

# Parmenides as Conceptual Analyst

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It is argued that the properties that Parmenides attributes to Being and Unbeing are best interpreted as a conceptual analysis of what it is for something to be thinkable. Whatever possesses contradictory properties is not thinkable and anything that does not possess contradictory properties is thinkable. What is thinkable is eternal and unchanging but is not to be identified with what is actually experienced. The view that Parmenides is offering an ontological thesis is rejected as it seems to require acceptance of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Connections are drawn between the conceptual interpretation of Parmenides and some of the ideas of David Lewis.

## Introduction

What, if anything, meets the description that Parmenides gives of Being and Unbeing and the relation between the two in his mysterious poem, *On Nature*, written in the 5th century BC? Does his description of Being and Unbeing best fit some empirical cosmological account of the universe, or is it a piece of conceptual theorising?

## Being and Unbeing

In his poem Parmenides makes a number of claims about “*to on*”, which, translated literally, means “the being”, but which is often translated in to English as “Being”, with a capital B. Anthony Kenny tells us that the definite article here performs the same role in the Greek as the article in an English expression such as “the dying”, as in a hospice for the dying. He says, “The being is that which is be-ing, in much the same way as ‘the dying’ are those who are dying.” The word “Being”, with the capital B, is to be understood in Parmenides as referring to “whatever is engaged in being”, or whatever is doing the be-ing (1998:9). “Being”, however, says Kenny, is not to be taken as equivalent in Parmenides to the notion of “existence”. Parmenides, he says, “is interested in the verb ‘to be’ not only as it occurs in sentences such as ‘Troy is no more’ but as it occurs in any kind of sentence whatever — whether ‘Penelope

is a woman' or 'Achilles is a hero' or 'Menelaus is gold-haired' or 'Telemachus is six feet high'. So understood, Being is not just that which exists, but that of which any sentence containing 'is' is true. Equally, being is not just existing (being, period) but being anything whatever: being red or being blue, being hot or being cold, and so on *ad nauseum*," (1998:9–10).

Kenny translates the opposite of Being as Unbeing.

In addition to his claims about Being, Parmenides also makes claims about the relationship of Being to thought. I will begin with a discussion of what he has to say about Being, then consider his remarks about the connection between Being and thought.

## The poem

I shall begin by highlighting some crucial sections of the poem. We are told that mortals, because they pass through the things-that-seem, think that these things-that-seem must "really exist", being, for them, all there is; that

what you can call and think must Being be, for being can, and nothing cannot, be; that Being is ungenerated and undestroyed, whole, of one kind, motionless, balanced. It never was nor will be. All is now, all together, one, continuous. It will never become something apart from itself. It is not divided but is all alike, neither more here nor less, continuous, neighbouring itself, beginningless and endless. It is complete, lacking nothing, complete from all directions, not weaker or stronger in any place, nor more here or less there, all inviolable, equal in all directions: that to think a thing is to think that it is, for thought has no reach apart from Being (Kenny, 1998:12).

Or, to put it in Barnes' terms, "for not without what is, on which what has been expressed depends, will you find thinking" (1982:179). The poem concludes with the assertion that "One and unchanging is that for which as a whole the name is 'to be'".

## Being as substance

One common interpretation of what Parmenides means by "Being" — perhaps the standard one — is to take him as talking about substance. Bertrand Russell reads him this way. He says, "What subsequent philosophy, down to quite modern times, accepted from Parmenides, was ... the indestructibility of substance" (1961:70). If this is so, then Parmenides' claim that "Being was never born and never dies" is to be read as a denial of creation *ex nihilo*, as an assertion that nothing can come from nothing. Substance, in effect, has always existed. Furthermore, in Parmenides' opinion, substance does not change over time either. This latter claim, says Russell, "was too violent a paradox' for Parmenides' successors to accept".

Anthony Kenny manages to put a plausible gloss on both the impossibility of all change and the indestructibility of substance. "To see why Parmenides drew this conclusion," he says, "we have to assume that he thought that 'being water' or 'being air' was related to 'being' in the same way as 'running fast' and 'running slowly' is

related to 'running'. Someone who first runs fast and then runs slowly, all the time goes on running; similarly, for Parmenides, stuff which is first water and then air goes on being. When a kettle of water boils away, this may be, in Heraclitus' words, the death of water and the birth of air; but, for Parmenides, it is not the death or birth of Being. Whatever changes may take place, they are not changes from being to non-being; they are all changes within being, not changes of being" (1998:11).

