

Straipsniai

## 'THEY ARE TELLING US A MYTH': A CURIOUS PORTRAIT OF THE PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS IN PLATO'S *SOPHIST*

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### I.

Philosophical implications of the dialogue-form have been, for quite some time, all the buzz in Platonic studies. One need not enumerate all the advantages and productive insights that this approach has generated. One facet of Plato's philosophical method, however, remains insufficiently explored so far: namely, Plato's reflections on the question of genre and form of philosophical discourse which could be gleaned from his judgments on his philosophical predecessors, the Presocratics.

What I propose to do here is to offer a close reading of a couple of Platonic passages where Plato's protagonists' engagement with the Presocratic doctrines is described or dramatised. In doing that, I shall seek to highlight Plato's position and judgments concerning the *form*, or *genre*,<sup>1</sup> of

<sup>1</sup> The notion of 'intellectual genre' here is considerably indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre. Though he was not the first to interpret various types of philosophical enquiry in terms of their genre of discourse, each of which presupposes a certain distinct type of validity for its statements, I found MacIntyre's observations in his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* particularly rewarding.

Presocratic discourse, and to trace the implications of those judgments with one question in view: what is the nature, in Plato's view, of Presocratic teaching qua intellectual enterprise or 'genre'?<sup>2</sup>

### II.

The most general and explicit comment on the style of past philosophers is made in the *Sophist*, after the Eleatic Stranger declares the opening of a major new stage in the enquiry into being and falsehood, in which 'it becomes necessary in self-defence to put to the question that pronouncement of father Parmenides', and to re-examine critically the relationship of being and non-being (241d5–7). The difficulty lies in that 'Parmenides and whoever strove to define τὰ ὄντα by determining their number and kinds talked to us in rather an offhand fashion

<sup>2</sup> This is an aspect of larger project of reconstructing Plato's reception of the Presocratic thinkers, addressed in my doctoral thesis.

(εὐκόλως)’ (242c4–6). Thus Plato’s philosophical predecessors are introduced as the source of the present confusion in philosophy, and simultaneously a problem is indicated, inherent in their mode of communication.

The Stranger further explains what he means by saying that each of the early philosophers seems to be telling a myth as if their audience were children: μῦθόν τινα ἕκαστος φαίνεται μοι διηγεῖσθαι παισὶν ὡς οὔσιν ἡμῖν (242c8–9). An annotated catalogue of philosophical schools follows, divided into three groups according to the number of beings each of them postulates: pluralists who maintain the existence of either two (‘wet and dry or hot and cold’) or three beings (242c9–d4), Eleatic monists (τὸ Ἐλεατικὸν ἔθνος, 242d4–7), and those who combine unity and plurality (συνπλέκειν ἀσφαλέστατον ἀμφοτέρω καὶ λέγειν ὡς τὸ ὄν πολλά τε καὶ ἓν ἔστιν, 242d7–243a1). It is not difficult to find identities for the unnamed philosophers of the pluralist group in the history of philosophy: both Pherecydes and Ion refer to three existing things (fr. 7 B 1, A 8, A 9, 36 B 1 DK), whereas Archelaus introduces Moist/Dry or Hot/Cold in his cosmology. The Ionian Muses quite certainly stand for Heraclitus, and the Sicilian ones for Empedocles.<sup>3</sup>

To insist on naming them, however, would be partly missing Plato’s point – the Presocratics remain unnamed because the catalogue of schools is intended to provide a sample of typical Presocratic accounts of being.<sup>4</sup>

