

Parmenides

We are turning to one of the most important philosophers in the pre-Socratic period, Parmenides. I have said previously that everything changes after Parmenides. Our biographical information concerning him is sketchy. Diogenes Laertius reports that Parmenides was a native of Elea, the son of Pyres. He was a pupil of Xenophanes, although Theophrastus reports that he was a follower of Anaximander. Diogenes Laertius notes that although Xenophanes instructed him, Parmenides was no follower of his. According to Sotion, Parmenides also associated with Ameinias the Pythagorean. Parmenides was more inclined to follow Ameinias way of life, and built a shrine in his honor.

Diogenes Laertius report of Parmenides views is very brief. He was the first to declare that the earth is spherical and is situated in the center of the universe. He held that there were two elements: fire and earth, and that the former discharged the function of a craftsman, the latter his material. The generation of man proceeded from the sun as first cause; heat and cold, of which all things consist, surpass the sun itself. Again, he held that soul and mind are one and the same, as Theophrastus mentions. He divided philosophy into two parts dealing the one with truth, the other with opinion.

So much for the report of his views and the events in his life. From what is stated above in the doxography, it would not appear that Parmenides was worth mentioning. However, one should not be confused by these ancient reports when we have the actual texts from these thinkers.

The sixth Century philosopher, Simplicius, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*, provides us with extended quotations of Parmenides' views. Simplicius says that the reason he is doing this is because Parmenides' work is becoming rare and he wanted to preserve these arguments. So, we do have approximately 150 lines of Parmenides' *On Nature*. I would like to divide the remaining comments into the following sections: The poem, the arguments against change, and the legacy of Parmenides.

The Poem

From the ancient reports, we know that Parmenides wrote one work, entitled *On Nature*, which was done in Homeric verse. The version of Greek used by Parmenides is odd, in that it betrays older forms of words than what would have been currently used. The work is in the same verse foot as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The proem (the initial framing portion of the poem) is reminiscent of a scene in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus enters the underworld and converses with the shades of the fallen heroes. Parmenides deliberately relocates this encounter not below the ground but above it in his work. The main narrative structure is the announcements of the goddess, which is also similar to the proem used by Hesiod in *Works and Days*. The goddess announces that men know nothing, and she is revealing the two paths of inquiry: the Way of Truth (ἀλεθεια) and the Way of Seeming (δοξα). Most of what remains of this work is the Way of

Truth. Although some recent work has been done attempting to understand the importance and content of the Way of Seeming, it is safe to say that this portion of the poem has had little influence on the development of Western Philosophy. However, the Way of Truth has had an enormous impact, which is why we should examine its content.

The Arguments for Monism

Let us look at some of the salient arguments for monism Parmenides advances. The section on the Way of Truth commences with the following fragments.

Come now - I will tell you - and bring away my story safely when you have heard it - the only ways of inquiry there are for thinking: the one, that is and that is not possible for it not to be is the path of Persuasion (for it attends upon Truth), the other, that it is not and that it is necessary for it not to be, this I point out to you to be a path completely unlearnable, for neither may you know that which is not (for it is not to be accomplished) nor may you declare it. (28B2)

. . . For the same thing is for thinking and for being (28B3)

But gaze upon things which although absent are securely present in thought. For you will not cut off what is from clinging to what is, neither being scattered everywhere in every way in order nor being brought together. (28B4)

And it is all common to me. From where I am to begin; for to there shall I come back again. (28B5)

That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be, but not possible for nothing to be, I bid you consider this. For <I bid you from this first way of inquiry, but next from the way on which mortals, knowing nothing, two-headed, wander. For helplessness in their breasts guides their wandering mind. But they are carried on equally deaf and blind, amazed, hordes without judgment, for whom both to be and not to be are judged the same, and the path of all is backward-turning. (28B6)

Part of the problem here is how to read fragment 28B2. The Greek reads *χρη το λεγειν τε ωσειν τε ον εμμεναι εστι γαρ ειναι, μηδεν δ ουκ εστιν.*

The Greek verb *ειναι* (to be) carries with it, in Greek and in English, both a potential sense and an existential sense. By potential sense, we mean that things exist, but has the ability to transform in form. For example. A man (A) is a policeman and a husband. The predicates *is a policeman* and *is a husband* are contained in the object (here: man) and are not mutually exclusive. By the existential sense, we are making a claim about the existence of some object. There is a man. Problem: Parmenides states that what *for the same thing is for thinking and for being* . This carries the connotation that whatever can be thought is, as in exists. Or, more importantly, whatever is, can be thought. What does not exist cannot be thought and what cannot be thought cannot exist.

