is that it's always other people's knowledge. We already have everything we need to know, in the darkness inside ourselves. The longing is what turns us inside out until we find the sun and the moon and stars inside. (DPW 67)



What we call human nature means being pulled by the nose in a hundred different directions and ending up going nowhere very fast.

But although there is no reasoning with our passion, it has a tremendous intelligence of its own. The only trouble is that we keep interfering; keep breaking it up into tiny pieces, scattering it everywhere. Our minds always trick us into focusing on the little things we think we want — rather than on the energy of wanting itself.

If we can bear to face our longing instead of finding endless ways to keep satisfying it and trying to escape it, it begins show us a glimpse of what lies behind the scenes. It opens up devastating perspective where everything is turned on its head: where fulfilment becomes a limitation, accomplishment turns into a trap. And it does this with an intensity that scrambles thoughts and forces us straight into the present.

Parmenides' poem is not for academics. There is nothing scholarly here at all. The word 'scholar' means, literally, a woman or man of leisure. Scholars are people with time on their hands, even when they are busy: time to waste, time to kill. But to understand Parmenides is a serious matter. It demands the same intensity and urgency he talks about — the urgency of our own being.

And for that, there is no time at all to spare. (R 28)



Of course we all have our moments of beauty and wonder and joy; but it's no pessimism to say these passing moments are nothing but the fragmented reflection, viewed in a distorting mirror, of a reality that's far richer and vaster. All our longing is secretly focused on that vastness, waiting for it, expecting it, breathing for something that's already available to us but so untouchable because we keep reaching out for other things instead — always settling for the little things, for second best.

The greatest possible pessimism is the one each of us shares when we take at face value this ridiculous world we have managed to construct for ourselves; is when we imagine that soon we are going to die and that is that.

We can cite as many reasoned arguments as we want. But in our hearts none of us believes we only live for thirty or fifty or eighty years, because we all know there is more to us without even understanding how we know. And this is the knowledge Parmenides was working to bring to life, in our minds as well as hearts.

Without it, all the beauty and the wonder that we are able to experience are nothing. They are just a film being shown to prisoners, hovering between existence and non-existence, as they wait to be executed on death row. (R 106)

7 Consciousness and Existence

Some of the greatest philosophers in the ancient world took it without any hesitation as meaning that [Parmenides] identified thinking with existence; and this identification even came to be viewed as a kind of trademark for his teaching. Most modern scholars,

as well, are only too happy to interpret and translate it in exactly the same way: 'For thinking and being are one and the same.'

The difficulties surrounding this translation on every side are overwhelming. Not the least of them is the fact that, later on in his poem, Parmenides plainly denies thinking and being are the same. To be sure, he explains in detail how one is related to the other—but identical they definitely are not. . .

Parmenides is saying that anything you can think about has to exist for you to think about it. . .

And this is where we have to remember, again, the place Parmenides happens to find himself in as he hears these words [*for what exists for thinking, and being, are one and the same*] from the goddess.

He is 'far away from the beaten track of humans' in the world of the gods. And, for Greeks, the world of the gods had one very particular feature. This is that simply to think something is to make it exist: is to make it real.

Parmenides is bringing back a message from the realm of goddesses and divine beings to people in the world of the living — or at least to the world of those who imagine they are living. To be more precise, he is returning with a revelation about the laws of divine reality and about the laws of human existence. The human law is that you will spend the greater part of your life desperately thinking of ways to make the things you want exist and the things you fear not exist.

As for the divine law: the very fact of thinking something is the assurance that it already is. (R 69–72)



If you are wondering why it is that Parmenides focuses so exclusively on thinking, the answer is quite simple. He doesn't.

From the moment he brings up the subject of thought — when he introduces the riddle about the two different paths that 'exist for thinking' — he uses one particular word for it in Greek. The word is *noein*, which was a whirlpool of subtleties.

Certainly in Parmenides' time it had the sense of thinking. But there was a great deal more to it than that. This one word referred as much to the act of perceiving as to the act of thinking: to direct, intuitive perception as well as perception through and with our senses. And, beyond even that, it described exactly what nowadays we would refer to as consciousness or awareness. (R 77)



[The Goddess] has already explained that whatever exists for thinking — the object of all our thoughts and perceptions — is being. But now we are being told something else: that the initial cause of thought, what gave rise to it in the first place, is also being. In other words we are being shown that the object of our thinking or perceiving, the end-

point and result of the process, its final focus, is identical to its point of origin. The beginning and the end are the same. (R 182)



And yet in our awareness, they almost never are.

We are constantly being bombarded by thoughts and perceptions. Whatever we see or hear, every idea that enters our minds, sends us off into a maze of thoughts about the past and future. Our whole lives are an incoherently coherent picture of reeling from one impulse to another, of always struggling for the completeness no one quite manages to find. We try to discover it by making plans that will lead to fulfilment in some future; but the greater the effort, the further it slips away.

For the only completeness is now. (R 184)



With the goddess, things are very different. . .

Her words are spoken not out of restlessness and searching but out of completeness. And this is why they keep exerting such an uncanny attraction: because we long for that completeness even while trying to analyze or tear it apart. Her awareness, itself, is complete. She starts from being and ends exactly where she began — with being in all its perfection and completion. And this is just how things have to be, because in reality we never find out more or discover anything with time.

Everything is already present in the beginning.

Reality is perfect, complete. But we are lost in its perfection, trapped in its completeness while imagining we are free. And there is nothing we can do to change it — to make it less perfect, or more — except by making one decision. The only choice we have, our single real freedom, is to decide whether to participate in it consciously or be at its mercy; whether to help complete the circle through our own awareness or just stay lost inside it.

Reality is our problem and also our answer. For, as always, the answer to the problem lies not in running away from it — there is simply nowhere to run to — but in turning to face it.

