



Parmenides's whole philosophy hinges on the idea of the non-existence of nothingness. In the *Sophist*, Plato quotes the relevant passage from Parmenides's poem:

*Never will this prevail, that what is not is:
restrain your thought from this road of inquiry.*

Plato, *Sophist* 237 A

If this makes your head spin, you're not alone. But let's try to break it down. The idea of 'nothing' is a tricky one. Often, we treat 'nothing' as something that exists alongside other things, as in the following dialogue:

Philosopher 1: What's in the box?

Philosopher 2: A cat!

[The cat jumps out... a few seconds pass.]

Philosopher 1: What's in the box now?

Philosopher 2: Nothing!

But there is a significant difference between these two answers. When we say that a cat is in the box, we are saying that a cat is a thing that exists, and this thing is in the box. But we say that nothing is in the box, we're not talking about 'nothing' as a thing that exists in the box. 'Nothing' doesn't refer to any existing thing at all. Nothing simply doesn't exist.

But if nothing doesn't exist, Parmenides reasons, then the only thing that can exist is *being* itself. And what is 'being'? Parmenides argues that once we have got rid of the idea of nothingness, then:

*Only one story, one road, now is left: that it is. And on this there are signs
in plenty that, being, it is ungenerated and indestructible,
whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete.
Nor was it, nor will it be, since now it is, all together,
one, continuous.*

As a work of philosophy, *On Nature* is unusual in that it is written in the form of a poem. Although this is not unique: much later, the philosopher Lucretius (c. 99 – 55 BCE) would also write an epic philosophical treatise on nature through the medium of verse.

Parmenides's poem is famously difficult to interpret; and this difficulty is compounded by the fact that of the original eight hundred verses, only just under one hundred and sixty lines have survived. Of the lines that survive, some are so fragmentary that they consist only of a single word; and the complete work is one that scholars have patchworked together from a wide range of later sources.

Parmenides is an enigmatic, difficult and puzzling philosopher. He is as provocative as he is divisive. In dividing the Way of Truth and the Way of Opinion so starkly, he seems to be pessimistic about our ability to say what is true. And perhaps — unless a kindly goddess happens to pass by, pick us up in her chariot, and explain things to us face to face — our odds of saying whether we are on the Way of Truth or else on the Way of Opinion remain frustratingly slim.

In fact, Parmenides saw his own philosophy as critique of Heraclitus's view of the cosmos, and the whole Greek

tradition which divided our understanding of nature into a surface and deep one, where the surface understanding applied to the knowledge of the senses, and the deep understanding to some a 'vision' that was hidden from most ordinary people.[1] into surface and depth, where the surface was to be explained by a hidden principle or arche, and he did this not by arguing from the senses but from logic. It has been said that he was the first to introduce deductive arguments into philosophy.[2] He wants to say that the whole approach of Heraclitus of divided being into the true and the false, or the one and the many, or even being and not-being, did not make any logical sense at all. This is not just because Heraclitus ended up saying paradoxical things, for even he realised that he did that, but that his whole *method* right from the very start was impossible.

This priority of reason over the senses is very important, as we shall see, in Plato's own thought, if not to the entirety of Greek philosophy after Parmenides. To emphasise this gulf, he presents us with this story of leaving the mundane world for the sake of the divine. After the prologue, the poem itself is divided into two parts, the way of truth, which is Parmenides own philosophy, and the way of opinion, which is a fanciful mimicry of the usual pre-Socratic arguments for a principle or arche as the origin of the sensible universe. It is important to realise that the way of truth is to show that the way of opinion, which most people associated with true philosophy, is in fact absurd and nonsensical.

