



The Agonist

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Reality (The Golden Sufi Center, 2003), Peter Kingsley.

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Reality, by classicist and historian of philosophy Peter Kingsley, introduces us to a singular vision of the origins of western philosophy through a penetrating, in-depth study of Parmenides and Empedocles. In *Reality*, these two giants of Pre-Platonic philosophy appear in a wholly new light—as prophets and initiates—links in an ancient tradition of philosophy as a way of life and a sacred path. Here Kingsley builds on his earlier work, especially the seminal *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1995) and his compact but inspired introduction to the poetry of Parmenides, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (The Golden Sufi Center, 1999). However, *Reality* goes well beyond both of these books, offering a thorough account of the philosophies of Parmenides and Empedocles as well as the history of the transmission (and distortion) of their writings from ancient sources through to modern scholars. Ultimately, Kingsley’s aim in this book is not to offer his readers a new understanding of two founders of western philosophy. Instead, *Reality* provides a way into the lived experience of their teachings and their world—a world of great beauty, subtlety, meaning, and magic.

I. Parmenides

The first five chapters of *Reality* focus on the poem of Parmenides. On Kingsley's reading, Parmenides, founder of western logic, has been profoundly misunderstood: he was far from the solemn rationalist and purely abstract thinker he has been made out to be. Instead, Parmenides was an *iatromantis*—a “healer-prophet” and practicing priest of Apollo. His poem both records and invokes the ancient technique of ecstasy-through-stillness known as “incubation.” His elusive logic is, above all, a pathway to the divine.

Kingsley lays the groundwork for this radical departure from conventional understandings of Parmenides with an astute analysis of the “*proem*” (the formal introduction found at the start of many archaic works) of Parmenides' famous poem, which has long been “put aside as nothing but a rhetorical device, an allegory; as just a vague poetic attempt at describing how the philosopher leaves confusion for clarity, darkness for enlightenment” (29). As Kingsley dryly notes, before we do this to Parmenides, “it can be a good idea to look at what he has to say” because “[e]ach image plays its part in a completely coherent whole. Every single detail has its own particular place” (29).

Kingsley makes his case convincingly. He notes that the mythical imagery and geography of Parmenides' poem suggest a shamanic descent to the underworld, to the realms of the dead (29-31). The description of this journey evokes the practice of incubation and its ability to give access to other states of consciousness—far from being a mere allegory, the *proem* is a record of a real and powerful experience. He also points out that the language used by Parmenides is recognizably incantatory and initiatory (32-35) and that some of the oddest and least comprehensible details and irregularities of meter in the *proem* begin to make sense in an incubatory context (36-37). In addition to this, Kingsley reviews and interprets the almost totally neglected archeological evidence from mid-twentieth century excavations at Parmenides' hometown of Velia—evidence indicating that Parmenides was remembered in his native city as the founder of a priestly lineage and a “son of Apollo” for centuries after his death (37-43). As Kingsley notes, this

evidence merely confirms the incubatory context already suggested by the opening of Parmenides' poem itself.

If this portrait of Parmenides strikes modern readers as surprising, it is because "Parmenides' teaching has been turned into something utterly dry; quite dead" (48). But behind the rigid, modern caricatures of "the father of logic" (which have their ancient antecedents) lies another Parmenides—a man whose teaching is about "life itself" and "has nothing to do with theory" because it is a "matter of experience: the experience of reality" (48). Making space for this long-forgotten experiential and initiatory core of Parmenides' teaching allows one to approach the poem with fresh eyes, opens up new interpretive paths.

Kingsley's grasp of Parmenides' skillful use of indirect language is one of his great strengths—his attention as a reader of ancient texts is both impressive and fruitful. He finds and makes use of pregnant allusions to Homer (64-65, 95-97, 222), meaningfully humorous contradictions in terms (89, 124), and tremendously subtle wordplay (96, 213, 225-229). But this expressive subtlety and hiddenness, a hallmark of Parmenides' poetry, springs from and points to something of much deeper significance, the leitmotif of *Reality: mêtis*. In ancient Greek, this was the word for "cunning, skillfulness, practical intelligence; and especially for trickery . . . It meant a particular quality of intense awareness that always manages to stay focused on the whole: on the lookout for hints, however subtle, for guidance in whatever form it happens to take, for signs of the route to follow however quickly they might appear or disappear" (90). *Mêtis* threads its song through *Reality*, and it is what allows Kingsley to present the three movements of Parmenides' poem as a seamless whole—in itself a major achievement.