The one option we have is to turn around and face, head on all the impulses that keep bombarding us and pushing us in every direction. By turning each impulse back on itself, we are returning thought and perception consciously to their source. For every thought and perception comes from being, and in returning them to being we complete the circle: make them perfect.

Then instead of being caught somewhere along the circle like an animal in a cage, we stop being a victim of reality and become the cage. Whatever thought or perception comes at us, all we have to do is turn our attention back onto it. Instead of seeing without really seeing, we can stop to look. Instead of half-hearing sounds that irritate

or please us, that either make some sense or just seem to be noise, we can listen to them all but at the same time be aware of listening to them.

This is simply a matter of letting nothing go unperceived, because every single thought and sensation and perception is waiting to be returned by us consciously to its source. Their aggressiveness and gentleness, their violence and impatience and their sweetness, are their way of urging us to do what we have to do.

Of course to our usual, wandering minds — that can only focus at the very best on one thing at a time — to do this is not just difficult. It's unimaginable. But there is another state of awareness we all have access to; and, for that, nothing could be more natural. (R 184–186)



This is the awareness known to Greeks as *mêtis*.

Mêtis is the particular quality of intense alertness that can be effortlessly aware of everything at once. While our wandering minds go off on their endless journeys, it always stays at home. And its home is everywhere. *Mêtis* feels, listens, watches; can even be aware at the same time, if left to itself, of every thought drifting into and out of our consciousness. It misses nothing.

This is how the circle begins.

When we really become aware of the sights and sounds and other impressions coming from all around us, after a while there is no longer the sense of just hearing and seeing this or that: instead, there is the awareness of everything as forming a single whole. Everything is exactly what it is, and always has been — but as a continuity now, all together, without any separation or division. And in this wholeness even the past and future start to merge until they are no longer separate. For they are both included in the now.

Then even the sense of any motion disappears. *Mêtis* is so fast in its response, so rapid in its alertness to the moment, that any movement is only perceived as stillness. But, by now, instead of just perceiving a tree or a chair you have become aware that you are perceiving one single being: whole, unmoving, quite still. And eventually, if you look, you will discover that instead of you perceiving reality what in fact is happening is that reality is perceiving itself through you.

This is how the circle ends. (R 186–187)

8 The Travesty

Not only has it become Parmenides' most famous, most quotable remark. It has been presented as the jewel in the crown — the first truly great achievement in western intellectual history. Everyone from the most specialized of experts in ancient Greek philosophy through to the most popular of historical writers is unanimous in celebrating the profound significance of that one, tremendous moment when Parmenides first an-

nounces ‘the autonomy and superiority of the human reason as judge of reality’.

And to be sure, such a moving statement would have been profoundly significant if he had ever said anything like it. One would have thought, even might have hoped, that after what he has said so far such a statement would be glaring in its absurdity. For this would be a wonder of wonders, if the goddess were really to be telling us to judge her words by reason — we helpless humans who are incapable of judging or deciding anything by anything, not to mention by reasoning. (R 126–127)



She might just as well be telling a man who is in danger of being shipwrecked far out on the high seas that all he needs to do is keep a firm grip on dry land.

But such considerations have little force for the writers of history. All of Parmenides’ unclarities are a small price to pay for his single, marvellous clarity. These simple words, ‘Judge by reason’, have become one of the greatest milestones in our past: the marker of mile zero, where reason was invented and rationality began. Everything can confidently be measured from here.

They have been made into the foundation for the whole edifice of reasoned thought on which Plato and his great successor Aristotle, followed by later philosophers, were all able to build. But no one has dared to ask if the building work was carried out in the right place — or if the foundation is really solid, let alone still standing. . . There has been no rush to look behind the scenes and discover just how much irrationality is needed to keep defending the bastion of rationality. . .

It’s just like the story of the emperor out on parade, wearing no clothes. Everyone is much too polite to point the matter out. (R 127–128)

9 Twin-heads

But then I hold you back as well from the [other road of inquiry] that mortals fabricate, twin-heads, knowing nothing. For helplessness in their chests is what steers their wandering minds as they are carried along in a daze, deaf and blind at the same time: indistinguishable, undistinguishing crowds who reckon that being and non-being are the same but not the same. And, for all of them, the route they follow is a path that keeps turning backwards on itself. (R 83)

Scholars have agonized for generation after generation over the question of who these people could possibly be. They have written hundreds of pages on the subject; have searched high and low, looked in all the most unlikely places. And, well over a century ago, one particular expert had a stroke of genius.

He decided that this mention of ignorant ‘mortals’ must be Parmenides’ highly generalized way of referring to another Greek philosopher, called Heraclitus, who very wisely described everything in existence as both containing and moving towards its opposite: that it must be a cutting criticism of his ideas.

The solution required a fair amount of manipulating of Parmenides’ text, not to men-

tion of the other evidence. Even so, it quickly caught on. In fact it proved almost irresistible to anyone looking to the past for a tidily packaged, self-enclosed story about the origins of philosophy. And one of the more remarkable results has been that a whole, crucial chapter in the history of western ideas has come to be written purely on the basis of this presumed attack by Parmenides on Heraclitus.

But there were a few other scholars who had a little more respect for what Parmenides actually says. They saw the craziness of this supposed solution and realized there is not the slightest reason for doubting that, when the goddess mentions ‘mortals’, she means exactly what she says she is referring to: humanity as a whole. They even went on to define these mortals with the finest eloquence as ‘all who are unacquainted with the divine’; ‘who unconsciously get confused into contradictions because they take the changeable world for true reality’; ‘who only see their daily surroundings but cannot see through them’.

And this is the furthest anyone has ventured to go.

All the elements of the equation are there. The figures are waiting to be added up. But nobody has wanted to see the result — which is that Parmenides is not describing some theoretical abstraction, some sample cross-section of humanity, any more than he is pointing the finger at one isolated figure in the past.