As I have already said, the traditional way of arguing in pre-Socratic thought is from the senses, and this is even the case with Heraclitus. I look at the natural world around me, and from the nature of the world, I postulate some origin or principle which makes sense of this natural world. In more formal language, we can say that the pre-Socratics argue from effects to an single hypothetical cause, like Thales' water. What is important about Parmenides is that he does not argue from the senses, but from logic. Thus, in his argument with Heraclitus, if we suppose that he is writing with him in mind, is not that Parmenides himself believes he has a better explanation of nature, rather that any explanation of nature whatsoever, which takes the *illogical form* of Heraclitus's type of natural explanation, makes no sense. We can decide whether this case or not simply by using are own minds without ever having to observe nature at all.

Change for Parmenides is not seen as something which needs explanation, but a concept which is fundamentally illogical. If the relation between a subject and predicate is a real one, and I identify being with the subject, then the predicate, if it differs from the subject, must be non-being, but if that is the case, then something is and is not at the same time, and this does not make sense.[4] Likewise with change, if something changes, then I am saying that it both is and is not at the same time. I am saying that the subject is, but by identifying it with its predicates, which it cannot be, then I also at the same time identifying it with what it is not.

Parmenides's argument with the very idea of an *arche* is that one cannot look for an underlying principle for that which cannot be explained logically, namely change. But the argument is also pushed one stage further. Let us say that arche is the fundamental reality of appearances, then the arche would be what is and appearances what is not. But if the arche is reality, then it does not make sense to say that the appearances are the reality also, which is what the arche is meant to explain. As soon as there is a distinction between reality and appearance, then it makes no sense to explain the latter by the former, for in reality, what you are positing are two realities one that is and one that is not, but reality cannot both be and not be and the same time. Thus there can only be one reality, which is being and being is thought. The world of the senses is not, and what is not cannot be.

This argument from reason demonstrates that if one is to have a true conception of being then it cannot be natural one. Being cannot have the property of sensible being, otherwise we end up with the aporias of change, which is the second path that asserts that being is what is not, and which is the logical absurdity that being is not being, or being both is and is not at the same time. On the contrary being must be identical with being, which is the first path, being is what is. If this is case, then being cannot be changing, but must be eternal and immutable, otherwise we would fall back into the same mistake of saying that being both is and is not. What is cannot come into existence out of what is not since what is not cannot give rise to something, since what is not cannot be intelligently spoken or thought of. If it did come into existence out of what is not, then it came into existence at a certain time. There is, however, no necessity that it comes into existence at one time, rather than any other, since this would mean that what is not, nothing, would have attributes that would determine 'what is' to be at this or that time, but 'what is not' cannot have any attributes since it is nothing.

The Presocratic notion of an arche is that it is different from what it explains, that there is split between appearance

and reality within reality. Parmenides's argument is that it makes no sense to say that reality is both reality and appearance at the same time. Rather we must make an absolute distinction between reality, which is being itself, and appearance which is not being. This being for Parmenides is thought, for it is the senses which lead us astray, whereas thought leads to the truth. What is important to stress here is that thought is not the ground or arche of the senses, for then this would mean that thought both is and is not at the same time, rather the realm of thought is completely separate from the realm of senses, and this explains the division of Parmenides's poem into two parts. This logical division between appearance, which is not, and thought, which is, will be decisive, as we shall see for Plato's own metaphysics. But before we go to that subject, we shall leave these abstractions behind, and return to more concrete matters of social milieu of the Sophists, and the ethical philosophy of Socrates.