Kenny's grammatical elucidation of what Parmenides says is an ingenious and illuminating one. However, if we do read Parmenides this way, then we have interpreted his claims about the impossibility of change and the indestructibility of substance as an empirical hypothesis, as a piece of empirical cosmology. We would be reading it as a set of claims about the world as a possible subject for scientific investigation. If so, then, some kind of empirical confirmation or falsification should be possible in which the occurrence of some observation rather than others render it more probable than some alternative hypothesis. It is, presumably, possible to hold it as an empirical hypothesis that the universe has always existed. After all, the considerations that have led scientists to the opposite view, to an acceptance of the Big Bang, are primarily empirical ones. While Parmenides would appear committed to the falsity of the Big Bang theory, if we take his claims as being about the physical universe, it seems that he does not do so on the basis of any empirical evidence. Those of his arguments that could be read as a defence of an eternal universe are not the kinds we would expect for something meant as a scientific theory.

In order to convince us that Being was never born and never dies, for example, Parmenides asks of Being, "How could it be born / Or whence could it be grown? Unbeing? No - / That mayn't be said or thought; we cannot go / So far ev'n to deny it is. What need, / Early or late, could Being from Unbeing seed? / Thus it must altogether be or not. / Nor to Unbeing will belief allot? / An offspring other than itself..." (Kenny, 1998:11).

What is it about substance, however, that means that it cannot spring into existence from nothing? While it may well be the case that there is no reason, or good explanation available, as to why substance came into existence when it did, supposing there to have been no substance prior to this coming-into-existence, why does this lack of reason or explanation rule out its randomly coming into existence? There appears to be no logical impossibility in the notion, no inherent contradiction in the claim that "First there was nothing then there was substance". There seems to be a pre-supposition here that every event must have a cause — a claim which is by no means self-evidently true. It may be that Parmenides held some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason — a principle most famously associated with the 17th century philosopher Gottfried Leibnitz but, apparently, first formulated by one of Parmenides' predecessors Anaximander of Miletus. According to Charles Freeman Anaximander held that "the world is stable because the forces surrounding it are equal and there is no reason for it to move from its central position". Freeman comments that, "This is known as the principle of sufficient reason and is the first instance of the principle's

use” (Freeman, 1999:151–152). That Parmenides had the principle of sufficient reason in mind is, therefore, not out of the question.

The essence of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, according to Simon Blackburn, is that “nothing can be so without there being a reason why it is so” (1994:367). What this means is that there is a sufficient explanation for why any entity exists, or why any event occurs or why any proposition is true, where what constitutes a “sufficient explanation” is to be construed, as appropriate, in terms of either reasons or causes. It may be that the principle is more plausible when cast in terms of one of these notions rather than the other.

Leibnitz, for example, employs the principle to argue that space cannot be an infinite box. As Blackburn puts it, “If space were an infinite box there could be no reason for the world to be at one point in it rather than another, and God placing it at any one point would violate the principle” (1994:367). Parmenides, then, could be arguing that substance could only come out of nothing if there were a sufficient reason for it doing so at one time rather than another. But there is no such sufficient reason, therefore substance could not have come out of nothing. As this exposition makes clear, however, this conclusion requires the truth of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The Principle, however, does not seem to be a necessary truth. There seems to be no contradiction involved in denying it. Parmenides, then, can only be taken to identify Being with substance if he is also taken to have committed himself to a dubious philosophical principle. Moreover, nothing the Goddess says commits Parmenides to a belief in a creator and without a creator the Principle of Sufficient Reason makes even less sense.

What else, besides substance, might Parmenides have had in mind with the notion of Being?

## Being as “the Possible”

It could be that, rather than making an ontological claim, Parmenides is making a conceptual one for which no empirical evidence is relevant. His idea might be that Being is just the category of all the things that could exist, of all the things of which something true or false could be said. It is not the kind of thing that we could use our senses to discover. Unbeing would then just be the complete class of contradictions, the class of statements that are necessarily false.

If so, Parmenides may well be the earliest attempt to try and distinguish between those claims that can be meaningful, that are open to our understanding them, and those claims that make no sense to us and can make no sense. If it is to be philosophical, then it is to be read as an early exercise in the philosophy of language or in philosophical logic. “Being”, then, on this account, is the class of all claims that can have a meaning, and the question of “What is Being” becomes the question of what it is that enables one sentence to be meaningful, to make sense, and another sentence to be meaningless, a nonsense.

As evidence that this is the most appropriate way to interpret Parmenides, consider the kinds of arguments he offers for his conclusions. They are not empirical arguments. They do not lead to the prediction of one kind of sense-experience rather than another. As Kenny puts it:

Being must be everlasting; because it could not have come from Unbeing, and it could never turn into Unbeing because there is no such thing. If being could — per impossible — come from nothing, what could make it do so at one time rather than another? Indeed, what is it that differentiates past from present and future? If it is no kind of being, then time is unreal; if it is some kind of being, then it is all part of Being, and past, present and future are all one Being. By similar arguments Parmenides seeks to show that Being is undivided and unlimited. What would divide Being from Being? Unbeing? In that case the division is unreal? Being? In that case there is no division, but continuous Being. What could set limits to Being? Unbeing cannot do anything to anything, and if we imagine that Being is limited by Being, then Being has not yet reached its limits (Kenny, 1998:11–12).