The poem is traditionally viewed as having three quite distinct parts. There is the introduction, which recounts Parmenides' journey to a nameless goddess. Next there is the "Way of Truth," the great logic, in which the goddess explains to him what reality truly is. Finally, there is the "Way of Seeming," now mostly lost, which the goddess freely admits is "deceptive" and in which she gives a detailed account of the world we

live in. As Kingsley notes, virtually absent from the scholarly literature is any sense that the parts of the poem once formed a coherent and organic whole: “The fixed tradition nowadays is to split his poem into three. The first part is poor myth; the second is philosophy; the last is poor science at the very best. And of course the general inclination is to focus on the philosophy, forget about the science and skip as quickly as possible over the mythology” (273). The problem with this approach is not just that it willfully disregards Parmenides’ own aims and intentions. The poem can only be understood as a whole—none of the parts, in isolation, makes any sense. However, with a respect for the living, experiential essence of Parmenides’ philosophy as a foundation, and with an awareness of the tremendous importance of *mêtis* as a guide, Kingsley is able to restore for his readers an understanding of the poem’s unity.

When the goddess gives her description of reality in the Way of Truth, she calls it birthless, deathless, unmoving, of a single nature, timeless, and one (163-180). And of course this doesn’t accord with our experience of reality at all. Thus, commentators in the ancient world and contemporary academe have tended to take the twin route of supposing that Parmenides is talking about some other reality than this one—some abstract, logical realm of pure being—and of thinking that Parmenides is an enemy of experience. But Kingsley argues that Parmenides is not talking about any other reality than the one all around us and is not opposed to experience but to the poverty of experience that fails to find oneness and eternity in the only place they are ever found: right here and now (123-125, 164, 199, 293-294). There is reality—which is all around us and can be experienced in all its stillness, oneness, and completeness at any moment—and there is illusion, which is simply the failure to experience reality fully and is thus the only reality we know: the world of change, motion, time, and separation we seem to live in (81, 170, 199). Here again *mêtis* comes in—as the divine, deceptive power that creates the illusion we inhabit, as the missing factor in our lives whose absence keeps us in bondage and delusion, and as the faculty of grounded cunning and intense awareness that can be used to find our way into the oneness surrounding us (215, 220, 228, 281). The similarities to Buddhist or Vedantic thought are striking but perhaps not as striking as an average western reader’s surprise at finding a rich mysticism at the heart of Greek philosophy. This, however, may

merely be symptomatic of how estranged we have become from the wellspring of our own culture. It may also be a sign of how much faith we have placed—or misplaced—in generations of scholars who have insisted, for reasons that were often less than noble and with arguments that were often less than rigorous, on presenting Greece as the source and pinnacle of all things rational in contrast to that great Other, “the East.”

In the fourth and fifth chapters of *Reality*, Kingsley explores the Way of Seeming and its relation to the Way of Truth. His recovery of Parmenides’ science is extraordinarily valuable, especially in light of the trend of dismissing the final part of his poem as “a stopgap, a filler, a feeble sequence of second-rate thoughts” (212). Here, in the few fragments that remain of the Way of Seeming and the scattered ancient accounts of its contents, we find the knowledge that the moon’s light is a reflection of the sun’s, the first mention of a spherical Earth, the understanding that the globe has a hot equatorial belt, temperate zones, and cold polar regions. As Kingsley demonstrates, this final part of Parmenides’ poem was no mere afterthought—it was cutting edge science far ahead of its time. But to understand why Parmenides considered advanced scientific knowledge to be illusion, a cosmic trick; to understand how this relates to the Way of Truth and knowledge of reality; indeed, to understand why Parmenides should have chosen to include the Way of Seeming at all: these are the real issues.

