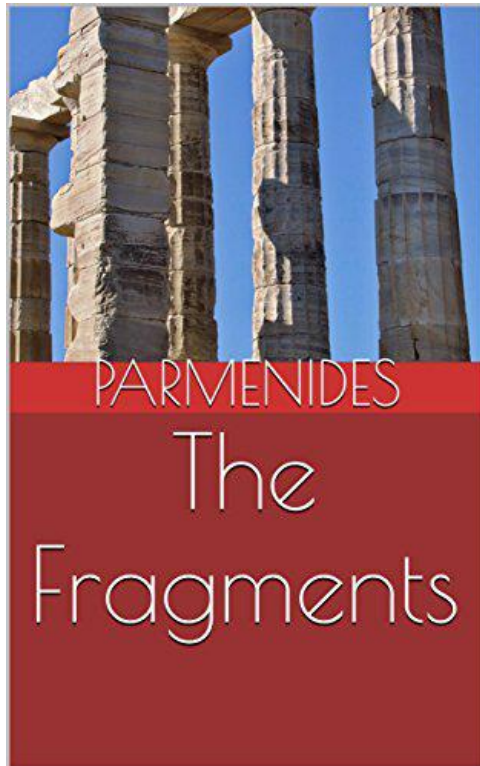


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Fragments of Parmenides

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Parmenides was born in 515 B.C. in the city of Elea in southern Italy. There are reports that he was a student of Xenophanes, and it seems plausible that his work was in part a reaction to Xenophanes' pessimistic epistemology.

Like Xenophanes, Parmenides wrote in verse. His poem "On Nature" is in Homeric hexameters and includes many Homeric images, especially from the *Odyssey*. With obvious reference to the poetic tradition, Parmenides begins his poem with the invocation of a divine source. Where the poets would invoke the muses in order to give themselves authority, Parmenides opens by describing a similarly fanciful scene: he is taken in a chariot to meet a goddess, who tells him that she will teach him all things about the nature of reality and assures him of the certainty of what she is about to reveal.

Putting all of his faith in the power of abstract reason, Parmenides argues in his poem that genuine knowledge can only involve being, and that non-being is literally unspeakable and unthinkable.

Using only the premise that "what is" is and what "is not" is not, he proceeds to deduce the nature of reality. The reality he arrives at bears no resemblance at all to the world we experience around us through our senses.

When starting out on a rational inquiry, according to Parmenides, there are only two logically coherent possibilities: either you begin your inquiry with the premise that the subject of your inquiry exists or you begin with the premise that it does not exist.

But the second of these possibilities, according to Parmenides, is utterly meaningless. It is, therefore, not a real possibility at all. Parmenides bases this claim regarding the path of "it is not" on the assertion that, "that which is there to be thought or spoken of must be" (28b6).

According to traditional interpretation (no longer universally accepted, but still common) Parmenides goes even further, denying that there is such a thing as *plurality*. On this view, Parmenides denies that there are *many* things, maintaining instead that only **one** thing exists. (It's not so clear, however, what he thought this one thing **is**.) Parmenides is without doubt the most difficult and obscure of the Presocratics. There are numerous different and conflicting interpretations of the curious bits of prose, poetry, and argumentation in the surviving fragments of his work, *The Way of Truth*. I won't try to canvas them all. I'll just sketch out one line that makes some sense of what Parmenides says.

