The instant (ἐξαίφνης) in Plato's *Parmenides* 155e3-157b4

by Luc Brisson

Abstract

When, in Plato's *Parmenides* 155e3-157b4, Parmenides refers to the instant (ἐξαίφνης), he is alluding to a paradox of Zeno, and not to an argument of Plato. Thus, in the second part of the *Parmenides*, the speaker is a fair representation of the historical Parmenides, and not a figment of Plato's imagination.

Key words

Instant (ἐξαίφνης), moment (νῦν), Plato, Aristotle, Parmenides, Zeno.

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I would like to show that Parmenides, when refering to the instant (ἐξαίφνης) in Plato's *Parmenides* 155e3-157b4, adopts Zeno's assumption of the divisibility of time, which Aristotle, by means of the moment (νῦν), rejects by appealing to the potential infinite, .

1. *The second part of the* Parmenides

Parmenides, an old man, and Zeno, much younger, come to Athens for the Great Panathaena. Socrates, who is young at the time, comes to hear Zeno read his treatise. Zeno tries to show that, if beings were many, contradictions would appear. When he has finished, Socrates proposes the hypothesis of the intelligible forms as a solution. The contradictory characteristics in sensible beings can be easily explained, he argues, by participation in the intelligible forms.

Parmenides takes the floor in defense of Zeno, who maintains his master's hypothesis: being is one. He makes a series of objections against participation. A sensible being cannot contain an intelligible form as a whole or as a part. Moreover, participation triggers an indefinite regress. These objections cannot be met, by claiming that the intelligible form is a thought. And it is impossible to separate intelligible forms from sensible beings. Because Socrates maintains that intelligible forms are necessary for thought and discourse, Parmenides

proposes to train Socrates to fight successfully by giving him the example of an exercise in dialectics.

According to his strategy, only one hypothesis is involved, that of Zeno, which is also that of Parmenides: "If you like, said Parmenides, take as an example this hypothesis that Zeno entertained: if there are many things, what must the consequences be both for these many things themselves in relation to themselves and in relation to the one, and for the one in relation to itself and in relation to the many things? And in turn on the hypothesis that there are not many things, you must again examine what the consequences will be both for the one and for the many in relation to themselves and in relation to each other." (*Parm*. 136a-b)

Because this hypothesis is taken not only as an affirmation but also as a negation, with regard to what is one and to other things, this results in eight series of deductions, divided into two sets, which form the two sub-sections making up the second part of the *Parmenides*. For the sake of clarity and to avoid any ambiguity, I will refer to eight "series of deductions" rather than to eight "hypotheses", as is usually done[1].

Hence this table:

> A) Parmenides's hypothesis is affirmed
> And from this affirmed hypothesis positive and negative consequences are drawn for the one and for other things.
> > 1) Positive consequences
> > > – for the one: II a) 142b-155el b) 155e-157b
> > > – and for other things: III 157b-159a
> > 2) Negative consequences
> > > – for the one: I 137c-142a
> > > – and for other things: IV 159b-160b
>
> B) Parmenides's hypothesis is negated
> And from this negated hypothesis positive and negative consequences are drawn for the one and for other things.
> > 1) Positive consequences
> > > – for the one: V 160b-163b
> > > – and for other things: VII 164b-165e
> > 2) Negative consequences
> > > – for the one: VI 163b-164b
> > > – and for other things: VIII 165e-166c

Thus, we have eight series of deductions involving four pairs, each of which has a positive and a negative branch[2]. If we accept this distribution, the passage from 160b4 to 160d3 will not be part of any series of deductions, but a summary of what has just been deduced in the series.

2. *The second part of Plato's* Parmenides

As I tried to show in my translation, the eight deductions in the second part of Plato's *Parmenides* deal with the sensible world, that is the universe, as is obvious from the structure

of the second series of deductions, which is the most detailed one. Each of the deals with a pair of categories in the sensible world[3].

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one / many
        whole / parts
                limited / unlimited
                        number
                        figure : straight / circular
                located in something else /in itself
                        contact
                        at rest / in movement
        identity / difference
                similar / dissimilar
                        in contact / not in contact
                        same age / different age
                                existence
                        knowledge, language
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Even if the formula τὸ πᾶν doesn't appear in the second part of the *Parmenides*, this second part has the world or the universe as its object.

