

Professor's Lecture Notes: Parmenides

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Wikipedia: Parmenides of Elea ([Greek](#): Παρμενίδης ὁ Ἐλεάτης; fl. early 5th century BCE) was an [ancient Greek philosopher](#) born in [Elea](#), a Greek city on the southern coast of [Italy](#). He was the founder of the [Eleatic school](#) of [philosophy](#). The single known work of Parmenides is a [poem](#), *On Nature*, which has survived only in fragmentary form. In this poem, Parmenides describes two views of [reality](#). In "the way of truth" (a part of the poem), he explains how reality (coined as "what-is") is one, [change](#) is impossible, and [existence](#) is timeless, uniform, necessary, and unchanging. In "the way of opinion," he explains the world of appearances, in which one's sensory faculties lead to conceptions which are false and deceitful. These ideas strongly influenced the whole of [Western philosophy](#), perhaps most notably through its effect on [Plato](#).

Preface:

Despite some good insights and clear explanations, our textbook misses or is wrong about a few important things, especially regarding the early Greek philosophers. Examples:

- Its understanding that "logos" always had to do with rationality.
- The idea that Heraclitus was simply saying that everything changes, and that he implied nothing deeper.
- And especially that Parmenides is philosophically less important than Plato and Aristotle. Palmer devotes a mere 5 pages to Parmenides and his disciple Zeno, but almost forty pages to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (this is typical of most histories of philosophy). The latter 3 had a far greater influence on the history of thought than did Parmenides, but Parmenides' philosophy is solid truth based on a person's direct experience of Being in the silence and on strict logic, while their ontologies—the very foundations of their philosophies—are based on speculation and are illogical.
 - That's a teaching in itself: Plato and Aristotle were unable to comprehend the importance of Parmenides' teaching that only Being is, or they were unwilling to accept its logical corollary that the material world is unreal—or both.
 - So the philosophical tradition from then on to the present has almost completely ignored Parmenides, using the principle that if you can't understand it, pretend it never happened.
 - The first extensive good scholarship on Parmenides (and Empedocles) has been done recently (i.e., 2500 years later) by Peter Kingsley (*In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 1999, and *Reality*, 2003, published by The Golden Sufi Center of Inverness, CA).
 - As the movie said, "You can't handle the truth!"

In this section of our course I will try to correct the errors about Parmenides, and, to clarify his understanding of Being, I will compare his teaching with the philosophical teachings of emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism, the Advaita Vedanta teachings of the *Ashtavakra Gita*, the story of Uddalaka and Svetaketu from the Chandogya Upanishad, the Buddhist *Heart Sutra*, and Psalm 82 in the Bible.

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Recap:

1. Earliest philosophers were searching for oneness.
2. Anaximander made three huge discoveries:
 - He discovered that whatever was the foundation of the material world could not itself be material.
 - He recognized that the universe of forms and the foundation/essence of the cosmos (the apeiron) contradicted one another. The apeiron is a perfect emptiness, while the world of forms is a fullness of objects (forms) that are imperfect, temporary, and cause pain as they interact.
 - He also saw that all things eventually return to the apeiron.
3. Anaximander, Rabia of Basra, and the Bible story of Adam and Eve getting themselves kicked out of the Garden of Eden, all are teaching that something went terribly wrong.
4. Heraclitus realized that everything in what we call the material world is in incessant motion, and the subtle meaning of that is that, since whatever is always changing and never stops even for a moment cannot be a specific "thing," the universe of things must be an illusion. Thus Heraclitus also discovered that reality is empty of forms, not full of forms.
5. About the same time, the Chinese were discovering that emptiness was the essence of all things. Remember *Tao Te Ching* poem 11: it is the emptiness at the center of the wheel that makes the wheel possible (and that formless emptiness is eternal, while the material parts of the wheel are finite and temporary). To live a realistic, fulfilling life humans must return to the Tao or void as much as possible, and this is done by spending a lot of time in stillness, and by minimizing unnecessary effort, which is practicing wu-wei.
6. Conclusion of this line of philosophy:
 - "Stuff" is unreal, emptiness (formlessness, apeiron, Tao) is real. This is the exact 180 degree opposite of what the masses of people (including almost all philosophy PhDs) believe is true.
 - Authentic ontology is also soteriology. Soteriology is the study of what will deliver us from this world of sorrow and suffering. The teaching of Lao Tzu, Parmenides, and others that we will study, is, implicitly or explicitly, that there is only one "way home" (Prodigal Son story), and that is realization/certainty that only God or Love is real—and that anything else that claims to our minds to be real is an illusion that exists for the sole purpose of keeping us from our home.