The tenets of Presocratic philosophy are narrated using picturesque imagery that is meant to

convey their ‘mythically-poetical’ way of communication (cf. πολεμεῖ 242c9, φίλα γιγνόμενα γάμους τε καὶ τόκους καὶ τροφὰς τῶν ἐκγόνων παρέχεται d1–3, συνοικίζει, ἐκδίδωσι d4, ἔχθρα δὲ καὶ φιλία e2, φίλον ὑπ’ Ἀφροδίτης e5, πολέμιον, νεῖκος 243a1). Moreover, the reference to the mythical mode of communication is explicitly reiterated in the case of the Eleatic and the ‘combined account’ schools (in the latter case, the implicit equation of the mythical with the poetical is achieved through reference to the Muses): τὸ δὲ παρ’ ἡμῖν Ἐλεατικὸν ἔθνος [...] διεξέρχεται τοῖς μύθοις (242d4–7), Ἰάδες δὲ καὶ Σικελαὶ τινες [...] Μοῦσαι (242d7–8). This repeated reference to the mythical mode of communication shows that it applies not only to the pluralists, but likewise to the Eleatics and Heraclitus with Empedocles.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the mythical, or mythically-poetical way of communication is imputed to all ‘schools’ of the Presocratic philosophy.

What does this mythical character consist in? The Stranger provides an answer later on, as he addresses the question for the sake of which all this doxographical parade was launched – namely, the effects of the peculiar Presocratic mode of communication on the present *status quaestionis* regarding being (cf. 242b10–c6): the ancient thinkers show too little consideration to, and can even be accused of disrespect for, their audience, since they pursue their arguments regardless of whether the audience follows or is left behind, each going after his objective: λίαν τῶν πολλῶν ἡμῶν ὑπεριδόντες ὠλιγώρησαν· οὐδὲν γὰρ φροντίσαντες εἴτ’ ἐπακολουθοῦμεν

<sup>3</sup> See O. Apelt, *Platons Dialog Sophistes*. Übers. und erläut. von Dr. O. Apelt, Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1914, S. 140–141, A. 59–62 for the identifications.

<sup>4</sup> In the same manner, the doxographic ‘catalogues’ in the *Phaedo* are intended give an example of standard Presocratic explanations (96b2–c1 & 99b6–c1), whereas the one in the *Cratylus* parades standard Presocratic conceptions of ‘the just’ (413a2–c8).

<sup>5</sup> Thus one cannot read τὸ δὲ παρ’ ἡμῖν (242d4–5) as contrasting the Eleatics to the mythical way of the pluralists. Besides, the word ἕκαστος at 242c8 must refer to *all* the groups enumerated afterwards. Such a reading would be implausible anyway in the view of the previous remark (242c4–6) which reproaches Parmenides as well as ‘everyone else’.

αὐτοῖς λέγουσιν εἴτε ἀπολειπόμεθα, περαίνουσι τὸ σφέτερον αὐτῶν ἕκαστοι (243a7–b1).

This seems to indicate that the Presocratic thinkers fail to interact with their audience in the requisite manner. What constitutes this failure? Surprisingly, when the Stranger comes to specifying it, he does not speak of their eccentric poetic imagery (such as the employment of ‘marriages’, ‘wars’ *vel sim.*), but refers to the use of fairly ordinary and abstract categories: ὅταν τις αὐτῶν φθέγγεται λέγων ὡς ἔστιν ἢ γέγονεν ἢ γίγνεται πολλά ἢ ἓν ἢ δύο, καὶ θερμὸν αὖ ψυχρῶ συγκεραννύμενον, ἄλλοθί πη διακρίσεις καὶ συγκρίσεις ὑποτιθεῖς (243b3–6).<sup>6</sup>

The Stranger illustrates this Presocratic failure at communicating and establishing the basic categories of their thinking in an imaginary dialogue concerning ‘being’, τὸ ὄν (243c2–d5). The choice of this category is determined by the dialogue’s overall goals, but we are probably meant to understand that the same kind of question can be legitimately asked about any of the Presocratic categories listed at 243b3–6. In that imaginary dialogue, the Stranger spells out his puzzlement by questioning fictional representatives of early philosophy: what do they mean when they say that heat and cold or some such two things really exist? What is this ‘existence’, or ‘being’ (εἶναι)? *Etc. etc.* (243d6–244a2). The Eleatic Stranger’s ἀπορία concerning the Presocratic way of speaking cannot be solved unless such questions are clarified (cf. 244a4–b1). His appeal to the imaginary pluralists to ‘teach’ him their meaning (διδάσκετε 244a8) is rhetorical: no early philosopher is present there,

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<sup>6</sup> This list may be instructive as a catalogue of what Plato saw as the basic conceptual stock of Presocratic philosophy.

or able to provide any additional clarification of his intended meaning to suit the Stranger’s requirements. The authors, to recall the *Phaedrus* and the *Theaetetus*, are dead and absent, and the Stranger’s reading of Presocratic philosophy ends in ἀπορία.