He is describing us. (R 85-86)



To watch how these particular lines of Parmenides have been interpreted in the past is like taking a very private look down the corridors of insanity linking the halls of learning. (R 87)

10 Socrates

And so we come to the term used by Parmenides for ‘demonstration of the truth’. In Greek it’s just one word, *elenchos*. Scholars have come up with a brilliant display of colorful translations — ‘challenge’, ‘argument’, ‘testing’, ‘proof’, ‘refutation’. And, in their own way, each of these translations has a certain validity. But the key in such a situation is to find the one, core meaning of the word from which all the others derive. . .

This particular word, *elenchos*, always refers to a process: the process of demonstrating the truth about a matter, of exposing the truth, of getting to what’s real at all costs. And just as with the word ‘exposing’ in English, sometimes the focus is on uncovering the truth but often it’s on revealing the deception or fraud. To get to the truth you have to unveil whatever is false; remove what stands in the way. (R 150)



There happens to be another man who became very famous in the ancient world for his use of *elenchos*. I am referring to Socrates.

Socrates went around Athens talking to people. His talk, his *logos*, was the immediate ancestor of what we have come to describe and know so well as the process of reasoning. But we haven't the least idea any more of what his talking meant. He would start up discussions with powerful politicians or simple craftsmen; lure them into conversation about themselves; make them contradict themselves; show them how, in spite of their belief that they knew things, they knew nothing.

And what's most difficult to understand is that for him there was nothing at all intellectual about this procedure.

His one concern was with exposing the reality about people's lives — not just their ideas. He was quite charming in his *elenchos*, bewitchingly so, but ruthless in his desire to get to the truth at all costs. And after a while the Athenians got so sick of being exposed as idiots that they killed him.

Now, of course, we romanticize the whole thing. Students learn in schools and colleges about the Golden Age of Reason, and Socrates at Athens is held up as the perfect example. But no one dares to be too specific about when exactly this golden age was: whether it was before the Athenians killed Socrates, or after he had been put to death, or perhaps right at the moment of his execution. The one thing we can be sure of is that if Socrates were to come into a modern classroom he wouldn't last for long. His questions might be tolerated for a couple of minutes. But after that he would be thrown out. There is no more room for him in our institutions than there was in ancient Athens, with the exception of our mental institutions. (R 151–152)



To turn to the essentials: the core of the *elenchos* process as shown to Parmenides by the goddess was that men and women 'know nothing'. The heart of Socrates' message, the unwavering purpose of his *elenchos*, was to show people that they 'know nothing'. For both of them, there was no hope of real knowledge without first accepting and understanding this.

Socrates' *elenchos* took the very particular form of making the people he talked to contradict themselves: of revealing that in spite of their apparent knowledge, they were completely at odds with themselves. For Parmenides, exposing the human condition for what it is meant showing that we are totally at odds with ourselves — living, walking self-contradictions — and that all our intelligence and best intentions only make matters worse.

For both of them, arriving at the knowledge of knowing nothing meant confronting utter helplessness. It involved having your whole being turned upside down until you no longer knew if you were coming or going. Socrates used to talk about *aporia* or 'pathlessness', about watching every familiar sense of direction vanish. But later philosophers managed, gradually and very cleverly, to shift this word *aporia* away from any sense of personal vulnerability or helplessness so that it ended up becoming a technical term for the formal practice of proposing specific solutions to particular problems.

All that was at stake now was how smart one was. One's fundamental intelligence was never open to doubt. One's being was no longer on the line. Ironically, the only signs of the *elenchos* process being kept alive in its intensity and terrible reality come not from Greece but from Egypt — from the Hermetic groups who lived there. The two founding fathers of philosophy had offered something incalculably valuable: the chance for self-transformation. But in the West people just threw the opportunity to the dogs. (R 154–155)



And yet there is no secret about the fact that originally the word 'philosophy' meant love of wisdom. Now it has just come to mean the love of endlessly talking and arguing about the love of wisdom — which is a complete waste of time. Philosophy is a travesty of what it once was, no longer a path to wisdom but a defence against it. There is only one way to wisdom: by facing the fact that we know nothing and letting our reasoning be torn apart. Then reality is what is left behind. (R 156)

11 Transformation

Through being drawn into the legal process that determines what is and is not to be, Parmenides is being invited to participate actively and consciously in the origins of the universe. The place he has come to, in this strange court of law at the heart of reality and the roots of all existence, is where everything has already been decided — but still is being decided, because the origin of the universe is now. (R 169)



It was almost a hundred years ago now that an American scholar saw what Parmenides' powerful image of driving out and wandering away naturally implied. He realized that 'true *pistis*' here means the persuasive legal evidence or proof presented to a court, explained that 'Parmenides clearly has in mind an action at law' and that with the driving out of creation and destruction he was describing something quite specific: a formal act of banishment. (R 173)



The basics of legal language used to be very straightforward. *Pistis*, the persuasive evidence presented in a court of law, is what leads to *krisis*: the critical final judgement. With the goddess' new announcement about the verdict already arrived at on the basis of persuasive evidence, she is pointing straight back to her other announcement a little earlier about the judgement already passed thanks to all the persuasive pleading on her part. Her statement, here, that creation and destruction have been driven far away is inseparable from her statement, there, that creation and destruction have been abolished — and that anything apart from unchanging being is to be rejected as not just unthinkable but 'unnameable'...

What has been banished is not just one, or two, individual successors but the principle

of succession itself: not just a child by birth but the entire process of birth and death. And what's left behind is all alone — without any future to look forward to although without the slightest sense of any lack, because it already knows the perfect fullness and completion that we always long for but are also terrified we might one day be able to find. (R 177-178)



In the ancient Greek world, to make an announcement that so-and-so's 'name shall be...' was to perform a very significant and solemn act. This was the act of giving a newborn baby, or a child who has not yet even been born, the name to be used in future by everyone from that day on.

