

# ΠΑΡΑ-<sub>para</sub>, the prefix of TANGENCY

We bodies (some-body, any-body) are in / move through space/time: that's four statements in one sentence. All languages have short phonetic morphemes (forms of sound) signaling where a "body" (some-body, -thing) is / is moving **in relation to** some other reality in/beyond space, time, or both. In many languages (e.g., Greek, Latin, English, German) these shorties are word-elements "fixed" on the front (as "pre-fixes") of roots/stems, in the middle ("in-fixes"), & on the back ("suf-fixes"). Mastering the "fixes" meanings in such languages shortens the time to learning-competence.

This Thinksheet is about one Greek prefix which appears slightly in Latin but extensively in English. It's of great importance in the NT (& the development of Christian **theology**, for which Greek is the primary formative language). (Note that the title transliterates the Greek prefix into English.)

My purpose? To illustrate what so far I've said about the importance of "fixes" &, in learning a language, coming to mastery. (This was a constant in my Hebrew-&-Greek courses in "The Roots of the Roots" [for those without structural knowledge of the biblical languages].)

**PRELIMINARY EXERCISE:** In any English dictionary (preferably a big one), read all the "para-" words you recognize & see if, by your knowledge of the words, you can arrive at a common sememe (i.e., meaning) for the prefix. Please do this before reading any further in this Thinksheet. (Don't get into the "par-[minus "a"]" words.)

Before detailing this prefix's semantic domain (i.e., meaning-range or -field), I'll suggest a **CONTROL METAPHOR**, viz. **tangency** (as in this Thinksheet's title)--from Latin "to touch": "para-" signals some-body / -thing touching, or in touching distance from, some-body / -thing. The simplest instance of tangency is "where the rubber hits the road": the point where a circle & line touch each other. The semantic range is about the same in Gk. & Eng.; here it is in Eng. (in the big Random House Dictionary): at or to one side of, beside, side by side; beyond, past, by; "auxiliary to or derivative of" (par-ody, par-onomasia); "ancillary" (para-medic, para-legal); "abnormal or defective" (para-normal).

Our experience of touching, & our experience of "touch" words, enhance our understanding (Verständnis) of & feeling (Sprachgefühl) for "para-" (again, in both Gk. & Eng.). An example with "touch": "Touching [i.e., on the subject of] global warming, my opinion is...." An example with a Latinism: "Don't go off on a tangent [i.e., wander away from the subject at hand, the point at & on which we have been touching]." (A "parabasis" = (lit., in Gk.) "a going aside, digression.")

More good news: Every time we use a "para-" (or "par[a]-") word, we (1) increase our grasp of this prefix's semantic range & (2) test our funded knowledge of it (especially in problematic instances: "The exception proves [meaning "tests"] the rule." (NB: Not all Eng. words beginning with "para-" or "par-" derive from Gk. "para-"; the word's dictionary-entry's etymology wises you up on this.)

Now let's look at a few "para-" words of negative force. The one mentioned above, for the "abnormal or defective" category, is **para-normal** = aside from (i.e., uncorrelatable with, and therefore scientifically unprovable by) the normal, therefore "supernatural." So is experience of the supernatural negative? Only (1) in the heuristic sense that it's uncatchable in the nets of rational normality and (2) in the moral sense that demonic influence has deleterious effects on human beings & human values. In the metaphoric mode of tangency, the paranormal is not in touch with (or, is out of touch with) the normal; but nevertheless is alongside of, exists in structural contact (as "-normal") with, the normal. (Also, extrasensory perception; telepathy.)

**Paranoids** are (1) out"side" their minds & so be"side" themselves, yet (2) fearfully-delusionally image they are "alongside," in touch with, malevolent presences (they "see things" [visions] & hear "voices" [auditions]). (Delusional is one diagnosis, demon-possessed is another: in each case, the person is alongside of, in touch with, either an abnormal mental projection or a supernatural "principality & power"

of evil.) (In pastoring I encountered both types. One of the former type I took to a "mental hospital" for a lobotomy [no, I'd not do that again!], which restored her to normality.) Princeton's econometric genius, John Nash, before his developmental recovery, had both visions & auditions; but "A Beautiful Mind," the film telling his story, represents him as having only auditions.

A **parasite** is an organism or (!) person "eating" on/along"side"/in someone.

