



Preliminary Study on Parmenides and the Origin of Greek Dialectic

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Abstract. The thesis is a discussion on Parmenides and the origin of Greek dialectic. By reviewing the main opinions on the discoverer of dialectic, we confirm that Parmenides is the discoverer of dialectic, both Plato and Aristotle provide us with potent evidences, and from their reports we can also find a line of development of Greek dialectic from Parmenides to Aristotle. In addition, we also observe the background of Parmenides' dialectical philosophy, it has a wide range of sources from previous philosophies. Through dialectic, Parmenides thoroughly changed the whole trend of Greek philosophy, and instilled new subjects and method into it.

Keywords: Parmenides, Dialectic, Greek Philosophy, Pre-Socratic Philosophy

1 Introduction

Dialectic or dialectical method, originates from the ancient Greek *dialogesthai*, which means “to dialogue” or “to conversate”. It is said that Parmenides is the discoverer of this method. The question of genesis of Greek dialectic is very important to our understanding of its essence and development, especially if we treat dialectic as a link which connecting the pre-Socratic philosophy and the classical period of Greek philosophy.

2 Parmenides as the Discoverer of Dialectic

Is Parmenides the discoverer of dialectic? We must ascertain this and analysis opinions of philosophers on the question, especially the two most important philosophers, i.e., Plato and Aristotle. Not only they two left the riches comments on this issue, but also dialectic itself in their hands obtained its highest and most mature form.

2.1 Plato's Opinion on the Discoverer of Dialectic

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates practiced dialectics all his life, but Plato never said that dialectic began with Socrates. According to Plato, we are informed that Socrates also studied natural philosophy when he was young [2], he did not engage in philosophy in the Socratic way that we are familiar with at the beginning, the so called “Socratic way”

originated from his method of elenchus, i.e., dialectic. So, we have to ask where are his dialectic from?

In Plato's *Parmenides*, Parmenides and Zeno came to Athens for the Panathenaea, and old Parmenides introduced and taught such a method to young Socrates [2].

If we consider the timeline of the plot of Plato's dialogues, not only this kind of method, but also the word *dialegesthai*, first appears in the mouth of Parmenides. And there are two other dialogues, *Theaetetus* and *Sophista*, support and reconfirm the above information [2]. Through the meeting between Socrates and Parmenides, Plato intended to remind us of the importance of this situation, even if it was not a real event in history, however it conveys crucial evidence: Socrates' dialectic directly comes from Parmenides.

2.2 Aristotle's Opinion on the Discoverer of Dialectic

Another potent opinion comes from his pupil Aristotle, the philosopher said that Zeno of Elea is the discoverer of dialectic [3].

For Aristotle, dialectic as a kind of syllogism, its premise is not necessarily true as demonstration, but *endoxa*, that is, those opinions held by the majority [3]. Therefore, demonstration is superior to dialectic. By considering Aristotle's definition of dialectic, it is not hard to understand why Aristotle regard Zeno as the discoverer of dialectic. For we think Zeno just only developed the dialectical debates, as a part of the complete dialectic. In his *Topica*, it contains the most complete teaching of dialectic as the art of debating [3]. Whereas for Plato, "philosophy" and "dialectic" are basically synonymous. Undoubtedly, Aristotle's definition of dialectic has undergone a great change: it has narrowed its connotation and application scope.

To sum up, Aristotle's opinion and reports on this issue are not disapprovals to our thesis, instead, they just confirm it. Further, he gave us important clues on the history of development of dialectic from Zeno to himself. Like Socrates and Plato, he also inherited and developed dialectic in his own way, and improved it, push it to the final form.

Thus, we can basically confirm that Parmenides is the discoverer of Greek dialectic.

3 The Sources and Background of Parmenides' Philosophy

Roughly there are three main sources of Parmenides' thought, they are the poets, Homer and Hesiod, then the Pythagorean school, and then other philosophers before him, Xenophanes and Heraclitus.

3.1 Parmenides and the Poets

The connection between Parmenides and the epic poets is the most direct, which is firstly reflected in the form of his poems. Not only in terms of the epic metre and Ionic

dialect, but also in terms of the vocabularies, we can basically find their origin in Homer and Hesiod's works [1].

These problems do not come from nothing. As far as we know, Plato has more or less linked him with the poets in his reports on Parmenides [2]. Although this is not a conclusion, it undoubtedly provides a basis for us to deal with this problem, and we also need to use Aristotle on this issue. His comments on poet are of great reference value to us. Obviously, Parmenides is not a poet, but fundamentally a philosopher.