I understand the hypothesis εἰ ἕν ἐστιν as meaning "if the universe is one", because I take the subject of ἐστιν to be τὸ πᾶν (the universe), which is equivalent to being (τὸ ὄν) and not the one (ἕν), which must therefore be considered as an attribute. This reading is also supported by a solid point of grammar: attributes lack a definite article in ancient Greek. And it does not conflict with the expression τὸ ἕν (the or this one), which frequently reappears in the second half of the *Parmenides*[4].

3. *Parmenides* 155e4-157a4

Here is the beginning of the passage. The most important question about this passage is to find out what τι δὴ τὸ τρίτον λέγωμεν means.

> P. Let's speak of it yet a third time (Ἔτι δὴ τὸ τρίτον λέγωμεν). If the one is as we have described it – being both one and many and neither one nor many, and partaking of time (καὶ μετέχον χρόνου) – must it not, because it is one, sometimes partake of being and in turn, because it is not, sometimes not partake in being ?
> YA. Necessarilly (*Parm.* 155e4-8, transl. Gill-Ryan)

Plotinus and other neoplatonists understood that this was a third series of deductions corresponding to the realm of soul.
But this would spoil the logical order of Parmenides' exercise. So, in agreement with Cornford, I would like to prove that 155e-157b is but a corrollary to the third series of deductions. Here is a description of the three steps of the argument in this series of deductions. First step : Parmenides' hypothesis is reworded (ἓν εἰ ἔστιν, 142b3) and then clarified (142b6-c7). Second step : From the starting hypothesis (ἓν εἰ ἔστιν, 142c8) the ten consequences are deduced (142c8-155e3). Thierd step : The initial hypothesis is repeated

(ἓν εἰ ἔστιν, 155e4). To conclude, this corrollary summarizes the consequences of the second series of deductions in a temporal context.

But for the first time, these consequences are situated in a temporal context :

> When it partakes, can it be that time not partake, or partake when it doesn't ?
> It cannot.
> [So it partakes at one time (Ἐν ἄλλῳ ἄρα χρόνῳ μετέχει) , and doesn't partake at another
> (καὶ ἐν ἄλλῳ οὐ μετέχει), for only in this way could it both partake and not partake of the same thing ?
> That's right.
> Isn't there, then, a definite time (οὗτος χρόνος), when it gets a share of being and when it parts from it?
> Or how can it now (τότε μὲν) have and then (τότε δὲ) not have the same thing, if it never (μήποτε) gets and releases it ?
> In no way.
> Don't you in fact call getting a share of being ″coming-to-be″ ?
> I do.
> And parting from being ″ceasing-to-be″ ?
> Most certainly.
> Indeed the one, as it seems, when it gets and releases being, comes to be and ceases to be.
> Necessarily. (*Parm.* 155e8-156b1)

The first consequence is being in opposition to non-being. Each of these contrasted consequences is situated in time, and more precisely in a period of time (τότε μὲν, τότε δὲ). This means that time is a succession of discrete periods of time. Hence the question of when does coming-to-be (γίγνεσθαι) and ceasing-to-be (ἀπόλλυσθαι), that is changing, occur ?

> And since it is one and many and comes to be and ceases to be, doesn't its being many cease to be whenever (ὅταν) it comes to be many ?
> Certainly.
> Whenever (ὅταν) it comes to be one and many, must it not separate and combine ?
> It certainly must.
> Further more, whenever (ὅταν) it comes to be like and unlike, must it not be made like and unlike ?
> Yes.
> And whenever (ὅταν) it comes to be greater and less and equal, must it not increase and decrease and be made equal ?
> Just so.
> And whenever (ὅταν), being in motion, it comes to a rest, and whenever (ὅταν), being at rest, it changes to moving, it must itself, presumably, be in no time at all (οὔτε ἐν χρόνῳ ὄν).
> How is that ?
> It won't be able to undergo being previously (πρότερον) at rest and later (ὕστερον) in motion or being previously (πρότερον) in motion and later (ὕστερον) at rest without changing ?
> Obviously not.
> Yet there is no time (Χρόνος δέ γε οὐδεὶς ἔστιν) in which something can simultaneously (ἅμα) be neither in motion nor at rest.
> Yes, you are quite right.
> Yet surely it also doesn't change without changing.
> Hardly. (Parm. 156b1-c8)

One can ask the same question for these opposites taken into account in the two previous series of deductions : one and many (156b1-5) ; like and unlike (156b6-7) ; greater and less

and equal (156b7-c1) ; motion and rest (156c1-5). Each of these opposite is in a time, before (πρότερον) or after (ὕστερον). They can't both be at the same time (ἅμα). There is no time (χρόνος δέ γε οὐδεὶς ἔστιν) for their changing. When do they change ?

