

Παρμενίδης ὁ Ἐλεάτης

A REVERENCE FOR THE DIVINE:

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER KINGSLEY

As an undergraduate transfer student looking over university course offerings, one listing caught my eye: pre-Socratic philosophy. I signed up without hesitation. And when I picked up our text, what names! Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus. The spell that had been cast somewhere in high school, of a Golden Age of Greece, was reanimated. What bright sparks might have served to kindle such glory?

I arrived on that first day of class full of anticipation. Of the pre-Socratics, said our professor, not much was known. This was the first and most basic thing we learned, a disappointment in keeping with the general tamping down of a rigorous education—science and scholarship, not magic! We learned that those early thinkers, primitive though they were, had turned in the right direction—away from mumbo jumbo and toward rational theory. Their ideas amounted to a proto-physics, we learned. There was even a crude idea of atoms. We looked back upon them as bright children, perhaps, and the class came and went. No Peter Kingsley had yet appeared in the world of pre-Socratic scholarship.

Two figures in particular, Empedocles and Parmenides, are important for Kingsley. Early on, as he was learning ancient Greek, an exposure to poetic fragments from these figures struck a deep, perhaps inexplicable, chord. As he made his way through university and postgraduate studies at King's College at Cambridge, his interest became all-encompassing. But it was only from such an immersion that the insights, finally revealed, were made possible.

My introduction to Kingsley came by accident. My wife had come by a copy of his book REALITY. The title intrigued me. What chutzpah! Picking it up, I had no idea I'd be taken back to the pre-Socratics, nor any idea of how excited I'd soon be.

It would be hard to overstate how much Peter Kingsley's understanding of these pre-Socratic figures has revolutionized conventional academic views. In his books, ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY, MYSTERY AND MAGIC (1995), IN THE DARK PLACES OF WISDOM (1999), and REALITY (2003), he argues that an understanding of the mystical traditions alive in pre-Socratic Greek culture is seminal to unlocking the meaning of their teachings. And now, in his remarkable new book, A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU (2010), Kingsley makes a case for something even more startling, that the pre-Socratic Pythagoras—and thus Greek and, ultimately, Western culture—was deeply influenced by the wisdom brought from Mongolia by a mysterious stranger.

What is most striking about Kingsley's work is how he has bridged the centuries separating us from the ancients to show how urgently real what they understood remains for us today.

—RICHARD WHITTAKER

RICHARD WHITTAKER: One of the things that struck me most in your book *REALITY* and now again in this new book, *A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU*, is that what you're saying feels like such a challenge to the fundamentals of Western thought. How do you see that?

PETER KINGSLEY: I notice that lots of people use the word "challenge" to define what my work is putting on the table. But to me it's all very simple. Most of the problems we have in the West are not due to the fact that, at the origins of Western civilization, there's something fundamentally wrong. On the contrary, there's something infinitely precious at the origins of our civilization; the trouble is that it's been lost, has been taken for granted. We've gradually let it distort itself. It keeps on falling down an octave, then another octave of understanding.

I don't really see how anybody on a philosophical, or spiritual, or any other kind of a level could object to the challenge to wake up and take responsibility for what we have been given.

RW: Here's a quote taken from your book *REALITY* that addresses this same question: "Facts on their own are like sitting on top of a goldmine and scratching at the dust around our feet with a little stick..... This book is about what they have covered over, about the reality that lies behind."

PK: It's very easy just to play around with facts on the day-to-day level and imagine they represent some real knowledge without pausing to pay attention to the broader context of our experience. What happens to us when we go to sleep? Where do we go? What is our con-

sciousness? And if we're going to reduce consciousness to brain phenomena, what are we doing? Is making consciousness into just another fact really getting us anywhere?

The crucial element missing here is something that was very present at the origins of Western civilization. Empedocles, the ancient Greek prophet and teacher with whom I have a particularly deep connection, says right at the start of his teaching about the cosmos and about the elements of existence, about biology, about astronomy, about everything, that people will never understand anything about any of these subjects, or ever be able to approach them rightly, unless they first learn to breathe in the right way; unless they learn to respect the life all around them; unless they cultivate a reverence for the divine in everything. But now this has all gone by the wayside. We not only discard these very clear warnings; we make a mockery of them. And yet they are absolutely essential. They are contained in the DNA, if you like, of Western culture—these pointers to the need for a right attitude. The real purpose of searching after facts is not so that we can manipulate the world to our advantage, but so that we can transform our own awareness. And this is something we have completely forgotten.



