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## **ESSENTIALISM IN PARMENIDES OF ELEA**

### **1. Introduction**

Essentialism<sup>1</sup> is commonly associated with Aristotle. The association is so strong that the notions ‘essentialism’ and ‘Aristotelian essentialism’ are frequently treated on an equal footing—synonymously.<sup>2</sup> The other philosophers are at best overlooked, and at worst totally excluded from the discussion of essentialism. There are two exceptions to this rule: Socrates and Plato, who are sometimes said to have originated an essentialist account (Abelson 1967).

My chief aim with this work is to bring back one oft-forgotten philosopher to the discussion of essentialism: Parmenides of Elea. At the same time, I should like to do two other things. Specifically, if I am correct in thinking that Parmenides is an essentialist, neither Socrates nor Plato cannot be argued to be the first to have proposed an

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<sup>1</sup> In spite of the fact, as well as because of the fact, that essentialism has many faces, I will not try to define it. One reason for this is that I do not want to restrict too much the field of investigation through too specific words. This would, in a sense, smack of essentialism. Another reason is that the concept of essentialism is now very well understood in the literature. It is this general understanding of the concept that is meant here. By way of example, I use the concept of essentialism in exactly the same way that Janicki (1999) or Hallett (1991) use it.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example, Cartwright (1968), Loux (1970), Tomberlin (1971), White (1972), Cohen (1978) and Matthews (1990).

essentialist account in philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, I should like to show that essentialism is not a uniform entity, but a complex phenomenon, which precludes it from being equated with Aristotle's essentialism.<sup>4</sup> By parity of reasoning, treating the notions of 'essentialism' and 'Aristotelian essentialism' synonymously is, technically, erroneous.

Parmenides does betray an essentialist view of the world and language. And his account is one of the *many* faces of essentialism that are pervasive in the old as well as, regrettably, in modern philosophy.

## 2. The dichotomy between 'the Way of Truth' and 'the Way of Opinion'

Parmenides sets forth his views in a poem *On Nature*. In the proem (introductory discourse) Parmenides, through the mouth of the goddess, has basically this to say (Kirk and Raven 1960: 267)<sup>5</sup>:

Meet it is that thou shouldst learn all things, as well the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, as the opinions of mortals in which is no true belief at all.

The question now becomes: Does this passage open way to essentialism, and if so, how? It is my contention that this excerpt forms a fine *point de départ* for essentialist thinking. Let us see now how it comes about.

First and foremost, Parmenides draws here a sharp distinction between the Way of Truth and the Way of Opinion. Let me elaborate on this point.

If, as Heraclitus would have it, everything was in flux and nothing stood still<sup>6</sup>, could anything definite be said about anything? Parmenides, the outspoken critic of Heraclitus, replies in the negative to the above query. If it were true that everything was movable and nothing was definite then we would have to acknowledge that to possess a real knowledge of anything was simply unthinkable. Parmenides, however, comes to the conclusion that there is really no change because everything, or, Being "must either completely be or be not." Wherefore change is only illusory: if Being were not entirely definite and immovable, then something that 'is not' would have a potentiality of becoming 'is', which is unimaginable (Kirk and Raven 1960: 273):

How could what *is* thereafter perish? and how could it come into being? For if it came into being, it is not, nor if it is going to be in the future. So coming into being is extinguished and perishing unimaginable.

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<sup>3</sup> Janicki (1990: 116) remarks, following Popper (1983), that the practice of essentialism may be traced back to animism, that is, in Janicki's formulation, "to a belief in *the power of words*, or word magic, which is also most salient in child language acquisition."

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Aristotle's essentialism is also far from being an invariable phenomenon. This is an idea I hope to discuss in a future article.

<sup>5</sup> After the proem, the work then divides into two parts, which correspond to the two stories told by the goddess: the 'Way of Truth' and the 'Way of Opinion'. The quotations (Kirk and Raven 1960: 266-283) which follow come either from the first part of the poem (the Way of *Aletheia*) or the second part (the Way of *Doxa*).

<sup>6</sup> Recall his famous aphorism *Panta Rhei*.

