

I AM AN IMPURE THINKER

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INTRODUCTION BY

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CHAPTER 7

HERACLITUS TO PARMENIDES



Preface

THE FOLLOWING LETTER IS NEITHER fiction nor forgery. It is a conjuration. A deep mental sickness of our time is attacked and conjurement or exorcism is not an unheard-of cure. In a strange obduration of our vision, we are taking it for granted that anybody born in Greece between Homer and Plotinus had to have a "Greek" mentality, unalloyed by Jewish, id est prophetic and monotheistic elements. On the other hand, we are not surprised to find that in Israel, the Egyptian or the Canaanitic or Greek features have often eclipsed the genuine Israelitic function.

The approach to the peculiarly Greek errancy (as the Greek Fathers of the Church called the Odyssey of the Greek mind in retrospect), which we here propose, is a different one. From Homer to Parmenides the road was still open, the door to a common spirit of man was not closed. Solely after or with Parmenides did the metaphysical prison start in which subject and object, mind and body, nature and society were forever split. From Parmenides to Heidegger a time-continuum exists and whoever enters this maze called metaphysics or even philosophy, loses his membership in the pre-Greek humanity. In revenge, he calls this pre-Greek humanity primitive or uncivilized or barbaric. It is true that all philosophical terms are of Greek origin as the term philosophy itself is; logic, ethics, physics, theology, all are Greek terms and products of the mind that beginning with Parmenides seceded from the rest of the

race as peculiarly Greek and is found in all "sophisticated" minds today.

The point of embarkation—and this is no accident but occurs at any such decisive epoch—was marked off by Heraclitus. Heraclitus was left behind by the philosophy of "being" and by the record of his protest we have the means of finding our own bearings when overwhelmed by the lures of "reason" in our own age or in any age. The Christian Fathers have given Heraclitus this honor of having been a Christian before Christianity. And when the socialists—after Hegel—tried to free mankind from the fetters of abstraction and ideology—Ferdinand Lassalle chose Heraclitus as his "Great Argument" in contrast to Marx who attacked the modern Parmenides of his day, Hegel. Every time has its new form of sophistry and philosopher. We have symbolic logic, we have Heidegger and Sartre. And again, Heraclitus may save us. Aye, it seems to me that this time, once for all, we may really break the vicious circle of the metaphysicians. Thanks to the sufferings of the last forty years, the bluff of metaphysics can be called. There is one more hurdle in our way. They whose jargon nobody can control or check, have nicknamed the simple and political and straightforward Heraclitus "The Dark" lest anybody read him. For the naive, primitive, normal member of any community, Heraclitus is simple, and the gentlemen from Parmenides to Heidegger are the ones who sit in the smoke-filled room of their own definitions. Hence the following document is composed with the utmost respect for our sources and tries to conjure up the eternal issue in terms which identify our situation and the situation in 500 B.C.

Heraclitus of Ephesus to Parmenides of Elea

Ephesus, On the day of Zeus thunders

My Parmenides,

You kindly wrote to me of your new generalizations. One of them you call "the being," to which you oppose that which should not be, *mee on*. And you request my opinion.

If I was the gruff man they pretend me to be, I would simply

say the new term "the being" is the only *mee on* to me, the one term which we should never use, because it was not meant to be said or thought by mortal man. But I am not as gruff and I see you and me quite well defined, standing in a totally different situation and therefore aiming at the very opposite types of articulating.

My point of view and your point of view are *loci standi*, and we do not stand in the same place. I once found myself as the legitimate appointed first mayor of our free port and city. I have succeeded into a succession of illustrious names and offices of the past. Your words aim at the minds of young men who still play around. They do not yet serve their country under any specific appointment or name. You, so to speak, address that element in a man with which he still is a student before graduation. To the man before he is initiated you address your generalizations.

My aim has been to speak to those who can think because they have been appointed. In practice, this may seem to be quibbling. Your reader may be as old as mine. But to talk to a man on the first day after he has taken office and to generalize for him as I have tried to do, so that he may find his way in the maze of innumerable contradictory functions, is one thing. And to speak to men to whom the whole universe is still on undivided space because the powers that be protect them in their wanderings and musings, as you speak, is quite another. Their universe is a world of play.