Kingsley grounds Parmenidean science in the realities of soil and blood, connecting it to the journeys of the great explorer Pytheas, Parmenides’ fellow Phocaeen who sailed beyond Gibraltar—apparently as far north as the Arctic. He brings out the significance of Parmenides’ choice of words, situating his striking language of “bonds,” “fetters,” “helplessness,” and “deception” in the vocabulary of ancient magic—especially that of binding spells and love magic. Most importantly, he shows how this magical dimension of Parmenides’ poetry allows us to understand the Way of Truth and the Way of Seeming, reality and illusion, as inseparable aspects of one reality, as two sides of the same coin. Kingsley’s work here is well researched, original, and brilliant. He takes us into the shifting, treacherous world of *mêtis*, a world so subtle and ambiguous that truth is necessarily shot through with illusion, a world in which illusions must be cared for as

much as truth and where trickery and deception are the greatest truths of all (257-258, 461). It is also a world where nothing is simple or clear-cut, where our ready categories fall to pieces around us. Popular debates over the clash between “faith” and “reason” seem almost pathetically naïve. And even the most sophisticated modern and post-modern discussions of the relationships between science, philosophy, and art appear needlessly constricted and limiting alongside a practical mysticism where they have always existed in an elegant and sublime union.

II. Empedocles

Empedocles, another founder of western philosophy, is the focus of the final seven chapters of *Reality*. Kingsley contends that the poetry of Empedocles has been every bit as misunderstood as that of Parmenides. His importance as a driving force behind early philosophy, cosmology, biology, and chemistry is undeniable. He is memorialized in textbooks as the originator of the tremendously influential idea of the four elements. But Empedocles’ deep, mystical religiosity, his concern with the destiny of the soul—clearly of fundamental importance to him—have long been pushed aside, treated as of secondary importance. They have even been seen as nothing more than an eccentricity—either as youthful idealism or a lamentable sign of decline, of the crochets of old age, depending how the scholar in question prefers to date his poetic output. In any event, the general sentiment has been that his religious views have nothing to do with the science and philosophy proper that find expression in his great cosmological poem (which, troublingly, took the form of an esoteric address to a lone disciple). It is because of this artificial separation, Kingsley argues, that so little of Empedocles’ meaning has been grasped.

For Empedocles was a magician, a man who openly claimed to have become divine, and whose philosophy—all of it—points to a way of life aimed at restoring the human being to his or her divine station (318-321). And just as commentators have failed to see the unity of the three parts of Parmenides’ poem, so too have they failed to see the intimate connection between Empedocles’ mysticism and his science—and that the

compartmentalization of Empedocles has been a total failure. It has not only been hermeneutically ineffectual, it has actually covered over the basic truth that “Empedocles’ entire account of the universe was bound up with the fate of the soul. All those themes and ideas in his supposedly rational poem that were soon to prove so important, that were to provide a platform for early physics and chemistry and science, were not there to offer factual information. They were there to save the soul” (323).

Kingsley takes the less-trodden route of treating Empedocles’ own concerns with great seriousness, plunges straight into the dark waters of esotericism and ancient magic—and the results are startling. If he is correct, then we have not only misunderstood Empedocles, we have essentially inverted his meaning. To see this, we need only look to what is perhaps the most striking example of this inversion: the issue of the sequence (and significance) of Empedocles’ cosmic cycles. The conventional accounts of Empedocles’ cosmology vary little from commentator to commentator. The dogmatic view has always been that there are four elements, divine and immortal: earth, air, fire, and water. These are separated and combined by the powers of Strife and Love. The universe *begins* with the elements in a harmonious mixture, a great homogeneous sphere, with all of existence totally under the influence of Love; then the elements are torn apart by Strife, with all the elements distinct from one another; then they are returned to their state of perfect harmony again by Love. Love is good, the bringer of unity and harmony, whereas Strife is baneful, terrifying, and accursed, the bringer of hatred, death, and separation (350, 369). And this, Kingsley claims, is completely wrong—literally backwards.