Parmenides, whose personal acquaintance with Anaximander does not seem unbelievable to me, and whose starting position from Anaximander's doctrines is not merely credible but evident, had the same distrust toward a total separation of a world which only is and a world which only comes-to-be that Heraclitus too had seized upon and which had led him to the denial of all being. Both men sought a way out of the contradictoriness and disparity of a double world order. The leap into the indefinite, undefineable, by which Anaximander had once and for all escaped the realm of come-to-be and its empirically given qualities, did not come easy to minds as independent as those of Heraclitus and Parmenides. They sought to stay on their feet as long as they could, preserving their leap for the spot where the foot no longer finds support and one must jump to keep from falling. Both of them looked repeatedly at just that world which Anaximander had condemned with such melancholy and had declared as the place of wickedness and simultaneously of atonement for the unjustness of all coming-to-be. Gazing at this world, Heraclitus, as we have seen, discovered what wonderful order, regularity and certainty manifested themselves in all coming-to-be; from this he concluded that coming-to-be itself could not be anything evil or unjust. His look was oriented from a point of view totally different from that of Parmenides. The latter compared the qualities and believed that he found them not equal, but divided into two rubrics. Comparing, for example, light and dark, he found the latter obviously but the negation of the former. Thus he differentiated between positive and negative qualities, seriously attempting to find and note this basic contradictory principle throughout all nature. His method was as follows: he took several contradictories, light and heavy for example, rare and dense, active and passive, and held them against his original model contradictories light and dark. Whatever corresponded to light was the positive quality, whatever corresponded to dark, the negative. Taking heavy and light, for example, light [in the sense of 'weightless'] was apportioned to light, heavy to dark, and thus heavy seemed to him but the negation of weightless, but weightlessness seemed a positive quality. The very method exhibits a defiant talent for abstract-logical procedure, closed against all influences of sensation. For heaviness surely seems to urge itself upon the senses as a positive quality; yet this did not prevent Parmenides from labelling it as a negation. Likewise he designated earth as against fire, cold as against warm, dense as against rare, feminine as against masculine, and passive as against active, to be negatives. Thus before his gaze our empirical world divided into two separate spheres, the one characterized by light, fieriness, warmth, weightlessness, rarification, activity and masculinity, and the other by the opposite, negative qualities. The latter really express only the lack, the absence of the former, positive ones. Thus he described the sphere which lacks the positive qualities as dark, earthy, cold, heavy, dense, and feminine-passive in general. Instead of the words "positive" and "negative" he used the absolute terms "existent" and "nonexistent." Now he had arrived at the principle--Anaximander notwithstanding that this world of ours contains something which is existent, as well as something which is nonexistent. The existent should therefore not be sought out-side the world and beyond our horizon. Right here before us, everywhere, in all coming-to-be, there is contained an active something which is existent.

On his way down he meets Heraclitus--an unhappy encounter. Caring now for nothing except the strictest separation of being from non-being, he must hate in his deepest soul the antinomy-play of Heraclitus. Propositions such as "We are and at the same time are not," or "Being and nonbeing is at the same time the same and not the same," tangle and cloud everything which he had just illuminated and distinguished. They drove him to fury. "Away with those people," he screamed, "who seem to have two heads and yet know nothing. Everything is in flux with them, including their thinking. They stand in dull astonishment before things and yet must be deaf as well as blind to mix up the opposites the way they do!" The irrationality of the masses, glorified in playful antinomies and lauded as the culmination of all wisdom was now a painful and incomprehensible experience.

And then he really dipped into the cold bath of his awe-inspiring abstractions. That which truly is must be forever present; you cannot say of it "it was," "it will be." The existent cannot have come to be, for out of what could it have come? Out of the nonexistent? But the nonexistent is not, and cannot produce anything. Out of the existent? This would reproduce nothing but itself. It is the same with passing away. Passing away is just as impossible as coming-to-be, as is all change, all decrease, all increase. In fact the only valid proposition that can be stated is

"Everything of which you can say 'it has been' or 'it will be' is not; of the existent you can never say 'it is not.'" The existent is indivisible, for where is the second power that could divide it? It is immobile, for where could it move to? It can be neither infinitely large nor infinitely small, for it is perfect, and a perfectly given infinity is a contradiction. Thus it hovers: bounded, finished, immobile, everywhere in balance, equally perfect at each point, like a globe, though not in space, for this space would be a second existent. But there cannot be several existents. For in order to separate them, there would have to be something which is not existent, a supposition which cancels itself. Thus there is only eternal unity.