And by gauging the solemnity of this act you will be able, once again, to appreciate the goddess' outrageous sense of humor. For here, with the same light-hearted laughter that has dogged us ever since she demolished all our pretensions by portraying us as idiots who are very clever about knowing nothing she is performing a mock ceremony over the one thing that has never been born and never will be because it knows no change and has no past or future. She is performing a naming ceremony for reality.

And this is the least of it.

She has been working so hard, so consistently, patiently, to get rid of creation and destruction and birth and death and movement and change and every possible shade and form of non-existence or non-reality. And just when we were feeling quite sure that we understood her intentions, that we saw where it all was leading, she suddenly hauls back in whatever she had thrown out.

Every illusion she had wrenched away and banished, demolished, all those names and expressions we were convinced we had seen the back of: here they are again. This is not what we had come to expect.

But, crazy as her behavior might seem, the one thing it most definitely is not is self-contradictory. Quite to the contrary, her unpredictable humor and extravagant outrageousness fit into place alongside what she has already said with the type of precision one could only ever hope to expect from a goddess.

The act of naming a child and the act of disinheriting were exact polar opposites; inverted mirror images of each other. Before, with all due formality, the goddess had banished every form of unreality and stripped it of its names. Now, just as formally, she is giving each of its names back — to reality.

In banishing creation and destruction, birth and death, she had left non-existence nameless. And now, with supreme logic, she is transferring everyone of its titles to existence instead.

There is a perfect symmetry here between the two acts of taking names away and then reassigning them. But it's not just a matter of symmetry. You might have supposed, very understandably, that to strip non-existence of all its names was the beginning and

end of the goddess' job. In fact it was only the first half of her task. By returning to reality the names she took away from unreality, she has finally accomplished what she started.

The names had a certain application to begin with. Then they had none at all. And now, at the end, they are valid again. The transfer is over: she has completed the circle, right here in the middle of her culminating words about circularity and completeness. . .

From the point of view of reality, nothing at all has changed: it never can. And from the point of view of this strange unreality that we move around in, again nothing has changed. We still walk down the same stairs; see the same faces; lie in the same bed at night.

And yet, from the point of view of the individual who has witnessed the goddess' performance, it's a very different story. For there is nothing quite as capable of changing a human being as the experience of utter changelessness. . .

The future and past that were taken away from you are given back. But they are no longer the independent realities they once had seemed to be: they are only inseparable parts of now. Every name you had used for referring to this or that is perfectly usable all over again, except that instead of applying to any number of separate objects they only apply to one single thing.

For anyone else, the difference could seem smaller than a hair's breadth. But in actual fact it's a work of magic — as complete as it happens to be subtle. Suddenly, instead of seeing and hearing a thousand things you only see or hear one. And if you have a particular fondness for giving to what you experience one of those names that mortals have invented: everything is divine. (R 192–195)

12 Persephone and Aphrodite

This quality of elusive beauty in the world Parmenides describes, as well as in the way he describes it, should come as no surprise: For there is one very particular divine being whom he presented as ruling our visible universe.

That's the goddess Aphrodite, queen of infinitely tempting beauty and love and charm. . .

Aphrodite was not just a divinity of beauty. She was also the supreme goddess of deception and illusion.

She is the great charmer who loves seducing gods, as well as humans, through the glitter of appearance; through desire and attraction and love. As for her sweet shimmer and the delicate magic of her sheer charm, they are precisely what gives her deceptions their ruthless power. Greeks understood very well that underneath the beautiful surface she is a superb hunter, expert at trapping and cunningly binding her prey.

And the one term that best summed up the effects of her deceptions on her victims is a word we should already be familiar with: *amêchania*, 'helplessness'.

There is the same, strangely fascinating scenario here that we have encountered before. The only way to explain how scholars have kept failing for centuries to notice the connection between humanity's fate, helpless and dazed in an illusory world, and the notorious ability of Aphrodite, ruler of the illusory world, to make her victims helpless and dazed must be that they are dazed in exactly the same way Parmenides is describing. After all, the best trick for keeping people helpless is also the oldest one: deceive them into thinking they know what they are doing, into imagining they are anything but helpless.

Hide from them the horrifying reality of their situation for so long that, even when eventually they are told how things are, most of them will never believe it.

Parmenides' portrayal of humans as dazed and deaf and blind and governed by helplessness or *amêchania* was inseparable, you may remember, from his crucial image of them as incapable of steering a straight course; as unable to keep on a steady path. But this is only one half of the picture.

The other is the remarkable description that we know he happened to give of Aphrodite as a helmsman: a description of her as the accomplished navigator who 'steers everything' in this deceptive universe straight and true by guiding female and male un-failingly together, by keeping all the opposites in tow on their perfectly illusory course.

And the missing link that holds the whole picture together, as you may have guessed, is *mêtis*.

Mêtis is the one essential quality navigators need if they are going to keep to a straight course instead of drifting, wandering, travelling aimlessly backwards and forwards, being led astray. At the same time, though, it's the one fundamental factor that according to Parmenides' teaching humans lack: the factor that simply through its unnoticed absence leaves us helpless, lost and trapped. (R 214–216)



The two central goddesses in his poem are not the lifeless, philosophical abstractions they have been turned into by century after century of thinkers. They are real potencies: Persephone, queen of the dead whose home Parmenides has come to in the underworld but who is happiest not being named, and Aphrodite who rules over the realm of the living.

And these goddesses have strikingly similar roles at the heart of their own respective worlds. Even from the little that survives of what he wrote towards the end of his poem, we can still see how the language he used in referring now to one of them and then to the other was pointedly similar as well. In fact the various similarities are so strong that it can be more than a little tempting to want to suppose the two goddesses are one and the same.