He points out, rightly, that Empedocles always states, directly or by implication, the sequence of the cosmic cycle as follows: the cosmos begins with the elements in a state of separation, completely under the influence of Strife; *then* the elements are combined

into the harmonious, blended sphere under the influence of Love; and finally they are separated out again by Strife (349-351).¹

This little detail has enormous implications—it leads right to the heart of a constellation of ideas that, if its significance is grasped, places Empedocles’ philosophy squarely in the company of Pythagorean and Orphic traditions that emerged from a living philosophical praxis aimed at the divinization of the human being. The key to understanding the importance of the cosmic cycles’ ordering comes from Empedocles’ own language, so subtle, that hints at the elements’ general attitude to the process of uniting and separating. Like all things in Empedocles’ magical universe, the elements have awareness, are divine and immortal, have intelligence and desire (348). And above all, they long to be with their own kind: like to like. The state of affairs at the beginning and end of each cycle, which can be viewed from one perspective as “separation and hostility,” can also be viewed, from the perspective of the elements, as a state of immortality, purity, and the fulfillment of natural desire. Conversely, the “harmony” of Love is nothing to romanticize—it is the forcing together of things that belong (and prefer to be) apart; the ruthless violation of the inner nature and longing of the elements; and, crucially for Empedocles, the transformation of the immortal and divine into the mortal (352-354).

For this is all that mortality really is for Empedocles—the bizarre result of Love’s fitting together of immortal elements into temporary (and therefore mortal) compounds: the short-lived mixtures of our changeable world that seem to come into and pass out of existence (418-424). The power of Love, often simply called Aphrodite throughout Empedocles’ poetry, accomplishes her work not by brute force but through the use of trickery and deception. This should come as no surprise, given Aphrodite’s reputation in ancient literature for achieving her aims through the gentle but irresistible means of love magic (377-379). She seduces the elements away from their home and joins them into all the myriad combinations of mortal beings in our world—ourselves, pointedly, included

¹ In Empedocles see fragments B17, B20, B21, B22, B23 (by analogy), B26, and B35. The system of numbering used here is the standard enumeration of Diels and Kranz.

(386). This is how Kingsley resolves the age-old question, the central question, posed by Empedocles' poetry: how does the story of the soul fit with the story of the cosmos? The answer comes from the fact that the element of air, or *aithêr*, was the substance of the soul for Empedocles. The *aithêr* of which every soul is composed—the divine, immortal consciousness at the heart of human experience—is a fragment of the *aithêr* of the heavens (401-402). This *aithêr*, in Empedocles' cosmic soteriology or soteriological cosmology, was long ago seduced into incarnation by Aphrodite; because of this, we are forced to live the myth of human existence, lost to what we truly are, our own original immortality and divinity forgotten under Aphrodite's spell.

And for Empedocles, just as for Parmenides, the only way to escape the bonds of our enchantment is to cultivate the divine faculty of cunning, alert awareness called *mêtis* (454-455). But of course this raises a very practical question: how can we human beings, so totally under the influence of Aphrodite's magic, find enough *mêtis* to break her spell, see reality as it is, and regain our divinity? The answer is as simple as it is surprising. We don't need to look anywhere else, to some otherworldly realm or some rarified, superhuman perception, because we already have everything we need inside us, a "gift of *mêtis* that penetrates our bodies, makes us virtually divine" (331). Empedocles finds divine *mêtis* in the senses, at the heart of embodied, human existence.

For those of us accustomed to think of mystics as despisers of the body, ascetics who try with all their might to escape the world of the senses, this information can come as something of a shock. Nevertheless, Kingsley shows how Empedocles' surreal language of "palms" that are "poured out" over people's limbs is the poet's subtly allusive way of indicating that, for him, the path to the divine runs right through the senses, not away from them (330-333). But the senses are a double-edged sword. Used consciously, they are "the essential instruments we need for openness and perceptiveness, for mastery, that can even make us divine" (331-332). But when we are so totally unconscious that we are "bombarded and overwhelmed by our perceptions" (332), then matters are tragically different. Then "our whole lives are a contradiction; an undoing of their own potential . . . The very fact that the promise inside us is unfulfilled makes it act, paradoxically, like a

curse. Instead of helping us, it works against us and destroys us” (332). To quote Empedocles’ own words about the utter futility of the human existence when lived unconsciously, at the mercy of the senses, without any *mêtis* worthy of the name: “During their lifetimes they see such a little part of life and then they are off: short-lived, flying up and away like smoke, totally persuaded by whatever each of them happened to bump into while being driven one way, another way, all over the place. And they claim in vain that they have found the whole” (326).