Deciphering the argument in fragments 2, 3, 6, and 8

- a The argument as it appears in the text:
- 1 There are only two routes (or "roads" or "ways") of inquiry: (a) "it is," or (b) "it is not."
 - 2 The second way, (1b), is "entirely unable to be investigated."
 - 3 For "you may not know that which is not, nor may you declare it."
 - 4 For "the same thing is for thinking and for being."
 - 5 "That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be, but not possible for nothing to be."
 - 6 "There is still left a single story of a way, that it is."
- b On the existential interpretation, a first stab at interpreting the argument looks like this:
- 1 If something is inquired into, i.e., thought about, then either: (a) it exists, or (b) it does not exist.
 - 2 The second alternative is impossible ("entirely unable to be investigated"). What follows is an argument against the second alternative (1b):
 - 3 For it is impossible to think about ("know") or speak about ("declare") what does not exist. [= a rejection of (1b)]
 - 4 For the things that **can** be thought about are the same as the things that **can** exist ("is for thinking" means "can be thought about"; "is for being" means "can exist").
 - 5 Anything that **can** exist and can be thought about **must** exist; for it can exist, and nothing (i.e., what does not exist) cannot exist.
 - 6 Only the first alternative is possible: if something can be thought about, then it **actually** exists.
- c
- d The key to the argument is the move from (4) and (5) to (3). (4) and (5) are clearly premises from which (3) is inferred.
- e (4) draws a crucial connection between the **possibility** of existing and the **possibility** of being thought about:
It is possible for x to exist iff it is possible for x to be thought about (i.e., iff x is **conceivable**).
(5) collapses the distinction between what **can** exist and what **does** exist:

What **can** exist, **does** exist. What does **not** exist, **cannot** exist.

1 Parmenides does not allow that you can think about what does not **actually** exist but could **possibly** exist. His argument rules out any distinction between **what is** and **what is not but might be**. Parmenides (as Ring says) collapses modal distinctions. For him:

what is possible = what is actual = what is necessary.

As Parmenides says (2): "it is and ... it is not possible for it not to be." What is cannot possibly be otherwise. What **can** exist **does** exist, indeed **must** exist.

Parmenides is posing constraints on language and on thought, a limit on what can be spoken of or thought about: we cannot speak or think about things that are not (real), that do not exist. That means that much of what goes by the name of "speaking" or "thought" really won't count as such for Parmenides. If you do anything that Parmenides would call "speaking or thinking of what is not," Parmenides would not even deign to call it speaking or thinking. For he could argue (along the lines that Plato suggested, cf. *Sophist* 237C-E):

If you are speaking of what is not, then what you are speaking about is nothing, i.e., is not anything at all. That is, you are not speaking of anything, which is to say that you are not even speaking. For speaking is always speaking of something, and in the (alleged) case of "speaking of what is not" there is nothing that is being spoken of. So there is no such thing as "speaking of what is not." An exactly similar argument could be used to establish the conclusion that there is no such thing as "thinking of what is not."

Now apply this to the topology of 'nature' according to Parmenides. For every "spot" on the "strip", there are two alternating orientations: the extensive orientation of Doxa and the eternal orientation of Aletheia. What is really surprising about this is that Doxa and Aletheia, supposed polar opposites, turn out not to be so very different after all. In fact, they turn out to be *the same thing*, just seen from the different perspectives of two mirror-image orientations.

What then really distinguishes the Way of Seeming from the Way of Truth?

"...From here onwards learn mortal beliefs...they distinguished opposites in body and established signs apart from one another...all things have been named light and night and these according to their powers (are applied) to these things and to those."

Of course, such naïve dualism never works and Parmenides understood as much. Naïve dualism merely creates two worlds instead of one and each of these worlds raises all the same ontological issues and problems as the single world of monism. To be a relevant tool for modeling actual experience, a dualism requires some sort of 'bridging agent' to bring the two realms into relation with one another.

Parmenides invokes the agency of 'the goddess': "In the midst of these is the goddess who steers all things; for she rules over hateful birth and the union of all things..." But ultimately, the role of the goddess is not to rule but to create a third term to unite the first two.

"...She devised Love (Erota) first of all the gods..."

British philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, in his seminal work of process philosophy, *Process and Reality*, concluded that a processional model of reality requires three 'undefined' terms (i.e. terms whose meaning can be taken for granted without further definition); for Whitehead those undefined terms were: One, Many and Creativity.

We might attempt an even more general formulation. Every process based model of reality must include a principal of disjunction ('or' in the language of logic) and a principal of conjunction ('and' in the language of logic). Since disjunction implies plurality, our model also ultimately assumes three undefined terms: disjunction and its products and conjunction.

