1

The Being of Illusion

Abstract: Particular problems connected with the notion of a ground for appearance, if Being is taken to be all there is.

Keywords: appearance; Being; ground; monism

In this essay, I shall attempt to connect some of the details in the introductory chapter, in a meditation on the problem, in philosophy, of whether there is a basic groundedness in reality in the first place. Parmenides here functions as a philosopher of the One Being, but even if Parmenides was a pluralist, rather than a monist, it is not clear why there is anything other than Parmenidean Being in the universe. Why is there Appearance? Who is it that sees it? Are the deluded “mortals” themselves beings? Are they other than being? Or are they illusory? To whom does Appearance appear? What is the difference between Being and Appearance? And, finally, why is Being such that it can be believed to be otherwise than it is?

This chapter attempts to at least raise these questions, if perhaps not to answer them, and to compare Parmenides on the subject of Being and Appearance with Plato; with medieval creationism; with postmodernism; with Nietzsche. Reality (be it single or multiple, or, if you prefer, the zone of reality, “what is,” “what counts and is significant as far as the way things are”) is to be distinguished from the way mortals take reality to be, from what they accept, recognize, countenance, from what passes muster with them—from their Opinions. So there is then the problem of how the distinction arises, of how the mortals become persuaded by deceptive views of the universe, of why what they think is different from the way they should think. There is also the (closely related, if not identical) problem of what it is about reality that lends itself to being taken unsuccessfully as well as successfully. For one could imagine a kind of reality about which it would be impossible even for mortals to be mistaken. And yet this does not seem to be the case with the Parmenidean Being, whatever it turns out to be. Is there Appearance, and, if so, why?

For Heidegger the big question was a different one, of course: why is there something rather than nothing? I regard this question as tantalizing, but unanswerable, at least for Parmenides, who appears to view the fact that there is something as basic. I am instead interested in a different question: if Being or Truth is all there is, why is there Opinion as well? Related questions in the history of philosophy are many and perhaps equally difficult: if Plato’s Forms have true reality, why are there particulars at all? Why are we in the cave? (A question left unanswered in the Phaedo and perhaps approached only later, in the Timaeus.) Or: if God is good, how is it that a good world created by God comes to contain evil? Or, from a completely different perspective: if the proletariat is our species-being, how is it that the proletariat is oppressed in the first place?