

Michael Della Rocca, *The Parmenidean Ascent*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xxiv, 315.

This book by Della Rocca (hereafter DR) is everything a good philosophy book should be: clear, well-argued, historically informed, written with a sense of humour, and—most importantly—bold and provocative. The main thesis of the book, following Parmenides, is that there are no distinctions in reality. There have certainly been philosophers who have defended a Parmenidian view of recent years. (To mention two: Michael Rea, ‘How to be an Eleatic Monist’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 15: 129-151 (2001), and Emanuele Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, London: Verso (2016)—a translation of the 1972 *Essenza del Nichilismo*.) What distinguishes DR’s book is its thorough-going relentlessness: he follows through the logic of the argument to its ultimate conclusion: there are no distinctions *in any sense at all*. In this way it goes beyond the view of even the historical Parmenides, who appealed to the distinction between appearances and reality to “save the phenomena”. Even this distinction is not available to DR. The conclusion, if true, is gobsmacking. And of course, it appears to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of writing a book to say it. DR is well aware of this. He is frankly self-reflexive, both in accepting that the conclusion must apply to his own writing, and in his awareness of his relationship with his readers—and their likely disbelief.

The backbone of DR’s philosophical reflections is as follows:

1. He endorses the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR, every state of affairs that obtains has an explanation), at least for *ad hominem* purposes.
2. This is then used to argue that there are no relations, on pain of vicious infinite regress. It follows that there are no distinctions; since if there are, there would be relations between the distinct things—if only that of distinctness.
3. The apparent philosophical own-goal of this conclusion is then addressed.

I will return to these matters later in the review. But first let me outline the contents of the book in more detail.

After a brief introduction (‘Proem’), the first chapter is an analysis of the historical Parmenides’ argument, interpreting it through the lens of the PSR. This chapter, in itself, is something that will interest anyone concerned with Presocratic philosophy. The next two chapters concern the notion of substance. The first analyses a number of Western philosophers who endorsed the notion of substance, arguing that each account can not meet its own explanatory demand. The second develops a general argument to the effect that any notion of substance which holds there to be distinctions is committed to a vicious regress. As DR points out, the ghost of Bradley stalks here.

The arguments developed in these two chapters are, in effect, quite general, and are applied in the next chapters to reach similar conclusions concerning other important topics. There are no legitimate notions which support distinctions of action (ch. 4), knowledge (ch. 5), meaning—and, as a corollary, truth (ch.6). (Similar arguments could clearly be applied to moral notions, but ethics does not feature in the book.)

Chapter 7, is an attack on what DR takes to be the methodology of contemporary “analytic” philosophy, and in particular on its complete disregard for the history of philosophy. The distinction between philosophy and the history of philosophy is also a distinction that cannot be sustained.

The topics of the previous chapters can be seen as involving demands for metaphysical explanations of some kind, as required by the PSR. Chapter 8 attacks the intelligibility of the very notion of metaphysical explanation—and, though it does not say so explicitly, *all* kinds of explanation. An explanation requires a distinction between *explanans* and *explanandum*. Such a distinction is as untenable as all other kinds.

Readers of the book to this point will have been itching to point out that the denial of the existence of distinctions of any kind seems to make DR’s whole project—or at least that of explaining it—self-refuting. Chapter 9 contains his response to the matter. In a nutshell, he accepts the conclusion with pride! Something else that readers will have been itching to challenge is the PSR itself. Chapter 10 provides a defence of this.

Chapter 11 returns to the methodology of “analytic” philosophy. DR’s position is clearly a gross violation of common sense. So much the worse for common sense—and “analytic philosophy” (since, according to DR, this is beholden to it). The conservatism of this simply drains the lifeblood from philosophy.

The very short chapters 12 and 13 are intended as both serious and amusing. I won’t spoil the joke here.

The discussions of the topics I have mentioned in the book, both of the philosophical issues, and of the numerous Western philosophers whose work comes in for scrutiny—Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Bradley, Wittgenstein, Quine, to mention just a few—are rich and repay careful thought (and let me make it clear that there is much in the book with which I agree). However, what one can do in a review is clearly limited. So in what follows I will concentrate on what I take to be the backbone of the book, as outlined above.

Let us start with 1, the PSR. DR's defence of the principle in ch. 10 distinguishes between tammers and deniers. The tammers endorse some restricted version of the PSR. The deniers simply deny it. Most of the chapter attacks the tammers: the restricted version commits them to the general principle. The attack on the deniers comprises one brief paragraph (p. 257f.) suggesting that it is hard to be a denier without being a tamer.

I must confess that I find myself in the camp of the deniers. I see no reason why everything should have an explanation—though it is certainly good if one can be found. The standard interpretation of Quantum Mechanics is the Copenhagen interpretation; and according to this, the collapse of a wave packet (such as that involved in the decay of an atom) is a random event. Of course, there are other interpretations, such as the many-worlds interpretation. Whether these involve such non-determinism is less clear. But if the Copenhagen interpretation does, in the end, turn out to be the best interpretation, so be it.