The other side of the futility and finality of mortal existence is the forgotten divinity hidden in the middle of it. And that divinity is only discoverable through the exercise of *mêtis*. In Empedocles’ philosophy, we can only begin to experience that nascent awareness through the conscious use of the senses—a practice that he laid out very clearly in his poetry, which can be described, with every justification, as a meditative discipline (507-517). Many modern scholars choose to interpret Empedocles’ writings on the senses as indicative of nothing more than an oddly colorful empiricism (507-508). They follow a fashion set by Aristotle, who, when he laid hands on Empedocles’ poetry, took the questionable step of treating an esoteric address to a single disciple as a Peripatetic psychological treatise, reading Empedocles as merely concerned with the theoretical problem of the unity of sense experience (515). And as Kingsley shows, repeatedly, Empedocles’ instructions to his student were couched in an esoteric form of expression so subtle, so deft that that they slipped and slip right by even the most formidable of intellects. But for those willing to look, there are signs of Empedocles’ true interests and aims waiting to be recognized.

To offer one important example, Kingsley’s reading of the difficult fragment B110 teases out and sees the significance of ritual titles and terms drawn directly from the great mysteries of archaic religion with their rich agricultural symbolism (520-533). In B110, Empedocles gives instructions to his disciple indicating how he must care for his teacher’s words: “If you press them down underneath your dense-packed diaphragm and oversee (*epopteuseis*) them with good will and with pure attention (*katharêisin meletêisin*) to the work, they will all without the slightest exception stay with you for as

long as you live. And from them, you will come to possess (*ktêseai*) many other things. For they grow (*auxei*), each according to its own inner disposition, in whatever way their nature dictates” (519). As Kingsley notes, we have here several references that hint at cult titles of Zeus (a god uniquely important to the sacred work of farming): Zeus *Auxêtês*, “Giver of growth”; Zeus *Epoptês*, “Overseer”; and Zeus *Katharsios*, “Purifier” (526-529). Empedocles’ choice of words here also suggests the traditional stages of initiation in the ancient mysteries—the first of which was purification (*katharmos*), followed by the transmission of the secret teaching itself, and then by the third and most important stage, the overseeing (*epopteia*) of the teaching as it germinates in the initiate, takes root and grows. As Kingsley notes, Empedocles assumes in his student a certain readiness to receive the esoteric teaching but is also careful to give him instructions, in B110 and elsewhere, on just how to oversee it so that it will begin to grow.

But seeing these references and parallels to the mysteries, with their lived spirituality and vocabulary of growth and grain, is more than just interesting; it is also exceptionally fruitful, as it allows the full meaning of Empedocles’ philosophy to come to life for the reader. In particular, these parallels underscore the fact that Empedocles’ teaching about the cosmos and the soul was not theory but an organic reality that takes root and grows in the reader, needs constant care and cooperation to flourish, has to be lived for it to bear fruit. Kingsley’s full resolution to the problem of the connection between Empedocles’ teaching on the cosmos, the soul, and meditation is formidable in its scope and accomplishments. It is certainly a philological and historical *tour de force* that resolves many longstanding debates and difficulties in the scholarship of Empedocles. To offer one highlight, he manages to make sense of—and link together—several typically baffling and bizarre Empedoclean expressions: his reference to a teaching that is “lacking in wood,” an injunction to “perceive just as the pledges from our Muse command,” his words to his disciple that speak of “splitting what I am saying in your entrails” (539-554). But Kingsley’s work here is most valuable for offering the contemporary reader a way to engage an ancient system of mystical philosophy rooted in the realities of the natural world—the body, the senses, the world of agriculture and plant growth—a spiritual practice in which we become “farmers of our immortality” (529).