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RW: Speaking of challenges to the modern way of seeing things, let's take the title of your book *REALITY*. Why such a big title?

PK: Oh, I remember this vividly. I came to the end of that book and meditated on what the title needed to be, walked around, and knew that the title needed to be *REALITY*. I remember a neighbor coming round one afternoon and asking about the title for the new book. I told her and she said: "What do you mean, *Reality*? Which reality? Each of us has our unique reality."

This is the modern idea. Your reality is different from my reality. But for me the question is *what is the reality that underlies our realities*—because if

there is no reality underlying all our apparently different realities, how can there be any communication? How can there be anything at all?

And there's another implication to this title, which verges on something extremely esoteric, but is also very important. We tend to assume that reality is just what it is, unquestionable. But what if everything we think of as reality—the lives we live, the culture we live in—was specifically brought into existence for us? In fact, one of the most constant themes of my work, and espe-



cially in my new book, *A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU*, is that cultures never just happen. They're not just hit-or-miss affairs that are the result of people fumbling around until they suddenly stumble on a civilization. All civilizations, including our own, are literally brought into existence from another reality, by very conscious beings. And to be able to do this: *that's* real knowledge!

RW: You have two prefatory quotes at the start of the new book. One is from Konstantinos Kavafis: "And now what's going to become of us without the bar-

barians? Those people—they could have offered some kind of solution, might have been our unbinding." Would you say something about why you picked this quote?

PK: First of all, I've been aware for a long time that, with this book, I'll be accused of being a pan-Mongolist. The accusation will go that just as Martin Bernal, in *BLACK ATHENA*, tried to say Western civilization came from Africa, Peter Kingsley is claiming it comes from Mongolia. But this is not to understand what I'm saying. To be sure, this book is about cer-

tain individuals who traveled all the way from Mongolia more than two thousand years ago to help people like Pythagoras in the planting of a new civilization—an unbelievably delicate and intricate process. I try to explain that this is how civilizations are born. This is how people can come together from thousands of miles away, because there is a tremendous intelligence behind them.

You could say this is crazy; what’s Peter Kingsley talking about? Well, it’s very simple: I’m talking about the migration of birds. I’m talking about the same sort of intelligence that will have birds migrating amazing distances, for tens of thousands of miles. This is natural intelligence. This is the intelligence of life on earth. And this is also the intelligence of life on earth that will bring a civilization like our own into existence.

So yes, Mongols were intimately involved and implicated in Western civilization from the beginning. And I hope the evidence I brought forward for this—evidence that even the greatest of historians are now accepting—will stop people in their tracks and make them think, my God! Mongols have something to do with Western civilization: this is quite something!

I hope people will be pierced by that, shocked by that, because we need to be shocked. We have a frighteningly destructive idea of higher versus lower civilizations, and here are people from a culture that not only Europeans, but also Tibetans and Chinese and Iranians, have looked down on with disdain and fear for centuries: a culture with a tremendous wisdom that also contributed to what was to become Western civilization.

But underlying all this, of course, is the category of the barbarian: of the primitive, the “other.” And if we truly

are going to understand such a category we have to put aside our obsession with ourselves, our narcissism, our fixation on who we are and where we are going.

This question of where we are going next in Western civilization, of what we are to *do* next, is something all of us are faced with nowadays. Of course the politicians have political answers; scientists have their scientific answers; and people with spiritual tendencies will talk about ushering in a new phase of global consciousness, a new spiritual awareness that will erupt overnight all over the place. But I inevitably find myself saying: hold on a second. You don’t just have to look back at history and see how every great civilization, Egyptian, Babylonian, Roman, has died out. There’s also a deeper issue here. Europe and the United States have experienced a tremendous flowering of civilization. But what do we know happens when roses are most abundant and their perfume is most exquisite? What happens when the crocuses are in full bloom? We know that over the next few days and weeks the petals are going to start falling. The flowers are going to die. It’s called “nature.”

We are obsessed with keeping everything going: with asking what do we do next? But what if that’s not the right question? What if even our efforts to do good or bring change or help or heal are, unknown to us, the subtlest forms of violence? What if we actually have to do nothing: just go deeper, wait? What if all the frenzy and hyperactivity of Western civilization that we’re experiencing nowadays is like an auto-immune disease? Because if the auto-immune system in a body stops working properly it usually becomes hyperactive. What if we need to rest, go back to that mysteriously fruitful state of helplessness known to the



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ancient Greeks as *aporia* or “pathlessness”? What if we were to dare to say: we have reached the point where we don’t know where to go?