But Parmenides' teacher is not just describing herself when she talks, quite objectively and matter-of-factly, about a divinity manipulating the universe of illusion. The two great beings all-powerful in their two contrasting realms, are different from each other

even though mysteriously similar; almost the same and yet not identical.

The queen of death in the world of reality and the queen of life in the world of illusion: they make a striking combination. But what gives the combination its deeper significance is the fact that these two particular goddesses — Persephone, Aphrodite — had a remarkably close and mysterious relationship to each other.

In the framework of Greek religion as a whole they formed a perfect polarity: life and death. But there was also the profound, lingering awareness of a hidden complicity behind the opposition. And in one part of the Greek world, more than anywhere else, the dynamics of this relationship were viewed as extremely meaningful. That was southern Italy.

There the worship of Persephone and the worship of Aphrodite came to be intimately connected, and this very special juxtaposition even led to the merging of their attributes to the paradoxical shaping of a dual divinity, Persephone–Aphrodite, who virtually became a single goddess. Combining diametrically opposite features and qualities, belonging to diametrically opposite worlds, Persephone and Aphrodite in the Greek West came to be associated and even identified just because the opposition between them was so fundamental. One and different, reflected mirror images of each other, they blended into a single figure and yet at the same time also managed to stay distinct. (R 217–219)



To start with we are all quite helpless — dazed and confused, trapped by Aphrodite. And that, for most people, is the end of the matter. It's how they live; how they die.

But there is also a possibility, ever so remote, of being drawn out from the illusion by a mysterious power behind love that happens to be even greater than love. This is the secret most people never know.

And this is why the hidden goddess offers so kindly, with an austere tenderness so different from all the superficial glamour and charm we are familiar with, to lead the initiate who reaches her out of the illusion into reality. For behind the force that drags us into the illusion in the first place is the power that can set us free.

Or to be more precise, the one being who seduces us into believing in her grand deception can then decide to seduce us out of it.

And yet to leave things there, to remain simply disabused, would be impossible. It would be to deny a half of what she is; to turn our back on her deceptive face; to stop half-way. In other words, it would be just as one-sided to stay in reality as it is for most people to stay caught in the illusion.

So we have to give the deception its due — plunge back into it, but now with the knowledge imprinted consciously on our heart of the oneness always present in the heart of reality.

One face of the goddess is movement; the other, utter stillness. But just as we had to

learn while approaching reality how all movement is held in stillness, we now have to be able to watch as the stillness dissolves again into apparent motion.

And just as the one thing we needed to guide us along that non-existent path to reality was the presence and continuous alertness of *mêtis*, so *mêtis* is what we are going to need now more than ever to carry us right through the deception. (219–220)

13 Science

One ancient writer — he is among the oldest and most reliable of sources on such matters — offers a name for the first philosopher who ever stated that the earth is round. The man he mentions came from Velia. . .

His name was Parmenides.



By describing the spherical shape of the earth, along with its zones, his goddess was fulfilling to the letter her promise that he would be able to outstrip anyone and everyone in his knowledge of the world. Her assurance had been no poetic exaggeration: no empty rhetoric, no trick. Packed away in the final part of his poem, where not too many people would be tempted to take it too seriously, lay the knowledge that was way ahead of its time. (R 251)



We need to appreciate that this is not some hillbilly talking: some eccentric mystic. Parmenides is someone who knew. He was right at the forefront, the cutting edge, of the knowledge of his times; way ahead. And he said it was an illusion. To hold the most advanced information in the palm of one's hand and describe it like that is not a scenario we are too used to. (R 252)



Well over two thousand years ago, science as we know it was offered to the West with a warning tag attached to it: Use this, but don't be tricked by it. And of course, impatient little children that we are, we tore off the tag and ignored the warning.

Still we play around with our imagined knowledge and don't realize it's a deception — honestly believe it's a great achievement to be able to differentiate between true and false with such apparent accuracy but aren't aware, except in our most private moments of helplessness, that even our truths are false.

We pride ourselves on being able to separate fact from fiction, science from myth, but don't see that our science itself is what it always has been: a fragile mythology of the moment.

And so we come back to the fact that in Plato's *Phaedo* — the first complete text still surviving to say the earth is a sphere — the idea of a spherical earth is presented to us fairly and squarely as a myth. (R 253–254)



Understanding of the illusion only comes after the understanding of reality, not before. The knowledge of many things, of absolutely anything, comes after the knowledge of the one and only thing: not the other way around. Until we have the experience of reality, in all its stillness, we are still lost.

So we have to go straight to the reality first. This is the only science. Otherwise we are just lost in the endlessly illusory knowledge of an endless myth that keeps twisting and stretching itself and receding further into the distance to accommodate our endless expectations.

And this is why the system presented by Parmenides over two thousand years ago, at the dawn of our civilization, is so extraordinary. For it offers us completeness first: not later or at the end, not at some distant point in the future.

The completion, the perfection, comes right at the start. And that's how things have to be, because unless the end were present at the beginning we would never be able to get there. But there is just one problem with the need for taking reality, in all its completeness, as our starting-point. This is that we can't even get there. The one thing we need is completely out of our grasp because by starting from the deception we will never arrive at the reality.

From every conceivable angle we are helpless.

We can never make our way to the truth. That would be out of the question. Like Parmenides, we have to be taken there instead; all we can do is wait. And it's only when we finally are taken that we can begin to see just how impossible it would have been to work our way out of the illusion towards the truth, out of some deception into reality. (R 256–257)

14 Empedocles

All words have a magical power of their own. But the nature of their magic varies, because they carry the quality of consciousness of whoever uses them. The millions of spoken or written words released aimlessly and unconsciously into the atmosphere at every moment are a massive tidal wave sweeping through the collective awareness of humanity, devastating everything in its path, wiping away any glimpse of reality, destroying the germs of true understanding before they even have the chance to take root and grow.