A **parable** is a story thrown (-ble, Eng."ball") along"side"--in tangency with--a truth (moral attitude, religious principle, etc.) thus illumined. While an allegory may have many points of contact with what the storyteller is preaching/teaching, usually a parable has only one, as perhaps all of Jesus's. A parable (I'm telling around just now) of undiscourageability: Coming upon an upside down sparrow in the road, a horseman inquired "What are you doing?" S: "I've heard the sky will fall today." H, laughing: "So you think you can hold it up." S: "No, but I'll do what I can." (Elton Trueblood's THE HUMOR OF CHRIST is an eye-opener.)

In a **paradox**, two incommensurables are put "side by side," perhaps both true, one counterintuitive to the other, the along"side"dness contrary to expectation, the tension not logically resolvable. Many a paradox of the mind is an open door for the heart, the spirit. (-dox? Gk., "thought, opinion"; elative [high meaning], "praise" [dox-ology].)

In gymnastics, **parallel** bars are two bars along"side" (literally) "one another" & equidistant. When you look up at a tall building, the illusion that the sides are convergent (rather than parallel) is called **parallax**, (literally) the "change" caused by viewing at "other" than a 90° angle. My old 2'-long view-camera had a parallax-correcting front: it tilted to parallel the lens plane with the glass-plate plane. My old (1906) Graflex surrendered parallax-correction in order to render the image (on the glass viewplate) rightside-up (as with all subsequent through-the-lens cameras). My between-the-Wars (I & II) cameras had tiltable viewfinders to create parallax so as to adjust for the variation between the view-frame (what the photographer saw) & the film-frame (what the film saw, i.e., the picture). (Oops, my passion for cameras is showing! I hope I haven't bored you.)

**Paragraphs?** Units of writing (i.e., "graphs") set "side-by-side" in a series.

A **paradigm?** A visualization of the inflexions (forms) a particular root/stem/word can take, all set out "side-by-side"; then a model, pattern, mold; then an ideal or touchstone; finally, a worldview (way of seeing the world, with all "parts" displayed [as it were] "side-by-side"), worldpicture (theory of life), worldstory (overall understanding of history)--the three "world-" words written with their modifiers, because representing three (as usual, agglutinative) German words: the Germans got there first. (-digm? Gk. "point," as with a "dig"-it, the finger being the human body's built-in pointer, which manipulates machines therefore called "digital.")

In the rolling of the Church Year, we're now in **Advent** (Lat., [Messiah Jesus] "coming" [not yet here]). Here we're plunged into the *Christian* worldstory, (in G. Fackre's favorite phrase) "the Christian Story." In RHD2, "Advent"2 is "the coming of Christ into the world"; 4, "See 'Second Coming'--which has "the Coming of Christ on Judgment Day" (1635-). This convergence of the Comings (the Incarnation to the Eschaton[End]), reminds me of the last lines of T.S.Eliot's "The Cultivation of Christmas Trees" (1954): "Because the beginning shall remind us of the end / And the first coming of the second coming."

The Bible is OT-NT, & only Mother Mary Theotokos (God-bearer, in her womb) sits on the hyphen: only she lived in both OT times (before the Incarnation, which was God becoming a zygote in her womb) & in NT times. (For Christians, that zygote converted "the Hebrew Scriptures" into "the OT.")

The Incarnation was God's "touching," coming into tangency with, humanity --a touching which ceases in Jn.20.17 (Vulg., "Noli me tangere" ["Don't touch me"; Gk., "hold"]; but see vs.27). God's being (ουσία *ousia*; what's one's own, thus one's self) is available to us only by grace of Incarnation/Redemption/Consummation--i.e. by his coming into tangency with us, on our "side" (παρά *para*) = **Par(a)ousia** = presence, arrival,\* (G.Fackre) revelatory/salvific activity\*\*(noted by E.M.Colyer 38n22 in S.K.Gibson, STORY LINES [festschrift to Fackre], Eerdmans/02).

\* A proper extended/resultant/inferential meaning, though not found in pagan or early-Christian Greek. The second Person of the Trinity to (purpose/result) reveal & save (C.S.Lewis: we're "The Visited Planet") came & will Return, Re-Presence (extended meaning of "Parousia") himself to complete the work he began in his First Coming ("Parousia").