

# Metamorphosis and the Concept of Change

## – From Ancient Greek Philosophy to the Apostle Paul’s Notions of the Resurrection of the Body

### Ancient Greek philosophy and the paradox of change

The notion of the resurrection of the body involves some kind of metamorphosis or radical change, i.e. a change from one state of being to another. Yet insofar as the object, or person, undergoing transformation



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remains in the same state of being, there has to be some kind of continuity. If there were no continuity, the object, or person, would just disappear, and there would have been no change. In other words, metamorphosis presupposes both change and continuity, amounting to no less than a paradox. Change presupposes its own opposite, i.e. ‘no change’

or sameness. This paradox, or the *discovery* of this paradox, can be traced back to one of the first Greek philosophers, Parmenides, who lived in South Italy around 470 B.C. Unlike his predecessors, Parmenides did not search for the origin or the end of all things, but formulated problems involving these very phenomena in particular and, more generally: all kinds of change. Parmenides’ reflections on the paradox of change may have determined the course of Greek philosophy and, to some degree, the subsequent course of Western philosophy as well.

The paradox of change, as formulated in Greek thinking, is based on a conviction of a certain relationship between human rationality and reality. This relationship was also first described by Parmenides: “... the same thing can be thought and can exist” (fragment 28 B 3<sup>1</sup>).

In other words, reality and human rationality follow the same rules. This does not imply that anything we can think of, e.g. a phantom or a man with three heads, has to exist, but it implies that phenomena that cannot be explained rationally cannot exist. Change is such a phenomenon, since it is based on a paradox.

The problem of change haunted Greek philosophy after Parmenides. Change is a phenomenon upon which all life is based: birth, growth and death involve change, even radical change, from non-being to being, and

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1: The number of the fragment is according to Diels and Kranz, 1951.

from being to non-being. It was perceived as no less than a scandal that such a common phenomenon, experienced all the time, could not be explained rationally.

### **Plato's *Parmenides*: the instant as the inexplicable source of change**

Plato (427 – 347 B.C.), the spiritual heir of Parmenides, can be described as having been obsessed with change, for the very reason that he could not properly explain it. For him, change belonged to the illusionary world of the senses, which was conceived as a mere copy of the real, and therefore rational, unchanging and eternal world to which our soul belongs. In his dialogue *Parmenides*, Plato comes closer than anywhere else to a means of dealing with the irrational phenomenon of change. Here, Plato situates change by invoking what he calls a 'very strange thing', a 'queer creature', a 'non-place' (*atopon*), namely, the *instant* (*Parmenides* 156 d-e). A transition from one state to another can only occur *instantly*, at a moment outside not only space but also time, i.e. a moment which is not a part of the world of the senses, nor of the ideal world of reason. The instant which, according to Plato, is the source of change, is beyond both. As a non-place it is an abyss, lacking a form, and as not belonging to any time, the instant has neither a before nor an after. It is not what we call 'now', or the present. In a way the instant does not exist, it just happens. Or rather: change happens, as an inexplicable event.

### **Paul: the mystery of the resurrection of the dead**

As a contemporary of Jesus, Paul was born about 350 years after the death of Plato. This is a very long time span, and I will say nothing about any possible influence of Plato on Paul. In the light of Plato's reflection on change in *Parmenides*, I will simply try to look at how Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, describes and explains the transformation of the resurrected body. His central focus in this letter is the resurrection of Christ, our belief in the resurrected Christ, and the consequence of this belief, namely the resurrection of the dead on the last day (1 Corinthians 15, 16–17). The resurrection of Christ is the one paradigmatic event, which is a necessary but not a sufficient, condition for the resurrection of the dead on the last day.

For Paul, man is not composed of a rational, immortal soul and an irrational, mortal body, and does not therefore look at death as a split between the two. Rather, Paul distinguishes between a mortal body of the flesh and an immortal body of the spirit: death involves the death of the flesh, but after death the person who believes in the resurrected Christ will get another kind of body, a body that will live forever (1 Corinthians 15, 36–38). In other words, death involves radical change, but also, it seems, continuity: the person remains, in some way or other, the same before and after death. It is, however, difficult to say exactly what kind of continuity this is. It does not seem to depend on an unchanging element, be it a soul or anything else, i.e. an element which remains the same before and after death and which does not ever, and cannot ever, undergo any kind of change. One thing is clear: Paul's notion of the resurrection of the dead constitutes a radical break with Platonic thinking.

Paul is perfectly aware of this break and makes a point of it more than once in his first letter to the Corinthians (especially 1 Corinthians 1, 20

– 25). Paul says his words will appear as ‘foolishness’ to the philosophers, (1 Corinthians 1, 23). The reason for this seems obvious: Paul’s preaching about the resurrection of the dead takes no account of the philosophical demand for an equation between reality and reason. The belief in the reality of the resurrection of the dead does not rely on reason and rationality, but rather on a mystery:

*Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.*  
(1 Corinthians 15, 51–53; 21st Century King James Version)

The mystery is this: the radical change of the body from being corruptible and mortal to being incorruptible and immortal.

### **Plato and Paul: beyond human reason**

Ironically, the phenomenon of change was as great a mystery to the Greek philosophers in the Platonic tradition as the metamorphosis of the body was to Paul. Neither can be explained by human reason, or by *logos*, which structures reason as well as reality. Paul’s ‘foolishness’ is perhaps no more foolish than Plato’s ‘explanation’ of change. In fact, they deal with it in similar ways. Whereas Plato described change as an event which happens in a moment, Paul tells us that “we will all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye”. The word which Paul uses for a ‘moment’, is *atomos*, which means something that cannot be divided, that cannot become any smaller. A moment is the smallest thing there is. Only at this moment, which escapes human reason, can this special kind of change – the resurrection of the body – happen.

Whereas Plato explains *all kinds of change* by the extraordinary and inexplicable moment, which is outside time, Paul explains *this extraordinary change*, the resurrection of the body, by a similarly extraordinary moment, which is also on the verge of time: at the last trumpet. Since all change is radical change to Plato, it might not be a complete coincidence that Paul here comes very close to Plato’s way of thinking.

### **References**

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