

As far as longing can reach. . .

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Synopsis: There is a spiritual tradition at the roots of western civilization. It found its expression in the teachings of Parmenides and of his student, Empedocles. Significant parallels exist between these teachings and the Vedic and Vedantic scriptures of ancient India. As we owe the recovery of the original meaning of the Vedas to Sri Aurobindo, so we owe the recovery of the original meaning of the works of these pre-Socratic philosophers (in the true sense: lovers of wisdom) to Peter Kingsley. I shall focus on Parmenides, who thanks to Plato's deliberate travesty of his teaching is now widely regarded as the inventor of rationalism and the grandfather of western philosophy. Plato and Parmenides agreed that there is a reality beyond the deceptive appearances, but it was Plato who created the fiction that this can be rationally ascertained. The real Parmenides insisted that what gets us there is (i) our longing, the intensity of which determines how far we can go, (ii) the realization that truly we know nothing, and (iii) the help of the divine Creatrix.

As Peter Kingsley (1999, 2003) has shown, the real origins of western philosophy, and of so many ideas that shaped the western world, lie in Elea (modern-day Velia in south-western Italy). Elea was founded by Greek settlers from Phocaea (modern-day Foça in Turkey) as they fled the Persian invasion of Ionia.

Alfred North Whitehead (1979, p. 39), a widely influential twentieth-century philosopher, characterized the European philosophical tradition as a series of footnotes to Plato. Plato himself regarded Parmenides as the greatest among his predecessors. Not the real Parmenides, though, who lived in far-away Elea, but the imaginary Parmenides who features in one of Plato's dialogues. The whole of this dialogue — titled *Parmenides* — is a fiction skillfully designed with one purpose in mind: to present Socrates and Plato — not Parmenides' disciple Zeno or anyone else — as the legitimate heirs to the teaching of Parmenides.

Who was the real Parmenides, and why did Plato think that this was important?

Parmenides wrote a poem. He wrote it in the meter of the divinely inspired epic poems of the past. It starts with these words:

*The mares that carry me as far as longing can reach
rode on, once they had come and fetched me onto the legendary
road of the divinity that carries the man who knows
through the vast and dark unknown. . . (Kingsley, 2003, p. 26)*

What gets Parmenides to where he is going isn't thinking, willpower, effort, or struggle. It's his longing, and the intensity of it determines how far he can go. Kingsley tells us that

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 to show us a glimpse of what lies behind the scenes. It opens up a devastating perspective where everything is turned on its head: where fulfillment 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. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 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. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 106)

The journey Parmenides describes is the only real journey we can make — the journey to the divine with the help of the divine.

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. (Kingsley, 1999, pp. 49–50)

The one option we have is to turn around and face, head on, all the impulses that keep pushing us in every direction. It is to focus on their source. And the same has to be done with our thoughts and perceptions.

Some of the greatest philosophers in the ancient world took it without any hesitation that Parmenides identified thinking with existence. Most modern scholars, as well, are only too happy to present him as saying that only what is intelligible can exist.

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 announces “the autonomy and superiority of the human reason as judge of reality”. And to be sure, such a statement would have been profoundly significant if he had ever said anything like it. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 126)

What the goddess told him was that “*what exists for thinking, and being, are one and the same.*” We have to remember the place Parmenides happens to find himself in as he hears these words. He is “*far away from the beaten track of humans*” in the world of the gods. And, for the Greeks — not to be confused with Plato and Aristotle and the ensuing series of “footnotes” — the world of the gods had one very particular feature. This is that simply to think, or imagine, something is to make it exist.

There is an awareness that was known to Greeks as *mêtis*. *Mêtis* is effortlessly aware of everything at once. And it is aware of everything as forming a single whole. Everything is exactly what it is, but without any separation or division. All is one unbroken, continuous being. Even the past and future are not separate. They are both included in the now.

When we turn around and focus on the source of our thoughts and perceptions, we find that it, too, is this one unbroken being. The object of our thinking and perceiving is identical to its point of origin. 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:

And what exists for thinking is the same as the cause of thought. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 180)

At the end of his journey “*through the vast and dark unknown*” Parmenides is welcomed by the goddess, who proceeds to teach him

*both the unshaken heart of persuasive Truth and the opinions of mortals
in which there is nothing that can truthfully be trusted at all.* (Kingsley, 2003, p. 27)

The term used by Parmenides for “demonstration of the truth” is *elenchos*, and just as with the word “exposing” in English, more often than not it means revealing a deception or fraud. To get to the truth you have to remove whatever is false.

There happens to be a man who became very famous in the ancient world for his use of *elenchos*. His name was Socrates.

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. . . [F]or 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. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 151).