Let me prove this first of all. You meet minds at play. For the real world is not one undivided space. The knowledge of the real world is entrusted to men after they have cut out paths through times and spaces by their bestowing names, rank, and degree to those with whom they live, in mutual recognition. All knowledge of the world is predicated on mutual recognition by name and introduction to each other. Of my listeners I have thought as people who had experienced how names opened up opportunity, how they stipulated in so many words as were required to perform so many acts among themselves. They would address each other by name so as to let each other pass or block the way. They would give orders,

the orders of their office, so that it may be done and then enacted as having been done at such and such a date. My listeners, then, use names to help or to obstruct each other, and they use verbs to begin or to end an act within society. They respect verbs not as statements of facts but because they make us turn agenda into acts, acts into facts, and conjugation is the purpose of their speech.

It is the illusion of the open heath, of the empty walls of study halls, to think of words as devoid of action, of action as possible outside of speech. This illusion now is nourished by you, Parmenides. Your term "being" tries to make the playgrounds sovereign. Let me explain to you how I feel about the waterfall of unpolitical thought which you are about to unleash. You will perhaps admit then that I am not ignorant of the relative truth of your procedure but that it strikes me as absurd that you try to give it the primacy in truth. Therefore, I first have to give the devil his due. Yes, you may talk about anything under the sun in your theories, Parmenides. But you cannot alter the fact that there always remains a difference of the first order between speech and talk. This distinction consists in *the form* of these two manners of expression. Speech is formal, talk is informal. Some truth cannot be expressed informally. But you proceed to do it just the same. Hence, a foreshortening of the truth must result if the formal, "highbrow" truths of courthouse and temple, council and army are translated into the informal language of academic discussion and private dialogue and fireside chats.

In our nurseries and playgrounds, after meals and in the bosom of the family, we do not speak but talk. The speaker is in harness in the uniform of his office; the talker is in shirt-sleeves and slippers. For to talk means to have relaxed. While we relax, we may be informal. The same judge who sends a murderer to the gallows, may crack informally a joke five minutes later. But he cannot pass the sentence by talk nor may he joke by using formal language. And here you see the dilemma. The judge *cannot* pass his sentence validly except by using formal language. But he could blaspheme against the sanctity of his office by playing with its formulas. Only he

"may" not if he wishes to be a good judge. Everything hinges on this distinction between "can" and "may." Formal speech *may* not be used by the magistrates as a joke. Informal talk *cannot* be used by the officers when officiating. You cannot pass sentence by talking off the record. You may not pass the time by undermining the sanctity of your office.

Our children play hopscotch. This is a play which imitates the serious procession of the dead through heaven and hell, when they are brought before their judges in the after-life as we were taught by the Egyptian priests. The distinction between speech and talk would never be lost if we still lived in the days of the ancients when neither women nor children spoke at all. But now everybody learns language. And now, the forms of the law and of worship are extensively played with by the young. In fact, all our children toy with the legal processes of their elders. They play marriage and war and pawnshop, and due process of law, in their playing with the forms and categories there established. And in their childish tongue, the distinction between the forms which may not be used and which cannot be used, vanishes. Therefore, let me make this distinction between formal speech and informal talk the main topic of my letter. For if children could fuse low-brow and high-brow *ad libitum*, your choice of the term "being" would be impeccable. It would just round out the vocabulary of informal thinking. To me, however, the realm of informal talk cannot transgress certain limitations. That it is impossible to say the things of greatest importance arbitrarily and informally, may be seen from a list of examples.

When I sent an embassy to Miletus, my messengers probably said rather informally, as we are good friends: "We have come to tell you such and such." But the stark truth behind their informal talk was the herald's or the usher's formal calling out: "The ambassadors from Ephesus," and the formal address of their credentials: "To the People of Miletus," lest they be liars. When a child says "daddy" and "mommy," the stark truth behind these informal words is that the parents are the child's father and child's mother and that a public record actually calls them so. The public record cannot speak of

daddy and mommy; for the opening of a common life is granted to those only who are called fathers and mothers in our city.

You have written to me about your find because I am Heraclitus and you are Parmenides. There is more persistence in your being Parmenides than in the "you" applied to Parmenides by Heraclitus in this present letter. Somewhere this, your official name, must occur although I may not use it in the context of the letter at all. For simplicity's sake, we here speak of you and I and me, and wallow in informality. Similarly, at our symposia, we may rant and curse that something is rotten, and the wicked will be acquitted anyway. Nevertheless, in back of such "somethings" and "anyways," definite misdemeanors must be understood. When I get up in the market place, I cannot simply say that something is wrong. I must say whether the mayor is a tyrant, or the *demos* anarchical, or the judges corrupt.