Next in line to answer the Stranger’s questions is ‘father Parmenides’ in the guise of an anonymous monist, and when his tenet that ‘all is one’ has been examined in a like manner, the Stranger no longer pretends that his questions can be answered by anyone, but states that ‘countless other difficulties, each involved in measureless perplexity (ἀπεράντους ἀπορίας), will arise, if you say that being is either two things or only one’ (245d12–e2).

One may note that in his enquiry into the meaning of earlier thinkers Plato remains faithful to his hermeneutic principles – namely, he maintains that the previous philosophers (as well as their philosophical tenets) cannot fully participate in a dialectical discussion, insofar as they are not ‘present’ to explain their intended meaning. Therefore such enquiry is bound to end, as it does end, in ἀπορία, and the problem has to be restated anew, independently of historical positions and formulations.

### III.

The principal lesson to be drawn from Plato’s exegesis of the Presocratic philosophers is that the ‘mythical’ quality of the early philosophers does not consist only in their adoption of mythological symbolism for the exposition of their philosophy. For although such symbolism is mentioned in the context of pluralists and the ‘combined account’ philosophers, they could not be ascribed to the Eleatics, whereas a mythical character is nonetheless explicitly imputed to

their mode of communication.<sup>7</sup> Thus ‘mythical’ properties apply to all the Presocratic postulates that the Stranger subjects to his detailed examination. Statements like ‘Hot and cold are all things’, as well as ‘All is one’ must equally be ‘mythical’ despite the fact that there may not be any ‘wars’ or ‘marriages’ of elements mentioned in them.

In all likelihood such propositions, and the philosophical narratives founded on them, are called ‘myths’ because of their self-positing, unaccountable, rationally opaque quality. Myth does not have to question its terms, it just posits itself without any further reason or explanation. In that respect to say that ‘Hot and cold are all things’, or that ‘Everything is water’ does not differ from saying ‘Chaos was first’.<sup>8</sup> On this reading, ‘myth’ is understood as a narrative that presupposes and uncritically asserts, rather than proves, its own authority and legitimacy. It is a narrative accepted unexamined, on authority. When Presocratic philosophy is characterised as ‘myth’, this metaphor most likely refers to unargued starting points, for which no further justification is given, to a narrative (rather than

argumentative) mode of exposition, and to uncritical, unexamined use of its terms and concepts.<sup>9</sup>

Final thing to be noted is that Parmenides’ mode of exposition, along with the rest of the Presocratics, is also characterised as ‘mythical’. This certainly indicates a change of heart on Plato’s behalf. In the *Theaetetus* Parmenides, the ‘reverend and awesome One’, is opposed to the whole Greek philosophical (and even proto-philosophical) tradition (cf. *Tht.* 183e5–7, 180d8–e4, 152e2–3). Plato would indeed seem to be intent on ‘parricide’ (*Soph.* 242a1–2, cf. McCabe, *op. cit.*, p. 60–66). The sense in which Plato uses ‘myth’ in respect to Parmenides is illustrated by the Eleatic Stranger’s critique of the ‘all is one’ thesis (*Soph.* 244b6–245e2). However important Parmenides’ achievements may seem in other respects, the Stranger im-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Apelt: *Diese alten Philosopheme erschienen dem Platon] wegen des Haschens nach einem aus äußerer Anschauung mehr oder weniger willkürlich aufgerafften angeblichen Prinzip aller Dinge, sowie wegen des Mangels an begrifflicher Orientierung, nicht minder auch wegen des mythischen Charakters der Darstellungsweise mehr als Märchen denn als Wissenschaft* (Apelt, *op. cit.*, S. 139 A. 57). Cf. F. Chiereghin, *Implicazioni etiche della storiografia filosofica di Platone*, Padova: Liviana Editrice, 1976, p. 73–82, W. Burkert, ‘The Logic of Cosmogony’, in: R. Buxton (ed.), *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, Oxford: University Press, 1999, p. 87–106, p. 88, 91. On the status of ‘myth’ in Plato, cf. e.g. P. Murray, ‘What Is a *Muthos* for Plato?’, in: Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 251–262, at p. 258–261, C. J. Rowe, ‘Myth, History, and Dialectic in Plato’s *Republic* and *Timaeus-Critias*’, in: Buxton, *op. cit.*, p. 263–278, at p. 264–271, L. Brisson, *Plato the myth maker*. Transl., ed., and with an Introd. by G. Naddaf, Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 89–115, Edelstein ‘The Function of the Myth in Plato’s Philosophy’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10 (1949), p. 463–481, at p. 474–477. Discussions on the meaning of Plato’s ‘myths’ seem to concentrate exclusively on the criteria of rationality, truth-value and narrative form. There is hardly any evidence of taking into account the specific understanding of authority that ‘myth’ presupposes in contrast to dialectics.

