

Parmenides and the Origins of Western Thought - An Interview with Peter Kingsley

Network

What first guided you to the importance of Parmenides, and to the fact that Plato had distorted or neglected to include in his own philosophy the essence of Parmenides' teaching?

It was instinct-the same instinct that makes the green swallows fly back thousands of miles to nest at exactly the same point in the eaves of our house where they had lived the year before.

In a sense, the process started for me when I was a teenager. Now if I look back in time I am amazed at the sequence of apparent accidents and coincidences that guided me, kept leading me towards the things I needed to find. But apart from the outer events, there was also something else: an inner necessity that kept me on course with a ruthlessness and an authority I was unable to disobey. Friends of mine at university tried to persuade me to study oriental religions with them; but something very strong in me (and quite irrational, in the sense that I was unable to explain it) insisted that I focus specifically on the origins of philosophy in the West. The rest followed from there.

Plato intrigued me for a while, but failed to satisfy me. I sensed that something was missing, intuitively knew that somehow he had lost far more than he had preserved. And gradually, over the years, I began to discover what this was. In a way, what I found was terrifying. By reading the philosophers before Plato in the original Greek, ever so carefully, word by word, I came to discover not only that what they said has been consistently mistranslated and misunderstood by modern scholars-but also that there has been a long tradition of altering the ancient Greek texts themselves to make them say what people have wanted them to say. It was an astonishing example of how we distort the evidence to fit our own expectations. The trouble is that this is not some mediocre scandal. It concerns the origins of ourselves and of the whole culture that we live in.

I feel I must emphasize that this process of rediscovering what had been covered over was not only a matter of careful work and analysis and research. It was always, for me, a matter of personal experience: something that had to be lived and tested on myself. And as I rapidly discovered, the early philosophers who attracted me were not just the theorists they have been made out to be. They were deadly serious, and I understood that I had to be equally serious in approaching them if I was to hope of learning anything from them at all. There has never been any possibility of holding back. I had to transform myself into the road that I travelled, and I had to become the bridges that I crossed.

Do you feel that Parmenides' legacy could be integrated into our Western approach to healing the sickness of body and mind?

I would love, of course, simply to say 'yes'. But it is important to be realistic about the factors involved.

The aspect of Parmenides' legacy that I emphasized throughout *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* is its fundamental link with incubation. The meaning of this word 'incubation' is quite straightforward. It means just to lie down, usually in some dark place, and wait for healing or guidance or understanding to come through a vision or through a dream. But what is involved in this apparently simple process is something quite tremendous. There are

no strategies or techniques in incubation. You just have to surrender and do absolutely nothing, be very patient and humble. It is particularly interesting that ancient Greek incubation centres were sometimes located at shrines belonging to gods of the underworld: the gods of death. You might think this is because when people were sick they wanted to go and propitiate the powers of death, ask them to stay away. But that is not the case. People went to these shrines simply to submit, surrender. It used to be said about Persephone, queen of the dead, that the touch of her hand was healing. This can be interpreted in two ways. Either it meant, quite literally, that death is the greatest healing. Or it meant that the only way to be healed of certain afflictions was to face the power of death, make contact with it, while still alive.

I hope I have said enough to make it clear in what direction the problem lies. We live in a society that runs from death. We are a 'fix-it' culture that always wants solutions and explanations, whether physical or psychological. It is almost intolerable for us to accept that illness could in certain cases be something unknown leading towards something unknowable. And of course we have no time. Time has become money, and illness is a costly affair. But what this means is that the motiveless moments, the magical space created by incubation, have been denied us both by our culture and by ourselves.

It is important to realise that this utilitarian approach to human existence, this fundamental rationalisation of its mysteries, is very old. While working at the final chapters of *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, I was struck by the very last passage that Plato ever committed to writing. It is the fruit of Plato's wisdom, more or less his last words. He is describing the supreme group of lawgivers in his imaginary state, and he refers to them as the Night Gathering. From various details in his account—such as that the group of lawgivers has to gather specifically in the interval between first dawn and the moment of sunrise, and is to be made up largely of priests of Apollo and the Sun—I was able to show that Plato was basing what he said directly on Pythagorean traditions. These traditions stated that the particular moments between earliest dawn and sunrise are the most important time for initiates, because they allow one to observe the mystery of the sun rising out of the underworld and are a reminder that the real source of light is to be found in the darkness. But Plato had no use for simple mystical contemplation. Everything for him had to have a clear reason, fit into a scheme; and the reason he presented for why his lawgivers have to meet at such an extraordinary time is a telling example of how easily things can become trivialized and distorted. Then, he explained, is the best time 'because it will allow everyone involved the greatest leisure and freedom from their other activities and commitments.'