And now, whenever Parmenides glances back-ward at the world of come-to-be, the world whose existence he used to try to comprehend by means of ingenious conjectures, he becomes angry with his eyes for so much as seeing come-to-be, with his ears for hearing it. "Whatever you do, do not be guided by your dull eyes," is now his imperative, "nor by your resounding ears, nor by your tongue, but test all things with the power of your thinking alone." Thus he accomplished the immensely significant first critique of man's apparatus of knowledge, a critique as yet inadequate but doomed to bear dire consequences. By wrenching apart the senses and the capacity for abstraction, in other words by splitting up mind as though it were composed of two quite separate capacities, he demolished intellect itself, encouraging man to indulge in that wholly erroneous distinction between "spirit" and "body" which, especially since Plato, lies upon philosophy like a curse. All sense perceptions, says Parmenides, yield but illusions. And their main illusoriness lies in their pretense that the non-existent coexists with the existent, that Becoming, too, has Being. All the manifold colorful world known to experience, all the transformations of its qualities, all the orderliness of its ups and downs, are cast aside mercilessly as mere semblance and illusion. Nothing may be learned from them. All effort spent upon this false deceitful world which is futile and negligible, faked into a lying existence by the senses is therefore wasted. When one makes as total a judgment as does Parmenides about the whole of the world, one ceases to be a scientist, an investigator into any of the world's parts. One's sympathy toward phenomena atrophies; one even develops a hatred for phenomena including oneself, a hatred for being unable to get rid of the everlasting deceitfulness of sensation. Henceforward truth shall live only in the palest, most abstracted generalities, in the empty husks of the most indefinite terms, as though in a house of cobwebs. And beside such truth now sits our philosopher, like-wise as bloodless as his abstractions, in the spun out fabric of his formulas. A spider at least wants blood from its victims. The Parmenidean philosopher hates most of all the blood of his victims, the blood of the empirical reality which was sacrificed and shed by him.

The prelude in Parmenides' philosophy is played with ontology as its theme. Experience nowhere offered him being as he imagined it, but he concluded its existence from the fact that he was able to think it. This is a conclusion which rests on the assumption that we have an organ of knowledge which reaches into the essence of things and is independent of experience. The content of our thinking, according to Parmenides, is not present in sense perception but is an additive from somewhere else, from an extra-sensory world to which we have direct access by means of our thinking. Now Aristotle asserted against all similar reasoning that existence is never an intrinsic part of essence. One may never infer the *existentia* of being from the concept being-whose *essentia* is nothing more than being itself. The logical truth of the pair of opposites being and nonbeing is completely empty, if the object of which it is a reflection cannot be given, i.e., the sense perception from which this antithesis was abstracted. Without such derivation from a perception, it is no more than a playing with ideas, which in fact yields no knowledge. For the mere logical criterion of truth, as Kant teaches it, the correspondence of knowledge with the universal and formal laws of understanding and reason, is, to be sure, the *conditio sine qua non*, the negative condition of all truth. But further than this, logic cannot go, and the error as to content rather than form cannot be detected by using any logical touch-stone whatever. As soon as we seek the content of the logical truth of the paired propositions "What is, is; what is not, is not," we cannot in-deed find any reality whatever which is constructed strictly in accordance with those propositions. I may say of a tree that "it is" in distinction to things which are not trees; I may say "it is coming to be" in distinction to itself seen at a different time; I may even say "it is not," as for example in "it is not yet a tree" when I am looking at a shrub. Words are but symbols for the relations of things to one another and to us; nowhere do they touch upon absolute truth. Above all, the word "being" designates only the most general relationship which connects all things, as does the word "nonbeing." But if the existence of things themselves cannot be proved, surely the inter-relationship of things, their so-called being or nonbeing, will advance us not a step toward the land of truth. Through words and concepts we shall never reach beyond the wall of relations, to some sort of fabulous primal ground of things. Even in the pure forms of sense and understanding, in space, time and causality, we gain nothing that resembles an eternal verity. It is absolutely impossible for a subject to see or have insight into something while leaving itself out of the picture, so impossible that knowing and being are the most opposite of all spheres. And if Parmenides could permit himself, in the uninformed naivete of his time, so far as critique of the intellect is concerned, to derive absolute being from a forever subjective concept, today, after Kant, it is certainly reckless ignorance to attempt it. Now and again, particularly among badly taught theologians who would like to play philosopher, the task of philosophy is designated as "comprehending the absolute by means of