III. Approaching *Reality*

As I have noted, *Reality* is not, essentially, a book *about* the philosophy of Parmenides and Empedocles. Rather, it is a point of access to the lived experience of their teaching. As Kingsley says of his own writing, the historical and philological information in *Reality* is “utterly unimportant” (315). “All the details” in the book are “just a trick” (315). This may seem a strange thing to say. But as Kingsley stresses throughout the book, Parmenides and Empedocles belonged to a wisdom tradition that was “not an exercise for intellectuals, but a guide for transformation” (300) and that has “nothing to do with any of our modern notions about philosophy” (324). The detailed teachings of this tradition were never offered for their own sake or to provide food for thought. Rather, they “had to be lived” and had “the power to change one’s life” (445). And because they came from a living experience, because they pointed to the experience of reality and the fullness of life, the words of Parmenides and Empedocles only make sense when we start to experience them, live them.

This last point, which Kingsley drives home in every chapter, is, I suspect, what lies behind the extraordinary style and tone of *Reality*. For Kingsley altogether abandons the somber voice, the cool and cautious objectivity of the average classical scholar. His book is filled instead with fire, humor, and boldness. The layout of *Reality*, too, is utterly unconventional. For instance, there is the issue of the 30 pages of endnotes, the bedrock of Kingsley’s arguments throughout the book, where the interested reader will find a truly impressive display of philological virtuosity and a wealth of groundbreaking insights and useful references. But these ingenious notes are tucked away at the back of the book, not mentioned once in the body text, and not referenced to page numbers. And yet it would be a grave mistake to suppose that Kingsley’s break with (indeed, his deliberate affront to) the norms of scholarship has no real significance, no deeper meaning. Kingsley’s basic point—that the writings of Parmenides and Empedocles came from lived experience and need to be lived to be understood—means that traditional scholarly approaches stand no chance whatsoever of grasping the meaning of the Pre-Platonic

philosophers. And there is much to be said for this judgment, as Kingsley shows throughout the book—the inability of academics to appreciate the livingness of early Greek philosophy, the stubborn insistence that these ancient esoteric texts can be approached with level-headed objectivity, have led to interpretive disaster. So Kingsley takes the other route in his book, rejecting the failed dogmas and methodologies of conventional scholarship, and demands of his readers just what Parmenides and Empedocles did: “the urgency of our own being” (28).

One final thing should be said about *Reality*. Throughout the book, Kingsley invites his readers into a world of esotericism and magic, a world of supreme deception that demands tremendous *mêtis* to navigate. He shows, in particular, how Parmenides and Empedocles composed their esoteric poetry to perform the very things they talked about, how the unusual cadences and imagery of Parmenides’ poetry, for instance, mirror the sense of what he is saying, reproduce the effects of the incubatory experience he is describing (36), how Empedocles’ poetry, with its dark riddles and cunning traps, is a “functioning model of the cosmos” (428)—a cosmos that is itself a great riddle and trap. It would take a great deal of obtuseness or self-deception on a reader’s part not to ask a very fundamental question: might not *Reality*, a book about performative, esoteric texts, itself be a performative, esoteric text? With this fruitful uncertainty lurking at the edges of one’s consciousness, *Reality* begins to appear a trickier read than first supposed. What slipped past the mind as an odd turn of phrase on a first reading is found, upon closer inspection, to contain a troubling and pregnant ambiguity. Patterns and echoes that might strike a careless reader as repetitive, even as indicative of an editorial oversight, turn out to have significance. *Caveat lector*.

In *Reality*, Kingsley has given us a brilliant and original recovery of the origins of our civilization. But ultimately, even this is beside the point. The real contribution of this book is that it brings something long forgotten to life again, offers the reader the opportunity to step into the world it evokes, and gives a way to live out the essence of an ancient wisdom in our time. It is a work of genius; the most highly recommended reading.