

Getting Younger

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Abstract: I argue that in Plato’s *Parmenides* 141a6-c4, things in time come to be simultaneously older and younger than themselves because a thing’s past and present selves are equally real. As a result, whatever temporal relation is predicated of any of these past and present selves is true of the thing in question. Unlike other interpretations, this reading neither assumes that things in time have to replace their parts, nor that time is circular.

Keywords: Plato’s conception of time, temporal relations, philosophy of time, persistence, identity.

Introduction

At *Parmenides* 141a6-b3, we find an argument whose striking conclusion states: “that which comes to be older than itself comes to be, at the same time, younger than itself”¹ (Τὸ πρεσβύτερον [...] ἑαυτοῦ γιγνόμενον καὶ νεώτερον ἑαυτοῦ ἅμα γίγνεται; 141b1-3). Since young Aristotle seems puzzled by this conclusion, Parmenides provides a second argument that runs from 141b3 to c4.² However, it is not entirely clear how its inferences are supposed to work.³ One half of the conclusion seems unproblematic since whatever is in time always comes to be older than itself. But the second half sounds far from obvious. Why would anything also and at the same time come to be younger than itself? This part of the conclusion does not seem to follow from any of the premises. How does this part of the dialogue work, and what kind of conception of time could Plato assume to allow him this claim?

Scholars have offered two main readings of this passage. I call the first one the ‘Renewal reading.’ The thought behind it is that something in time comes to be younger than itself in the sense that it becomes ‘afresh’ or ‘new’ by reason of replacement of parts.⁴ One might think this works like Theseus’ ship. If Theseus is always replacing pieces of his ship, every day his ship is one day older than it was, but it is also always newer than it was the day before because it has new

¹ All translations of *Parmenides* by Gill and Ryan (1997) with minor modifications.

² See *Prm.* 141a. See also *Prm.* 151e-152b and 155d.

³ Already in antiquity some people thought these arguments were sophistical: ‘some commentators have given up in face of this argument and have not scrupled even to say that Plato is appearing here to indulge in sophistry, all too readily transferring their own ignorance to the argument.’ Proclus, *In Parm.* 1226.2-6; transl. Dillon & Morrow (1992). See also Dillon’s (1992, pp. 483–484) comments on this section. Rickless (2006, pp. 131–132) offers a valid reconstruction of the main argument but here I will show some limitations of his analysis and propose an alternative reconstruction.

⁴ See Allen (1997, 242).

parts. It can be objected that not everything that exists in time replaces its parts with new ones. But we can think about it differently. This year I am 38. In a sense, it is the first time I look the way I look. I am a new me, with new grey hairs and wrinkles. So even if my parts are not getting youthful, they are new because they are different than they were before.

A problem remains, though. The Renewal reading assumes that all things that exist in time require a constant and uninterrupted replacement of parts. However, things can exist from one time to another without replacing any of their parts, even if they will eventually replace them or continue changing in some other way. Plato never commits himself to an ontology that demands an uninterrupted replacement of parts. He may assume that the sensible realm is always changing, but this change does not always have to be about replacement of parts.

A different take on the passage –which I call the ‘Circular time reading’– argues that Plato assumes here a circular or periodic conception of time. According to this reading, anything in time is getting farther from its beginning, and thus coming to be older than itself; but it is also approaching its beginning in the next period, and thus it is getting younger than itself.⁵ However, for this reading to work, one would require that everything in time would come to be again at the moment it perishes, without intervals of non-existence. Otherwise, it seems odd to say that even during the time where something does not exist (the time between its destruction and its new beginning) it is still getting younger and older. Besides, elsewhere in the *Parmenides* Plato’s conception of time seems to be linear.⁶

⁵ See Syrianus, *In Parm.* Fr. 9 *apud* Proclus, *In Parm.* 1226.22–1227.24. See also Proclus, *Platonic Theology* II, 12, p. 71, 13ff. For Syrianus’ conception of time more generally, see his *In Parm.* Fr. 8 *apud* Proclus, *In Parm.* 1217.11–1219.7, Wear (2008), and Wear (2011, pp. 298–301).

