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ENCOUNTERS WITH BOOKS FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES

Homer, Parmenides, and the Road to Demonstration

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Encountered by Maksymilian Del Mar

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What are the prospects for a poetic history of reasoning (including legal reasoning)? This question receives a stimulating answer in Benjamin Folit-Weinberg's *Homer, Parmenides, and the Road to Demonstration* (2022a). Parmenides is often credited with having discovered or invented extended deductive argumentation or, in short, demonstration. Often celebrated as a 'grandfather of philosophy' and said to be the most important precursor to Plato, Parmenides, in his *The Way of Truth*, is said to have brought into being one of the 'foundations of Western thought': '(i) proceeding from a starting point that has to be accepted; (ii) by strict deductive arguments; (iii) to establish an inescapable conclusion' (p. 2).

What is less commonly known, or if known rarely taken seriously, is that the form in which this alleged discovery or invention is said to have been made was a poem, and indeed an especially powerful poem: a poem filled to the brim with 'richly textured, imagistic language' (p. 5), including 'dramatic framing' (p. 8) and 'narrative mechanics' (p. 5). The questions, then, that one may be tempted to ask – though it is already important that they be asked – are: 'Why verse for a deductive argument? Why the dramatic encounter . . . ? Why so many images, such figurative language?' (p. 9).

If one fails to ask these questions, and thus fails to read Parmenides' text as a poem, necessarily in its cultural and historical context, then one risks imposing on it, anachronistically, all the standards and styles of deductive reasoning that are familiar to us today. From that perspective, the emergence, in Parmenides's text, of what we have come to call demonstration appears primitive, amateurish and full of 'schoolboy blunders' (p. 8). There is, however, another way: to read the text as a poem, and thus:

> 'to attend to the densely imbricated richness of its language and the many layers of resonance compressed in, and radiating out from, key words; to trace with care the imagery that Parmenides puts into circulation and mobilises, activates and exploits; to read and hear this poem alongside its major predecessors in dactylic hexameter, with ears sharply attuned to echoes in linguistic and imagistic detail, dramatic setting, plot mechanics and formal organisation and structure; and to relocate this poem in the physical and social reality of its time and place.' (p. 11)

This is exactly what this book does and, in so doing, shows us that poetic histories of reasoning are possible and why they are so important.

Why, indeed? Reasoning can all too easily flatten into an impersonal, disembodied, dispassionate, a-social, a-cultural, a-historical and all-too-formal domain of marks on a page. There is nothing wrong, of course, with formalisation – marks on a page can be very helpful. But

when such formalisation stands for the practice itself, then we risk putting, as in a bad metonymic joke, the cart before the horse. Undoing such mental habits takes painstaking cultural and historical work, which often needs to range across many different kinds of texts, which is also why it is rarely attempted and even more rarely accomplished. When it is, though, it can illuminate something of great importance: that reasoning is a practice rooted in experience – affective, sensory, embodied and deeply social experience, which is necessarily culturally and historically situated – which is mediated by the ways in which we model and communicate that experience, whether that be with the techniques of poetry, drama, narrative, or rhetoric.

Legal scholars will be more than familiar with Justice Wendell Holmes's famous saying: 'The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience'. Holmes's opposition, however, between logic and experience is misleading: logic is also based on experience; put another way, logic is logic because of how it is experienced, e.g. affectively, as something that compels us or binds us in a particular way, but also kinesically, as a particular kind of movement through space in which we sense that, because we care about the outcome (e.g. we are committed to certain values) we have only one real way of proceeding. Logic is not distinct from experience; logic is a distinctive kind of experience.

It can be humbling to discover the very contingent and all-too-human roots of the most cherished of logical or philosophical methods, but rather than being a cause of depression, that is something much to be celebrated. Further, far from denigrating logic or philosophy, such work enriches our understanding of it, as long as one does not hold dear to any disciplinary hierarchies (placing, for instance, logic or philosophy on a pedestal above poetry or above history). Again, rather than being deflating, such research can be deeply generative and illuminating, opening up new ways of inquiry and enlarging our appreciation of how reasoning works and why it plays such significant roles in our lives. One recent example of just such generative illumination was Caterina Dutilh Novaes' genealogy of deduction as stemming from certain ancient dialogical games (in her *The Dialogical Roots of Deduction*, 2020), thereby showing just how much deduction is an art and an ethic of social interaction. This new book can be added to this new(ish) and exciting bookshelf (one need only mention the name of Geoffrey Lloyd to realise that this line of work is part of a tradition of scholarship, even if that tradition has been neglected and marginalised in theories of reasoning).