This, I am afraid, is our intellectual heritage; and if we try to implement schemes for integrating incubation into our present medical systems we are likely to end up falling into the old trap. Certainly modern medicine is incalculably more effective than many ancient healing techniques, and this is why the opportunities for integration are so vast. But it seems to me that the real changes can only come about through inner transformation of those who want to make the changes: as a result of personal example, and on an intensely individual basis.

How do you assess the consequences of the lack of real initiation procedures in the modern West?

There is a huge amount that could be said, and already has been said, on this fundamental issue. However, we need to be extremely careful not to generalize—and, in particular, not to

project romantic notions of a Golden Age back onto older cultures. Athenians had the Eleusinian mysteries in their back pockets and yet in their own way they were not much less greedy or violent, or rigid or materialistic, than the modern West.

So instead of generalizing, I would rather mention just one subject which we have already touched on and which is hardly ever associated with initiation: illness. It is a very delicate subject, very complicated because so many different levels are involved. But some things can at least tentatively be said.

Shamanic traditions around the world insist that the normal way of becoming initiated as a shaman is through illness. Also, once people have become shamans, if for some reason they stop shamanising then they are likely to become ill again-and go on being ill until they accept their fate as shamans. But this is not just a matter of shamanic cultures. A few years ago I published a paper on the Hermetica in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, where I pointed out that the Hermetic literature we are familiar with in fact had its origin in the ritual practice of incubation. And I mentioned in the paper a beautiful autobiographical text, found on a papyrus in Egypt. It was written by an Egyptian priest who describes how he was faced with the overwhelmingly difficult task of presenting the essence of his religious tradition in a way that could be understood by the Greeks who had taken over his country. He avoided the task, ran away from it; then he became terribly ill. Eventually the god whose priest he was appeared to him in a dream and explained to him in no uncertain terms that he would take away his illness-provided that he started writing and fulfilled his task. This autobiographical note formed the preface to his great work: he had accepted his task, and been cured.

If we look at the implications of all this, they are quite extraordinary. Illness, and naturally that includes more elusive conditions such as depression, might be an opportunity: a door opening into whole new areas of ourselves. And that of course is precisely the meaning of initiation. So when we try to banish illness, through physical or psychological means, and when those who apparently have our best interests at heart-our family, our doctors-try to rescue us from suffering, it could just be that we are losing the opportunity for initiation. I should make it clear that I consider this phenomenon far more widespread than we might imagine. There are many, many Jonahs who have run away from their destiny without realising that this is in fact what they are doing. In short, nothing is necessarily what it seems.

What do you see as the most direct way to overcome the idea that the non-rational is the enemy of the rational?

This is an urgent question for a great many people-and rightly so. For the issue of rationality and non-rationality is not just a concern of academics or intellectuals: it has to do with the way each of us thinks and functions, how we justify what we feel and do. So we need to be extremely careful about how we choose to formulate it.

The first point I would like to make is that as soon as we start to speak about the 'non-rational' and justify it, or in any way try to defend it, then the situation has already become hopeless. This is something that is very rarely appreciated. It is because the real problem lies not in the term 'non-rational', but in the term 'rational'. I am reminded of the time when, as a young boy, I timidly asked my English teacher what he meant by the words 'subjective' and 'objective'-and was shouted down in front of the whole class for daring to show my

ignorance by asking such a stupid question. In retrospect, I can now see that the reason my teacher was so quick to humiliate me was because he would not have been able to answer my question if he had tried. The same applies to the word 'rationality'. We are all supposed to know what it means, but in fact our concepts of what rationality is are incredibly vague. I have to admit that after many years of looking into the definition and the history of the word, I understand it less than ever; and that after meeting many highly rational individuals I have come to realize that they are (in terms of their own definitions!) highly irrational people.

