

Kurt von Fritz, *ΝΟΥΣ, ΝΟΕΙΝ, and their Derivates in Pre-Socratic Philosophy (Excluding Anaxagoras): Part I. From the Beginnings to Parmenides*, in «Classical Philology», vol. 40, n. 4 (1945), pp. 223-242

Estratto, pp. 223; 239-242

The fundamental meaning of the word νοεῖν in Homer is to realize or to understand a situation. Etymologically, the words νόος and νοεῖν are most probably derived from a root meaning “to sniff” or “to smell”.

But in the stage of the semantic development represented by the Homeric poems, the concept of νοεῖν is more closely related to the sense of vision.

[...]

It is perhaps not without interest to observe the relation between Parmenides’ notion of νόος and νοεῖν in regard to truth and error with the notions of his predecessors and contemporaries. The νόος of Parmenides is even less concerned with the understanding of individual situations than that of Heraclitus.

Like Heraclitus’ νόος, it is essentially concerned with the ultimate truth, which is but one. But since the νόος, in spite of being linked inextricably with ultimate reality, nevertheless can err, there is also, just as in Homer, the possibility of different νόοι in different people, according to the mixture of their structures or constitutions.

Yet, contrary to Homer, it cannot be said that the reason for the difference in their νόοι is that the truth itself is not the same for all of them. For it is the *erring* νόος which is different in them. This implies, of course, that – as in Hesiod but not in Homer – the νόος can be not only dulled but also, at least in some way, deceived.

So all the notions of νόος in regard to truth and error that could be found before Parmenides appear in his work. But they are no longer separated but have all of them become different aspects of one and the same indivisible concept, and in the process of this unification they have all of them been slightly changed.

All this, however, does not yet answer the question of the nature of the νόος in Parmenides’ thought.

Theophrastus says¹ that Parmenides makes no distinction between sensual perception and φρονεῖν; and, since he himself in this passage seems not to differentiate between φρονεῖν and νοεῖν, his statement seems also to apply to νόος and νοεῖν.

This interpretation is by no means, like Sextus’ misinterpretation of Heraclitus, due merely to an indiscriminate application of the oversimplified concepts of a later period to a philosophy to which they do not apply. At first sight it may seem as if it could be justified even on the basis of Homeric and generally pre-Parmenidean terminology. For if the νόος of human beings is concerned with warmth and cold, with light and dark, etc., it seems that it is not its function to understand

¹ *De sensu* 3; Parm., Frag. A46 (Diels): τὸ γὰρ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν ὡς ταὐτὸ λέγει; but cf. Aristotle *Metaph.* A 5 986 b 32.

situations, like the νόος in Homer, or to recognize definite, concrete objects, which in Homer is the function of γινώσκειν, but that the νόος in Parmenides is on the same level with ἰδεῖν, ἀκούειν, etc., in Homer, since warmth and cold seem to be “sensual qualities”.

Yet there is a very essential difference. The νόος in Parmenides perceives² not only sounds, or rather sound, but also silence, which can hardly be called a sensual quality; and in this connection it is certainly significant that Parmenides does not, like Democritus, who is really concerned with sensual qualities, speak of color³ but of light and darkness. We have then to remember that the presumed sensual qualities of which Parmenides speaks are most closely related to the primary contrasts from which, in the philosophy of Anaximander, the world in which we live emerges. It is these primary world-creating contrasts which the πλαγκτὸς νόος of human beings, even though erroneously, imagines it grasps.

This shows that what Parmenides has in mind in the second part of his poem is by no means sense perception pure and simple but something much more nearly related to the intuitive νόος of Heraclitus, though the concept has become much more complicated, since the νόος in Parmenides can err. The same intuitive nature of the νόος is also most clearly described in Frag. B2 – λεῦσσε δ’ ὁμῶς ἀπέοντα νόῳ παρεόντα βεβαίως – which belongs to the first part of the poem and deals with a νόος which does not err but is aware of the truth.

So far it might seem as if Parmenides’ concept of νόος was still essentially the same as that of his predecessors, including his contemporary Heraclitus. In fact, however, Parmenides brings in an entirely new and heterogeneous element.

