

Chapter 15

Parmenides

c. 515 BC - c. 450 BC

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Whatever can be thought of or spoken of necessarily is, since it is possible for it to be, but it is not possible for nothing to be.

Parmenides of Elea, *On Nature* (Diels-Kranz 28 B6 = Barnes, 158. See references.)

The oldest surviving work in the Western philosophical tradition is the metaphysical poem *On Nature* by Parmenides of Elea. Written in the epic hexameter verse of Homer and Hesiod, the poem has not survived in its entirety, although we have significant fragments of it. It represents the first known rigorous and sustained logical argument. Because it attempted to logically prove ultimate truths about the universe, its author is widely considered to be the father of both metaphysics (the study of ultimate reality) and philosophical rationalism (the assumption that reason is the primary means of coming to know reality).

Parmenides was known in his day as a scientist, philosopher, physician and lawmaker. He wrote the legal code for the city of Elea, which may well have been in force for many hundreds of years. The ancient city no longer stands, but recent decades have witnessed an impressive archaeological excavation of the ruins (called by its Latin name 'Velia'), which has unearthed many fascinating artifacts, including a bust of Parmenides himself.

Parmenides' poem argues for a fundamental distinction between belief (that which *seems* to be) and truth (that which actually *is*). According to Parmenides, all the 'things-that-seem' that we perceive around us (such as trees, rocks, rivers and cats) are not, in themselves, the true reality. There is a greater reality of which the world of our everyday perceptions is but a part.

The poem opens with the philosopher himself carried off to an ethereal realm of an omniscient Goddess, whose words form the rest of the poem (DK 28 B1 = Barnes, 156). The Goddess, representing the point of view of logic, explains that there are three ways of knowing: the 'Unthinkable Way', the 'Way of Truth' and the 'Way of Belief', each of which yields a different approach to metaphysics.

The essence of metaphysics is summed up in every child's question, 'Why is there something, rather than nothing?' The 'Unthinkable Way' expresses the second option: that there might have existed nothing at all. But what would this 'nothing' be, and what could we mean by saying it 'exists' if we cannot even conceive of it? For if nothing exists, then surely the very word 'exists' is meaningless. So Parmenides asks us to agree that we must allow that *something*

exists. Yet, the moment we allow Parmenides this one assumption—that ‘nothingness’ is meaningless—he will use this to push us, by force of logic, into a very counter-intuitive conclusion.

Once we have granted that *something* exists, Parmenides gives us another choice: do all *possible* things exist, or are there some possibilities that exist and some that do not? The ‘Way of Truth’ argues that anything conceived of purely through reason (as opposed to mere perception) *must* exist. In some sense, by clearly conceptualizing it, we have already admitted some sort of existence for it.

What Parmenides thinks these rationally conceivable things actually are is not entirely clear, but we can guess that logical proofs and mathematical equations would certainly count. Rocks and trees and rivers and cats probably are not rationally conceivable *by us*, but the omniscient Goddess should be able to conceive of them. But if the Goddess could conceive of the natural order around us, then she surely could conceive of *other ways* the world *could have been* instead (like a world without a moon, or a world with unicorns). But from the Goddess’s viewpoint (that of logic), why should *this* world—the one we live in—exist, while another possible world does not? From a logical perspective, all possible worlds that are logically conceivable are equally possible and hence equally real.

Parmenides’ ‘Way of Truth’ was the beginning of philosophical rationalism: conceivable things just *are*, by virtue of their being conceivable:

Whatever can be spoken or thought of necessarily *is*, since it is possible for it to be, but it is not possible for nothing to be. (DK 28 B6 = Barnes, 158)

It is the same thing, to think of something and to think that it *is*. (DK 28 B8 = Barnes, 157)

The Goddess nonetheless acknowledges the importance of understanding the empirical world of the senses. She tells Parmenides:

And it is right that you should learn all things, both the unshaken heart of persuasive Truth, and the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true trust. But you shall learn these too: how, for you who are passing through them, these things-that-seem must ‘really exist’, being—for you—all there is. (DK 28 B1 = Barnes, 156)

In fact, the bulk of the poem was originally the section that put forth a comprehensive physics and cosmology—the ‘Way of Belief’ (although not much of this section has survived). As with our common everyday beliefs, empirical scientific theories—both those of Parmenides and of modern science—generally assume that there is only one possible world that actually exists—our world. Yet there is nothing we can rationally say about any one logical possibility that could mean it exists, while others do not. When we say that the others ‘do not exist’, we are saying that they are ‘nothing’. Yet, we already agreed that the idea of ‘nothing’ was nonsensical, when we rejected the ‘Unthinkable Way’, and so we are trapped in a contradiction.