Informal speech can never identify reality to its highest possible degree. Neither "I," nor "you," nor "he" nor "it" are the complete procedure for identification. They are pronouns. The list,

| | |
|--------|---------|
| daddy | mommy |
| I | you |
| he | it |
| this | that |
| anyway | somehow |
| Jennie | Mike |

is a list of pro-nouns which we use instead of nouns when we talk informally.

Pronouns are a compromise between the real name of a person or a thing and the pointing finger while such person or thing is within the reach of our sense perception. To call a spade a spade is one thing; to point to the spade while it lies before us, which simply requires the gesture and a "there!" is a totally different act. One is the act of naming, the other is an attempt to reduce naming to its informal minimum.

Keep these two situations in mind: the solemn way of call-

ing out names while in our temples or at our gatherings, and the animal ways of crying and whistling, and you will no longer overestimate the compromise affected between the two by the young. In the presence of folks or food, the animal cub and his mother get by with grunting and barking and whistling. Our children compromise and we the parents gladly compromise with them, whenever we use pronouns, nicknames, slang, between the full names of the initiated and the laziness of the private home.

Forgive me when I repeat once more, in contrast, that nobody can function in his office unless his name is recognized. I must repeat this because from there we may go on to your generalization's strange assault on life's functioning.

The mariner calls out: gangway for the doctor, and that may save a sick sailor's life. The political power of names makes people circulate. Names signify our division of labor. They make room for a man and a thing. The "throne," the "hustings," our "tongue" as Greeks, the "eye of justice," the "thunder of Zeus," those were all names whose invocation made people move out or in. I understand that, among you, the words for "things" are thought of as mere etiquettes for physical objects. And "mother tongue," "the eye of God," "the thunder of Zeus," you call metaphors. For heaven's sake, Parmenides, "mother tongue" is the original meaning of tongue. A chair or throne was a throne first before it ever was a "thing." *Speech* is creative metaphor. And only *talk* is emptying thrones, tongues, hands, thunders, into mere physical objects. But let me be forgiven for getting angry at this point. For it was not my purpose to digress about the priority of metaphor. What I really wish to agree with you on is the necessity that all names are reciprocal.

Names make no sense unless they stand in mutual relation. Mother is not mother unless she may call, under the law, somebody the father. Brother is brother to a sister. And unless he calls her sister and she calls him brother, the name is worthless. The general and the sergeant, the master and the apprentice, the army and the navy make room for each other, in the wonderful whole of names. All names belong to this

holon, to society. No name is good without the others. The Pan of the universe drives people panicky, that is they lose speech. The *holon* of the city gives everybody a name in such a manner that everybody else now can be named by him, too.

When men philosophize about the world, the whole nomenclature of real titles, offices and names must be on their minds before they may generalize. Zeus and Artemis are the Gods of Ephesus. Only informally, we talk of them as "the divine." The divine comes in handy when we dislike to be solemn. But it has to be added to the list of pronouns. Neuters are one more version of the eternal pronoun of our informal nature. Why? Because Zeus and Artemis are reciprocal interests, "the divine" has lost its mutuality of functioning names. Nobody can be sure to what other part of reality "the divine" reciprocates. To those who never have invoked one single God, fearful to use the right name for him, *the* divine does not mean a thing.

Please allow me to sum up the argument as it has unfolded so far. There are three stages of linguistics: animal sounds, formal speech, informal talk. The step which separates the animal world from man is not the step from the rooster's cry to the baby's lullaby. It is in the jump from a sound to a name. In the formal world of names, all names are reciprocal and make room for speakers and answers or give way to each other, in one *holon*. Then rises the realm of the informal, in which words lie together as the toys of a child in the circle on the beach, encyclopedically, and that is without reciprocity of speakers and listeners.

There could be no informal speech unless we had created and did retain formal speech. Names have priority over pronouns. One cannot derive names from pronouns. Names are free creations; pronouns are natural derivatives.

By now, I hope that I have convinced you that the low-brow is the reflection of the highbrow, in the mind of the young, the relaxed, the players. Unless I have convinced you, the second half of this letter on "being" itself will not satisfy you. For in this second half I intend to apply the findings

for our names to the meaning of verbs, in human speech. The noun-pronoun relation is of old standing. But you now parallel this relation by a verb-proverb relation. And this is new.

We have gotten over the shock of daddy and mommy and "it rains" for Zeus rains. But that Zeus who thunders, shall be said to "have being," Artemis who hunts, to be subsumed under "being," shocks us still. You say that verbs may be turned into an omnibus ersatz pro-verb, as names may become pronouns. As the children play with the city, so you invite us to play with the gods.