<sup>7</sup> Cf.: τὸ δὲ παρ’ ἡμῶν Ἑλεατικὸν ἔθνος [...] ὡς ἐνὸς ὄντος τῶν πάντων καλουμένων οὕτω **διεξέρχεται τοῖς μύθοις** (242d4–7).

<sup>8</sup> Someone might object, on the force of the fact that the intended audience of those ‘myths’ are described as ‘children’, that μῦθος at 242c8 need not be taken strongly to mean ‘myth’ *sensu proprio*, but only a ‘children’s tale’, as McCabe seems to imply: ‘μῦθος [...] picks up, not so much the ‘mythological character’ of early speculation [...], but rather the attitude taken by the story-teller. [...] The same thought, about telling stories to children, turns up at the introduction of the myth at *Politicus*...’ (M. M. McCabe, *Plato and His Predecessors. The Dramatisation of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, n. 24 p. 65). It can be countered that (a) the ‘tales’ told to children would have consisted of myths; (b) regardless of their content, children’s tales qua narratives also possess the same self-positing character.

plies that his unexplained and uncritical adoption of the terms like ‘being’ and ‘one’ remains within the ‘mythical’ mode of exposition of the Presocratic epoch. This criticism is repeated almost verbatim in the *Parmenides* (v. *infra*).

But is it actually such a big change of heart? When in the *Theaetetus* Socrates describes himself as caught in the middle between the Scylla and Charybdis of the adherents of change and rest, between the Heracliteans and the Eleatics, he already indicates a certain equivalence between these two extreme positions (*Th.* 180d7–181b4).<sup>10</sup> The *Sophist* thus completes what the *Theaetetus* had begun: Parmenides and the rest of the Eleatics are ‘Presocratic’ in their ‘mythical’ philosophical style just as in their theoretical radicalism. Despite their relative merits, both positions fall within a broader category, which we call ‘Presocratic philosophy’, united by an archaic, ‘mythical’ form of narrative in which their philosophical insights were embedded. The firm constitution of the Presocratics as an historical-philosophical category (which involves both the cosmological thinkers and the Eleatics) is one of the most important developments of the *Sophist*.

#### IV.

Thus, Presocratic philosophy as a whole seems to be characterised by a certain communicative failure, a certain hermeneutic deficiency. This deficiency is further illustrated in the beginning

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<sup>10</sup> See also the analysis of the passages in G. Cambiano, ‘Tecniche dossografiche in Platone’, in: G. Cambiano (ed.), *Storiografia e dossografia nella filosofia antica*, Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1986, p. 61–84, A. Patzer, ‘Platon über den Ursprung der Eleaten und Herakliteer – ein Vortrag’, in: P. Neukam (ed.), *Exempla Classica*. (*Dialog – Klassische Sprachen und Literaturen*. Bd. XXI.), München: Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag, 1987, S. 109–121.

of the *Parmenides*, where Socrates asks Zeno to re-read the first hypothesis of his treatise and then conjectures that the intention of Zeno’s arguments is to prove that things are not many. Yes, that is precisely the intention of the whole of my treatise, agrees Zeno (127e8–128a3). Then Socrates accuses Zeno of ill faith: he wants to state the same thing that Parmenides affirms in his poems, but disguises it so as to deceive the audience and lead them to believe he is saying something different (128a6–8). One of them affirms unity, the other no plurality, ‘and each expresses himself in such a way that your arguments seem to have nothing in common, though really they come to very much the same thing. That is why your exposition and his seem to be rather over the heads of outsiders like ourselves’ (128b3–6).