However, what about the case of imaginary objects? I can think that there is a unicorn, but because I can think this, there must be in the strong sense actual unicorns? Are we to read this passage in the sense that Parmenides is attributing being to these objects insofar as they can be conceived and hence thought? Moreover, because what exists necessarily exists, and what can be thought necessarily must exist, then imaginary objects, under this analysis, also must necessarily exist. Clearly if we understand Parmenides this way, he is committing a fallacy of attributing necessity to being on the basis of an objects conceivability. The real question remains, what does he do with this position?

Parmenides starts with the idea that there is only one thing in the universe. This notion has a history starting with Anaximander's ἀπειρον leading through Xenophanes God-Sphere. If the One necessarily exists, and it is the only object of thought necessarily, certain implications follow.

1. We humans perceive many different things in the world. Some of these things exist for a long period of time, others for a very short period of time. Yet, if there is only one thing in the universe, then there cannot be many things, because this would be to distinguish difference within the uniform sameness of the one. The one cannot have parts, because to have parts, this would imply that the one was not one, but many, which is impossible. The one cannot change, because if the one were to change, it would have to change into something it presently is not, and not does not exist. So, the one cannot change. Also, we humans perceive objects moving in three dimensional space. However, if there is only the one, then there is nothing through which that one can move. So, there cannot be motion. Likewise, if the one is truly one, and cannot change, then the perception of time also is an illusion, because change in time denotes a something through which for the one to move, which has been shown to be impossible, or to change in quality, which would denote that there is something besides the one, which has been shown to be impossible, or that the one is subject to division, which has also been shown to be impossible.

So, what are we left with? What is for thought, necessarily is, and this must be the one. All of human perception violates these principles, and hence is rejected as mere seeming. In order for something to be true, it must necessarily exist, hence only the one can satisfy that condition. Hence, all human knowledge is illusory.

The Parmenidean Legacy

In evaluating the legacy of Parmenides arguments, we should take away at least 5, possibly 6, important enduring challenges.

1. In the ancient world, any attempt to found philosophy on a single principle would have to answer the arguments proposed by Parmenides. No later philosopher attempted this. In other words, the Milesian approach to philosophy was dead. Later thinkers would either posit two or more principles out of which to explain the world, etc.
2. Any attempt to explain the phenomenon of change (generation and corruption) would have to address Parmenides arguments against change. Explanations of change that only relied on expansion and compression would not do.

3. Because Parmenides argued for his position, all future philosophical systems were required to appeal to reasoned arguments in order to support their positions. Appealing to what the master said, citing example and then extrapolating over the evidence, or other sorts of reasoning would not be enough. Parmenides use of argumentation demolished any other systems of thought.

Now, in order to be a philosopher, you would have to use skilled reasoning, a type of proto-logic if you will, in order to advance positions.

4. Because of the arguments advanced by Parmenides, how the verb to be is to be understood complexified. It is not clear from his use whether Parmenides intends the verb to be to mean the identity use of the verb, the predicative use of the verb (i.e., is white), or the veridical use of the verb (i.e., is true). His claim that nothing cannot exist, or no thing is not, marks an advance in the use of the verb to be. In fact, because of Parmenides, it is difficult for present day philosophers to properly capture the triple entendres denoted in the poem.

5. Finally, because of these initial 4, all future philosophers would either have to answer Parmenides challenge or avoid him altogether. I have suggested in previous lectures that we have tended to avoid Parmenides rather than try to answer him. However, there are some truly giants in the field who have taken up the challenge. In fact, Gottlieb Frege in his paper *Sinn und Bedeutung* can be read as trying to answer the problem of predication over empty names (sounds a lot like trying to claim that nothing has properties).

6. Because of the division and arguments between the Way of Truth and the Way of Seeming, the division between knowledge and belief becomes firmly entrenched in Western epistemology. Knowledge must necessarily be true, whereas belief may either be true or false. This distinction will have a profound influence on Plato and all later thinkers.