⁶ As already noted by Cornford (1939, 128).

In this paper, I propose a different solution. My main thesis is that things in time come to be simultaneously older and younger than themselves because in Parmenides' argument a thing's past and present selves are equally real. Thus, whatever temporal relation is predicated of any of these past and present selves is true of the thing in question, if it is indeed the same object. My reading does not assume, like the Renewal reading, that things in time have to replace their parts, nor does it demand, like the Circular time reading, a periodic conception of time.⁷

Context of the passage

Let me first offer some background. The arguments that interest me come up in the first deduction of the second half of the *Parmenides* (137c-142a). They belong to a larger argument

⁷ Proclus preserves two other ancient readings of the passage (*In Parm.* 1226.6-11, and 15-19). The first one – ascribed to Porphyry and Iamblichus by Dillon (1992, p. 567) – takes the passage as saying that the same thing is at the same time younger in respect to the future and older in respect to the past. But this cannot explain the tense of the relation in the conclusion. We do not come to be but already are older than the past and younger than the future. The second interpretation reads as follows: ‘Another set [of interpreters], again, declared that everything is both older and younger than itself, what is now existent being older, and what was before younger, and that what is now older can be said to be older than what was formerly younger.’ However, the argument would have to conclude not that things in time come to be simultaneously older and younger than themselves, but that things come to be older than they were, and things were younger than they are now – which is not the same. Sattler (2019) has recently suggested another option. She suggests that for Plato the arrow of time goes in two directions to explain how the one would become older and younger than itself. However, her reading does not explain how this twofold direction of time would work, and her interpretation only works if there is just one being when in reality the arguments apply to any being in time, regardless of how many things there are.

about time (140e-141d) which concludes that the one has no share of time, nor is it in any time.⁸ This conclusion is used, in turn, to prove, first, that ‘the one in no way is’ (οὐδαμῶς [...] ἔστι τὸ ἓν; 141e9-10), and, from there, that the one ‘is not named or spoken of, nor is it the object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything that is perceive it’ (142a4-6). Since these consequences sound intolerable, Parmenides invites young Aristotle to take a step back and return to the beginning in the hope they can derive a different and more palatable result about the one (142a-b).

Although the passage I discuss here (141a6-c4) belongs to this larger context, my aim here is humble. I just want to explain how Parmenides concludes that things in time come to be younger than themselves, and what can that tells us about the background assumptions regarding time in this section of the dialogue. I leave everything else for future research.

Prm. 141a6-b3

Without further ado, then, the first argument reads as follows (141a6-b3):

“...isn’t it necessary, if something is in time, that it always come to be older than itself?”—“Necessarily.”—“Isn’t the older always older than a younger?”—“To be sure.”—“Therefore, that which comes to be older than itself comes to be, at the same time, younger than itself, if in fact it is to have something it comes to be older than.”

⁸ ‘Therefore, it [i.e. the one] has no share of time, nor is it in any time’ (Οὐδὲ ἄρα χρόνου αὐτῷ μέτεστιν, οὐδ’ ἔστιν ἓν τι χρόνον), *Prm.* 141d4-5. Being in time implies sharing in time but the reverse may not be true. See Scolnicov (2003, p. 90). For this paper, just notice that the things picked out by the ‘older than’ and ‘younger than’ relation seem always to be in time.

...οὐκ ἀνάγκη, εἴαν τι ἦ ἐν χρόνῳ, ἀεὶ αὐτὸ αὐτοῦ πρεσβύτερον γίγνεσθαι; — Ἀνάγκη. —
Οὐκοῦν τό γε πρεσβύτερον ἀεὶ νεωτέρου πρεσβύτερον; — Τί μήν; — Τὸ πρεσβύτερον
ἄρα ἑαυτοῦ γιγνόμενον καὶ νεώτερον ἑαυτοῦ ἅμα γίγνεται, εἴπερ μέλλει ἔχειν ὅτου
πρεσβύτερον γίγνηται.