What I am trying to say, and what I have often emphasised in my writings, is that the categories of irrationality and non-rationality are simply constructs of our rationality. The only fruitful line of inquiry is to investigate the category of 'rationality' itself. And the fact is that it is a very shoddy affair. If I wanted to try pinning down its meaning, I would start by equating it with a fondness for close argumentation. But in order to argue, you have to start from certain assumptions; and that is where the problem lies. You could say that rationalism requires a critical or sceptical attitude. The trouble is that I have never met a sceptic who is prepared to be radically sceptical about his scepticism. Being sceptical is a rather cosy belief system—a matter, as someone once said, of 'inverse credulity parading as scepticism'. And the truth is that reasoning is terribly unreliable. One only has to glance back at history to see how deceptive it can be. Aristotle, for example, forcefully argued that people who say dreams or visions can be sent from the gods are talking nonsense and should not be believed; modern commentators contentedly nod their heads, appeared to be radically sceptical about his scepticism. Being sceptical is a rather cosy belief system—a matter, as someone once said, of 'inverse credulity parading as scepticism'. And the truth is that reasoning is terribly unreliable. One only has to glance back at history to see how deceptive it can be. Aristotle, for example, forcefully argued that people who say dreams or visions can be sent from the gods are talking nonsense and should not be believed; modern commentators contentedly nod their heads, appeared to be radically sceptical about his scepticism. Being sceptical is a rather cosy belief system—a matter, as someone once said, of 'inverse credulity parading as scepticism'. And the truth is that reasoning is terribly unreliable. One only has to glance back at history to see how deceptive it can be. Aristotle, for example, forcefully argued that peoplism logic; and frankly, the Buddha's discovery of the five great truths about desire and suffering strikes me as a perfect example of real logic. In fact I would go so far as to state that true logic has its origins in mystical experience and demands a fundamentally religious point of view. It is something infinitely more than that strange compromise called rationality. One only has to think of Socrates, who pushed his reasoning with people and their beliefs so hard that eventually the Athenians killed him. Nowadays he is taught in universities, discussed and written about by countless scholars. But if Socrates himself was to walk into a university today, I doubt whether he would last very long. People generally want the ideas, not the reality.

And it is interesting to look back and see what happened to Socrates' teaching. On the one hand it passed into Platonism, was converted into an intellectual system, and led to the endless academic hairsplitting which is still being carried on. But on the other hand this Socratic influence, as I have shown, was surprisingly enough also inherited and preserved by the great teachers in the Hermetic tradition: teachers who, as we can still see from the texts that survived, worked by pushing their disciples to their limits and then beyond, stripped them of all their beliefs, faced them with impossible riddles and contradictions, confused them until their minds were completely paralyzed, forced them almost to suicide until they

eventually made the jump into another dimension of awareness. I am not talking here about Zen Buddhism, but about an ancient teaching lineage with roots reaching back thousands of years into the West.

'Rationalism' and 'rationality' have become highly emotive terms for the same reason that they have become so vague and confused-because they are simply based on compromises or misunderstandings, because they are substitutes for something else that we have forgotten in the West. As I emphasise throughout *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, we are surrounded by substitutes concealing the original meanings that they have come to replace. But meaning, real meaning, is as important to us as oxygen. It is not easy to function properly, or think clearly, without air.

Do you feel there is more to be discovered in Velia? Perhaps a library of manuscripts?

To start with the second part of the question: papyrus was the basic material used by Greeks for recording literary texts, but papyrus is not the most durable substance. Nearly all the surviving Greek papyri were found in southern Egypt, where the intense dry heat preserved them. The papyri discovered in Italy, or Greece, have only survived because of very unusual circumstances. I could mention the library of papyri found at Herculaneum in Italy, buried and preserved by the lava from an eruption of Vesuvius-or the papyrus containing Orphic poetry that was found near Thessaloniki in northern Greece, charred and burned from being thrown on a funeral pyre. So the chances of coming across manuscripts in Velia are not very good.

But this is not to say there are not other things waiting to be found at Velia. Archaeologists reckon they have touched only 15% of the original town. Looking at the area as a whole while I was there, and taking into account the long stretches of hillside where the town used to exist, I have to say that 5% would be closer to the mark. There is a good chance that somewhere the hero-shrine which Parmenides built for his teacher is still intact, together with its dedicatory inscriptions. And, ironically, there are objects which have already been discovered whose true significance has not yet been assessed.