If this model (or Whitehead's) be taken as the universal substructure of all process based models, it is important to note that Parmenides' model (Doxa) meets that test; his terms are Light and Night and Love. In his Doxa, there is a disjunctive function ("distinguished opposites") and a conjunctive function ("the union of all things").

Parmenides identified and defined the minimal conditions necessary for "process" to occur. In this, Parmenides anticipated Marx's Dialectical Materialism by two dozen centuries (Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis) and Trinitarian theology by half a millennium (Father, Son, Spirit).

Parmenides, on the other hand, has left us long fragments of a poem written in the same meter as the Homeric epics; although there is no lack in it of goddesses and mystical symbols, the main thrust is austere logical. The poem has two parts: the first is "the way of Truth," the second, "the way of Opinion." Parmenides' main truth is: *We cannot think nor say not-being*. Thus, he rejects outright the possibility of what I called the horribly difficult thought of not-being. Let me explain how he does it. Suppose I say, "Dragons are not (i.e. they don't exist)." Parmenides would reply: either there are dragons out there, in which case you are uttering a lie, or there are not, in which case your word "dragon" (and your thought) are about nothing. But a thought or a word cannot be about nothing, words and thoughts are like arrows, or like wasp stings: they must hit a target. If you say, "But my word 'dragon' hits an idea of dragon I have in my mind," he would reply, "Then you're changing the subject: your word means an idea, not an object out there, and in that case, when you say that dragons are not, you're uttering a lie, for you say that the idea *is* in your mind." Similarly, if you tell Parmenides that elephants are not flying animals, he will reply the following: "You're saying that flying elephants are not, but as I told you before..." In summary, we cannot say that something is not, nor can we say that A is not B. Remember that Aristotle's principle of contradiction states that you cannot say at once that A is B AND A is not B; but Parmenides was far stricter: he stated that we cannot say that A is not B, period. The consequences of this strict logic are stunning. Change and becoming are stopped in their tracks, and differences between things are erased, for saying A is different from B is tantamount to saying A is not B. For Parmenides the truth about our universe is that it is timeless, eternal, motionless, perfectly uniform, the same all throughout. Being no fool, he knew that's not the way we experience it with our senses, so he allowed for the way of opinion (*dóxa*). The word *dóxa* meant not only opinion but appearance, prestige, fame, and many other things. What Parmenides was after, then, is the truth behind appearances, and what he was saying is that becoming and change are merely appearances; true being is changeless. I said before that philosophy struggles with the difficult thought of not-being, and also that all philosophy is paradoxical. I may add now that at the time of the Greeks as well as in our own, the number of people who care to think those difficult thoughts is very small: philosophy is by nature elitist. Heraclitus and Parmenides seem to be on opposite sides: one affirms becoming and change, the other denies them.

For Parmenides, true being is whatever is changeless behind the appearance of change. In their differing ways, both philosophers struggled to rescue eternal being from the flux of appearance and change. Both, heroically, tried to stamp becoming with the seal of being, which is the intellectual way of abolishing death. Remember the bully Gilgamesh, who was no intellectual: he tried to become immortal, and failed. Philosophers try it in a different way, by thinking immortal thoughts.

"The fragments of Parmenides are an important monument of Greek poetry at the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century B.C. In time they cannot be far removed from Pindar's Pythian x, which was written in 498, or from his Pythians VI and XII, which were written in 490. With these flights of lyrical genius the poem has little in common, but it belongs to the same age, and it has suffered from being too often considered either in isolation as a contribution to truth or as an episode in purely philosophical poetry.

Parmenides' Proem may be called allegorical because it has two meanings--the superficial meaning which tells a story and the implied meaning which gives the essential message of the poet. He tells of a chariot journey through gates to a goddess, but what he really describes is the transition from ignorance to knowledge. The use of allegory on such a scale is extremely rare in early Greek poetry. The first signs of it may be detected in Homer's account of the *Aitia*(2) and in Hesiod's steep path which leads to *Arethé*.(3) But in neither of these is much added to the essential facts by the allegorical dress, and in both the allegory is closely related to traditional mythology." (pp. 97-99)