That the conclusion is somewhat unexpected is marked by young Aristotle's reaction, in which instead of agreeing with Parmenides' conclusion, he asks for clarification (141b3). The first premise is clear enough. It amounts to saying that if x is in time, x comes to be older than x . A common way to understand this is to say that if x is in time, then x at t_2 is older than x at t_1 .⁹ My present self is older than my five-year-old me. The second premise depends on knowing that the relation 'older than' has as its correlative relation 'younger than.' To say that these are correlative terms means that if one thing is older than a second one, then the latter is younger than the former, and vice versa (see 141a7-8; 141c1-2).¹⁰ In other words, if x is older than y , y is younger than x . When applied to two different things or persons there seems to be nothing odd about this claim. If Bob is two years older than Paul, Paul is two years younger than Bob. This also holds when things come to be older or younger than something else: if x comes to be older than y , y comes to be younger than x . But, what kind of terms can these 'coming to be' relations take? Perhaps I can say that when Paul was born, he came to be younger than Bob, and Bob came to be older than him.

⁹ See Rickless (2006, p. 132) and Coxon (1999, pp. 132–133). For now, I will accept this interpretation but in the next section, I will explain why it is imprecise.

¹⁰ For correlatives more generally, see *Prm.* 133c8-d5 and compare with *Resp.* 4, 438a-c; *Chrm.* 167e, *Tht.* 160a, *Symp.* 199d-e, *Soph.* 255d; compare also with Arist. *Top.* 6.4, and *Cat.* 5. For discussion see McPherran (1983), Duncombe (2013) and (2015).

There is still a question about what happens when these relations refer to the same object or person. If I am older than myself, am I also, like in Bob Dylan's song, 'younger than that now'?

That is the conclusion of the argument: if x comes to be older than x , at the same time, x comes to be younger than x . But the argument seems to require a caveat that Parmenides drops in almost like an afterthought. He adds that the conclusion follows if the thing in question, in fact, has 'something it comes to be older than' (141b2-3). This seems to specify that the terms in both sides of the relations 'older than' and 'younger than' exist (they have to be 'something'). It seems that for Plato's Parmenides when I say that I am older or younger than something else, I am implicitly committing myself to the existence of the thing I am comparing myself. The argument also requires identity over time. When I say that Paul is older than himself, I assume that Paul at t_2 and Paul at t_1 are the same person, even if they are different (*i.e.* located at different times). The argument suggests, then, that past-Paul and present-Paul equally exist and constitute the same person, despite having different ages and locations in time.¹¹

The argument works if we understand it as follows:

1. If x is in time, x comes to be older than x .
2. If x comes to be older than y , then [at the same time] y comes to be younger than x .
3. Therefore, if x is in time, x comes to be older than x , and at the same time, x comes to be younger than x .

¹¹ Notice that the correlative relations 'younger than' and 'older than' work without supposing identity over time. In such a case, Paul is not older and younger than himself but older and younger than someone else (given that present-Paul \neq past-Pauls).

Looking back to the examples used above, you might still wonder whether the argument hangs on an ambiguity in the use of the relation ‘comes to be older than’ in the first and second premises. After all, the way I come to be older than myself is not the same way Paul came to be older than Bob when Bob was born. In the first case, I keep coming to be older than myself whereas in the case of Paul and Bob the relation refers to a punctual moment in time. Once Bob was born, they simply hold an ‘older than’ ‘younger than’ relation. But this is not a problem. The relations in the second premise can pick relata from different times, past or present. One could be in the present while the other could be in the past. Each day, present-Paul comes to be older than three-years-ago-Bob. The core argument might be reformulated like this:

1. If x is in time, then x at t_2 is older than x at t_1 .
2. If x at t_2 is older than y at t_1 , then [at the same time] y at t_1 is younger than x at t_2 .
3. Therefore, if x is in time, x at t_2 is older than x at t_1 , and, at the same time, x at t_1 is younger than x at t_2 .

