

The Pluralists

PHIL301

Prof. Oakes

Winthrop University

From Parmenides:

- Monism: there is only one thing.
 - o I.e., there is no plurality.
- There is no change.
 - o No motion (change in location).
 - o No alteration (change in quality).
 - o No generation or destruction (change in ontological state).
 - o No time (physical change per se).
 - o Note in general that the prohibition on change is often made in terms of *ex nihilo* becoming. That is, any truly new state or condition, presumably, involves the creation of something that previously did not exist. Insofar as it did not previously exist, the new thing or state may be said to come into existence “from nothing”, *ex nihilo*. The conceptual puzzle of such creation provides much of the motivation, evidently, for Parmenides’ view.
- There is no diversity.
- There is no void (reality is a *plenum*).

Pluralists and Atomists

- Some philosophers succeeding Parmenides tried to reconcile his claims with the appearance of change and diversity. While they shared his rejection of generation and destruction, they rejected his monism in favor of a pluralism, accepted diversity to varying degrees, and they rejected the denial of motion. And while they depart from Parmenides’ strict monism, Parmenides’ influence remains strong; their innovations attempt to preserve his notion of being as complete and simple.
- Empedocles and Anaxagoras (the “pluralists”) also shared Parmenides’ rejection of a void, which distinguishes them from the atomists.
- Note, too, the response to Zeno, specifically. Where Zeno bases his arguments on these two claims:
 - o Whatever has size has parts;
 - o There is a smallest size part;two philosophers respond as follows:
 - o Anaxagoras: there is no smallest size part (59/B1);
 - o Democritus: not everything having size has parts (67A13).

Empedocles (492-435 BCE): four elements plus two forces

- Like Parmenides, Empedocles rejects any simple sensory access to metaphysical truth. (32/31B133, 33/31B17ln21)

- Empedocles accounts for apparent reality by means of the coalescence and separation of four basic kinds of thing: earth, air, fire, and water.
- The force bringing things together is “Love” and that forcing them apart is “Strife”. (It is not clear whether these are intended anthropomorphically. There is a single reference to panpsychism at §29, 31B110ln9. Otherwise, Empedocles’ system seems largely naturalistic. See also references to gods in §62, 31B115, etc.)
- The motions of the four elements are varied over time, leading to the occasional dominance of one or another element (as in, e.g., times of drought or storm), and leading to the temporary existence of all physical and biological forms.
 - o Different mixtures of the elements yield different stuffs, such as bone (43/31B96) and blood and flesh (44/31B98).
 - o Various physical phenomena are explained by reference to the mixing properties of the elements, such as water’s affinity for wine but aversion for oil (40/31B91).
- This amounts to *Reductionism*: an apparent reality is explained in terms of another.
 - o Note, in particular, that life itself seems represented as an illusion or mere appearance. See 46/31B8, where Empedocles seems to say that nothing mortal in fact emerges from the immortal (i.e., from the elements, which are indestructible); and he goes on here to suggest that all things are in fact “dead” or unliving, and that the nature/humanity distinction is also mere appearance. Thus, life reduces to that which is not alive; all things are of the same ultimate four kinds.
- Evidently, there are times when the four elements are united – though this is difficult to reconcile with the denial of generation and destruction. (33/31B17ln16f)
 - o It may be that Empedocles has in mind a kind of Heraclitean balanced cycling: as love brings the elements together, strife grows in strength proportional to the love thus expended and the unity thus achieved. (See also 39/31B35, 40/31B36. There is also some suggestion here of an understanding of potential versus kinetic energy: the farther from the “center” moves strife, the greater its potential for return. Aristotle will make this dynamic central to his physics.)
 - o Perhaps Empedocles means this giant, oscillating motion to be the prime mover of all lesser motions and changes.
 - o The identities of the four elements, however, must presumably be retained during times of union; otherwise the prohibition on generation and destruction will be violated.
- Cosmogony: As above, Empedocles seems to envision elemental unification events which give rise to the proliferation of biological species. See fragments 49/31B35, 53/31B57, 54/31B58, 56/31B61, where we see strange combinations of animal parts and a plethora of life forms produced.
- Empedocles also includes principles of a moral order (62/31B115ff). It is not clear how these are related to his metaphysics. (This separation of the moral from the physical and metaphysical will continue until we reach Plato.)

Anaxagoras (500-428 BCE): myriad elements

- Anaxagoras, too, denies the capacity of sense to penetrate metaphysical truth. See 21/59B21, 22/59B21a.
- For Anaxagoras, Empedocles' ontology is (much) too sparse. With only four elements, Empedocles must deny the reality of all apparent kinds other than these. Thus, blood, bone, hair, copper, tin, biological species, etc. are, in reality, only manifestations of earth, air, fire, and water. While Empedocles' account will seem familiar to us now (think of particle physics), there is nevertheless significant intellectual discomfort in rejecting the distinction between, say, oak and cherry.
- No emergent properties: an application of the prohibition on generation and destruction. If oak *were sui generis*, then asserting its origin in some combination of earth and water (say) would imply the creation of something (oakness) from nothing (the absence of oakness). Anaxagoras' solution is to maintain the reality of indefinitely many distinct kinds.
- In order himself to avoid *ex nihilo* becoming, Anaxagoras must assert that all things exist together in all places.
- Cosmogony: initially, all things are mixed uniformly; there are indefinitely many distinct things thus mixed; and initially this whole is indefinitely small. (1/59B1)
 - o Evidently, there is an important qualification: air and aether "dominate" at this time, being "largest in the totality, both in amount and in size."
 - o It is not clear that this idea is coherent. One thought here seems to present air and aether (substantial space) as the infinitely large repository of the infinitely small nascent universe. But this would violate the uniform mixture hypothesis. And if the mixture is uniformly mixed, it is not clear in what sense air and aether can differ in respect of amount and size.
 - o Perhaps Anaxagoras means that throughout the air/aether were distributed infinitely and homogeneously the rest of the elements.
 - o In any case, in initial conditions, opposites have yet to emerge (wet and dry, hot and cold) nor is there light or color. See 5/59B4.
- A subsequent revolution event occurs, a spinning of very great speed, resulting in a great "separation". This separation results in the exaggeration of one or another quality, resulting in the appearance of diversity. (See 10/59B10, 11/59B11, 17/59B16)
 - o It is difficult to reconcile the several aspects of Anaxagoras' belief.
 - o At 7/59B6 and elsewhere he claims that one kind is not separate from its opposite (cf. Heraclitus); at 9/59B8 he denies that anything is separate from anything else. In what sense is Anaxagoras a pluralist?
 - o Anaxagoras seems to want to preserve something of the Parmenidean homogeneity: all things are intermixed equally, so that, in fact, we have an overall perfect homogeneity, albeit one consisting in indefinitely many distinct kinds.
 - o In places, however, one or another kind predominates – not to the exclusion of other kinds; but only insofar as the portions of those other

kinds are smaller. Given that things can be indefinitely small, this is at least coherent.

- Thus, while there appear to be regions of gold, bone, etc., these are in fact mixed with their opposites and with all other things in perfect and unchanging proportion.
- Note that Anaxagoras allows a further element, Mind, which is ubiquitous, admits of no opposite, and is the prime mover. See 13/59B12.
 - Mind, further, “rules all things,” suggesting an equivalence (equivocation?) between mind and natural law. (Again we see a confusion of ontological principle with epistemic: the same thing has both ontological and noetic qualities.)