

Parmenides

PHIL301

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Parmenides and Philosophy

- Parmenides represents a watershed in the history of Western philosophy.
- The level of logical sophistication in his writing is greater than (or, anyhow, represents a culmination of) anything preceding it. The questions he raises concerning the logic of negation continue to inspire work at the most advanced levels of contemporary thought. (See e.g., Gottlob Frege, W.V.O. Quine, and Colin McGinn for recent discussion. For further general discussion of Parmenides' thought, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/parmenides/>.)
- We speak of Parmenides and Zeno as constituting a "Critical Phase" in the development of Pre-Socratic philosophy, and we might broaden this claim to philosophy in general. Parmenides' thought, in particular, may be spoken of as critical in two senses:
 - o First, as above, Parmenides' thought represents the maturation of a self-aware intellectual tradition – i.e., one that seeks to apply its method even as it evaluates the utility of that method. Previous philosophers, such as Xenophanes and Heraclitus demonstrate an awareness of the question whether the rational method is capable of yielding truth. In Parmenides, this question is fully on display: given its results, what are we to think the rationalist method of securing truth?¹
 - o Second, we have a "critical" phase of philosophy inasmuch as Parmenides' conclusions are among the most vexing in philosophy. (See below.) If this is the view of truth that philosophy leads us to, what are we to think of it? We may speak of this as a *crisis* in philosophy.
- The Logic of Negation: The basic problem raised by Parmenides concerns how to think about falsehood and non-being. Non-beings (non-entities) do not exist, of course, so how does language describe or refer to "them", if at all? How is it possible for us to think about these "things"? How are we to talk of unicorns, for example, if there exist none? Likewise, falsehood concerns that which is not, and that which is not does not exist. It's false that McCain won the 2008 Presidential election, which raises the question, for Parmenides, of how we are to talk or think of that non-event.
- Presumably, there is a difference between falsehood and nonsense, but logicians have struggled to characterize successfully the difference. There exists a well-received predicate logic owing to Bertrand Russell, Quine, and Frege; but controversy remains as to whether this account is correct. (See Quine, "On What There Is" and McGinn, *Logical Properties*.)
- Ordinary language and thought do distinguish between falsehood and nonsense; but this is precisely the talk and thought of "mortals" that Parmenides calls into question.
- Note, too, that whereas his predecessors sought to *explain* the apparent nature of the world as involving change, fundamentally, Parmenides is the first Western philosopher to reject

¹ We can trace this question all the way back to Hesiod, whose Muses intimate it with their teasing lines:
We know how to tell many believable lies,
But also when we want to, how to speak the plain truth.
- *Theogony*, lns. 28-9

wholesale the basic appearance of reality in favor of a theoretic reality. (See e.g., 4, lns. 1-2, §7, ln. 5. Plato will advance a similar account, though he will retain some sense of a real order of change.)

The One

- According to Parmenides, there is only one thing, the One. The One is eternal and unchanging, it contains no diversity but is entirely and continuously homogeneous. It is a plenum, a complete reality such that nothing could be added to it. And it is a single thing, as opposed to a plurality. Further, the One could not fail to exist – it is not possible for it not to exist – nor is it possible for any real state to be different. And nothing other than the One could exist: everything that is possible is actual; nothing that is not actual is possible.
- The One is the “way of truth” – i.e., in order to speak or think truly, one must speak or think of the One. Paradoxically, there is no alternative.
- In particular, “the Other” is the “way of error.” Not only does the Other not exist, but it is an error to think that we can speak or think of it. This makes a certain sense, of course: if the “One” is all there is, any assertion about anything else will necessarily be false (except for the assertion that this “Other” doesn’t exist; but that will be paradoxical, too).
- See §§2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 for the heart of this view.
- Why would anyone hold such a view? What is Parmenides thinking?

What can and cannot be thought

- The correct account of Parmenides’ thought remains a subject of ongoing debate. Here is my (present) understanding:
- At §2 lines 6-8 (2.6-8), at §3, and at §8.34-5, Parmenides suggests that we can think only of something real, and never of something that is not real. What does this mean, exactly, and why does Parmenides say it?
 - o For one thing, to think of “that which is not” (say, a unicorn) is for one’s thought to “fail to refer”. By contrast, to think of “that which is” (say, a donkey) is for one’s thought successfully to refer. In the false case, there is no actual “target” for one’s thought; in the true case, there is.
 - o It is natural to object: but isn’t it *true* that there are no unicorns? The answer is, yes – but, now, what *makes it true* that there are none? There aren’t any unicorns about which to say that they don’t exist. What, then, is the statement ‘there are no unicorns’ about?
 - o In the case of donkeys, we can say that the statement ‘there are donkeys’ is true because there exist donkeys. I.e., it is the existence of the donkeys themselves that makes the statement true.
 - o Perhaps, then, we should say that ‘there are no unicorns’ is made true by the unicorn-less world. This, however, tends to confirm Parmenides’ point – we can only talk about “that which is”, and only “that which is” makes any given statement true.
- Non-actual possibility: a non-actual possibility is a possible event or state or object that doesn’t actually obtain in the real world. For example, it seems possible that I had a younger sister, but in fact I have none. Parmenides thinks that talk of non-actual possibility is like talk of non-entities. If the “possibility” isn’t actual, then that is to say that it does not exist at all. Philosophers have struggled to define non-actual possibility.
- Let us grant, for the moment, that Parmenides is right to say that we can only think of “that which is” and never “that which is not.” This will allow us to develop his full view. Later, we will return to this point.

