Commentary on Clay

by Mitchell Miller

> Hidden harmony is stronger than visible.
>
> Heraclitus

Because I find Professor Clay's paper so thought-provoking, I want to make myself an heir to its insights rather than an antagonist. In particular, there are three bequeathals, three possible implications, that I want to single out and, with some developments of my own, accept: these are, first, a methodological constraint in reading the dialogues; second, an *aporia;* and third, an important clue in face of that *aporia.*

First, the methodological constraint. Given that Plato chooses to write dialogues, it seems necessary that, to quote Heraclitus once more, "The sun is new every day." Professor Clay stresses the point that no dialogue is made to depend directly, in advancing its own argument, upon the argument of another; the dialogues, therefore, should not be seen as steps within any overarching deductive system. This is surely right. After all, an essential feature of dialogue form is the way conversation arises out of and in response to a distinctive human situation. The arguments in each dialogue, in turn, belong to and have their point and function within its conversation. For the interpreter, this means that there can be no *presumption* of continuity across dialogues. However similar particular propositions or lines of reasoning may seem, Plato's decision to write dialogues puts the interpreter under the constraint—as a precondition for correctly seeing how arguments from different dialogues fit together—to first interpret each of these arguments in its function within its own dramatically projected context.

The second bequeathal is an *aporia.* Though the main project of this paper is to show how the dialogues comprise a "universe...of apparent and surface discontinuity" (p. 135), Professor Clay makes clear that to regard the *corpus merely* as a σάρμα εἰκῇ κεχυμένων, a heap of occasion-bound pieces, is an incomplete response to Plato. True, the ambiguity or elliptical character or factual impossibility of the various apparent links between the dialogues serves to check any inclination to lift passages out of their dramatically projected contexts and treat them as steps in some overarching system of argument. But Professor Clay suggests that Plato has a positive purpose as well, that he gives us "the apparent disorder of the...dialogues" as a "provocation" to go beyond this very appearance. Stressing the point that Plato "left it to his reader to fill, as best he can, the gaps he has created among the dialogues" (p. 157; cf. also pp. 136 and 153), Professor Clay implies that Plato, even while he deliberately frustrates our tendency to look for one sort of connection, intends to move us to make another. And here is where *aporia* develops. Can the disruption of one sort of coherence actually be the means for establishing another? And if so, what sort of coherence?[1]

[1] It may help to focus this question and its provocative power if we distinguish three different kinds of "gaps," each of which calls for a different kind of response from the interpreter. (1) There are, first, "gaps" that appear to be accidental in nature. The *Critias,* for example, appears simply to be unfinished, not intentionally left open for the reader to develop an "outer dialogue" with Plato. And if this is so, then the same probably holds for the so-called *Hermocrates,* projected as the successor dialogue to the *Critias.* (2) Contrast this with the *Philosopher,* which does seem to be projected and then left unwritten as a provocation to the reader. Part of the evidence to be considered here is *Sophist* 216c-217a: Socrates, immediately after having warned that the philosopher takes on the appearance of the sophist and the statesman to the nonphilosophical many, asks the Eleatic stranger for definitions of the sophist, statesman, and philosopher. By leaving the *Philosopher* unwritten, Plato seems to challenge the reader to press on for himself, taking the definitions of sophistry and statesmanship, in

It has been in pondering these questions that it has occurred to me that Professor Clay's paper may also contain an important clue: I am thinking of his striking remarks on the *Republic* and its distinctive sort of "incoherence" (p. 139). If I understand his intention correctly, he introduces the *Republic* into his discussion in order to suggest that the same sort of "incoherence" that characterizes it and prevents the familiar notion of organic unity from applying to it in any straightforward way also