This rendering of the argument has a disadvantage, though. By referring to two fixed moments in time (t_1 and t_2) the reconstruction substitutes the relations ‘comes to be older/younger than’ with ‘older/younger than’ relations. To understand why this is inexact, let’s now turn to Parmenides’ second argument.

Prm. 141b3-c4

In this intricate argument, Parmenides uses the notion of difference to reach his previous conclusion. The relevant passage runs from 141b3-c4, where we read:

“[T]here is no need for a thing to come to be different from a thing that is already (ἤδη) different; it must, rather, already (ἤδη) be different from what is already (ἤδη) different, have come to be different from what has come to be different, and be going to be different from what is going to be different; but it must not have come to be, be going to be, or be different from what comes to be different: it must come to be different, and nothing else.”— “Yes, that’s necessary.”—“But surely older is a difference from younger and from nothing else.”—“Yes, it is.”—“So that which comes to be older than itself must also, at the same time, come to be younger than itself.” —“So it seems.”¹²

διάφορον ἕτερον ἐτέρου οὐδὲν δεῖ γίγνεσθαι ἤδη ὄντος διαφόρου, ἀλλὰ τοῦ μὲν ἤδη ὄντος ἤδη εἶναι, τοῦ δὲ γεγονότος γεγονέναι, τοῦ δὲ μέλλοντος μέλλειν, τοῦ δὲ γιγνομένου οὔτε γεγονέναι οὔτε μέλλειν οὔτε εἶναί πο διάφορον, ἀλλὰ γίγνεσθαι καὶ ἄλλως οὐκ εἶναι. —Ἀνάγκη γὰρ δὴ. —Ἀλλὰ μὴν τό γε πρεσβύτερον διαφορότης νεωτέρου ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενὸς ἄλλου. —Ἔστι γάρ. —Τὸ ἄρα πρεσβύτερον ἑαυτοῦ γιγνόμενον ἀνάγκη καὶ νεώτερον ἅμα ἑαυτοῦ γίγνεσθαι. —Ἔοικεν.

Some have suggested that Parmenides introduces here a formulation of the principle of sufficient reason.¹³ It could be understood as follows: to prove that x is different from y , it is

¹² After this, Parmenides adds another premise and reaches a more ambitious conclusion: “But it must also not come to be for more or less time than itself; it must come to be and be and have come to be and be going to be for a time equal to itself.”—“Yes, that too is necessary.”—“Therefore it is necessary, as it seems, that each thing that is in time and partakes of time be the same age as itself and, at the same time, come to be both older and younger than itself.”—“It looks that way.” (141bc4-d3). However, I leave the discussion of this argument for another time.

¹³ See Hermann & Chrysakopoulou (2010, p. 120), who remind us of Parmenides Fr. B8.9-10.

sufficient to show that x and y are different at the present moment.¹⁴ According to this, there is no need for these things to become any more different from each other than they already are. If my friend John doubts that twins Peter and Glenn are different people, I only need to bring them both at the same time to meet with John. That suffices to prove the point. There is no need to ask them to behave differently or try to look even more different than they already look.

But perhaps Parmenides' main point could be explained more easily. The relata picked out by 'already different from', 'come to be different from', 'have come to be different from', and 'be going to be different from' may have the same formal properties but are not interchangeable. The tense should not be confused. For example, if x is already different from y , then y is already different from x , but you cannot say that if x is already different from y , then y comes to be different from x . The tense indicates a specific time and continuance or completeness of the differentiation between the relata. These tensed relations make it possible to track the relata over time and state if a pair of things are already different, the process of differentiation is still ongoing, happened in the past or will happen in the future.