> So when does it change ? For it does not change while it is at rest or in motion, [156d] or while it is in time (οὔτε ἐν χρόνῳ ὄν).
> Yes you're quite right.
> Is there, then, this odd thing (τὸ ἄτοπον τοῦτο) in which it might be, just when it changes ?
> What oddthing ?
> The instant (Τὸ ἐξαίφνης). The instant (τὸ γὰρ ἐξαίφνης) seems to signify something such that changing occurs from it to each of two states. For a thing doesn't change from rest while rest continues, of from motion, while motion continues. Rather, this odd creature, the instant (ἡ ἐξαίφνης αὕτη φύσις ἄτοπος τις), lurks between motion and rest – being in no time at all (ἐν χρόνῳ οὐδενὶ οὖσα) – and to it and [**156e**] from it the moving thing changes to resting, and the resting thing changes to moving.
> It looks that way. (*Parm.* 156c8-e3)

The answer is the instant, which is in no time at all (ἐν χρόνῳ οὐδενὶ οὖσα), because it is from it and to it that changing occurs. It is very interesting that Plato uses the word ἄτοπος, which means ″without a place″ and metaphorically «odd».

> And the one, if in fact it both rests and moves, could change to each state – for only in this way could it do both. But in changing, it changes at an instant (μεταβάλλον δ' ἐξαίφνης μεταβάλλει), and when it changes, it should be in no time at all (ἐν χρόνῳ οὐδενὶ οὖσα, and just then (τότε) it would be neither in motion nor at rest.
> No, it wouldn't.
> Is it so with the other changes too ? Whenever the one changes from being to ceasing-to-be, or from not-being to coming-to-be, isn't it then between certain states (μεταξύ τινων τότε) of motion and rest ? And then (τότε) it neither is not is not, and neither comes to be or ceases to be ?
> It seems so, at any rate. (*Parm.* 156e3-157a4)

The instant, then, is that in which change occurs between two opposites. This means that it is not in time, which is not continuous, because it is made of discrete periods[5].

4. *Aristotle's criticism*

There are only two occurrences of ἐξαίφνης in all of Aristotle's works, in the context of a criticism of *Parmenides* 155e4-157a4.

> [15] The instant (τὸ δ' ἐξαίφνης) refers to what has departed from its former condition in a time imperceptible because of its smallness (τὸ ἐν ἀναισθήτῳ χρόνῳ διὰ μικρότητα ἐκστάν) ; but it is the nature of *all* change to alter things from their former condition (μεταβολὴ δὲ πᾶσα φύσει ἐκστατικόν). In time all things come into being and pass away (…) It is clear then that it must be in itself, [**20**] as we said before, the condition of destruction rather than of coming into being (for change, in itself, makes things depart from their former condition), and only incidentally of coming into being, and of being. A sufficient evidence of this is that nothing comes into being without itself moving somehow and acting, but a thing can be destroyed even if it does not move at all. And this is what, as a rule, we chiefly mean by a thing's being destroyed by time. [25] Still, time does not work even this change ; even this sort of change takes place *incidentally* in time.

> We have stated, then, that time exists and what it is, and in how many senses we speak of the 'now' (τὸ νῦν)[6], and what 'at some time' (τὸ ποτὲ)[7], 'lately' (τὸ ἄρτι)[8], 'presently' or 'just' (τὸ ἤδη)[9], 'long ago' (τὸ πάλαι)[10], and 'suddenly' (τὸ ἐξαίφνης) mean. (*Phys.* IV 13 222b15-29, transl. Ross)

Motion and rest occupy time (*Phys.* VI 234b9), and the instant is a limit of motion and rest. The instant is an extremely small duration, which means it is a part of time. For Aristotle, there is no such thing as the beginning or the end of a process of change (*Phys.* VI 263a 14-15), since time is continuous. He appeals here to the potential infinite, since time can be divided only potentially, while for Parmenides time is a succession of separate moments (νῦν) appealing to an actual infinite.

This definition of ἐξαίφνης is not to be found with this meaning in Plato[11].

