

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2019

Volume 45 Issue 2

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Alex Priou, *Becoming Socrates: Political Philosophy in Plato's "Parmenides."*
Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018, 256 pp., \$95.00 (hardback).

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Plato's *Parmenides* is arguably the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates converses with another political philosopher. Neither the mathematical cosmologist Timaeus nor the Eleatic Stranger are philosophers in the sense of being political philosophers. In the *Parmenides*, Socrates is young, and has not yet become the gadfly of Athens. Thus, no Platonic dialogue features more than a single speaking philosopher—Socrates is a listener in the *Timaeus* and the *Sophist*—and further, the only dialogue that features a philosopher other than Socrates is that which presents the education of Socrates. But *in what* is Socrates educated? The most well-known aspect of the dialogue is Parmenides teaching the young Socrates problems that arise when positing the existence of the ideas (*eidē*). The well-known first part is paired with an extraordinarily dense and complicated second part consisting in a series of eight deductions. Their difficulty is amplified by the fact that on the surface it is not clear how the two parts fit together. Alex Priou achieves an extraordinary feat in his study of the *Parmenides*. He provides a new interpretation of the dialogue, one that argues for the unity of the dialogue by showing it is Socrates's education in political philosophy and in the priority and centrality of political philosophy.

When Socrates was young speculative philosophy had become mired in the dispute between the monists and the pluralists. The arguments of both seem to have devolved into eristic sophistry. Socrates's solution to the monist-pluralist impasse is the ideas (15). The ideas are intelligible (i.e., not

visible) beings, unities, and it is in virtue of them that visible beings exist by “participating” in the ideas. It is through participation that the ideas are said to be causes of the temporal, material world. But the ideas are not only causes and the highest beings in the order of being (or, perhaps it would be said that *because* they are such), the ideas are also said to be the foundation of logos in the following sense: the heterogeneity of the kinds of beings and the individuals named after their kind is due to participation. Thus, logos names Socrates and Plato after the idea “human being,” names Fido and Rex after the idea “canine,” and so on. It appears that intelligibility stands or falls with the ideas (15, 210n34). When we posit the ideas, however, politics is at stake as much as metaphysics, for the ideas promise what Priou calls “the twin demands of rule” (16). First, rule demands access to or knowledge of the ideas; second and consequently, rule demands precision in political matters, that is, perfect guidance in practical action.

If the ideas appeared promising, Parmenides proceeds to show Socrates the several problems that one who posits them must overcome, and participation proves especially problematic (25). This is the first part of Parmenides’s education of Socrates, and it now seems that logos has no foundation because of the failure of the ideas, and consequently, that it is impossible to guide politics in accordance with knowledge and precision. But the problem greater even than participation is how one will convince the skeptic, who does not believe it is possible for the ideas to be known, that he is wrong in this belief (135a1-b2). Parmenides insists that the ideas must exist for thought and speech to be possible (135b5–c3). Thus, it is imperative to convince the skeptic that he is wrong. It is in this context that Parmenides proceeds to engage in work-like play, a difficult but necessary training for Socrates the would-be philosopher. The first step in uncovering the unity of the dialogue is recognizing that the motor of the second part is not the problem of participation, however tricky that may be, but the skeptic’s demand for knowledge and precision, a demand that the ideas fail to fulfill (8). While the content of the second part of the *Parmenides* appears to be abstract ontology, the motive for the work-like play is political.

In the second section it is not so clear what, if anything, Socrates’s education is. Parmenides and Aristoteles, the youngest interlocutor present, work through a series of eight deductions. These are extended conditionals; the first four begin “If one is” and the last four begin “If one is not.” Priou’s study of the deductions goes farther than any purely analytic study because of his attention to dramatic elements. Through the opaque Aristoteles, Priou

uncovers Parmenides's critique of what Priou calls "the logic of despair" (162). The skeptic now despairs because the first three deductions have shown that unity is mediated multiplicity, or in other words, unity requires plurality (75). Knowledge, therefore, comes at the cost of precision, and so the twin demands of rule are unmet. Deductions 4–8 are Parmenides's articulation of and critique of the logic of despair (162–63).

In the final, fourth chapter, Priou turns to why the twin demands of rule cannot be met by the ideas. Intelligibility or access requires plurality and therefore entails contradiction. Precision in turn cannot abide contradiction. If the demand for precision in politics proves to be so problematic for the political community, then what is the source of rulership's demand for precision? Priou locates it in the necessarily propositional form of opinion (*doxa*). The form of propositions, "x is y," gives the (often false) appearance of precision (195) and suggests (falsely) that there is no tension between knowledge and precision.

Having recognized that the ideas are the foundation of logos only as assumptions owing to the problem of participation, we may understand them politically as that which purports to meet the twin demands of rule, namely knowledge and precision. These demands are fundamentally in tension with one another. Knowledge requires plurality and therefore necessarily entails imprecision and error. But the propositional form of opinion gives the appearance of precision and therefore certainty.

What, then, is Socrates's new understanding of the ideas? Rather than being the objects of speculative ontology they are where political philosophy begins. The objects of Socrates's "What is...?" questions—justice, virtue, piety, etc.—have a semblance of unity due to the propositional form of opinion. Rather than ascending to the ideas, Socrates begins with a purported unity given in the propositional form of opinion and proceeds to show how the opinion is partial. Alex Priou's *Becoming Socrates* is essential reading for understanding both the emergence of political philosophy and the centrality of political philosophy.