For both Socrates and Parmenides, arriving at the knowledge of knowing nothing meant confronting utter helplessness. When Socrates talked about *aporia* or “pathlessness,” he meant watching every familiar sense of direction vanish. Modern philosophers understand it as a technical term for

the intellectual game of proposing specific solutions to particular problems. What is now called “philosophy” — “love of wisdom” —

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. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 156)

First the goddess uses her *elenchos* to demonstrate that what is, cannot cease to be, and what is not, cannot come into being. In other words, there is no such thing as creation or destruction. Change, movement, birth, and death are illusions.

But then she does something quite unexpected. She strips unreality of her many names — creation, destruction, birth, death, and so forth — and solemnly transfers them to reality. The things that were taken away are given back, but they are no longer the independent realities they once had seemed to be. The names that had been used for referring to this or that are perfectly usable again, only instead of applying to any number of separate objects they now apply to one single thing.

This isn’t all. The goddess herself has two names. She is Aphrodite, who drags us into the illusion, and she is Persephone, who can set us free:

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. (Kingsley, 2003, pp. 219–220)

It’s no small matter, either, that Parmenides is mentioned by one ancient writer — who is among the oldest and most reliable of sources on such matters — as the first philosopher who ever stated that the earth was round. How he came to know this is not hard to reconstruct. After all, he was a direct descendant of the people who were forced to leave their original home of Phocaea for the west.

In the seventh century BC, the Phocaeans were already making their way out into the Atlantic. At a time when Parmenides would have been no older than a young boy, a Phocaeen called Euthymenes headed out from Massalia — modern-day Marseille, another Phocaeen settlement — through the Straits of Gibraltar and turned left. He got at least as far as Senegal. We also hear of a Phocaeen called Pytheas who, everyone seems to agree, was the greatest Greek explorer who ever lived. He made his way from Massalia out into the Atlantic and headed north. He went up as far as Britain and Ireland, left them behind. He passed the northern tip of Scotland. And he kept on going until, eventually, he came to what he called “the solid sea.” In other words, he went as far north as the

Arctic Circle. But if you travel as far south and as far north as some Phocaeans did, you can't help noticing that the earth is round.

By describing the spherical shape of the earth, along with its [climatic] zones, [Parmenides'] goddess was fulfilling to the letter her promise that he would be able to outstrip¹ anyone and everyone in his knowledge of the world. . .

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. (Kingsley, 2003, pp. 251–252)

Peter Kingsley, too, is someone who knows. I'm not referring to his academic degrees, awards, and honorary professorships, nor to the fact that he can handle his material — be it in the field of classical studies, religious studies, in the history of healing or of science, in anthropology, philosophy, or the study of ancient civilizations — as well as anybody else, nor that he can stand his ground with any academic who is willing to discuss this material with him. What I mean is that he couldn't have figured out Parmenides without getting to know *by experience* what Parmenides was talking about, just as Sri Aurobindo couldn't have uncovered *The Secret of the Veda* (Sri Aurobindo, 1998, p. 39) if the Vedic hymns hadn't "illuminated with a clear and exact light" psychological experiences of his own, for which he "had found no sufficient explanation either in European psychology or in the teachings of Yoga or of Vedanta."

In the words of one ancient writer, "Parmenides was the teacher of Empedocles who was the teacher of Gorgias." For want of time I must skip Kingsley's illuminating account of Empedocles' teaching. Gorgias used to be known as a sophist, was sometimes even referred to as the father of sophists. And if there is one thing the sophists were not, it's philosophers.

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. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 478)

[Gorgias] explained that people as a rule live in a world totally dominated by deception. . . 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. (Kingsley, 2003, pp. 481–482)

¹ See Kingsley, 2003, p. 221–224.

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 Gorgias has missed something absolutely fundamental: the crucial role played by *logos* in reasoned argument and discussion — its ability to carry us into a realm of certainty. 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.

And we don't realize how Plato used deceptive persuasion no less expertly than Gorgias. Apart from the fictional dialogue he wrote about Parmenides, he also wrote one called *Gorgias*. These deft caricatures of the characters involved proved so persuasive and deceptively effective that along with Aristotle's writings they helped create the basis for our present intellectual order.

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. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 483)

The teaching presented by Parmenides in his poem had placed a roadblock in front of the mind. It ended up denying our thoughts the slightest room for manoeuvre. There was nowhere to go; the mind was trapped — in reality. 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. Our minds were given permission to play hide-and-seek with themselves.