And yet there are some words that act in a very different way because the substance they are made of is completely pure. Of course this sounds sheer nonsense to us. All we are used to understanding is what words refer to, not what they are. And in just the same way that we are always chasing off after some meaning outside of ourselves, our words are as lost as we are wandering around in search of something to refer to, looking for something they can mean.

But even though the words spoken by certain people may appear to refer to this or that, like any other words, really they refer to nothing.

In fact they will have a far greater depth of meaning than other people's words. But even that meaning is an illusion because, in essence, these particular words are far too simple and powerful to mean anything. They need no reference outside of themselves. They mean what they are; are what they mean.

And the only way to receive such words is just as Empedocles describes. If they are not welcomed and treated properly they will shake the dust off their feet and leave. Try to rationalize or explain them away and you have already lost them. Try to argue with them and they will disappear. Even try to think about them and that means you have not breathed them deep enough inside yourself.

For the only place to work with these words, which are made from the substance of pure divinity and are messengers from our own true home, is at the borderline where consciousness meets unconsciousness deep inside ourselves. There is simply no other place they are able to grow except down there, in what seems to us to be sheer darkness.

And as Empedocles hints in his usual subtle way, by caring for these words we are doing something extraordinarily significant. We are becoming the farmers of our immortality. (R 527-529)



But what's so strange about the entire process is that, as Empedocles himself so clearly hints, it looks after itself. And all the time that we think we are having to look after it, it's actually looking after us. This is what it means to work with nature. It means anticipating in a process beyond human understanding that, even so, requires our human cooperation. And in spite of the silence, the quietness, nothing could be more dynamic. (R 532-533)



We tend to think very humanly that we have the power to act even when we don't, just as we prefer not to know that we know nothing. And the only way for us to start knowing or doing anything at all is with the help of these mysterious beings who know more about us than we understand about ourselves. This is the kernel of religion.

Nothing could be simpler, more natural, than to grow out of being human into becoming divine. Nothing could demand less in the way of effort while being so absolutely necessary. And in nothing are we helped so much.

But as for that perversity Empedocles refers to: it's to make a business of appearing to do everything possible while managing to avoid this one commitment, is to devote the greatest effort to neglecting it, to take endless care to forget it. Even then, though, we are never without superiors who quietly watch and wait. And when we feel most alone is when they are closest to us, because they are not separate from our own selves. (R 545)



Every ounce of our attentiveness is demanded of us, but only so that we can discover how unbelievably attentive our superiors are to us. And the mystery behind their constant caring is that it can only ever start to bear any fruit through our constant attention to them – through our sensitivity and responsiveness to all their smallest hints, through our total obedience to whatever they command. (R 546)



Everything Empedocles says does add up very nicely. The trouble is that he is a magician: not a mathematician. . .

Up until a moment ago the world of the senses had been the whole field of your existence, the entire domain of your experience. It was what you thought you were born into, was where you imagined you would die and spend all your time until then. It was everything you lived for, wanted for its infinite charmingness and feared for its unfathomable grimness.

Now, suddenly, it consists of nothing but ‘pledges from our Muse’. Good news, bad news, whatever gives you pleasure or hits you on the head: this is all just an assurance from the Muse. And now you may be able to grasp the real nature, to appreciate the true scope, of that agreement drawn up by Empedocles between his disciple and the Muse.

In this covenant between the human and the divine, mediated by someone both divine and human, the Muse is expected to offer a token of her sincerity. But her token turns out not to be some ordinary object.

Neither, for that matter, is it any extraordinary object. Even a rainbow in the sky would be far too modest.

With the most majestic of gestures Empedocles announces instead: as a pledge from our Muse take the world.

The sheer extravagance of such a gesture, its boundless humor and above all its uncontrollable daring, are so stunning that the human mind can hardly even register what it means.

This is the doing of a man so crazy that, as we have already seen before, you need to be more than a little crazy if you are going to have any hope of understanding him.

It’s the work of a sorcerer who is concerned not just with creating extra illusions to add to the one we happen to be immersed in, but whose greatest magic is to show that everything we think of as real is itself a trick.

And it’s the teaching not of a human but of a divine being who is able to transform the whole of existence so that everything we are used to, or even not used to, is no longer just what it seems to be.

Instead, whatever you perceive and experience will be imprinted now with a divine sig-

nature — the signature of the goddess who is Empedocles' Muse.

There can be no such thing, any more, as an anonymous reality. Anonymity is the kind of brutal comfort you can no longer afford. On the contrary, every single thing you are able to perceive now exists for your sake and yours alone. Whatever happens to come to you through your senses is an intimate token for you, a gift to wake you up, and at the same time a sacred memento: a reminder of the work you have to do. (R 548–550)



The whole point of Empedocles' repeated emphasis on the importance of staying alert to everything around us is not because he wants us to perform some exercise in awareness for its own sake. The purpose of perceiving consciously is so that all the perceptions provided by each single one of our senses can be implanted, like grafted branches, onto the tree growing up inside us.

And if you cooperate with this process you will soon make an extraordinary discovery — that the source not only of your own existence but of absolutely everything else's existence as well now lies inside yourself. (R 554)



All of a sudden we become aware that, instead of our being born into the world, this world has simply been born in us. Wherever we look we are seeing not what we depend on for our survival but what now depends on us in order to survive. For through our divine awareness we are the source and creator and maintainer of the universe just as a tree sustains its branches and shoots.

To plant our perceptions in ourselves, to become the trunk and stock they all take their life from: this is not insanity, although it will certainly seem so from the human point of view.

On the contrary, it's only the ancient practice of common sense.

It's the action that has to be taken by humans who are ready to obey their superiors. And as a result of this one action, infinitely more real than any other decisions you imagine you have ever made, you will discover that nothing exists apart from you. There is nothing outside you any more: nothing out there at all. You are everybody, everywhere.