Another example: in mathematics some proofs provide explanations; some do not. How to draw the distinction is moot, but there are clear examples of each. As an example of a non-explanatory proof, take the only proof that we currently have of the Four Colour Theorem. The Theorem is decomposed into 1,476 cases, each of which is algorithmic and can be checked by a computer. This is clearly not an explanation of what is proved, and there is presently no other proof. For all we know, none will ever be found. We could just have a brute combinatorial fact. Or again, in a moment, set theory will loom. The basic set-theoretic facts are of the form  $a \in b$ . It is hard to see how there could be mathematical explanations of such facts—or explanations of any other kind. (Such cannot be of the form that  $a$  satisfies the defining condition for  $b$ , since the absolute infinity of sets shows that most sets do not have defining conditions.)

Of course, what is at issue here are scientific and mathematical explanations, not metaphysical explanations. But I don't see why metaphysics should be any different. What are some examples of metaphysical facts that have no explanation? I'm not sure, since we don't know the explanations of all the things that have explanations; but it would not surprise me if the fact that there was something rather than nothing turned out to be a brute fact.

Let us now assume the PSR for the sake of argument, and turn to 2. If there are distinct things,  $a$  and  $b$ , then there is a relation, say  $R_0$ , between them. There must be an explanation of how  $R_0$  relates  $a$  to  $b$ . This requires a new relation,  $R_1$ , which relates  $R_0$  to each of its *relata*. But then, for the same reason, there must be a new relation,  $R_2$ , which relates  $R_1$  to each of its *relata*. We are off on an infinite regress (or a cycle, which is just a

regress with repetitions). And, the argument goes, the regress is vicious. We never obtain the explanation we require.

Now, at this point, we have to distinguish (DR notwithstanding) between explanations and “complete” explanations. A complete explanation is an explanation where one cannot go on asking why. As any parent with a six-year-old knows, there is no such thing. Indeed, the PSR entails that there is no such thing. But the fact that there is no complete explanation does not entail that there is no explanation. I can explain the fact that there is an eclipse by saying that the Moon has come between the Earth and the Sun. This is a perfectly good explanation, even though I can ask why the Moon thus interposed itself. In the same way, the existence of  $R_{i+1}$  explains how  $R_i$  does its job, even if we can ask how  $R_{i+1}$  does *its* job.

There is an issue here, however. One might take a leaf out of Leibniz’ discussion of the Cosmological Argument (in ‘On the Ultimate Origination of Things’), and point out that, even if every  $R$ -relation is explained, there is something that requires an explanation: the existence of the whole regress:  $R_0, R_1, R_2, \dots$ . One might take a leaf out of Hume’s book (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ch. 9), and suggest that if every part of a whole is explained, that is itself explanation of the whole. Or one may offer an explanation for the whole sequence,  $R_\omega$ , and thence, driven on by the PSR, a sequence of relations the length of all the ordinals. What one might say about *that* whole sequence is mired in the murky depths of discussions about absolute infinity. However, there is a simple way of avoiding this. Applying the techniques of non-well-founded set-theory, one can construct a sequence of relations of length  $\omega$ , but such that the whole sequence is one of the members of the sequence, and so has an explanation!

Let us turn, finally, to 3. DR recognises the situation he is in (p. 221): ‘A view so radical as to deny, as Parmenides and I do, that there are any distinctions or relations and indeed to deny the very coherence of the notion of relations must be a view that cannot coherently be stated—or said—and cannot be coherently argued for’. His response is the *Tractarian* one of accepting that his writings are a ladder up which one must climb, to finally throw away as incoherent to see the world aright. This is the Parmenidean ascent of the book’s title—or perhaps better than ascent, decent into some kind of Dante-esque hell.

Whether the move works for Wittgenstein we may argue about, but DR’s situation is much worse. Wittgenstein takes much of the *Tractatus* to be meaningless; but not the language of science or mathematics. For DR there are no relations, so there is *no* truth, as opposed to falsity, *no* meaningfulness as opposed to meaninglessness; and this applies to *all* language. There is, then, no distinction between  $2+2=4$  and  $2+2=347$ ; or between

‘ $2+2=4$ ’ and ‘ $2+=4$ ’. This is all just noise. As the *Zuangzi* puts it (ch. 2) it is all just the world piping, like the screech of an owl, or the sound of waves.

DR takes this to be liberating. With a nod in the direction of Rorty he says (p. 223): ‘we and our words are no longer obligated to stand in a certain relation to the world and our words are (happily) free to play, perchance to joke’. Unfortunately, of course, there is no such thing as a joke, as opposed to a non-joke. So there is no possibility of making one.

DR has thus boxed himself into the same corner of Cratylus, who, speechless, was reduced to wagging his finger (except that DR has no part of his anatomy to wag). Indeed, he must reject not only language, but, for the same reason, articulated thought (as he himself notes, p. 223). There is, here, a convergence with Zen philosophy. In Zen, there is no duality in ultimate reality. It is beyond language and conceptual thought. Zen philosophers, however, at least acknowledge a conventional reality as well: our *Lebenswelt*, full of familiar objects and their relations—in some ways, not unlike Parmenides’ own world of appearances. DR cannot even invoke that distinction.

If this is where philosophy leads, so be it. Let Jesus Christ and Donald Trump pipe. There is no distinction between their pipings—indeed, between Christ and Trump themselves. But, as I have said, the path to this end seems eminently resistible.

Clearly, I have disagreed fundamentally with DR’s views in what I have just said. (DR, I am sure, would not be surprised.) That does not mean that I think ill of the book—on the contrary: it made me think much harder about many things. Philosophy is at its most profound when it challenges us, and DR’s book does so in spades.

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