So, what is the history of demonstration told in this book? The starting point and anchor of the story is one Ancient Greek word: *hodos*. We may not realise it at first (though once we do, it is suddenly obvious and fascinating), but we have an echo of this word in our term 'method'. Method is a term that can appear hard and cold – impersonal, disciplined and capable of being applied by anyone who knows it. But how did we get to this image of method? And how, more broadly, did we get to the idea of demonstration – of proof by indisputable, fixed, unchanging, ever-lasting deduction?

According to Folit-Weinberg the answer, as just mentioned, lies in the reality and, at once, generative poetics, of *hodos*. A *hodos* is only misleadingly translated as a 'road', especially since our twenty-first century Western image of roads tends to be of multi-lane highways with smooth asphalt surfaces (an image that has recently, and bafflingly, been used at a prominent UK university to describe 'research highways' – an oxymoron, if there ever was one). Even if we are historically minded, a road will tend to conjure up Roman roads (after all, all roads lead to Rome), which were and still echo as important ingredients of an imperial imaginary. Equally, a *hodos* is also not well served by translating it as a 'path' (or a 'beaten track'), for our associations with that tend to be meandering country paths, deployed often as a pedestrian alternative to prescribed routes or suggesting new explorations where official routes are unavailable.

In the Ancient Greece of Parmenides, sixth to fifth century BCE, however, a *hodos* was something altogether different and very distinctive (see also Folit-Weinberg, 2022b). As Folit-Weinberg explains, 'the stony Greek terrain (and, perhaps, the slightly more modest finances of the individual polis) demanded another method' i.e. a 'rut road', 'track road', or 'the stone railway'

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(p. 36). This consisted of 'a pair of grooves engraved into the rocky Greek terrain' (p. 36). The ruts or grooves were designed for the wheels of vehicles, which, once they were in them, could not deviate from the track. Indeed, once the wheels were in, that was it: one was set on a track to a particular destination, with no possibility of deviating, meandering, or slipping off course. This generated an experience of ineluctable, inevitable and unchangeable directionality towards a set destination – engraved, as it were, into the stone. Further, perhaps again because of the construction costs, there was only ever one set of such ruts or tracks between destinations (some very major routes had two, one in each direction, but the vast majority only one), with predictable clashes when two vehicles met, some of which were alleviated by occasional lay-byes, but many of which required one side to undertake the extremely laborious task of taking the vehicle out of the rut to let the other pass. As Folit-Weinberg notes, tongue-in-cheek, this context sheds a new light on that most famous of all cases of road rage: Oedipus killing his father, Laius. *Hodos* of this kind also had another feature: they included markers, often set up at halfway points between the various destinations. These markers had two sides: on one side was included information about where the traveller was (e.g. how far it was to the relevant destination) and on the other, remarkably, there was 'a moralising or philosophical maxim', e.g. 'walk thinking just thoughts' or 'do not deceive a friend' (p. 43).

Inspired by the distinctive reality and accompanying experience of these rut-roads or track-roads, as well as by the suggestiveness of these two-faced markers, Folit-Weinberg invites us to consider the relations between *hodos* and forms of philosophical or logical argument, especially demonstration (i.e. as above, extended deduction). As he puts it, 'the archaic and classic Greek *hodos* for wheeled vehicles, a rut road that locked the vehicles that travelled on it into a prescribed track, offered Parmenides a tremendously powerful conceptual resource' (pp. 45–46). It is by invoking this image that Parmenides – talented poet and rhetorician that he was – was able to bring into being an argument form that was 'intrinsically teleological, something, that is, inherently directed towards a terminal destination and a conclusive goal' (p. 47), something that gives one the experience of proceeding, effectively without choice, to an 'inescapable conclusion' (p. 48). Note, too, that a *hodos* is a built construction, and indeed a purposive one; similarly, a demonstration is an argument, made by someone, for someone else to process, such that once they engage upon its journey, they reach, inevitably, the destination that the argument had designed for them to reach.