Zeno objects that the true story is different, that he wrote his treatise in order to silence those who objected to Parmenides’ thesis. (He did so by providing proofs that the pluralist position is even more absurd than Parmenides’ monism.) Thus Socrates is mistaken in thinking that the treatise was written out of an elderly man’s φιλοτιμία, the desire to gain reputation in cleverness, – but rather out of a young man’s contentiousness, φιλονικία (128b7–e4). Although he says that Socrates has missed the point, Zeno commends his interpretative skills: he pursues the implications of what is said ‘like a Spartan hound’ (128c1–2), and, after all, his presentation of Zeno’s intention was not at all bad (οὐ κακῶς ἀπήκασας 128e4).

This exchange is short and is soon forgotten as Socrates moves on to his exposition of the Theory of Forms. However, Socrates’ remark about Zeno talking ‘over their heads’ (ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἄλλους φαίνεται ὑμῖν τὰ εἰρημένα εἰρησθαι 128b5–6) seems to echo the Eleatic Stranger’s complaint about the Presocratics’ mode of ex-

position in general: *λίαν τῶν πολλῶν ἡμῶν ὑπεριδόντες ὀλιγώρησαν* (*Soph.* 243a7–8). The suggestion here, just as in the *Sophist* (cf. *supra*), seems to be that Zeno’s and Parmenides’ philosophical accounts fail to state their intentions and conclusions in a manner that would enable them to relate both to each other and to external reference points (see 128b3–6, esp. οὕτως ἐκάτερον λέγειν ὥστε μηδὲν τῶν αὐτῶν εἰρηκέναι δοκεῖν σχεδόν τι λέγοντας ταῦτά). They lack a certain ‘co-ordinating’ architectonic statement of what is achieved by the argument. Therefore, Zeno’s and Parmenides’ accounts are hermeneutically deficient, since they are in need of an additional interpretation that would enable one to comprehend their implications in terms of their overall philosophical significance. Additional interpretation is also required if their writings are to be understood in their relationship to each other’s, and also to other philosophers’, positions.<sup>11</sup>

Socrates supplies precisely such an additional interpretation when he says that Parmenides and Zeno are stating the same in ostensibly the opposite manner, and his exegesis is commended by Zeno. This would indicate that Plato maintains such a *type* of interpretation to be admissible and productive. On the other hand, it would also suggest that no similar overall architectonic view was offered either by Zeno or by Parmenides themselves. On the basis of the affinity with the parallel *locus* in the *Sophist* (v. *Soph.*

243a7–b10) it could be argued that Zeno’s treatise possesses these features as a representative of a more primitive and less accomplished philosophical ‘style’, and that Plato, despite repeatedly singling out the Eleatics from among other Presocratics, nevertheless maintains Zeno (as well as Parmenides) to be a Presocratic figure because of his deficient mode of philosophical expression.

Furthermore, Plato seems to be giving an illustration of what he had in mind in the *Phaedrus*, when he warned against putting philosophical insights into writing. In the *Parmenides* we have a case when an author is ‘present’ to help his ‘offspring’ of a writing along and defend it from misinterpretations. It is, however, easy to imagine a situation when he is absent – and sooner or later he of necessity will be so – and what will become of his literary offspring then? Who is then going to defend the honesty of the motives behind his writing? In fact, we do not even have to conjecture about the implied possibilities – there is already a note of warning in Zeno’s speech: when he, out of contentiousness, had written the treatise in his youth, someone stole it, thus depriving him of the choice whether to publish it or not (128d6–e1). Once a work is written, the author is helpless *in spite of the fact* that he is ‘present’; to help his writing as its ‘authorised interpreter’ is the only thing he can do to minimise, not to avert, the inevitable harm.