And soon it was obvious to almost anyone that the way to get to the truth was not through entering some other state of consciousness but through thinking. 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. (Kingsley, 2003, pp. 305–306)

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 particu-

lar, 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. (Kingsley, 1999, pp. 196–197)

Having said that in “*the opinions of mortals. . . there is nothing that can truthfully be trusted at all,*” Parmenides' goddess went on to say that

even so, this too you will learn — how beliefs based on appearance ought to be believable as they travel all through all there is. (Kingsley, 2003, p. 277)

What she is telling Parmenides is that beliefs can come to possess a certain reliability if they meet one specific condition: they have to be able to travel through all there is, all the way through everything, right to the end. For Greeks of his time this, in conjunction with the particular words used, meant something quite specific. Her saying that human opinions only become trustworthy when they reach the furthest limit of existence, has nothing to do with any idea we might have about pushing back the boundaries of knowledge. This only expands the illusion that we live in. To travel the whole way through the illusion, right to the end, is to reach reality — illusion's origin and the place from where we can embrace it without being caught up in it, so that it ceases to be an illusion.

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. . . 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. (Kingsley, 2003, pp. 253–254)

I'm going to add something to convince you that what Kingsley is saying here is right on the money. Quantum mechanics is the fundamental theoretical framework of contemporary physics. According to Richard Feynman, nobody understands it; according to Roger Penrose, it makes absolutely no sense; according to Michio Kaku, of all the theories proposed in the 20th century it's the silliest. “The only thing quantum theory has going for it, he adds, “is that it is unquestionably correct.” There is a simple explanation for this mess. It is that everyone is trying to explain the illusion in terms of the illusion or, if you prefer, to explain the manifestation in terms of the manifested.

As my work during the past decade has shown, quantum mechanics concerns the relation between reality and its manifestation. It concerns the origin of the illusion. It concerns the emergence of the Many from the One (Mohrhoff, 2005, 2007a-d). Once we understand this, we can go further and understand the reason why the well-tested laws of physics have the particular form that they do (Mohrhoff, 2002, 2006, 2007acd). What we cannot do is mechanize or “naturalize” the magic to which these laws owe their effectiveness — which is precisely what theoretical physicists are paid for.

Before concluding, I want to point out some obvious parallels. We can go where we are supposed to go only as far as our longing can reach, and only because a goddess is showing us the way. Most of you will know the opening sentence of Sri Aurobindo's little gem *The Mother*:

There are two powers that alone can effect in their conjunction the great and difficult thing which is the aim of our endeavor, a fixed and unfailing aspiration that calls from below and a supreme grace from above that answers. (Sri Aurobindo, 1971, p. 1)

The aspiration that draws us towards the heights is, of course, the Vedic Agni, the psychic flame, the mystic fire, the "priest of the sacrifice" by which we invite the gods — powers of divine consciousness — to enter and transform us.

According to Indian Vedanta, reality — Brahman — is both the substance (*sat*) that constitutes the world and the consciousness (*chit*) that contains it. The world is Brahman presenting itself to itself under a myriad aspects. And since we too are Brahman — though we can't see the wood for the trees — the object of our perceptions is the same as the subject that perceives through us. Just as Parmenides said.

Central to Indian psychology is the distinction between the Knowledge and the Ignorance (*citti* and *acitti* in the Vedas, *vidya* and *avidya* in the Upanishads):

the Ignorance is in its origin a dividing mental knowledge which does not grasp the unity, essence, self-law of things in their one origin and in their universality, but works rather upon divided particulars, separate phenomena, partial relations, as if they were the truth we had to seize or as if they could really be understood at all without going back behind the division to the unity, behind the dispersion to the universality. The Knowledge is that which tends towards unification and, attaining to the supramental faculty, seizes the oneness, the essence, the self-law of existence and views and deals with the multiplicity of things out of that light and plenitude. (Sri Aurobindo, 2005, p. 507)

When the goddess strips unreality of its many names and solemnly transfers them to reality, she is effecting the transition from Ignorance to Knowledge.

Kingsley's observation that "it would be just as one-sided to stay in reality as it is for most people to stay caught in the illusion," echoes verse 9 of the Isha Upanishad:

Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone. (Sri Aurobindo, 2003, p. 8)

Nor is it difficult to recognize in Persephone and her integral creative awareness, *mêtis*, the higher, supramental Maya of the Vedic seers, and in Aphrodite the lower, mental Maya:

Maya meant for [the Vedic seers] the power of infinite consciousness to comprehend, contain in itself and measure out, that is to say, to form — for form is delimitation — Name and Shape out of the vast illimitable Truth of infinite existence. It is by Maya that static truth of essential being becomes ordered truth of active being — or, to put it in more metaphysical

language, out of the supreme being in which all is all without barrier of separative consciousness emerges the phenomenal being in which all is in each and each is in all for the play of existence with existence, consciousness with consciousness, force with force, delight with delight. This play of all in each and each in all is concealed at first from us by the mental play or the illusion of Maya which persuades each that he is in all but not all in him and that he is in all as a separated being not as a being always inseparably one with the rest of existence. Afterwards we have to emerge from this error into the supramental play or the truth of Maya where the “each” and the “all” coexist in the inseparable unity of the one truth and the multiple symbol. The lower, present and deluding mental Maya has first to be embraced, then to be overcome; for it is God’s play with division and darkness and limitation, desire and strife and suffering in which He subjects Himself to the Force that has come out of Himself and by her obscure suffers Himself to be obscured. That other Maya concealed by this mental has to be overpassed, then embraced; for it is God’s play of the infinities of existence, the splendours of knowledge, the glories of force mastered and the ecstasies of love illimitable. . . (Sri Aurobindo, 2005, p. 123–124)

It’s the same message again: leave the deception or illusion by immersing yourself in the Divine, then reach out from there to embrace and transform it with the Light, Power, and Love of the Divine.