Parmenides:

- He was a priest of Apollo, and regarded logical ontology as a matter of spiritual life and death.
 - For him the main purpose of logic was to save souls. I.e., he believed the only real value of ontology and logic was soteriological.
 - His goal was to set people free in this lifetime.
 - That's why his poem presents logic as a "gift of the gods" (of a goddess).
- The 3 elements of authentic ontology according to Parmenides:

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LONGING: Think of the Prodigal Son: only those who desperately want to go home can know Being/God. Authentic ontological knowledge is impossible for those who are satisfied with living meaningless lives in this world. (A good example of young people caught up in the thrill of creating meaningless lives for themselves is the movie *The Social Network* (2010).)

STILLNESS: Incubation and meditation; he created a shrine to his teacher, Ameinias, for teaching him stillness.

LOGIC: Parmenides invented logic and logical (deductive) inference; saw it as a spiritual discipline, for the sake of “saving souls”—but not otherworldly—be free here and now by bringing their minds back from illusion to reality. Zeno and Jesus perfect examples of this. Almost everyone misses this: that his giving the world logic wasn't just some abstract philosophical effort, but was seen by him as part of his pastoral duty, his duty as a priest of Apollo. Try to see logic and ontology (in fact, all of authentic philosophy) in this light.

- **The Great Tautology of Parmenides: “It is necessary to think and say that Being is and not-being is not.”**
 - This statement is necessary, like an axiom in Euclidean geometry.
 - A “necessary” statement is one that cannot be denied by a rational person. It also means that it is so “clear and distinct” that a rational person, if unencumbered by conventional prejudices (in this case, materialism) can see its truth without further reasoning. I.e., it is an “indubitable” statement.
 - E.g., all triangles on a plane surface contain 180° of angularity.
 - The opposite of necessary is contingent (“it depends”). E.g., “a triangle contains 180° of angularity” is contingent on the surface of the triangle being a plane.
 - But note that Parmenides’ proposition is contingent on nothing.
 - Many philosophers and scientists, following Plato, believed that “Euclidean” thinking proved that we could have certainty about things in this world. It would not be until the 19th century and the invention of non-Euclidean geometries that philosophers would see that certainty in science is impossible (and quantum physics absolutely ended the belief in certainty in science). But uncertainty in matters of this world was already taught by Parmenides (his teaching of The Two Ways of *alethia* and *doxa*).
 - I’m being deliberately anachronistic. Euclid of Alexandria lived around 300 BCE.
 - From a necessary (or atomic or axiomatic or indubitable) statement we can logically infer other necessary truths. A few examples of what logically follows from the statement “Being is and not-being is not”:
 - Being cannot arise from not-being: since not-being is not, there is nothing for Being to arise from.

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- Later this would be called the principle of *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* (Nothing can come from nothing).
- Being must be infinite: if Being was not infinite it would have to be bounded by something other than Being. But there can't be anything other than Being.
 - Another way to put that: If Being was not infinite, it would have to be bounded by something that is not-being. But not-being is not, so Being must be infinite.
- Being must be indivisible: if Being could be divided into separate parts, then only one part could be called "Being," and the others would have to be something else; but there is no something else, only Being "is."
 - Thus separation, individuality, and separate things are an illusion.
 - Thus, as I often say in class, "Only God is real." That's the meaning of the Burning Bush story in the Bible (Exodus 3:14): only God can say "I am"—and, since humans are forever saying "I am" and "it is"
 - The first philosophical "big guns," Plato and Aristotle, evidently could not understand that in reality separation is impossible.
- Motion is impossible: if motion was possible then when Being is here, it is not there, but will be there, and not here, sometime in the future; but this implies that Being can change to/from not-being, which is inconceivable.
 - As the textbook (5e pages 36-37) says: "Motion is impossible because motion would involve Being going from where Being is to where Being isn't (but there can't be any such place as the place where Being isn't)."
 - Parmenides' disciple Zeno of Elia showed with simple math that motion is impossible.
- Similarly, change is impossible: if change was possible, then Being could come to be something other than Being, which is not-being.
 - Note: about 2300 years later Immanuel Kant will say that time and space are artificial forms humans make up so that they can understand the world of ever-changing separate objects.
 - I.e., space and time are illusions, mind-tricks, that make a universe of always-moving separate objects seem real.
 - Heraclitus seems to disagree with Parmenides, for he said that only change is real. But if you "unpack" what he says, he is agreeing with Parmenides (only Parmenides was clearer). If change is incessant, then there can be no "things" (as we have discussed in class); and therefore there can be no things to change and move—therefore change and things, both, are illusions.
- Being is complete: if Being was not complete, then there would have to be something else besides Being.