What of it, you will reply. Is this not ineluctable? It is the obvious trend of evolution.

My Parmenides, Gods are not men. Two facts about the Gods make them different from mortal men. And "being" will forever dampen the crowd's eagerness to learn of these two facts. What are they? The first is: we meet the Gods in the opposite manner from our fellow-men. The other is equally important: no one God is always with us.

As to point one, may it suffice to say this. When a man approaches us from afar and we cannot recognize him, he already is a man to us though not yet identified. Then he begins to act and then we specify who he is. With Gods, it is the other way. Their acts are the only facts known of the Gods. We see them in their acts first and never see much more of them. Tremendous movements of army against army allow us to say that Ares rages. The harvest's bounty shows us how Demeter blessed our fields. As a result of this difference between Gods and men, we are satisfied to give names to people. *Names never suffice for Gods.* It is their specific act which compels us to believe in the specific God. And it is the actuality created by the God's activity which compels us to worship the reciprocal Goddess. Surrounded by majestic catastrophes and bounties, we speak of the Gods in as far as acts stage our human drama, and we speak of Goddesses as we are made secure by the actualities created around such dramatic action. The cities and the virtues and the processes of law are the recurrent actualities of our Gods' initial acts.

Take away these acts of the Gods and the actualities of our *akropoleis*, our temples, our laws, and the wide earth becomes ineffable again.

The Gods have acted all the verbs which now form the matrices of our vocabulary. For verbs preserve the acts of Gods, not men. The verb and the specific verb is the lifeblood of a God. He commands, he blesses and he rises and he curses and he thunders. He exalts and he humiliates. Always does he become known in his act and never outside of it. Our point of contact with the Gods is in their acts. This has a grave consequence. Humans can drop their official masks. They can play. The Gods as far as they come into our lives never play with their function. We have no other way of coping with their acts except by taking them seriously. Homer has the Gods relax, I know, but this is not his source of information for the Gods. Of men we know after we have met them at games, and in the privacy of the home. Here, the playground is the best introduction; not so with Gods. If you ever wish to meet him, forget the manner of being introduced to your friends. The Gods cannot be known outside their serious acts.

Your term, "being," however, plays with all verbs. This, no God can survive. You take his scalp when you suppress his act.

Point two is even more readily overlooked. As the God acts, his act comes *kairoi*. At the appointed instant, his act makes its entrance and its exit. Today, he thunders, tomorrow he lifts Ganymedes to Olympos. Yesterday, Poseidon raged against Odysseus. Tomorrow, Hermes will go to Kalypso and consult with her on the hero's homecoming. We pray or deprecate the future acts of the Gods, we prophesy their approach, we thank them for their fulfillment in our festivals. This means that any God acts at his appointed hour. They befall us and they leave us again. And we are challenged to use a certain acuteness of our time sense. Now, that the Gods act is enshrined in our verbs. And this is obvious. It is less obvious that the appointed hour also is embalmed in the matrices of all our spirit. Is it not the wonderful form of any verb that it cannot help expressing the appointed hour by placing us

either before, or in, or after the event? In this sense, I have spoken of Fire. It was, I wrote, and it is, and it shall be. For Gods pass and return.

Alas, my own step of lumping all the acts of the Gods together when I said: it was, it is, it shall be, now may be held against me. "Why do you bear a grudge against Parmenides? Is not your word, it was, it is, it shall be, as weak a term as any pronoun? Is it not exactly the omnibus pro-verb, this 'instead-of-all-specific-verbs' which you fear in Parmenides?"

Well do I know that I may be accused of heralding your own innovation. But while your "being" may make people think of Gods outside their acts, I felt that none of my citizens could slip in this manner as long as the act kept its refreshing unexpectedness before, and now, and after. Thus, you never are sure. "Fire" is uncertain in its central character. It is extinguishable, although it flares up again. And I was in deadly earnest with my generalizations. On the crossroads of the earth, our city has introduced so many exotic crafts and guilds that *the reciprocity of all* their professions had to be freshly stressed. The ebb and tide of everybody's participation in the life of the *holon*, I tried to drive home.

Your term "being," however, is not the result of such a pressure for political harmony. It is a mirror of life, no medicine for its confusions. With the Gods, their appointed hour is our appointment with our destiny. "Being" is indifferent to the God's appointment with us. His absence or his presence you suggest shall make no difference. "Being" is good enough for spectators of life. But men must know when Gods ask us to speak, and when to fall silent. To children on whose lips no God ever placed any words and never silenced them with awe, "being" is as good a word about reality as "he" for the king, and "she" for the maid. But "it" is not a word for any God as it wipes off our brow the sweat of fear and trembling and expectation and despair.