And when we manage to pause, when we come to this stage of stopping, then we can start to share the vision experienced by the wonderful Greek poet, Konstantinos Kavafis, while living at Alexandria in Egypt. When he saw all the complexities of civilized life, the corruption, the narrow-mindedness, he realized that something needed to come from somewhere else. It might be destruction, which is what the barbarians represent. But in his very moving poem called *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*, he hints at how the barbarians aren’t interested in the pomp and ceremony of civilization—they just want the simple reality that lies behind. What makes the

poem so beautiful is that, towards the end, the civilized people inside the city are full of fear and expectation because the barbarians are coming; but instead of preparing to fight them, they are ready to open the gates and let them in. Everyone has realized that all the politicians and politicking have got them nowhere. Everybody is waiting for the barbarians. But the real end to the poem comes when word arrives that the barbarians have changed their mind: they aren’t coming. And instead of the relief and rejoicing you would expect, there is just emptiness of purpose—an enormous sense of disappointment. What’s going to become of us without the barbarians?

RW: Today it seems almost a point of honor to feel it would be weakness to

think there's something like meaning or purpose in the nature of things.

PK: In my experience, purpose and life are absolutely inseparable. Each of us has come into existence as human beings for a purpose. There is a specific purpose to the culture we live in. All these purposes are interrelated and interweave and are fundamentally one. And everything we do either brings us closer to our own innate purpose or takes us further away—further from life and from ourselves.

RW: One quote I wrote down from your new book is “the taboo against discovering the sacred source of the world we live in.”

PK: Alan Watts quite rightly talked about the taboo against knowing who we are. But there are other even greater taboos behind that, especially the taboo against facing up to the sacred source of the culture we live in—because when we start discovering the sacred origin of our own culture, then we have to start to behave. Then we have to become conscious. Then we have no choice but to grow up and actually become human beings, not the children we are.

I called my new book *A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU* because, while writing it, I was forced to realize the extent to which consciousness demands *focus* of us. And I'm not just talking about the intellectual focus of a disciplined mind. I'm talking about something that will keep us moving through the trees, keep us walking and running through the forest of life—because there is a tremendous urgency in life. Life is calling to us. Of course many poets and philosophers have heard the call of that urgency; and they respond as

best they can. But there's a grave risk of falling into the trap of creating an artificial, introverted system of thought, which fossilizes and encases the life that called to us in the first place. Really this is just as dangerous as creating extroverted systems that alienate us from ourselves in other ways.

RW: This focus is not some ordinary focus, then?

PK: It's a focus with one's whole being: with one's mind, with the sensation in one's body, with one's whole awareness, one's feeling, one's love. Everything has to come together into the point of an arrow.

RW: We think we know about focus of mind but I don't think people know much about what you're speaking about, an alignment of the entire self. We have a bodily intelligence, a kind of feeling intelligence, plus some kind of mental intelligence. To have that all awake at once—we don't really know that. Would you agree?

PK: Certainly. I'll give a simple example. When I was doing research at Cambridge University, years ago, I realized that I needed to understand the philosophy of Parmenides. He's an extraordinarily important figure in the West: more or less everyone since the time of Plato acknowledges him as the father, the ultimate source, of Western logic. The trouble is that nobody can agree with anybody else about how to interpret him. You can see that even the great Plato felt out of his depth.

So I sat alone in my room and I said: OK, I know ancient Greek well, I have the text of Parmenides here, I'm just

going to read his original words about being and reality, and focus on them until I understand them. I would sit, and start reading a line or two of his poetry about the ultimate reality and the utter stillness of being, and my mind would wander.

At the beginning of his poem, Parmenides warns about the mind that wanders all over the place. And here is my mind wandering. One moment it's on the text that's pointing towards the all-encompassing oneness of being. The next moment my attention is on a motorbike outside the window, or suddenly I'm thinking about a girlfriend. It wasn't long before I realized the absurdity of trying to understand Parmenides' words with this wandering mind, because he's very clearly stating it *can't* be done.

So I began to become conscious not only of the Greek text in my lap but also of everything else: of all the sounds outside the room, of the posture I was sitting in, of how much I'd eaten, of how easily I was breathing, of how everything was affecting my ability to focus on Parmenides' work. This process went on and eventually I realized not only that, when Parmenides is talking about being or reality, he is talking about absolutely everything in my experience, at every moment. I also realized it wasn't going to be my little wandering mind that would understand Parmenides: it was going to be *everything*.