At once an object, but also a process – an activity that one engages in, a process one undertakes – the Greek *hodos* is a powerful image. Like other images, it is powerful because of the kind of affective and embodied experience it models and gives rise to. A *hodos* enables a journey, a process that takes time and that is realised by movement (of the body through a particular kind of space) and that, once accomplished, and the destination is reached, offers a sense of fulfilment or accomplishment. Importantly, too, although a *hodos* suggests inevitability and inescapability – a sense, precisely, of necessity – it is not thoughtlessly and effortlessly so. The experience of travelling on a *hodos* is not like that of being shot out of a cannon and thus of being catapulted into some space without any agency. Instead, it is a particular kind of agential experience: one enters the grooves and one proceeds along, it being possible but extremely difficult practically to move oneself out of those grooves, until one finally reaches the destination. Some contingency and possibility of things being otherwise, remains, even if very faintly. There is thus necessity, but arguably of a specific kind: a sense of feeling compelled or bound, of proceeding upon an appropriate track, of being engaged in something worthwhile – perhaps, precisely, a sense of logical, rational, or indeed normative necessity. This is a practical or purposive kind of necessity – a difficult concept to follow (pun intended!), which is part of the point: it can be understood only when offered an analogue in experience.

It is worthwhile pausing here to reflect, with Folit-Weinberg, on the generative power of this image – of its legacy for Western culture (Folit-Weinberg confines himself to this Western legacy) and what it claims for itself, especially in the form of certain understandings of rationality,

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knowledge and normativity. The very notion of pre-existing tracks leading to a fixed, ultimate, conclusive destination, from which – as long one wants to accomplish the purpose of the journey – there is no justifiable deviation, offers a set of evocative and familiar co-ordinates for accounts of reason, knowledge and normativity. If one is committed to rationality, one needs to comply with the norms of logic, and these norms, if followed, allow one to claim compliance with reason. If one wants to attain a secure knowledge, untainted by doubtful appearances, one must be disciplined and follow a particular method. If one wants to instantiate a particular value – a certain understanding of what makes an individual or a communal life valuable – then one better follow such-and-such rules. Indeed, the very notion of normativity as rule-following, proceeding along certain Kantian rails, avoiding distraction by emotion or desire, has an uncanny resemblance to the image and experience, of journeying upon a *hodos*. By unearthing it, so to speak, by transporting us back to the pangs of its birth and thus by revealing a hidden or long-buried phenomenology, Folit-Weinberg offers us the prospect of a critical genealogy of much that has been claimed for the superiority of the Western tradition, from Parmenides to Kant and beyond.

That is not, however, all that this book offers. Parmenides is an inventive collector and transformer not only of the physical realities around him, but also of the poetic and rhetorical, and thus language-based, arts with which is he intimately familiar. Indeed, tracing the passage from, including exploring, in fine linguistic detail (which I cannot reproduce here), the parallels but also important differences between, Book 12 of Homer's *The Odyssey* and Parmenides' *The Route to Truth*, takes up a considerable bulk of the book. The argument is that, precisely by drawing, creatively, on the image-complex of the *hodos*, Parmenides transforms, while still echoing, Homer's poetics of the journey. He does so by transplanting the journey undertaken by Odysseus on sea (leading, significantly, to his testing and recognition, by Penelope, in the bedroom of their home in Ithaca) via ship, to the rocky terrain of the *hodos*, and travel by chariot. In so doing, Parmenides is able to communicate, effectively, with his audience, which is steeped in Homeric poetics and its language, thereby capturing their affective imaginations, while nevertheless putting all that to a new use, one that his audience will also relate to, having, no doubt, some experience of travelling on a *hodos* in a chariot.