Everything is inside you now, rooted deep into your being. And with the entire universe inside of you, where in reality it always has been, you can sense for the first time how much power you hold in the palm of your hand. For the whole world — whatever you experience or perceive — is just buds on the tree that you are. (R 556)

15 Gorgias

The line running from Parmenides' teaching through Empedocles' didn't stop there. In fact we are told how it was continued; through whom. But no one either cares, or dares, to uncover what this really implies.

Ancient writers quite often mention in passing that Empedocles had a successor. To quote the words of one author who neatly summed up the situation as a whole: 'Parmenides was the teacher of Empedocles who was the teacher of Gorgias.'

And such a statement, if anyone ever comes across it nowadays, will be politely smiled at; then put aside. For, if treated with the seriousness it deserves, it has the power to destroy everything we take most seriously. (R 477)



At least Parmenides and Empedocles were both philosophers. And yet Gorgias has come to be considered something very different from any philosopher.

He used to be known as a sophist. In fact he was sometimes even referred to as the father of sophists. And however much individual scholars might try to shift or redefine the dividing line between sophists and philosophers, the division still stands.

Philosophy is supposed always to have been a very solemn occupation. The sophists, on the other hand, have become famous for their verbal trickeries; for their 'playful intellectual diversions' which seemed to make a mockery of every serious philosopher.

Of course to maintain this basic distinction means having to claim that Parmenides in particular, the father of logical philosophy, was the perfect antithesis of playfulness — is to have to stay oblivious to the goddess' constant joking, her endless amusement in making fun of humans. . .

Philosophy is traditionally held to be a matter of careful reasoning and responsible argument. The sophists, on the other hand, have become notorious for appealing not to the force of reasoned argument but to something quite different: the sheer, emotional power of persuasion.

And yet to maintain this particular distinction means having to ignore the fact that Parmenides' goddess tells us in advance she will be following the path of persuasion to carry us to reality — and then goes on to demonstrate with overwhelming clarity just what she means when she starts persuading us, through her extraordinary logic, to accept conclusions which from every reasonable point of view could hardly be more absurd.

The danger is that any line running from Parmenides through to some sophist, not to mention someone who could be called the father of sophists, threatens to expose what a total illusion our fixed concepts of philosophy and rationality really are. (R 478–479)



Gorgias went to Athens and took the city by storm.

The Athenians were great lovers of words, clever talk. He gave them what they wanted. But they had never heard anything like this.

He made a point of appearing in front of audiences without preparing any set talk or topic. Instead, he would let the audience itself dictate the subjects he would discuss. As

for himself, he simply trusted in the situation. He ‘surrendered to the moment’.

‘The moment’, or *kairos* as it used to be called in Greek, was something very dear to his heart. He is said to have been the first person who ever wrote about it as a subject in its own right — even though, quite characteristically, he never attempted to define it.

And he taught nothing.

He laughed at anyone who tried to imply that he or anyone else had anything particular to teach to anyone. He himself had no definable wisdom to offer; no body of knowledge; nothing specific or precise. And as for why he adopted such a position of no position, the reasons he gave are still very clear.

He explained that people as a rule live in a world totally dominated by deception: *apatê*. They have no real desire for truth and, even if they did, would never be able to tell it apart from pure fiction. So that leaves only one way to influence or affect them.

This is not by trying to teach them some truth but by knowing how to persuade. For Gorgias explained how the spoken word, *logos*, is a magical power — a power of sheer deception that can make anything, however illusory, seem true and the job of any speaker, any teacher, is to use that magic; is to trick and deceive.

Philosophers from Plato down to the present day have listened to these statements with a mixture of horror and disbelief. They point out, time and time again, that in describing words as a power of deception Gorgias appears to have missed something absolutely fundamental.

He has left out the crucial role played by *logos* in reasoned argument and discussion: its ability to carry us beyond the realms of mere persuasiveness into a world of certain fixed, undeceptive reality.

But Gorgias has missed nothing out at all. For our rationality, our proud belief in the ability to argue our way to the truth, is an essential part of the deception.

Apart from a fictional dialogue that Plato wrote about Parmenides, known as the *Parmenides*, he also wrote one called *Gorgias*. Or to be more precise, these works of his were not so much dialogues as meticulously crafted mimes: deft caricatures of the characters involved that made them little more than puppets in Plato’s hands. But, as fictions, they proved so persuasive and deceptively effective that along with Aristotle’s writings they helped create the basis for our present intellectual order.

And this was just what was needed, is exactly what during the past two thousand years has been called for, to help give people’s growing minds something solid and tangible to hold on to. The trouble is that we have no idea any more of how much heartache it has caused.

Plato was quite right when he implied through his fictitious mimes that there is some reality beyond the deception all around us. In fact to impress the existence of such a reality on people’s minds was a part of his job. And yet the mistake he made, the necessary mistake, was to suggest that we can think our way towards it; can find it through

argument and reason. (R 481–483)



There are visible lines and invisible ones. Some traditions have the function of rooting themselves in this familiar world and providing a certain continuity and guidance. But there are others that always stay completely rooted in another world.

They lack the visibility of a continuous tradition. And yet they have another type of continuity, another kind of power altogether different from anything we are used to. They appear, then disappear. They manifest in periods and in places where a particular understanding of timelessness is called for; where a certain quality of need, of deep dissatisfaction, means a time for renewal has come.

And because they are not burdened by any visible past they stay pure in a way our minds can never appreciate. As they weave their way freely into and out of this existence they operate on a level beyond both time and the reach of our senses where everything, including East and West and all illusory traditions, is one.