Next, Parmenides introduces the following premise: "But surely older is a difference from younger and from nothing else" (Ἀλλὰ μὴν τό γε πρεσβύτερον διαφορότης νεωτέρου ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενὸς ἄλλου). The challenge here is to provide a reading of this phrase that works with the rest of the argument. Scholars sometimes read it as establishing that the relations in question are opposite and correlative.¹⁵ But if that is the purpose of Parmenides' claim, spelling it out in terms of difference seems too general. The 'older than' relation is different from all other relations such

¹⁴ The Greek here is (ἤδη) which could mean 'already', 'by this time' but also 'actually' and 'now.' However, compare it with the 'now' (νῦν) and the 'instant' (τὸ ἐξαίφνης), discussed later at 152b-157b.

¹⁵ See for example Scolnicov (2003, p. 90).

as ‘taller than’, ‘smarter than’, or ‘happier than,’ not only from its opposite and correlative ‘younger than.’ Besides, it was already clear from 141a7-8 that the relations are opposite and correlative. The terms ‘older’ and ‘younger’ could refer instead to the relata picked out by the relations (i.e. the older *thing*, and the younger *thing* instead of ‘older than’ and ‘younger than’). But the problem seems to remain. Bob is not only younger than Paul, he is also younger than George, John and many other people.

The difficulty is solved if we read the claim as an application of Parmenides’ previous statements about difference and tenses. In context, the scope of οὐδενὸς ἄλλου (‘from nothing else’) at the end of the sentence is more plausibly restricted to the other tensed relations just discussed above (i.e. ‘come to be different from’, ‘have come to be different from’, and ‘be going to be different from’). In this way, the premise establishes two points. First, that the relations ‘older than’ and ‘younger than’ are subtypes of relations of difference, and second, that the relations they establish cannot be confused with those established by the tensed version of these relations –in this case ‘come to be older/younger than’, ‘have come to be older/younger than, and ‘be going to be older/younger than.’ Thus, the temporal difference between ‘the older thing’ and ‘the younger thing’ remain stable. In other words, the relata in an ‘older than’/‘younger than’ relation already have a different age from one other, so they do not come to be older or younger than the other, etc. If something has a different age than something else, it only means that the latter has a different age than the former.

In the conclusion, Parmenides combines these results with the previous agreements that things come to be older than themselves (141a6-7), and that ‘older than’ is the correlative relation of ‘younger than’ (141a7-8). The argument could then be understood as follows:

1. Relations of difference can be expressed denoting various tenses ('already different than,' 'come to be different than,' 'will be different than'; cf. 141b3-c1).
2. Relations of difference preserve their properties as long as the sequence of tenses is respected (e.g. if x is already different from y , y is already different from x , and nothing else; cf. 141b3-c1).
3. The relations 'older than', 'younger than' are subtypes of relations of difference (so points 1 and 2 apply to them; cf. 141c1-2).
4. One of the properties of the 'older/younger than' relations is that they are correlative (this is the same as to say that if x is older than y , y is younger than x ; cf. 141a7-8).
5. Therefore, if x comes to be older than y , then [at the same time] y comes to be younger than x (implicit).
6. If x is in time, x comes to be older than x (cf. 141a5-7).
7. Therefore, if x is in time, x comes to be older than x , and at the same time, x comes to be younger than x (cf. 141c3-4; 141b1-3).

This argument highlights the importance of keeping the tenses in the premises and the conclusion and suggests a more precise reading of what it means for a thing to come to be older and younger than itself. One interesting feature is that things in the past are fixed. They do not keep growing older. But we in the present do.