Therefore, there must exist something definite, immovable and complete; something that does not allow a more or less, something that is full of itself and is fettered to stand still (Kirk and Raven 1960: 273):

One way only is left to be spoken of, that it *is*; and on this way are full many signs that what *is* is uncreated and imperishable, for it is entire, immovable and without end ... Nor is it divisible, since it is all alike; nor is there more here and less there, which would prevent it from cleaving together, but it is all full of what is. So it is all continuous; for what is clings to what is.

To attain the immovable, to attain *It*, Parmenides has recourse to something purer and more truthful than the delusive opinions of the world of appearance, which are 'mere names', 'deceitful ordering of words' 'laid down by mortals' who believed them to be true.<sup>7</sup> This recourse is the pure knowledge of reason (Kirk and Raven 1960: 269):

Come now, and I will tell thee—and do thou hearken and carry my word away—the only ways of enquiry that can be thought of: the one way, that it *is* and cannot not-be, is the path of Persuasion, for it attends upon Truth.

To recapitulate, the diversity of sensible things is declared illusory and the only resort from that which is illusory is our intellect. The upshot of this reasoning is the radical differentiation between Becoming, the unreal experiential world or the Way of Seeming and the Real, the *It*, the Being or the Way of Truth which can be attained by reasoning only.<sup>8</sup>

I take the very distinction between the Way of Seeming and the Way of Truth to express essentialist thinking.<sup>9</sup> This is made manifest in the premise that the objects of sense, being contingent upon the Heraclitean flux, are void of a clearly determinable reality. A clearly indeterminable reality cannot be an object of serious inquiry; for it conjures up the associations of wavering, instability, decay or mere probability. *Ergo*, we must seek somewhere else: reason is a good candidate. The objects of reason, thanks to their unshaken nature (or essence), lend themselves to further inquiry; for they bear all the hallmarks of the real, the entire and the certain. The objects of sense, on the other hand, bear all the hallmarks of the illusory, the incomplete and the unstable. Clearly, we are confronted here with an essentialist dichotomy.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Kirk and Raven 1960.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Copleston 1947: 48-51.

<sup>9</sup> I contend that many other dichotomies, which, for obvious reasons, cannot be the subject of this paper, betray essentialist reasoning. I hope to discuss them at a later date in a separate article, but a brief mention of these dichotomies can be made here: essence – accident, analytic – synthetic, universal – specific, subjective – objective, deep – surface, logical – illogical, competence – performance, rigid – fuzzy, correct – incorrect, formal – natural, meaning – use, the necessary – the contingent. Cf. with Hallett 1991: 93, who expresses a similar view.

<sup>10</sup> I do not wish to assert that every dichotomy is essentialistic. Far from it. I do assert however that building a false dichotomy is a first step towards essentialism and it is my position that a false division is exactly what has taken place here.

### 3. The dichotomy between That Which is Worthy and That Which is Unworthy

The next move in the essentialist direction is to make one of the elements of the dichotomy more worthy. How is this executed? First of all, it is done by belittling the other half of the dichotomy. More specifically, it is done by ‘denying reality’ to it (Popper 1963: 117):

I agree with essentialism in its view that *science is capable of real discoveries*, and even in its view that in discovering new worlds our intellect triumphs over our sense experience. But I do not fall into the mistake of Parmenides—of denying reality to all that is colourful, varied, individual, indeterminate, and indescribable in our world.

Secondly, it is performed by formulating a theory which will suit the very needs of the already-adopted underlying assumptions. To illustrate: let us now imagine the following quandary: if an object  $x$  changes, then it is no longer the same object  $x$ . What measures are to be taken to ensure that object  $x$  stays the same throughout? An essentialist-oriented scholar can follow two alternative routes; one *via* property differentiation, and the other *via* object differentiation. In the former strategy two kinds of property are distinguished; let us call them ‘essential’ properties (those whose absence causes object  $x$  to disintegrate) and ‘accidental’ properties (those whose absence does not affect the essential ‘constitution’ of object  $x$ ). Accidental properties are of no great import since they do not affect the constitution of our object of inquiry, *eo ipso* we may even dispense with them whilst conducting serious philosophical endeavour. In the latter strategy, we assume our object  $x$  not to undergo alternation at all. What *does* alter however is our perception of object  $x$ , not the object *qua* itself. Our perception is, of course, a misconception of what *really* is, which can be further investigated through our intellect. Accordingly, it is unworthy to tussle with what is merely a delusion. Both routes satisfy an urge for essentialism, but it is the latter one that Parmenides espouses (Guthrie 1993: 88):

a stable reality, which can be discovered only through the activity of the mind working altogether apart from the senses.