consciousness,\" even in the form of \"The absolute is already present, how could it otherwise be sought?\" (Hegel) or \"Being must be given to us somehow, must be somehow attainable; if it were not we could not have the concept.\" (Beneke) The concept of being! As though it did not show its low empirical origin in its very etymology For *esse* basically means \"to breathe.\" And if man uses it of all things other than himself as well, he projects his conviction that he himself breathes and lives by means of a metaphor, i.e., a non-logical process, upon all other things. He comprehends their existence as a \"breathing\" by analogy with his own. The original meaning of the word was soon blurred, but enough remains to make it obvious that man imagines the existence of other things by analogy with his own existence, in other words anthropomorphically and in any event, with non-logical projection. But even for man- quite aside from his projection--the proposition \"I breathe, therefore being exists\" is wholly insufficient. The same objection must be made against it as must be made against *ambulo, ergo sum or ergo est*.

The second concept, of more content than being, likewise invented by Parmenides though not used by him as skillfully as by his disciple Zeno, is that of the infinite. Nothing infinite can exist, for to assume it would yield the contradictory concept of a perfect infinity. Now since our reality, our given world, everywhere bears the stamp of just such perfect infinity, the word signifies in its very nature a contradiction to logic and hence to the real, and is therefore an illusion, a lie, a phantasm. Zeno especially makes use of indirect proof. He says, for example, \"There can be no movement from one place to another, for if there were such movement, we would have a perfect infinity, but this is an impossibility. Achilles cannot catch up with the tortoise which has a small start over him, for in order to reach even the starting point of the tortoise, Achilles must have traversed innumerable, infinitely many spaces: first half of the interval, then a fourth of it, an eighth, a sixteenth, and so on ad infinitum. If he in reality does catch up with the tortoise, this is an un-logical phenomenon, not a real one. It is not true Being; it is merely an illusion. For it is never possible to finish the infinite.\" Another popular device of this doc-trine is the example of the flying and yet resting arrow. At each moment of its flight it occupies a position. In this position it is at rest. But can we say that the sum of infinitely many positions of rest is identical with motion? Can we say that resting, infinitely repeated, equals motion, which is its contrary? The infinite is here utilized as the catalyst of reality; in its presence reality dissolves. If the concepts are firm, eternal and exist-ent (remembering that being and thinking coincide for Parmenides), if in other words the infinite can never be complete, if rest can never become motion, then the arrow has really never flown at all. It never left its initial position of rest; no moment of time has passed. Or, to express it differently: in this so-called, but merely alleged reality, there is really neither time nor space nor motion. Finally, even the arrow itself is an illusion, for it has its origin in the many, in the sense-produced phantasmagoria of the non-one. Let us assume that the arrow has true being. Then it would be immobile, timeless, uncreated rigid and eternal-which is impossible to conceive. Let us assume that motion is truly real. Then there would be no rest, hence no position for the arrow, hence no space-which is impossible to conceive. Let us assume that time is real. Then it could not be infinitely divisible. The time that the arrow needs would have to consist of a limited number of moments; each of these moments would have to be an *atomon*--which is impossible to conceive. All our conceptions lead to contradictions as soon as their empirically given content, drawn from our perceivable world, is taken as an eternal verity. If absolute motion exists, then space does not; if absolute space exists, then motion does not; if absolute being exists, then the many does not. Wouldn't one think that confronted with such logic a man would attain the insight that such concepts do not touch the heart of things, do not undo the tangle of reality? Parmenides and Zeno, on the contrary, hold fast to the truth and universal validity of the concepts and discard the perceivable world as the antithesis to all true and universally valid concepts, as the objectification of illogic and contradiction. The starting point of all their proof is the wholly unprovable, improbable assumption that with our capacity to form concepts we possess the decisive and highest criterion as to being and nonbeing, i.e., as to objective reality and its antithesis. Instead of being corrected and tested against reality (considering that they are in fact derived from it) the concepts, on the contrary, are supposed to measure and direct reality and, in case reality contradicts logic, to condemn the former. In order to impose upon the concepts this capacity for judging reality, Parmenides had to ascribe to them the being which was for him the only true being. Thinking and that single uncreated perfect globe of existentiality were not to be comprehended as two different types of being, since of course there could be no dichotomy in being. Thus an incredibly bold notion became necessary, the notion of the identity of thinking and being. No form of perception, no symbol, no allegory could help here; the notion was utterly beyond conceiving, but-it was necessary. In its very lack of any and all possibility for being translated into sensation, it celebrated the highest triumph over the world and the claims of the senses. Thinking and that bulbous-spherical being, wholly dead-inert and rigid-immobile must, according to Parmenides' imperative, coincide and be utterly the same thing. What a shock to human imagination! But let their identity contradict sensation! Just that fact guarantees better than anything else that this was a conception not derived from the senses.