The culmination of this process came when I was walking down one of the busiest streets in London and was about



to cross it at a pedestrian intersection. Suddenly the light for me turned from red to green, and it hit me, with more immediacy than I'd ever experienced anything in my life, that Parmenides' words can only be understood through the whole body—and most immediately through the belly.

RW: Through the belly?

PK: Yes. In fact, *my whole body was understanding him*. And ever since then, I can explain any aspect of Parmenides' teaching without a single thought—simply from the consciousness in my body. The funny thing is that you have all these philosophers with their complicated commentaries and interpretations; but no one has a clue what Parmenides was really talking about because he was talking from, and about, experience.

RW: It's very interesting to me that clearly you have all the scholarly credentials, and yet you've gone a different route, not only in what you write about but also in your writing style. I wonder if you'd say something about that.

PK: Again, let's stay focused on the essentials. This new book, *A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU*, is about the origins of Western philosophy. Philosophy means the love of wisdom. The love of wisdom is very, very

simple and it has been made very, very complicated. In my earlier books, I explained how the love of wisdom eventually became corrupted into the love of just talking and speculating about wisdom. This is quite a tragedy because there are still many teenagers who go to college to find wisdom and are given nothing but evasions and all kinds of complicated ignorance.



*It is necessary to speak
and to think what is;
for being is,
but nothing is not.
(B 6.1-2)
—Parmenides*

The origins of Western philosophy are, in fact, intimately connected with the origins of Western civilization. There's really no separating the two. This means that philosophy has a cultural mandate—which is something very crucial, very elegant, very serious, something very much tied to the realities of life. And it's extremely significant that the earliest philosophy was written either in the form of simple laws, or in the form of poetry.

Originally both these forms of communication carried a very powerful, in fact a magical, energy. Philosophical poetry was actually incantatory, initiatory poetry—a truth modern scholars are terrified to admit. But if I, unlike them, write now in a certain way, it's because I'm simply being true to those original Greeks. I will add plenty of references and endnotes because I'm totally respectful of all the fine details, of the linguistic and historical and philosophical subtleties that have been lost.

But this doesn't change the central fact, which is that the real philosophical project is to bring us into harmony with life for the sake of everyone, and everything, now.

RW: As I'm listening, the image that's coming to me is: "So there *is* life on other planets!" It's almost on that level. And I think what you're discovering can be life-enhancing in a very exciting way.

PK: I trust so. And with this life comes purpose, which makes it all so wonderful. It's not that some Mongol from thousands of miles away just happened to stumble onto Greek soil by accident. He traveled to Greece—and in my new book I show how he did this—because he had been guided by dreams and visions. Again, it's all about focus and purpose. And what *A STORY WAITING TO PIERCE YOU* is really asking is: can't we wake up to the life-giving purpose behind existence as we know it, and especially behind this Western civilization that has wandered so far from its origins?

RW: Some years ago I was driving late at night through the Southwest and I tuned in to a Navajo radio station. A Navajo man was talking about how, with the publication of Castaneda's books, lots of people would show up at the reservations looking for Native Americans who would introduce them to their magic. But he said, "What we have is simply that we can see what's here." We in the West go through life believing we're seeing what's there. But what this Navajo man meant is that it's not so easy just to see. Does that make sense?

PK: That is the seeing behind the seeing. A large part of my book *REALITY* is taken

up with explaining that, according to the ancient founders and benefactors of our civilization, we don't know how to see. We don't even know how to look. And nothing has changed in the last two and a half thousand years: we still don't know how to use our senses. That to me is an essential aspect of what any real training is about, and it's essential to how I work with people now. That, to me, is a real tradition. Of course there are many aspects to a real tradition; but one essential aspect, which is so much forgotten, has to do with the senses. We don't have the faintest idea how to use the senses, or what the mystery of the senses is. We also don't know the dangers of not using our senses consciously—because our senses are tremendously powerful organs.

And if we're not in touch with them, if we're not able to see and sense in the way the Navajos or the ancient Greeks refer to, then that organ turns against us. It's like anything in life. If you have a dog and you neglect it, it's going to end up whining and getting miserable and probably biting somebody. If we are not initiated into really learning how to see and hear and touch and taste and feel and be inside our bodies, then all of that will turn against us, sooner or later. It will just happen inevitably.

This is the indigenous wisdom in Navajo tradition, and it's the indigenous wisdom at the roots of Western civilization too. It's simply a matter of whether we can find the humility to go back to our own original instructions. ¶

For Peter Kingsley's work visit www.peterkingsley.org.