I was extremely lucky. I was not only given free access to the heavily guarded depository in the local town which contains many of the archaeological objects; I was also allowed to photograph whatever I wanted. In one corner of the packed room, on a top shelf, a row of marble heads was lying on old newspaper; and among them was an extraordinarily beautiful one with very feminine features which in fact represents the god Apollo in a state of ecstasy. It had been found very close to the three inscriptions for the Oulis healers and the inscription for Parmenides, in the ruins of the same building. But this already tells you something about the two main problems that stand in the way of effectively processing the discoveries at Velia: bureaucracy on the one hand and, on the other, the very real threat of theft. Any objects which are available for viewing by the public and which are even conceivably stealable are copies. The originals are stored away behind locked doors. The beautiful statue of Asclepius-with a snake climbing up his robe-which was also found next to the Parmenides and Oulis inscriptions was standing in a dark corner of the depository, tied to a metal shelf with electrical cable to stop it falling down, its wobbly base supported by a kitchen sponge.

There are also other factors that weigh against finding very much of any real significance. All the statues of Parmenides and the healers which I describe in my book were found thrown

together in one single building. The initial excavators concluded, very plausibly, that the statues had simply been rescued and brought there around nineteen hundred years ago from an older location higher up the hillside which had been destroyed in a major landslide. So the original site is probably lost forever. And to complete the picture, right next to the building where the surviving objects were discovered the remains were also found of Byzantine equipment designed to chew up and recycle marble for use in new building projects. In other words, the few statues and inscriptions which have come to light were simply the few that through sheer luck escaped being converted into limestone. As one Italian told me, it is a downright miracle that anything survived at all. And the horror stories continue down to the present day. The brother of a very kind archaeologist proudly told me that he had bought a plot of land near to the acropolis, where he had already started building. When I asked him if there might not be important ruins buried on his land he answered: 'I am sure there are, but I am not going to look for them so who will ever know?'

And yet, as I walked around at Velia or sat among the ruins, I understood that none of this matters at all. When writing *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* I stated very clearly-because I instinctively knew it was the truth-that after a while the successors of Parmenides simply packed up their bags and moved on. Such traditions go where the spirit moves them, and they leave hardly any traces behind. In Velia it hit me with a shock that the one really important thing now is to find the Velia inside: inside myself, inside us all. Everything discovered at Velia is simply a trace of a trace, a copy of a copy of some distant record. The archaeological finds only confirm what should already have been clear for a long time from the poetry of Parmenides that survives. We have the essence in our possession already. It is just a matter now of honouring it and nurturing it. As Zen tradition says so simply: when faced with a finger pointing at the moon you need to look at the moon, not the finger.

People very often complain about the fragmentary nature of the surviving writings of the early Greek philosophers. They always want more. This always makes me laugh, because it shows that they don't know how to read the material we already have. Scholars have been terribly excited recently about the discovery in southern Egypt of shreds of papyrus containing a few new lines of poetry from one of Parmenides' inheritors, Empedocles. And yet they have failed completely to understand the real teachings contained in the passages from Empedocles' poetry which have been available for centuries. Both Parmenides and Empedocles warned so eloquently against the danger of being led astray by distractions. Life is very short, we have to get to the point, and we have no time to waste.

What to you would be the discovery of greatest significance that would follow the one revealed to us in your book?

My answer follows on naturally from what I just said. I indicated at the end of *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* that everything I have described there is just a prelude, an introduction to something much more important. We can talk as much as we want about history, about manuscripts, about fascinating archaeological discoveries; but Parmenides and the people close to him always emphasized that this world of time and space is ultimately an illusion. Even more significant, for me, than the material I have just published are the central teachings of these people as they still survive. We have in our hands astonishingly powerful meditation techniques, written in mesmerising poetry two and a half thousand years ago, which provide simple and effective methods-not for turning our backs on this world of illusion but for seeing right through it, to its roots. And I am talking about literature produced by the people who originally shaped and created the Western culture that we live

in. This is the material which I must try, as best I can, to present in my next book. I have no choice.

Professor Peter Kingsley is a visiting professor at Simon Fraser University and author of In the Dark Places of Wisdom, reviewed by Anne Baring in this issue.