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- Remember the **problem of desire** (*Tao Te Ching* 1): if you think there is something important lacking from your life, then you don't realize that you **are**. Whatever is is all there is. You are living without realization, you are living unrealistically—illogically and crazy—and thus can never be fulfilled. This is a tremendous practical problem for all of us.
- Not realizing that you are, and the attendant senses of lack coupled with chronic desiring of more, is absolute insanity, and nearly all humans are insane
- The problem of human life:
 - The goddess who teaches Parmenides teaches that humans believe in an impossible world that is a mixture of being and not-being.
 - A world of greater and less Being, of levels and degrees of Being; and of beings who lack things.
 - E.g., cockroaches have less Being than humans (i.e., their being has a lot more not-being mixed in it than humans do); beautiful and rich people have more Being (and thus are more important, as the media are always telling us) than ordinary people; and on and on and on and . . .
 - Prodigal Son story: as long as you believe this you will never be home or free.
 - When you realize the simple logic that only Being is, then, as the Jewish philosopher, Jesus, said, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32)
- **The Two Ways.**
 1. *Aletheia* (ἀλήθεια). It means truth and certainty. The way of aletheia is the way of salvation or freedom in this world.
 2. *Doxa* (δόξα). It means opinion, contingent truth, scientific truth; appearances). The realm of *doxa* ranges all the way from the stupidity of the masses (see Plato's story of the cave) to the strictest science. Science can never be certain, but Parmenides' Goddess taught him that science is important to humans and we must strive to come as close to certainty as we can.
 - **The way of certainty**: the only thing we can ever know for certain is that Being is and not-being is not, and the corollaries of that proposition.
 - But this realization/certainty—and only this one—will transform our lives, as it did the lives of Zeno and Jesus, for examples.
 - Note the Greek word "aletheia": it comes from a, not, and lethe (λήθη), which means forgetting or being in the state of unmindfulness; i.e., aletheia means remembering and being aware of reality. Certainty is remembering. Plato picks up this idea from Parmenides.
 - Plato used the word *anamnesis*, meaning the ability to recall things. He and Socrates saw the role of the philosopher as being a midwife who helps others remember what is real and true.

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- In Greek mythology, Lethe was one of the five rivers of Hades. Also known as the Ameles potamos (river of unmindfulness), the Lethe flowed around the cave of Hypnos and through the Underworld, where all those who drank from it experienced complete forgetfulness. Lethe was also the name of the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion, with whom the river was often identified. (Wikipedia)
- The way of *doxa* implies for Parmenides that in this illusory world it is worth the struggle for truth to escape the ignorance of the mob.
 - Three amazing scientific discoveries (i.e., discoveries based on sensory evidence) of Parmenides: he was the first to write that:
 - The world is a sphere.
 - Moonlight is reflected sunlight.
 - The world consists of five temperature zones.
- The connection between the Two Ways is the same as the connection between the Two Truths in the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy.
 - The Mahayana ideal is to be a Bodhisattva, one who shines her enlightenment on all the people she comes in contact with.
 - *Chandogya Upanishad* 6 implies it is teaching others the truth of their being (*Tat twam asi*, You are that—i.e., you are the one and only Being).
 - The Dali Lama said it was kindness.
 - Psalm 82 says it is caring for the less powerful in society.
 - Parmenides' disciple, Zeno, was executed for smuggling arms into a little city-state to arm its citizens against a tyrant in league with Athens who wanted to oppress them.
 - And remember *A Course in Miracles'* principle of ontological forgiveness, which is perhaps the greatest form of kindness toward/caring for others.
 - Professor Eckel described the connection between the Two Ways as a process, a process of moving back and forth between one way and the other, a process of thought and a process of life (Eckel lecture@15:09min). He used the Zen tea ceremony to illustrate this (17:30min *et seq.*)
 - So the connection can be called various things, all of which are pretty much the same: forgiveness, kindness, compassion, defending others, service to others, teaching the Truth, etc.
- Conclusion: The achievement of Parmenides (i.e., Parmenides' "firsts," in no special order).
 1. Gave us logic. Clear and distinct propositions that are non-contingent: they depend on nothing other than themselves to be true, or they depend on another absolutely non-contingent proposition.