It is a rather remarkable fact that Heraclitus uses the particle γάρ only where he explains the ignorance of the common crowd. There is absolutely no γάρ or any other particle of the same sense in any of the passages in which he explains his own view of the truth. He or his νόος sees or grasps the truth and sets it forth. There is neither need nor room for arguments. Homer and Hesiod, likewise, when using the term νόος, never imply that someone comes to a conclusion concerning a situation so that the statement could be followed up with a sentence beginning with “for” or “because”. A person realizes the situation. That is all. In contrast to this, Parmenides in the central part of his poem, has a γάρ, an ἐπεὶ, οὖν, τοῦδ’ εἵνεκα, οὖνεκα in almost every sentence. He argues, deduces, tries to prove the truth of his statements by logical reasoning.

What is the relation of this reasoning to the νόος?

The answer is given by those passages in which the goddess tells Parmenides which “road of inquiry” he should follow with his νόος and from which roads he must keep away his νόημα⁴. These

2 It is very difficult to render adequately in any modern language what Parmenides means by νοεῖν. When we say “It was so quiet that one could hear the stillness”, we feel that we use a metaphorical, almost paradoxical, expression. But Parmenides’ point is just that this is quite wrong. Silence and darkness are as positive and real as sound or light. In fact, to the dead they are what light and sound are to us. We should not make this difference, which is merely a difference in name (cf. B8. 53 ff., and B9. 1ff.). Perhaps this makes it also possible to explain the seeming contradiction in Theophrastus’ two statements: (1) that perception through warmth and light is purer than perception through cold and darkness and (2) that the two perceptions should be symmetrical or equally balanced. For in the light of the passages quoted, it seems likely that, according to Parmenides, perception through warmth and light is pure in us (the living) because it makes us feel light and warmth as something positive, while our perception through cold and darkness is not pure because it makes us perceive cold and darkness as something negative. If we had a “symmetrical” or well-balanced perception, we would feel no such difference.

3 Frag. B9 (Diels): νόμῳ γλυκύ... νόμῳ χροῖή, ἔτεῃ δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν.

4 This passage seems also to prove that Parmenides does not use the word νόημα strictly as a *nomen rei actae* or to designate *einen vollzogenen Akt*, as Fränkel contends (see above, n. 90). The meaning of the word as used here and,

roads, as the majority of the fragments clearly show, are roads or lines of discursive thinking, expressing itself in judgments, arguments, and conclusions. Since the *vóoc* is to follow one of the three possible roads of inquiry and to stay away from the others, there can be no doubt that discursive thinking is part of the function of the *vóoc*.

Yet – and this is just as important – *voẽiv* is not identical with a process of logical deduction pure and simple in the sense of formal logic, a process which through a syllogistic mechanism leads from any set of related premises to conclusions which follow with necessity from those premises, but also a process which in itself is completely unconcerned with, and indifferent to, the truth or untruth of the original premises. It is still the primary function of the *vóoc* to be in direct touch with ultimate reality. It reaches this ultimate reality not only at the end and as a result of the logical process, but in a way is in touch with it from the very beginning, since, as Parmenides again and again points out, there is no *vóoc* without the *ẽov*, in which it unfolds itself⁵.

In so far as Parmenides' difficult thought can be explained, the logical process seems to have merely the function of clarifying and confirming what, in a way, has been in the *vóoc* from the very beginning and of cleansing it off all foreign elements.

So for Parmenides himself, what, for lack of a better word, may be called the intuitional element in the *vóoc* is still most important. Yet it was not through his "vision" but through the truly or seemingly compelling force of his logical reasoning that he acquired the dominating position in the philosophy of the following century. At the same time, his work marks the most decisive turning-point in the history of the terms *vóoc*, *voẽiv*, etc.; for he was the first consciously to include logical reasoning in the functions of the *vóoc*⁶.

The notion of *vóoc* underwent many other changes in the further history of Greek philosophy, but none as decisive as this. The intuitional element is still present in Plato's and Aristotle's concepts of *vóoc* and later again in that of the Neo-Platonists. But the term never returned completely to its pre-Parmenidean meaning.

in fact, in most of the passages where it occurs in Parmenides is rare with nouns in -μα but has a perfect analogy in the use of the word ἄλμα in Euripides *Electra* 439, where Achilles is called κοῦφος ἄλμα ποδῶν and where the reference is certainly not to the completed act of jumping.

5 Though the element of reasoning in *voẽiv* is here much further developed and much more conscious, the connection with the Homeric concept of *voẽiv*, which means an intuitive understanding, which, however, may be the result of a process of reasoning, is not yet completely broken.

6 See above, p. 241.