- The key point, as far as his argument for The One is concerned, is the prohibition on talk or thought of “what is not.” If we cannot, in fact, think or talk of that which is not, then, it would seem, such talk has no meaning. To say that it has no meaning is to say that there are no states or possibilities other than those that are. All that exists is The One, and that is all that can possibly exist.

Without the unthinkable

- As above, Parmenides maintains that the world is unchanging, homogeneous, complete, single, and necessarily so. These specific prohibitions follow from his general restriction on what can be thought.
- Change: There can be no change, because change involves that which is not.
 - o I.e., in generation, we have change from nothing to something. But that “nothing” is unthinkable, and so not possible. Similarly for destruction, which involves a change from something to nothing. See §8.3-10, 8.27.
 - o In alteration, we have change from having a property to lacking it (or vice versa), or from standing in a relation to not standing in a relation (or vice versa). But not having a property or relation is in itself not a real thing, unthinkable, hence impossible. This applies to changes in color, e.g. (8.40) and to motion (8.40) and increase or decrease (8.23).
 - o Parmenides also argues that the state prior to generation, a state in which the being in question does not exist, is thus a state of non-being – i.e., a state from which no being could evolve. This is a prohibition on *ex nihilo* becoming. No being can emerge from nothingness. See §8.7-10.
- Qualitative Diversity: There can be no qualitative diversity (one thing having one property, another having another), because diversity involves that which is not.
 - o See 8.4, 8.22-24, 8.46.
 - o E.g., if one region of space or time were blue and another white, then some would be not-blue and some not-white. But there is no such thing as being not-blue or not-white. So there can be no diversity.
- Numerical Diversity: There can be no numerical diversity (the existence of more than one thing). For if there were two things or more, then there would be one thing that was not another, which again involves talk of that which is not.
- Parmenides seems also to suggest that where there is no change or diversity, there is also no passage of time (§8.5, 18). This is evidently a consequence of there being no possibility of distinguishing one moment from another, given the homogeneity entailed by the lack of change and diversity.
- Plenum: The One is “full” in the sense that nothing can be added to it. For if something could be added to it, then it would lack something. But no lack is real. See 8.32-33.
- Monism: I.e., the One is one single entity, and does not contain a plurality of distinct entities. For if one entity within the One were distinct from another (i.e., not the same one thing), then again we would have a non-being – namely, one thing not being the same one thing as another. See 8.10.
- Necessity: in §2, Parmenides observes that that which is not cannot be. That is, there can be no non-actual possibility, for the non-actual does not exist. Since the non-actual does not exist, the putative statement asserting a non-actual possibility in fact refers to nothing and fails to assert a possibility.

Evaluating Parmenides

- As above, it is not clear that Parmenides is wrong, but one understanding of logic and language suggests that he is.
- For one thing, Parmenides may be guilty of a logical error in his claim that the non-actual cannot exist.
 - o This statement is *ambiguous* as between the following:
 - ♣ Necessarily, that which is non-actual does not exist.
 - ♣ That which is non-actual necessarily does not exist.
 - o These two statements have very different meanings. The first states an evident commonplace: a non-existent thing does not exist. E.g., it is a necessary truth that my non-existent little sister is non-existent. (Compare this: necessarily, a blue thing is blue.) The second asserts a more controversial thesis: there can be no non-actual possibilities. E.g., my non-existence sister is necessarily non-existent – i.e., she couldn't have been real. (Compare: a blue thing is necessarily blue.)
- Further, contemporary predicate logic treats *existence* not as a property of things, but as the ground of truth and falsity.
 - o If we treat existence as a property of things, we face awkward formulations such as this: the unicorn lacks the property of existence. Such a sentence seems to say that there is a thing, a unicorn, that doesn't exist. That sounds incoherent.
 - o Alternatively, we may stipulate that the meanings of expressions such as 'unicorn' and 'donkey' serve to classify the objects of the world. Some classes have members, such as the class of donkeys; others lack members, such as the class of unicorns.
 - ♣ To say 'there is a donkey' is to say that somewhere in the world there exists an object satisfying the description by which the donkey class is specified.
 - ♣ To say 'there are no unicorns' is to say that every object in the world fails to satisfy the description by which the unicorn class is specified.
- However, the jury is still out on this matter. The logic described above involves abstract objects (classes, descriptions) and obscure relations (satisfaction) which are part of the terrain under dispute. Whether such talk is correct is controversial, and so the issues raised by Parmenides remain contentious. (*Modal* talk – that involving possibility – requires similarly controversial analysis, especially about the status of the non-actual.)
- We can say this, however, with confidence: the issues raised by Parmenides are vital to our understanding of logic. His work is not quaint, outmoded puzzling, but rather an important critique of the structure and possibility of human thought and understanding.