3.2 Parmenides and the Pythagorean

Next, we need to deal with the relationship between Parmenides and the Pythagorean school. This is not only because in the history of philosophy, from the geographical division and the characteristics of philosophy, the Eleatic School and the Pythagorean school both belong to the philosophy of South Italy. And according to Diogenes Laertius, Parmenides has a close relationship with the Pythagorean school, and it relates to the beginning of Parmenides' philosophical life [4].

The question we need to ask is, at what level and to what extent Parmenides is a Pythagorean. We can recognize the Pythagorean characteristics in Parmenides' philosophy, but in fact, there are a lot of differences between them.

3.3 Parmenides and the Philosophers

At last, we will discuss the relationship between Parmenides and the philosophers. The main content will focus on the relationship between Parmenides and Xenophanes and Heraclitus. Other natural philosophers are not unimportant, but these two philosophers have a direct connection with Parmenides not only in history, but also in theory.

It is said that Parmenides is a pupil of Xenophanes. The latter's philosophical work, like many other pre-Socratic philosophers including Parmenides, is titled "On Nature" (*peri phuseos*) [5]. As for the relationship between Xenophanes and Parmenides, Plato also traced the thoughts of the Eleatic School back to Xenophanes and established him as the founder of the Eleatic school [2]. Therefore, even if there is no real teacher-student relationship between two, there is no problem for us to regard Xenophanes as one of the philosophical sources of Parmenides.

Another major figure we must discuss here is Heraclitus. There are many views that Heraclitus is the main rival in philosophy to Parmenides, and their philosophical principles are tit for tat. Plato's dialogue also supports such a view. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, Parmenides was at the same time but a little later than Heraclitus, the latter's works referred to Xenophanes but did not mention Parmenides. In contrast, Parmenides' thought is obviously influenced by Heraclitus [5]. We cannot simply think that Parmenides' philosophy is just only a criticism of Heraclitus, if we see a deeper relationship between them.

4 Parmenides' Dialectic and Its Influence

From the most external form, Parmenides provides a division of truth and opinion, we think this is the foundation of Parmenides' dialectic, and thus the foundation of the possibility of dialectic itself.

4.1 Main Content of Parmenides' Dialectical Philosophy

Parmenides' philosophy consists of two parts: truth (*aletheia*) and opinion (*doxa*) in appearance, but in depth, it revolves around the concept of "being" (*eon*) [1][6].

The main content of truth is the discussion on the problem of "being". The field it governs does not involve generation and change. The final conclusion that can be obtained by following the path of truth is that "being is one". The content of opinion is about the generation field and natural things. Only in the way of opinion can various phenomena be presented and explained. Generally, we accept the view that Parmenides himself believes that there is only "being", while the opinion is false, so we must reject it.

What we want to clarify here is that this is not the view held by Parmenides himself. Opinion is different from truth mainly in that it is not based on the criterion of truth, but has its own form. Therefore, what must be rejected is not the opinion itself, but the confusion between opinion and truth. This is where people often misunderstand. The fields of truth and opinion can be said to go their own way, but if we want to get to the bottom, opinions are based on truth, which is why we must first discuss the truth before opinions can be established. In Parmenides' poem, the goddess also warned him that he must experience and be familiar with both truth and opinions, but did not let him completely abandon opinions [1].

Parmenides' theory of cosmology is based on his theory of opinions, his cosmology involves the order of the universe (*kosmos*), and the relationship between celestial bodies, such as the sun and the moon, as well as the discussion on the origin and elements, and finally on reproduction of lives [1][6].

4.2 The Influence of Parmenides' Philosophy

As a new method and philosophy, dialectic must have some characteristics which are totally different from the previous philosophy. And it must be clarified how did the arrival of dialectic affect the Greek philosophy.

The pre-Parmenidean natural philosophies are basically focused on all kinds of material principles or *archai*, but did not go deep into the level of forms or rational principles, and Aristotle has given a good summary of this in the first chapter of *Metaphysica*.

Since Parmenides, Greek philosophy has entered a stage of paying attention to rational argumentation, and one of its prominent features is the contempt or even rejection of the senses. Of course, this is not to say that Parmenides completely rejected the perceptual world, but clearly separated the perceptual from the rational. The two do not

affect each other, because they belong to different fields, have their own objects, and are dominated by different principles.

5 Conclusions

Parmenides as the discoverer of dialectic, his dialectical philosophy injected a new method of discussion and new subjects of researching into Greek philosophy. So, his philosophy became an important turning point to the pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, a series of main concepts and important distinctions in the western philosophy also came from him.

6 References

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