Now, most of this can be cast in terms of the issues I have identified i.e. it can be seen to be philosophical, about our concepts not about the world itself. The class of all thinkable things must be everlasting i.e. it must have always been the class of thinkable things for eternity and always will be. It is not a class to which anything can be added or taken away. Either X is a thinkable thing or it is not. If it is not then it is in the class of unthinkable things i.e. it is a contradiction, and something that is a contradiction was always, is, and shall always be a contradiction, and something that is not a contradiction was, is, and shall always fail to be a contradiction. This kind of conclusion, this kind of arrival at truth, is not an arrival that waits upon how our experience turns out. It is not a litmus-test kind of knowledge, waiting on the result of the litmus test before we know whether it's an acid or a base. Rather, it's a non-litmus kind of knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge or truth we can arrive at merely by spelling out what the concept of the class of thinkable things commits us to, what is logically packed into the concept. In effect, it is looking at what are the conditions of meaningful discourse, of thinkability, and the answer it gives, in effect, is that the limits of the thinkable is the contradictory. If it is not contradictory it can be thought.

Moreover, as Anthony Kenny points out, if something is thinkable it is, like Being, “that of which something or the other, no matter what, is true” whereas if something is unthinkable, like Unbeing, then it is “that of which nothing at all is true”. In effect, he takes Parmenides to be denying that there are any such things as true contradictions. However, rather than construing unthinkability in terms of contradiction, he understands the idea of Unbeing in the following way; “if I tell you that I am thinking of something, and you ask me what kind of thing I’m thinking of, you will be puzzled if I say that it isn’t any kind of thing. If you then ask me what it is like, and I say that it isn’t like anything at all, you will be quite baffled. ‘Can you then tell me anything about it at all?’ you may ask. If I say no, then you may justly conclude that I am not really thinking of anything or indeed thinking at all. In that sense, it is true that to be thought of and to be are one and the same”. Kenny then proceeds to point out that

“there is an important difference between saying ‘Unbeing cannot be thought of’ and saying ‘What does not exist cannot be thought of’. The first sentence is, in the sense explained, true; the second is false” (1998:10–11).

Now, on my account, Parmenides would not accept that there is an important difference between “Unbeing cannot be thought of” and “What does not exist cannot be thought of”. They are the same claim. Unbeing cannot be thought of because all members of Unbeing are contradictions and, if something is the subject of a contradiction, it does not exist. All sentences putatively referring to it are to be construed as claims that there is an X such that it is both A and not-A, and there are no such objects. By contrast, as Bertrand Russell construes Parmenides, if something can be thought of, if the thought of it is not a contradiction, then there must be a sense in which it exists and “since you can think of a thing or speak of it at one time as well as another, whatever can be thought of or spoken of must exist at all times. Consequently there can be no change, since change consists of things coming into being or ceasing to be” (1961:67).

Russell himself gives us a solution to Parmenides’ paradox. “Suppose, for example, that you talk of George Washington. Unless there were a historical person who had that name, the name (it would seem) would be meaningless, and sentences containing the name would be nonsense” (1961:67). So, he continues, “what, then, are we to say about George Washington? It seems we have only two alternatives: one is to say that he still exists; the other is to say that, when we use the words ‘George Washington’, we are not really speaking of the man who bore that name. Either seems a paradox” (1961:68). He then proceeds to try to show why the latter is less of a paradox.

We do not need to follow his argument here but it is interesting to note that not everyone has thought the latter less of a paradox. David Lewis, for example, in the words of Daniel Nolan, has held that

other possible worlds are just as real as this one, and are much the same as this one. For him, there really is such a thing as a species of land-dwelling squid, not in our cosmos, perhaps, but in some other possible world. Every possible description of a world matches up to a real, concrete universe out there. Talk of possible worlds is to be taken entirely at face value. ... if there really are singing cows, swooping stars, or palaces of solid gold a mile high, then we have a straightforward story of what people are talking about when they talk about the possibility of such things existing.

He notes, however, that Lewis’ view “has gained very few adherents”, even though Lewis thinks that it is an improvement in unity and economy over our common-sense opinions (2005:53–54).

If, in addition to Lewis’ view of possible worlds, we also held what is known as an “eternalist” theory of time, we would have the complete set of possible states of affairs laid out in an unchanging form across eternity and that looks a lot like Parmenides’ theory of Being. Eternalism is thought to solve problems about the truth-makers for claims about the past and the future. How can it be true that Abraham Lincoln was taller than Napoleon if there is no sense in which neither Lincoln nor Napoleon exist?

Even if we accept Parmenides account of Being because it, or something like it, solves these problems, the problems thereby solved, as we saw earlier, are not empirical problems but conceptual ones. It may well be, as Russell suggested, that Parmenides provides us with the first example in philosophy of an argument from thought and language to the world at large, but it may just as well be that Parmenides provides us with one of the earliest examples in philosophy of an analysis of what must be assumed in the concepts we use.

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