And when Kingsley says that “This all served its purpose,” Sri Aurobindo (2005, p. 73–75) would be first to agree:

For if we examine carefully, we shall find that Intuition is our first teacher. Intuition always stands veiled behind our mental operations. Intuition brings to man those brilliant messages from the Unknown which are the beginning of his higher knowledge. Reason only comes in afterwards to see what profit it can have of the shining harvest. Intuition gives us that idea of something behind and beyond all that we know and seem to be which pursues man always in contradiction of his lower reason and all his normal experience and impels him to formulate that formless perception in the more positive ideas of God, Immortality, Heaven and the rest by which we strive to express it to the mind. For Intuition is as strong as Nature herself from whose very soul it has sprung and cares nothing for the contradictions of reason or the denials of experience. It knows what is because it is, because itself it is of that and has come from that, and will not yield it to the judgment of what merely becomes and appears. What the Intuition tells us of, is not so much Existence as the Existent, for it proceeds from that one point of light in us which gives it its advantage, that sometimes opened door in our own self-awareness. Ancient Vedanta seized this message of the Intuition and formulated it in the three great declarations of the Upanishads, “I am He”, “Thou art That, O Sweetaketu”, “All this is the Brahman; this Self is the Brahman”.

But Intuition by the very nature of its action in man, working as it does from behind the veil, active principally in his more unenlightened, less articulate parts, served in front of the veil, in the narrow light which is our waking conscience, only by instruments that are unable fully to assimilate its messages,— Intuition is unable to give us the truth in that ordered and

articulated form which our nature demands. Before it could effect any such completeness of direct knowledge in us, it would have to organise itself in our surface being and take possession there of the leading part. But in our surface being it is not the Intuition, it is the Reason which is organised and helps us to order our perceptions, thoughts and actions. Therefore the age of intuitive knowledge, represented by the early Vedantic thinking of the Upanishads, had to give place to the age of rational knowledge; inspired Scripture made room for metaphysical philosophy, even as afterwards metaphysical philosophy had to give place to experimental Science. . . And this process which seems to be a descent, is really a circle of progress. For in each case the lower faculty is compelled to take up as much as it can assimilate of what the higher had already given and to attempt to re-establish it by its own methods. By the attempt it is itself enlarged in its scope and arrives eventually at a more supple and a more ample self-accommodation to the higher faculties. Without this succession and attempt at separate assimilation we should be obliged to remain under the exclusive domination of a part of our nature while the rest remained either depressed and unduly subjected or separate in its field and therefore poor in its development. With this succession and separate attempt the balance is righted; a more complete harmony of our parts of knowledge is prepared.

Finally, let us remember that

[t]o cling to what you think you know, to cling to what you feel, to cling to what you like, to cling to your habits, to cling to your so-called needs, to cling to the world as it is, that's what binds you hand and foot. You must undo all that, one thing after the other. Undo all the bonds.

This has been said thousands of times, but people go on doing the same thing. . . Even those who are, you know, very eloquent, who preach this to others, they CLING — they cling to their own way of seeing, their own way of feeling, their own habit of progress, which to them is the only possible one.

No more bonds. . . Always ready to change everything, except ONE thing: to aspire. That thirst.

I quite understand: some people don't like the idea of a "Divine" because it immediately gets mixed up with all the European or Western conceptions (which are dreadful)... but we don't need that! The "something" we need, the Perfection we need, the Light we need, the Love we need, the Truth we need, the supreme Perfection we need — and that's all. The formulas. . . the fewer the formulas, the better. A need, a need, a need. . . that THE Thing alone can satisfy, nothing else, no half measure. That alone. And then, move on! Move on! Your path will be your path, it doesn't matter; any path, any path whatever. . . (The Mother, 1988, p. 160)

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* A compilation of passages from these two books by Peter Kingsley is available via <http://anti-matters.org/ojs/index.php/antimatters/article/view/43>.

Articles and talks by the author can be obtained via <http://thisquantumworld.com/papers.htm>.

The works of Sri Aurobindo are available via <http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org/ashram/sriauro/writings.php>.

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