From the Goddess’s point of view, our perceptual world is real enough, but so are all the other possible ways the world could be. The ‘Way of Truth’ combines together all these possible ways of being into a new conception of reality, which

we will call the ‘One Reality’. Because the One Reality contains all possibility, it must be a homogenous, undifferentiated whole. To see why this is so, consider a block of marble from which Michelangelo is about to carve the statue David. The block of marble will represent, for us, the totality of logical possibility—it already implicitly contains all possible sculptures. To create David, Michelangelo need only remove the bits that are not part of what he has in mind. Once some bits are removed, certain sculptures are then eliminated from the marble forever. But if all possible sculptures are included, no bits can be removed and the block remains continuous, undifferentiated and homogeneous. David, then, existed *inside the marble* before Michelangelo took chisel to hand. He merely discovered David, by chipping away the non-David bits to reveal what was already there.

To the Goddess, as to Michelangelo, the One Reality is a marble that already contains all possible ‘sculptures’, of which the world of our senses is but one. Of course, it is only the omniscient Goddess, standing *outside the marble*, who can conceive of all possibilities. We, who are living *inside the marble*, perceive the particular sculpture that makes up our environment as the one and only ‘true reality’.

Thus, if unicorns are as logically conceivable as horses, then unicorns must exist in the One Reality every bit as much as horses. Trapped in our ‘Way of Belief’, we mere mortals see horses, but no unicorns, in our corner of reality. But the Goddess sees both, or else none at all (but then, that would be the ‘Unthinkable Way’).

The One Reality cannot even exist within the flow of time, or within the extent of space. For how could it exist ‘here’ or ‘at this time’?—that would imply that there is some other place or time outside of it. The universe itself must somehow be timeless and placeless:

What-is, never having come-to-be, is... whole, of a single kind, immovable and complete. ... For what kind of coming-to-be will you seek for it? How and from where did it grow? I shall not permit you to say or to think that it grew from what-is-not, for it is not to be said or thought that *it is not*. What necessity could have impelled it to grow later rather than sooner, if it began from nothing? Thus it must either fully be, or be not at all. (DK 28 B8 = Barnes, 178)

Some have dismissed Parmenides as a dreamer who saw the physical world as mere illusion, but this is a serious misreading. Parmenides clearly saw empirical science as important—it originally formed the bulk of his poem. His own scientific theories—put forward in the ‘Way of Belief’—were not themselves especially influential, but his overall approach set the example for the rest of ancient Greek science. If we cannot describe the world of our perceptions as one homogeneous thing, Parmenides reasoned, then we can at least strive for logical simplicity, and keep our theories as compatible with the homogeneous One Reality as possible. Parmenides himself theorized that the natural world could be explained in terms of just *two* basic categories: light and night.

While earlier philosophers had certainly grasped the basic requirement of simplicity (Thales of Miletus had tried to reduce everything in the universe to water), not until after Parmenides did theories deal in the highly abstract form of

logical simplicity that is so characteristic of post-Eleatic Greek science. Empedocles of Acragas reduced everything to Earth, Air, Fire and Water, driven by the forces of Love and Strife. Leucippus of Miletus and Democritus of Abdera reduced the universe to a swarm of uniform, unchanging, indivisible atoms separated by empty space. Each atom was a ‘little One’, with some of the rationally elegant features of the One Reality. In fact, every major Greek philosopher after Parmenides made answering the Eleatic challenge a central concern.

Today, we continue to push our conception of the universe closer and closer to the ‘One’ of Parmenides. Some cosmologists have even taken a kind of Eleatic view of the universe by suggesting that the total mass-energy of the universe, on a global scale, might be zero—our universe of nonzero mass and energy being only a local phenomenon (‘within the marble’, so to speak). There is even a very popular theory amongst cosmologists, supported by the paradoxes of quantum mechanics, that the universe as a whole is really a ‘multiverse’ of all possible universes—another echo of Parmenides.

Parmenides would be well pleased to see this latter-day revival of Eleaticism, for as scientists race to discover the Unified Theory of Everything, ancient Eleatic ideas are arguably being taken more seriously now than they have been for more than two thousand years.

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

- Barnes, Jonathan. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Revised Ed. London: Routledge, 1982.
- Diels-Kranz. For an explanation of this form of referencing, please turn to the first page of the essay on Anaximander, Chapter 8.
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- Parmenides of Elea. *On Nature*. A.F. Randall (Ed.).
<http://www.allanrandall.ca/Parmenides/>
(For the nonspecialist; all quotations in this chapter are from this translation.)

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