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which, indeed, there are elements of philosophy, as his point of departure. Thus the *Philosopher* would be a "gap" that is pointedly designed to provoke "outer dialogue" (pp. 137-138 and 139). (3) Finally, there may be some "gaps" or, more precisely, apparently tenuous connections between dialogues whose tenuousness is more a function of our distance from Plato's situation than of Plato's own intention. It may be that the ambiguous place of the *Parmenides* relative to the *Theaetetus* on the one hand and to the *Sophist/Statesman* on the other is a case in point. To sketch an argument for this very briefly: Plato, by selecting as the non-philosophical interlocutors in these dialogues students from the circle of Theodorus and the very young Socrates, seems to indicate that his intended audience or (to borrow a felicitous phrase from R.E. Allen's *Plato's **Parmenides***, Minneapolis, 1983, p. 197) readers "in first intention" are the young aspiring philosophers-to-be in the Academy. Now, at *Theaetetus* 183e-184a the elder Socrates defers discussion of what Parmenides said to him in their extraordinary conversation, fearing that its "depth" might surpass the present understanding of Theodorus and his students. At *Sophist* 217c, on the other hand, Socrates refers back to that conversation without caution and urges the visiting stranger, a philosophically accomplished follower of Parmenides, to share his Eleatic learning with the same group. The contrast in the character of these allusions makes it tempting to think that Plato intends to place the *Parmenides* after the *Theaetetus* and before the *Sophist* as the pivotal member of a pedagogical series aimed at the Academy. To bear this out and see its precise significance, of course, would require careful study and extended argument. For the moment, it must suffice to note that the *Parmenides* introduces and—on my reading, see note 3 below—saves what the *Theaetetus* pointedly lacks in its failed effort to give an account of knowledge and what, on the other hand, the *Sophist* makes good use of, namely, the theory of forms.

prevents the grander notion of "cosmos" from applying to the *corpus* as a whole. He thus makes the *Republic* an analogue to the *corpus*. What makes this particularly fascinating in the context of the *aporia* is that he also argues that this "incoherence," the periodic "disruption of [the] apparent plan" of the *Republic*, is itself the way the real plan is revealed (p. 141). Thus, on the one hand, no "assent" is "permanent" (p. 142), and each major moment of "apparent closure" is rendered "illusory" by subsequent "dissent" (p. 141); on the other hand, it is just this "dissent" that gives Socrates the occasion he needs to move, and to move the conversation, from one level of reflection to another. Obviously, Plato understands full well that characters like Glaucon and Adeimantus, noble at heart but not yet able to see a realistic alternative to Thrasymachean cynicism, will push Socrates to defend his uncynical understanding of justice and the soul more and more deeply. This is just why Plato casts them as Socrates' interlocutors. By having them periodically make objections to the whole of what Socrates has up to that point established, Plato can structure the *Republic* as a series of fresh beginnings, a series that leads the reader through different levels of understanding.

Once we see this pattern in the *Republic*, I think we will begin to see it in many other dialogues as well—the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Symposium* would only be the most obvious cases. The huge question at hand, however, is whether we can also find something like this pattern in the relations between dialogues. To put this in a phrase, can we recognize ways in which the *corpus* has the unity not of an organism and not of a cosmos but, rather, of a journey whose moments of apparent completion set the stage for dissent and fresh departures that, in turn, make for its real continuance?

Needless to say, this is not the occasion to attempt the full study this suggestion calls for. Instead, as an enticement, let me offer a few brief notes on what may be an exemplary and illustrative connection between two particular dialogues. Professor

Clay has given compelling arguments against the familiar reading of the *Timaeus* as a sequel to the *Republic*.[2] As an alternative, let me propose the *Parmenides.* What is the evidence for this, and what would Plato's purpose be? Necessarily, the evidence must be two-fold, coming on the one hand from the *Republic* and on the other from the *Parmenides.* First, from the side of the *Republic:* note that at several key junctures in Books VI and VII Socrates restricts himself to giving an image, a sensible simile, of the forms (506d ff., 509d, 514a, 533a); yet he also indicates that the purpose of the mathematical education he prescribes for the philosophers-to-be—and, more particularly, of the "study of the one" (524e) with which it begins—is to enable the "conversion" of the soul (518c) from sensibles to forms. Thus, at the heart of his most direct articulation of the theory of forms, Plato seems to indicate indirectly that Socrates' *mode* of presenting the forms, through sensible simile, fails to do justice to these as its content and needs be overcome. Second, from the side of the *Parmenides,* there are three points to observe. To begin with, by his choice of characters and

2 Professor Clay has marshalled persuasive evidence to the effect that the account of the good state that Plato has Socrates report in the opening lines of the *Timaeus* ought not to be identified with the account that Plato has him report in the *Republic.* I would add, however—in pursuing the question Professor Clay leaves us with regard to Plato's intent—that Plato must surely have intended the reader of the *Timaeus* to be reminded of the *Republic* and to notice the striking omissions that differentiate the account of the good state in the former from the latter. I have not chosen to pursue the *Republic-Timaeus* connection, however, because I think that Plato's purpose in this reminding is irrecoverable. As Paul Friedländer points out, "Why there is no mention of the philosopher-kings, or of their education, or of the *idea* of the Good, we would be able to understand fully only if Plato had completed the trilogy [of *Timaeus, Critias,* and *Hermocrates*]" (*Plato,* vol. 3, p. 357). This is so because it was only in the *Critias* and, perhaps, the *Hermocrates* that the discussants were to resume and develop the account of the good state that Socrates, in the *Timaeus,* reports having given the day before.