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2. Showed the 3 necessary characteristics of and conditions for authentic ontology (longing, stillness, logic).
3. Showed us the one and only necessary proposition of which we can be certain (i.e., "Being is and not-being is not"); also showed us several crucial implications of that "keystone" proposition (e.g., Being is not divisible, there can be no separate things).
4. Showed us that our freedom or salvation depends on certainty (certain, rather than contingent, knowledge). I.e., it does not depend on anything we do or believe. In this he can be said to complete Xenophanes, who detested anthropomorphic, belief-based religion. It is outrageous that so many people base that which is most important to them—returning home again—on ideas that other people have supplied them that are based neither on personal experience nor on logic.
5. Gave us the principle of *Ex nihilo*.
6. Showed how important the distinction between necessary and contingent propositions is. (This distinction will be rediscovered by Leibniz ca. 1700 CE, and will become very important to modern philosophy—although everyone will have forgotten that it was invented by Parmenides!)
7. Clear understanding that the essence of the human predicament is illogical thinking (i.e., craziness) that tries to combine Being with nonbeing. Plato would describe this as living in a dark cave of ignorance and violence (Plato got his cave idea from Parmenides and Empedocles).
8. Certainty about what is really important is remembering something we forgot when we came into this world. (Hence the importance of gentle childbirth—be sure you understand this!)
9. Showed the importance of clear thinking, or science (i.e., *doxa*), even in this confused world. However, we can never be absolutely certain about this world. Scientific truths can never be certainties, only highly refined opinions. We might call science "good doxa," as opposed to conventional opinion, which is irrational and unscientific, and therefore "bad doxa."
10. Showed that reality is one and formless, it has no parts, levels, or degrees. Absolute, logical, anti-materialism. The material world is an illusion, only Being/God is real. After Plato the world will take for granted that reality is like an ontological ladder, each rung, from stones at the bottom to god at the top, representing greater being—which Parmenides showed is logically impossible. (Note that Aristotle, in the 4th century BCE, was the first to clearly show that matter is the principle of separateness; in the 18th century CE Bishop Berkeley showed there is no such thing as matter.)
11. Showed that motion and change are impossible, thus illusions. (To believe they are real is a commitment to irrationality.) His disciple, Zeno of Elia, is famous for his illustrations of the impossibility of motion.
12. Created the first and only major nondual philosophy in the West prior to *A Course in Miracles* (1976). "Nondual" (or nondualism) means "not two" and, by implication, it often is used to mean "not multiple" or "not plural." Often nondualism is confused with "non-

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ism” or saying that “all is one.” Example: Spinoza (17th century Dutch philosopher) taught that the universe is one thing—he called it “nature or God”—but one thing comprehending all separate things. That view is monism and pantheism, not nondualism. Nondualism recognizes there cannot be separate things in any sense since Being (or God or Reality) is itself necessarily one. Confusing monism and nondualism is a sloppyspeak mistake, and even scientists and philosophers commonly make this mistake. (As I have said in class, I sometimes use sloppyspeak just because it's easier than precise philosophical speech, which frequently sounds stilted.)

Next in our course, after Parmenides and Zeno:

- We will look at to the Buddhist teachings of Emptiness and the Two Truths, which exactly parallel and help us understand Parmenides' teachings that only Being is and that, for practical purposes, there are two truths. I will show a video lecture on this by Professor Malcolm Eckel of Boston University, perhaps the world's greatest scholar of this subject today.
- Then we will look at the famous *mahavakya* (“great saying”) *Tat Twam Asi* (“You are That”) from chapter 6 of the Hindu *Chandogya Upanishad*.
- Next we will study the *Heart Sutra*, one of the clearest statements ever made of nondualism.
- Then we will study the first four chapters of the *Ashtavakra Gita* (don't confuse it with the *Bhagavad Gita*), a great Hindu Advaita Vedanta guide to reality and realistic living.
- Then we will look at the philosophy of Empedocles, who also lived in south Italy. His philosophy seems to be pluralistic, but that might be because he knew, from Parmenides, that he was doing doxa and that Parmenides had already said all that could be said about Being and aletheia.
- This will end the material of the second section of the course, which will be tested in test 2.