This interpretative deficiency is a characteristic that plagues the Presocratic mode of exposition, and Plato’s own dialogical mode of discourse is meant to minimise the dangers inherent in writing as much as possible. It is important that in his discussion of the Presocratics, Plato seems to be conscious of opening a new epoch both insofar as substantive philosophical insights are concerned, and also with respect to the essential form, or ‘genre’, of philosophical discourse.

<sup>11</sup> Besides, because of the deficient self-clarification, the Eleatic writings are also open to conflicting interpretations, as the short debate regarding Zeno’s intentions (*φιλονικία* vs. *φιλοτιμία*) indicates. / For *φιλοτιμία* as a particularly ‘Presocratic’ vice – a desire to impress the audience by radicalness and sheer outlandish *tour de force* of one’s conclusion, cf. *Tht.* 180d4–7 on the Heracliteans: ἵνα καὶ οἱ σκυτοτόμοι αὐτῶν τὴν σοφίαν μάθωσιν ἀκούσαντες καὶ παύσωνται ἡλιθίως οἰόμενοι τὰ μὲν ἐστάναι, τὰ δὲ κινεῖσθαι τῶν ὄντων, μαθόντες δὲ ὅτι πάντα κινεῖται **τιμῶσιν αὐτούς**.

**„JIE MUMS PASAKOJA MITĄ“:**

**IKISOKRATINIŲ FILOSOFŲ PORTRETAS PLATONO *SOFISTE***

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje mėginama pažvelgti į tai, kaip specifinį ikisokratinių mąstytojų rašymo ir filosofavimo būdą suvokia Platonas. Itin daug dėmesio Platonas skiria filosofinėms rašytinio teksto pobūdžio implikacijoms; Platono dialogai kaip rašymo forma atitinka tam tikrą „diskurso žanrą“, suponuojantį savitas tiesos sąlygas savo teiginiams. O ką autorius, tiek dėmesio skyręs filosofijos formai, mano apie ikisokratinių mąstytojų diskurso formą arba žanrą? Lemiamas kontekstas Platono nuostatai šiuo požiūriu suprasti pateikiamas dialoge *Sofistas* (242–243). Ten Platonas ne tik pateikia ikisokratinių mokyklų „doksografinį parodą“, bet ir mėgina nustatyti ikisokratinės filosofijos kaip tam tikro daugiau ar mažiau vieningo mąstymo horizonto pamatinius trūkumus. Ikisokratinis mąstymas apibūdinamas kaip „mitinis“. Šis nuosprendis liečia ne tik vaizdingas ikisokratikų vartojamas metaforas, bet ir esmines jų filosofinio diskurso prielaidas bei pobūdį. Be to, jis

taikomas ne tik kosmologinėms pliuralistų spekuliacijoms ir simbolių gausiam Herakleito bei Empedoklio mąstymui, bet ir Parmenidui bei Elėjos mokyklai, kitur Platono laikomiems griežto filosofinio mąstymo pirmtakais, apibūdinti. Kruopščiau paanalizavus matyti, kad „mitas“ šiuo atveju nurodo į neargumentuotas ikisokratinės filosofijos priiimamas prielaidas, naratyvinę (o ne argumentacinę) dėstymo būdą beigi nekritišką, nekvestionuojantį sąvokų ir terminų vartojimą. Šiuo požiūriu eleatiniai mąstytojai ne mažiau „mitiški“ negu ankstyvieji jonėnų pliuralistai, kuriuos Platonas kritikuoja kitur. Su *Sofistu* turinio ir žodinėmis paralelėmis susijęs kontekstas – dialogo *Parmenidas* įžanga – patvirtina tokį Platono nuostatos ikisokratinių filosofų atžvilgiu skaitymą. Taigi galima teigti, kad Platono *Sofiste* ikisokratiniai filosofai pirmąsyk konstituojami kaip atskira istorinė-filosofinė kategorija.

Gauta 2004 11 05  
Priimta publikuoti 2004 12 20

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