This, then, is the manner of real speech, that he who tries to join a living community of speaking members must humbly ask what is going on. Our words for the question what, who, how, where, etc., are all fillers and they are whispered with

no less breath and emphasis than the known parts of the sentence. The man who asks for the road to Ephesus, must say: where does the road to Ephesus go? And he thereby shows that he cannot complete the sentence himself. He already knows the name of Ephesus or road and the word go. But "where" is to be thrown out by the competent answerer who, as a full-fledged resident of the place, can distinguish Miller's Pond from Hangman's Corner. The resident, in his answer, directs the outsider so that he is enabled to complete the sentence: the road to Ephesus leads by Hangman's Corner.

Real speech, then, gives the man second rank. To ask is to look for fuller information by those who know. This normal service of question and answer, that it is a feeder into participation in a going concern, is perverted in your students' manners. You now ask the ignorant and promise that the experts will be enriched by the answer of the ignorant. This sophistry makes the question an independent act which no longer presupposes somebody who can be asked because he knows. The revolution will shake every commonwealth. For the know-nothings now are not only asking the questions but they now feel unencumbered by any existing answer.

Parmenides, Parmenides, by making him who must ask, at the same time that man who also can give the answer, law and government will become impossible. The gymnasiums filled with naked, beautiful but inexperienced boys will proclaim their own untested truth as the answer is given there and not sought from those who do not have to ask because they have mastered the replies by their actions and habits since time immemorial.

You detach the students from the wise, the young from the old, and the ingenious tapestry of life between the many generations of man is replaced by a wild scramble of contemporary boys without memory and their flatterers, admirers and bought tutors among the old. For such a crowd of men who live by curiosity and who answer their own questions in an obscene self-love, the only way out is your way: to proclaim generalizations like "being," abstracts like "it" and "they."

I did generalize, too, but I still did it for the adult and

officiating citizens. Everyone of our guilds and crafts—to say nothing of judges, priests, captains, and police—every activity in our city has come into existence because a God sponsored their acts. Pray, said the God, and the priest prayed. Bake, tailor, hunt, guard, the God commanded, and he who baked became the baker, he who tailored became the tailor, he who hunted became the hunter of our good city. Without this obedience to Hephaistos, Hermes, Zeus, no *poietai* would work the statues of the Gods, no merchant would go to market, no judge would uphold the Themis. In the division of labor of our city, every citizen got his good conscience from the verbs. They explained to him the rhythm, the beginning and the end of his activities within the sacred calendar and liturgy of the whole. Our city moves in the trance of a cosmic dance in which judge and baker know their password because of their names.

I have tried to purify this dance and to prevent confusion, by assigning to every member his rise and fall, his going and returning. The city requires both, great zest and transient zest. The most eager judge must stop when meal time has come. Where many must act seriously, yet differently and at different times, I tried to restate the commonwealth's paradox of *transient zest*. The appointed hours and the appointed offices must both be brought on by us; for this reason our names and titles are specific and formal, and our acts are God-ordered and God-rescinded. The names of the Gods and the names of men are reciprocal. Neither means anything by itself.

You, Parmenides, have abandoned the serious liturgy of city life. You wish to *see* the Gods. For this contemplation which you take to the playground, you send the times on vacation. You are like the barker in front of the circus who promises a magic mirror of the universe. The man who enters his booth relaxes. He loses his identity. He is one of the crowd. The people is changed into the public.

The public is a bunch of cowards always. Your boys now can debate about the universe without the fear of blasphemy. It may be an interesting topic in the palestra whether the divine has "being." The council of our city must try to find

out whether Zeus blesses or curses, whether Hera sends discord or peace.

You treat as a topic of relaxation the very acts which never relax. Out of the affairs of the community you produce generalizations. You complete the secession of our playboys from our citizens. For this reason, I have to draw the line between you and me.

I still try to speak to everybody as a citizen who at any time may officiate. You address the informal daddy or kid in all of us. For by now you will not deny that the *scalping of names*, in which you have taken the last step, is permissible solely to those who talk, never to those who speak. "Being" is the scalp of the divine acts and the political names. This scalp hangs dangling from your belt. To hell with your "pronoun," to hell with your pro-verb "being." Or we all shall find ourselves in hell.

Heraclitus