staging, Plato surely intends to remind us of the *Republic.* In the opening lines the first three characters named are Adeimantus, Glaucon, and (the Clazomenian) Cephalus, and the situation to which, *via* Antiphon's memory, they turn their attention is precisely analogous to that of the *Republic:* an elder and well-known philosopher (Parmenides, in parallel with Socrates in the *Republic*), accompanied by a favorite younger friend (Zeno, in parallel with Glaucon), comes to the city for a public festival (the Panathenian Games, in parallel with the festival of Bendis) but instead spends his time in a private household, engaging in philosophical talk with the young men of Athens. If, however, Plato recalls us to the *Republic,* he does so, apparently, in order to challenge it. In its drama, Adeimantus and Glaucon are no sooner introduced than they are set aside (126a ff.), replaced by the youthful, philosophically keener Socrates, and in place of the elder Socrates, we are given Parmenides, master of abstract thinking. In its apparent content, in turn, the *Parmenides* offers a series of devastating criticisms of the theory of forms, criticisms that, on key points, seem to target the doctrine just as the elder Socrates had put it forth in the *Republic.* In fact, however, I believe it can be shown that, beneath its surface, the *Parmenides* has a more positive purpose and content. The specific focus of Parmenides' criticisms is, first, not so much the theory of forms itself as the simile Socrates relies on in thinking it (131b, 132d) and the way in which this tends to reduce forms to the status of things; in the second half of the *Parmenides,* in turn, Parmenides offers an intensely abstract "study of the one" (see 137b) that, properly interpreted, contains a new, purely conceptual account of the forms that meets and overcomes his earlier criticisms.[3]

Let me conclude by putting these remarks into the relevant focus. The movement between the *Republic* and the *Parmenides,* I want to suggest, is precisely analogous to the movement be-

3 I have attempted to make the full case for this reading of the *Parmenides* in my *Plato's* ***Parmenides****: The Conversion of the Soul* (Princeton, 1986).

tween phases of the *Republic:* apparently "disruptive," "cast-[ing an] earlier project [namely, the articulation of the nature of forms in *Republic* V-VII] into a new and withering light" (p. 140), the *Parmenides* is actually a fresh beginning that leads not away from the *Republic's* central teaching but to a new level of insight into it. I realize, of course, that sketched so briefly, this claim can stand only as a conjecture. If, however, a close study of the *Parmenides* should bear it out, then we have an enticement to wonder whether the same sort of connection may relate dialogues at other junctures in the *corpus* as well, to wonder, that is, if the sum of the dialogues, ostensibly a plethora of isolate reflections, can be construed instead as a set, or sets, of fresh beginnings that lead the responsive reader, in measured stages, into philosophy.

Vassar College

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Chapter Five

Divine Being and Divine Thinking in *Metaphysics* Lambda

by Aryeh Kosman

I. Why this Essay is about Divine Being

The good, Aristotle observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics,*[1] is predicated in the category of what something is—ἐν τῷ τί—in the case of ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς, that is, when we say of something that it is, as the translators give us, God and intelligence, or God and reason, or God and mind. It seems clear that here, as well as in the parallel passage in the *Eudemian Ethics,*[2] the phrase ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς, is a hendiadys; that is good in its essential nature which is the divine mind or the god that thinks. But if we keep this fact in mind, then the phrase 'God and mind' is a reasonable translation of ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς; what I have offered as the title of this essay about θεός and νοῦς—"divine being and divine thinking"—is not meant to be an alternative translation of ὁ θεὸς καὶ ὁ νοῦς, but a paraphrase.

But I think it is an important paraphrase, and one from which the central argument of this essay can be read: in his discussion of the divine in *Metaphysics* Lambda, Aristotle is concerned with a mode of being which is divine. This divine mode of being, I shall suggest, is the principle of that more general mode of being discovered in the central books of the *Metaphysics* as the formal explanatory principle of being in general. The fact that Aristotle is concerned in Lambda with a

[1] *Nicomachean Ethics,* I 6, 1096a24.

[2] *Eudemian Ethics,* I 8, 1217b30.