Consider it in the following way. All my past selves are getting younger with respect to my current self, my current self is getting older than myself at any given past moment. Now, I can only get older than myself if both all my past selves and my current self are equally me. Then I can say of myself that overall (i.e. taking into account my past and present selves) I am at the same time getting older than myself (i.e. my present self in relation to my past selves) and younger than

myself (i.e. my past selves in relation to my present self). For example, my 5-year-old me is at every moment getting younger and younger than my present older self. The same applies to all my past selves with respect to my present self. If I am not only my current self but also all my past selves, then I can say that, overall, I am simultaneously coming to be older than myself and younger than myself. This implies that my past selves are as real as my present self, and, thus, every day I am younger than yesterday. This reading is the only one that explains and preserves the active sense of the relations (i.e., it's not 'younger' and 'older' but rather '*getting* younger' and '*getting* older', continuously). We can generalise this and say that any past self of a thing is coming to be younger than the present one if it is indeed the same thing. Thus, if speaking in general of something that exists in time (and not with regard to any particular time), we can claim that it is always coming to be older than itself and at the same time younger than itself.

Notice that the tensed relations 'come to be older/younger than' cannot really be substituted in the way I did at the end of the previous section. There I accepted that 'if x is in time, x comes to be older than x ' could be substituted by 'if x is in time, then x at t_2 is older than x at t_1 .' But the second part of the passage makes clear that this is imprecise. If we are to preserve the tense of the premises and the conclusion, it is crucial to realise that on one side the relation picks out a past-self fixed in a specific moment and on the other it picks out an ongoing present-self that is moving in time. So a more precise reading of the conclusion of the arguments is that if x is in time, x in the ongoing present comes to be older than x at any given past moment, and at the same time, x in any given past moment comes to be younger than x in the ongoing present.¹⁶

¹⁶ That this is the sense of the argument is confirmed later at *Prm.* 152b2-4. From there, however, Parmenides introduces the problem of transition that will culminate with the discussion of the 'instant' (τὸ ἐξαιφνης).

Time, Persistence, and Identity

If this reading is right, in this passage of the *Parmenides*, Plato presents a rejection of presentism –the view that only the present exists– in favour of a growing universe theory where the past and present exist. This is because if only the present is real, then, strictly speaking, we could not get older than ourselves. The ‘older than’ relation would lack one of its relata. For Parmenides, past selves of anything in time must be real “if in fact it [i.e. the thing in time] is to have something it comes to be older than” (141b2-3). But if past selves have to be something, it means they share in being (see *Soph.* 237d). This allows a special kind of predication with regards to things in time; a predication that picks out all of the things’ moments in time and considers them equally real. The results are interesting. A person could be getting wiser and wiser with time, but simultaneously would become more naïve and ignorant at every turn. Things in time are then much more than what we see in a given moment. They would have temporal parts and their existence would be expanded over their trajectories in time.

It is tempting to again use modern terminology and claim that in this model things in time persist (they possess temporal parts that ‘perdure’). We would not only be what we already are but also the collection of everything we have been before. This is more than simply recognising that we have been ignorant or young in the past. It is to accept that part of us is and will always remain ignorant and young. Thus, these arguments also seem to imply a rejection of endurantism (the view according to which things can be wholly present in a given time).

An question remains, though. Are these arguments part of a bigger and more complex conception of time? I think they are. At *Prm.* 152a-b and 152d-e, the main conclusion of the arguments is used again. Notice, however, how at 152e1-3, Parmenides seems to introduce

endurantism with respect to the one that is in time (*i.e.* the one of the second hypothesis): “Yet the now is always present to the one throughout its being; for the one always is now, whenever it is.”— “No doubt.” Accepting this claim leads, at 155c4-7, to conclude that ‘the one itself both is and comes to be older and younger than itself and the others, and it neither is nor comes to be older or younger than itself and others.’ We could also ask how all this fits with the famous passage about the now (νῦν) and instant (τὸ ἐξάιφνης) at 152b-157b, and contrast Parmenides’ arguments about time with time in the *Timaeus*. These topics deserve a more detailed examination, but I will have to discuss them another day—once we all get a bit younger than yesterday.

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