When Gorgias destroyed the line he belonged to, he really destroyed nothing except for an illusion. And he destroyed it in such a conscious way that he made sure it would always be available to come back, as paradoxical as ever, when needed: timely and yet timeless, visible but also invisible, ordinary as well as utterly extraordinary. (R 498)

16 Now what?

Plato's fictional visitor from Velia explains quite clearly why Parmenides had to be got out of the way. The teaching presented by him in his poem had placed a roadblock in front of the mind. In saying that everything simply is, by denying the existence of non-existence, Parmenides had ended up denying our thoughts the slightest room for manoeuvre. There was nowhere to go, backwards or forwards or sideways. The mind was trapped — in reality.

And that was an essential aspect of his teaching. For the way Parmenides worked, much the same as Zeno did, or Socrates, was to challenge the mind only to undermine it; was to paralyze it, silence it, bring it face to face with stillness.

Plato's genius was to realize this was no longer enough. The intellect of the people all around him had become much too powerful, too irresistible. The only way to master it would be to go with it instead of trying to stop it, would be to trick it into believing it really could do something useful. And as Plato made his fictional Velian visitor explain, Parmenides had to be murdered so we could bring non-existence in again through the back door: so we can safely say that even if something exists 'in one sense', it doesn't have to exist in another.

With this little 'in a sense' — so appealing to reason and to what soon would be known as common sense — the philosophy we are now familiar with could come into being. All the seriously complicated edifices of the western intellect could be built; Plato was able

to start structuring a whole world of separation, to begin theoretically articulating the principle of transcendence: of the need to get from here to there even though there is no there apart from here. Our minds had been given permission to play hide-and-seek with themselves.

He did this according to the same principle we use when we give a dog a ball to keep it happy. The growing western mind was restless for experience, for complication, so it was best to give it what it wanted. Parmenides' teaching had been that logic is something divine, a gift from the gods. Plato took logic and put it in everyone's hands: encouraged people to think and argue for themselves.

It was a tremendous achievement. It required all sorts of distortions, falsifications, obscurations — which his successor, Aristotle, was soon pursuing to perfection. And yet, at the time, these were a small price to pay. For through his writings Plato was able to transmit revealed teachings, traditions, ideas, in a way that would make them not just accessible but also intriguing to the mind.

He had given people something wonderful to play with. And soon it was obvious to almost anyone that the way to get to the truth in those ideas was not through entering some other state of consciousness but through thinking. As one historian has described his achievement, in terms that are accurate enough, Plato was the man who 'by a truly creative act transposed these ideas definitively from the plane of revelation to the plane of rational argument'.

But now, after over two thousand three hundred years of thinking and debating and rational argument, the time has come for a little honesty.

In all those years our minds have allowed us to do great things. We can build bridges and fly, heal and kill ourselves in thousands of new ways. As for reality, though, and the soul, and all those questions that Plato insisted mattered most: we have got absolutely nowhere. We have plenty of theories, endless discussions of problems about problems about problems. But the simple fact is that through our minds we have not managed to understand one single thing. And the time for thinking and for reasoning is over now. They have served their purpose. They have kept us busy, allowed our minds to grow, carried us a little way further on the route towards greater individuality and self-consciousness. The problem is that we still know nothing. (R 304–306)

17 Epilogue

Reason is one of those things — like common sense — that everyone is assumed to know the meaning of. Already as children we are told to be reasonable, which essentially means doing what others want us to do. We are all supposed to have a clear idea of what reason is. But there is no one who does.

The closer you look at it the vaguer it becomes. And the closer you look at people who claim to be most rational, the more irrational they turn out to be. . .

As for logic, this too is not what it seems — or what it once was. Originally it had nothing to do with complicated formulas, fancy calculations. Its purpose was to awaken: to touch and transform every aspect of a human being. What we refer to nowadays as logic is like a baby girl shuffling around self-importantly in her mother's shoes. With our endless learned debates over the last two thousand years about religion and reason, logic and science, we have lost any grip on reality and been behaving like little children. It's time we started growing up. . . (R 20)



[F]rom the divine point of view all our intelligent decisions are nothing but indecision. Every choice we ever make stems from the lack of any true ability to discriminate. What for us is discrimination is the exact opposite for Parmenides; is what keeps us spinning around in a daze. And what Parmenides means by discrimination is total madness to us.

The difference in perspectives could hardly reach deeper, or be more paradoxical. And yet it's very easy to understand. The decisions we make, the only type of decision we are familiar with, are always between one thing and another; between something and something else. But the decision that the goddess is facing us with is between everything and nothing — which is a completely different matter.

It makes no sense at all to our usual restless thinking, to what Parmenides calls our 'wandering minds'. But one thing should be quite clear: there is nothing even remotely rational about this decision, this choice between two paths.

Rationality is the first thing to go out of the window, because the choice we are being asked to make involves saying yes to absolutely everything we see or think or hear. It demands a state of total alertness, complete acceptance. There is no time to discriminate, no room to be reasonable. And there is not the slightest reason to go along with this choice that the goddess is urging us to make. Having divine logic on her side has never been enough for her to convince anyone, because only one single factor will ever persuade us.

This is the silent awareness, nurtured in stillness, of how all our careful decisions are nothing but avoidance of that one crucial decision the gods have been waiting and waiting to see us make for thousands of years. (R 97–98)



Peter Kingsley is internationally recognized for his groundbreaking work on the origins of western spirituality, philosophy and culture. Through his writings as well as lectures he has helped to transform many people's understanding not only of the past, but of who they are.

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After graduating with honors from the University of Lancaster, England, in 1975, Peter Kingsley went on to receive the degree of Master of Letters from King's College Cambridge before being awarded a PhD by the University of London. He has worked together with many of the most prominent figures in the fields of classics and anthropology, philosophy and religious studies, ancient civilizations and the history of both healing and science. The recipient of many academic awards, he was a Fellow at the Warburg Institute in London and has been made an honorary Professor both at Simon Fraser University in Canada and at the University of New Mexico. With his wife he emigrated from England to Canada in 1995, then from Canada to the United States in 2002.

And behind all these details, dates, places, is the consciousness that never changes.