5. *Parmenides, not Plato*

According to Parmenides, in the second part of the *Parmenides* (*Parm.* 156c8-e3), nothing can be at rest or in motion in the instant in which change is supposed to occur. The consequence is a paradox of Zeno presented by Aristotle as the Arrow :

> The third is that already given above, to the effect that the flying arrow is at rest, which result follows from the assumption that time is composed of moments: if this assumption is not granted, the conclusion will not follow (*Phys.* VI 239b5-9, 30-32)

The arrow is neither in motion nor at rest in the instant in which change occurs.

> Zeno's reasoning, however, is fallacious, when he says that if everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always occupying such a space at any moment, the flying arrow is therefore motionless. This is false, for time is not composed of indivisible moments any more than any other magnitude is composed of indivisibles (*Phys.* VI 263a4-b5, cf. Simplicius, *In Phys.* 1290, 21-24 Diels)

If time is composed of instants, the arrow when in motion is not in motion, and when it is at rest is not at rest. This paradox is based on the assumption that time is composed of discrete moments, a claim Aristotle denies on the basis of his analysis of infinity, which is potential and never actual.

To conclude. When refering to the ἐξαίφνης, Parmenides is, alluding to a paradox of Zeno, and not to an argument of Plato. Thus, the second part of the *Parmenides* deals with the hypothesis of Parmenides, and even if this hypothesis is affirmed, negative consequences can be drawn for the one and for other things. In this passage, which is a temporal corrollary of the second series of deductions, Parmenides' argument refers not to Plato's but to Zeno's conception of time. Thus, in the second part of the *Parmenides*, the speaker is the historical Parmenides, and not a figment of Plato's imagination.

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[1] For different divisions of the second part, see Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne*, texte établi et traduit par H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink, livre I, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1968 : Introduction, p. LXXX-LXXXIX.

[2] For different divisions of the second part, see Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne*, texte établi et traduit par H. D. Saffrey et L. G. Westerink, livre I, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1968 : Introduction, p. LXXX-LXXXIX.

[3] Platon, *Parménide*, traduction inédite, introduction et notes par Luc Brisson, Collection GF 688, Paris (Flammarion) 1995, 1999[2], 2011[3], 2018[4].

[4] Brisson, Luc, "Is the world one? A new interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*", *Oxford Studies in ancient Philosophy* 22, 2002, p.1-20.

[5] *Plato's* Parmenides, translation and analysis by Reginald E. Allen, Oxford (Blackwell) 1983, p. 264-265.

[6] The 'now' is the link of time, as has been said (for it connects past and future time), and it is a limit of time (for it is the beginning of the one and the end of the other). But this is not obvious as it is with the point, which is fixed. It divides potentially, and in so far as it is dividing the 'now' is always different, but in so far as it connects it is always the same, as it is with mathematical lines. For the intellect it is not always one and the same point, since it is other and other when one divides the line; but in so far as it is one, it is the same in every respect.(222a10-17)

[7] 'At some time' means a time determined in relation to the first of the two types of 'now', e.g. 'at some time' Troy was taken, and 'at some time' there will be a flood; for it must be determined with reference to the 'now'. There will thus be a determinate time from this 'now' to that, and there was such in reference to the past event. But if there be no time which is not 'sometime', every time will be determined. (222a25-28)

[8] 'Lately', too, refers to the part of past time which is near the present 'now'. (222b6-7) Lately', too, refers to the part of past time which is near the present 'now'. 'When did you go?' 'Lately', if the time is near the existing now. (222b13-14)

[9] 'Presently' or 'just' refers to the part of future time which is near the indivisible present 'now'. (222bb7-8)

[10] 'Long ago' refers to the distant past. (222b14)

[11] In Plato, ἐξαίφνης appears mostly in its usual meanings : sudden, at once, immediately. *Crat*. 391a1, 396b4, c7, d3 ; *Theaet*. 162c3, 203e1 ; *Pol*. 291b7 ; *Symp*. 212c6, 213c1, 223b2 ; *Gorg*. 523e4 ; *Laws* 665b4, 678b9, 712e4, 738d4, 866d7, 867a3, b6, 944b2 ; *Resp*. 472a1, 553a10, 584b6, 615d6, 621b6. Its philosophical use qualifeis the access to the intelligible realm linked to light. : *Symp*. 210e4 ; *Lettre* 7th, 314 e7 ; 515c6, 516a4, e5,