The Whole of the Poem

- It may surprise the student that Parmenides writes in verse, and more especially that he includes an invocation to a goddess as well as an elaborate, seemingly mythological cosmogony. Both are reminiscent of Hesiod's *Theogony* and a poetic tradition against which we have contrasted the thought of the Pre-Socratics. How should we understand these elements of Parmenides' work?
- Invocation
 - o The invocation is distinctly reminiscent of Hesiod's ode to the Heraklion muses.
 - o We are presented with a stirring account of the narrator's chariot ascent to the gates of heaven, where a goddess reveals to him the truths of the world. It is here that we first learn that there are two Truths, one legitimate, the other false. What follows is conveyed by the narrator as the words of the goddess.
 - o One might, then, wonder whether Parmenides hasn't undermined his own rationalist stance by appeal to a supernatural source of wisdom.

- While much like Hesiod's ode, we also find significant differences in this invocation. The goddess speaks of the narrator "learning" all things, which leaves open the possibility that knowledge in this case is not revealed but natural – i.e., discerned by reason or sense, though, as we see, it is reason not sense, in this case, that perceives truth. Further, as the poem continues, we see Parmenides deliver arguments for his claims, which is in strict keeping with the critical tenet of rationalism.
- Also notable in the invocation are the two images drawn at lns. 6-8 and 11-13 of the completeness of complementary relationships, first between the axle and wheels and second between the lintel and threshold and doors of the gate of heaven. Where Parmenides is intent upon demonstrating the logical completeness of his account, a conceptual wholeness or plenum, these images serve as preview of the order and integrity of that account.
- The Cosmogony
 - Beginning with §9, Parmenides relates an account of the origin of the universe which has challenged commentators' ability to interpret Parmenides' thought. Why, having argued against the reality of appearance, would Parmenides now assert a process of change that would seem utterly at odds with his central thesis? Does he intend an irony, a satire of the way of error?
 - The Cosmogony is interesting for its specific details. Supposing that this is an account of the cosmos under the way of error, we are told that all things on this view partake equally of a "light" and a "night" (§9). By this, the suggestion seems to be, we will know "the nature of the aether" (§10.1) and the galactic elements that "surged forth to come to be." (§11.3) Given the contrast developed by Parmenides between what is and what is not, it seems natural to suppose the light to imply what is and the dark to imply what is not. To the extent that the senses systematically misrepresent reality, they should be understood to inject something of the dark, the negative, nothingness, into whatever they perceive.
 - Does this undermine Parmenides' way of truth? Perhaps not. Falling as it does after presentation of his central view, we are invited to consider this account of the world with that view in mind. The cosmogony, notice, is essentially a naturalistic process. Gods are mentioned, but there is none of the anthropomorphism found in Hesiod. Rather, we are offered a relatively plausible account of the origins of the natural world in some natural cataclysm, one which produces first fire and space (§12.1-3) and then evolves into the familiar present state (11.3), later to expire (18.2).
 - What is it to consider this account under the aegis of the way of truth? Arguably, it is to remind ourselves that our erroneous way of understanding, for all of its accuracy and detail, involves drawing distinctions where in fact there lay none. It is we who distinguish one thing from another by means of conceptual discrimination. This form of thought, however, is accidental to the truth. Our concepts are pragmatic, at bottom, drawing distinctions that matter to us, but which are ultimately arbitrary and conventional. It is worth noting that the same period in Ancient Greek history witnesses the development of individualism even as that process meets resistance – this opposition is the topic of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, in which he pits Apollo against Dionysus as the key, formative opposition in the Greek mind. Apollo is the god of illusion, the god of dreams, the god of visual art, the god of rational discrimination. Dionysus is the god of unity, of drunkenness, of self-forgetfulness, of music. Even as humans develop the means by which to distinguish themselves from their environment and from one another, we find the longing for a return to unity with nature and with each other. Parmenides may be seen here to

invoke this development of rational illusion in the face of a monolithic, mute world of being.