The story that Folit-Weinberg tells, in this respect, is not only fascinating for what it reveals about Parmenides's poem, or about demonstration, but also for the account it provides of intellectual work and thus the model it offers of intellectual history. On this model, change in intellectual history is not, at least certainly not only, a matter of a succession of worldview or paradigm, each subsequent one opposed to the preceding one, but instead a transformation, a translation, a creative imitation (see also Burrow), a digestion, of culturally present materials, metamorphosed, often with great subtlety and nuance, into new bodies (with apologies to Ovid). Homer's poems, on this view, are like 'chunks . . . of precious metal that could be collected, beaten into new forms, recast with one's own visage imprinted on the front, and put into circulation anew' (p. 75). Parmenides, much like many before him and many after – out of the philosophers, perhaps most notably Plato – collects, like a magpie, culturally powerful discourses and appropriates them, transforming them and marshalling them to new ends (in Plato's case, this includes sophistic rhetoric, comedy, tragedy, as well as Aesopian fables and the very character of Aesop, who Socrates resembles in many respects: see Nightingale, 2009). As Folit-Weinberg puts it, Parmenides is 'a virtuoso myth-maker who marshals together meaning-making symbols from different discourses and, activating their individual powers at different points and in different ways, harnesses each of these within one supercharged but unified, coherent whole' (p. 110). Folit-Weinberg demonstrates this – especially via a reading of Homer's Book 12 – in extraordinary detail, down to the sound and pace of the poem (in dactylic hexameter), the use of certain verbs and other grammatical devices, certain characters (e.g. the goddess who guides the mortal) and certain dramatic scenes.

Part of the account is the complex relationship – both in Homer and in Parmenides – between narration, description and argument. Drawing on and extending work by Christopher Gill (1998)

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on 'Homeric deliberation', Folit-Weinberg shows how Homer's Book 12 dramatises a certain process of reasoning, which involves working out implications from possible courses of action, rejecting one option in favour of another one and doing all of this in light of a goal or general rule (see p. 151). The description consists of populating the world in which actions are to happen, but in such a way that the description often anticipates the action that ultimately turns out to be the only feasible one. The techniques deployed here are fascinating, including description-by-negation, as when Scylla's rock is described as a place 'a dark cloud surrounds: nor does it ever draw away, nor does sunlight ever/Reach that peak, neither in the peak of summer nor in late summer' (*The Odyssey*, 12.73–76, at p. 174), and later, that 'No sailors yet may boast/That they have passed this way by ship unharmed' (*The Odyssey*, 12.106–10, at p. 176). As Folit-Weinberg notes, the description 'amounts to an implicit proscription by negation' (p. 176), anticipating Circe's advice to Odysseus as to the only viable route he can take. Ultimately, both description and narration work to show that what might have first appeared as a choice between two exclusive possibilities (a *krisis*), is not really one: that, if Odysseus wants to go home, there is only one way (it would be interesting to compare this to Carlo Ginzburg's account of narrative as the reading of clues while hunting, which Peter Brooks characterises as 'retrospective prophecy' and also sees at work in legal reasoning: see Brooks, 2017).

It should be added, too, that the moment at which this scene occurs is very significant in *The Odyssey*, for it is only from when Odysseus encounters Circe, and her guidance, that he finally ends his wanderings and begins the journey that takes him home. And, argues Folit-Weinberg, it is precisely this transition from a plot that meanders prior to Circe's guidance, to one that becomes a 'quest type', focusing on 'arrival at a single, ultimate destination' that proves so useful to Parmenides (p. 200) and which he puts to such ground-breaking use. How exactly this is achieved, both at the level of description and narration, including via what grammatical constructions, and with poetic force, is what this book illustrates. In doing so, it provides us with further resources to construct a poetic history of reasoning. On this approach, we can trace the making of particular kinds of argument via grammatical, descriptive-imagistic and narratological devices, which work together to create particular kinds of affective-kinesic experience of certain movements through certain spaces. Reasoning, including legal reasoning, has no nature, but it does have an extraordinarily rich history, which draws on our abilities to craft experiences, based on the physical realities around us and the cultural resources available to us. The history of reasoning, it turns out, is a poetic history, a history of making, a history of bodies moving in space.

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