One might advance against Parmenides a sturdy pair of arguments *ad hominem* or *ex concessis*. They would not bring the truth to light, to be sure, though they do expose the falsehood inherent in the absolute separation of senses and concepts, and in the identity of being and thinking. In the first place: if thinking in concepts, on the part of reason, is real, then the many and motion must partake of reality also, for reasoned thinking is mobile. It moves from

concept to concept. It is mobile, in other words, within a plurality of realities. Against this, no objection can be made; it is quite impossible to designate thinking as a rigid persistence, as an eternally unmoved thinking-in-and-on-itself on the part of a unity. In the second place: if only fraud and semblance emanate from the senses, and if in truth there is only the real identity of being and thinking, what then are the senses themselves? Evidently a part of semblance, since they do not coincide with thinking, and since their product, the sensuous world, does not coincide with semblance. But if the senses are semblance, to whom do they dissemble? How, being unreal, can they deceive? Nonbeing cannot even practice deceit. Therefore the whence of illusion and semblance remains an enigma, in fact a contradiction. We shall call these two *argumenta ad hominem* one, the argument based on the mobility of reason; two, the argument based on the origin of semblance. From the first follows the reality of motion and of the many, from the second the impossibility of Parmenidean semblance. In both cases, we are still accepting Parmenides' main doctrine concerning being as well-founded. But this doctrine merely states, \"The existent alone has being; the nonexistent does not.\" Now if motion has being, then what is true of being in general and in all cases is true of motion: it is uncreated, eternal, indestructible, without increase or decrease. But if semblance is denied of this world (by means of the question as to its origin), if the stage of so-called coming-to-be, of change -in other words our whole multi-formed restless colorful and rich existence-is protected against Parmenidean discard, then it is necessary to characterize this world of interaction and transformation as a sum of such truly existent essences, existing simultaneously in all eternity. In this sup-position too there is no room for transformation in a narrow sense, i.e., for coming-to-be. But what we have now is a multiplicity which has true being; all the properties have true being, as has motion. About each and every moment of this world, even if we choose moments that lie a millenium apart, one would have to be able to say: all true essences contained in the world are existent simultaneously, unchanged, undiminished, without increase, without decrease. A millenium later exactly the same holds true; nothing has meanwhile changed. If, in spite of this, the world looks totally different from time to time, this is not an illusion, not mere semblance, but rather the consequence of everlasting motion. True being is moved sometimes this way, sometimes that way, together asunder, upwardly downward, withinly in all directions.