Thus Parmenides’ doctrine necessitates a stable object to be known: ‘the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth’. Now, for ‘heart’ read ‘essence’ and we stand both feet on the fertile ground of essentialism: the most profound and most essential sense of truth, its intrinsic essence (Kubok 2004: 101-110). The Way of Truth or the Way of Inquiry is geared towards what truly is, the invariant essence of things to be grasped by the mind (Kubok 215-216).

Thirdly, the worthy element of the cleavage will be far more trustworthy once seasoned with a bewildering array of impressive sounding epithets, especially if we juxtapose them with an ‘inchoate’ amalgam of their contraries: imperishable – perishable, complete – incomplete, unshaken – unstable, immutable – changeable, indeterminate – definite, continuous – divisible, homogeneous – heterogeneous,

permanent – temporary, real – unreal, true – untrue, and what have you. Such epithets also manifest essentialism (Hallett 1991).

Notwithstanding, Parmenides avers that such oppositions are ‘opposite in appearance’, ‘mere names’, ‘a deceitful ordering of words’, which have no real existence whatsoever (Kirk and Raven 1960: 269):

The other [path], that it *is-not* and needs must not-be, that I tell thee is a path altogether unthinkable. For thou couldst not know that which is-not nor utter it.

And further (Kirk and Raven 1960: 277):

What can be thought is only the thought that it is. For you will not find thought without what is, in relation to which it is uttered; for there is not, or shall be, anything else besides what is, since Fate fettered it to be entire and immovable. Wherefore all these are names which mortals laid down believing them to be true—coming into being and perishing, being and not being...

This is how Russell (1967: 67) presents the lesson of this argument:

When you think, you think *of* something; when you use a name, it must be the name *of* something. Therefore both thought and language require objects outside themselves. And since you can think of a thing or speak of it at one time as well as at another, whatever can be thought of or spoken of must exist at all times. Consequently there can be no change, since change consists in things coming into being or ceasing to be ... We can put the argument in this way: if language is not just nonsense, words must mean something, and in general they must not mean just other words, but something that is there whether we talk of it or not.

According to Russell, we are dealing here with the first ever instance in philosophy of a relationship between language, thought and the experiential world. I hold the argument (the divorce of language and thought from the world at large) invalid, as Russell did before me, though for a different reason.

The divorce of language and thought from the world at large forces Parmenides to place meaning outside the experiential sphere of phenomena and anchoring it to something *out there*, extant in fixed reality wherein no change abides. I claim that dissociating ‘immortal’ meaning from ‘mortal earthlings’; fastening objects outside language, thought and human practices onto ‘more worthy’, timeless and stable reality, as well as assigning objects to meanings on a one-to-one basis to be discovered by armchair philosophising<sup>11</sup> are all salient tokens of essentialism.<sup>12</sup> I leave the last word with Popper (1963: 115):

Essentialism looks upon our ordinary world as mere appearance behind which it discovers the real world.

<sup>11</sup> Assigning objects to meanings on a one-to-one basis is strongly suggestive of isomorphism. Gawroński (1984: 105), following E. Rivero, sees Parmenides as the first to have committed the error of isomorphism. Isomorphism is a form of essentialism.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Janicki 1999: 59-69.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Before anything else, I hope to have awakened the impression or the fact that the philosophy of Parmenides of Elea merits the label 'essentialism'. At the same time I hope to have shown two 'lesser things'. First, neither Socrates nor Plato, or, *a fortiori*, Aristotle could be credited with being the first to embody essentialist urges. Parmenides had done so before them. Second, without detailed elaboration it appears that the notion of essentialism is not itself an invariant reality or a clear-cut notion with fixed boundaries. Essentialism has many faces. The manifestations of essentialism presented above make it vacuous to simply talk about *the* essentialism. This mode of thinking would itself be essentialist. Accordingly, treating the notions of 'essentialism' on a par with 'Aristotelian essentialism' is objectionable.

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