

**Title: Conversations**

**Subtitle: Parmenides and Zeno is the same as Paul (Paradidomi)**

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Author: wizanda

Date: 1149808128

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Parmenides and Zeno

[Elea, 515 - ? BC]

Heraclitus maintained that everything changes, and since philosophers love to argue, it is perhaps unsurprising that someone stated the exact opposite, namely that nothing ever changes. This view was put forward by Parmenides, son of Pyres who came from Elea, a Greek foundation in southern Italy.

The chronicle describes Parmenides as a nobleman who once established a new law for Elea, which became so popular that all new officials of the city had to swear they will abide by the Parmenidean law when they were inaugurated. Parmenides is also known for the philosophical school established in his city, the Eleatic school. It is further said that Parmenides' main disciple, Zeno, once came to Athens for the festival of the Great Panathenaea where they had an encounter with the young Socrates. Although the narrative is uncertain, there is no doubt that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were strongly influenced by the Eleatic school.

Parmenides stated that the senses deceive us and, hence, our perception of the world does not reflect the world as it really is. Instead, the real world is something beyond our apprehension and can only be apprehended through logic. His chief doctrine was that the only true being is "the One" which is indivisible and infinite in time and space. But "the One" is not conceived by Parmenides as we conceive God, but rather as something reminiscent of the Hindu "Brahman". Instead he thinks of it as a material, unchanging, infinite extension, which he concludes from logical reasoning.

He argues that the perception of movement and change is an illusion and that everything that is, has always been and will ever be, since it can always be named and spoken of. The essence of this argument is: If you speak or think of something, the word or thought relates to something that actually exists, that is both in reality and in language require objects outside themselves, otherwise they would be incoherent. Parmenides assumes a constant meaning of words and concludes from this that everything always exists and that there is no change, for everything cannot be otherwise at all times.

In fact, he did not express his ideas so straightforwardly. His writings are in dactylic hexameters, its contents intermixed with unfathomable symbolism, as in the following example: "The mares that carry me as far as my heart may aspire, they have escorted; they had guided me and set me on the celebrated road [...] Only one story is left: that it is. And on this there are signs in plenty, that, being, I am unborn and indestructible, whole of one kind and unwavering, and complete was it, nor will it be, since now it is, all together, one, continuous. [...] from what is not I shall not allow you to say or think - for it is not sayable that it is not." (Simplicius, Commentary on the Physics, 144.25 ff)

Melissus, an eminent citizen of Samos and admirer of Parmenides produced approximately 50 years later, rendering Parmenides' doctrines in clearer form. In the following excerpt he explains the canon of infinity and perpetuity of the universe. "What comes into existence has a beginning, what does not come into existence has no beginning. But what exists has not come into being. [which was deduced from the text] Therefore it has not got a beginning."

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Again, what is destroyed has an end, and if something is indestructible it has no end. Therefore what exists, being indestructible, has no end. But what has neither beginning nor end is in fact infinite. Therefore what exists is infinite. If the universe is infinite, it is unique. For if there were two things they could not be infinite, for they would have limits against one another. But what exists is infinite. Therefore there is only one plurality of existents. Therefore what exists is one." (Simplicius, Commentary on Physics, 103.13 ff)

The above states the gist of classical monism. It is obvious that Parmenides' theory, although his deductions are logically correct. The problem lies in the axiom that the intelligible world and the things themselves have a common existence. Parmenides attempted to build his metaphysics on basis of this axiom and the conclusions derived from this axiom. Although the resulting theory is erroneous, the methodology was a genuine innovation.

Parmenides profoundly influenced later philosophers with this method and supplied the spark for Plato's theory of ideas. Since Eleatic philosophy contradicts common sense, it is unsurprising that his teachings brought forth challenge and ridicule among his contemporaries. It was Parmenides' brilliant disciple, Zeno (some say he was his lover, too), who became the chief defender of his master's position. Again, the methodology is conclusive argument.

Zeno followed his master's advice to disarm his adversaries by leading them to an ad absurdum and thus became famous for his paradoxes. That the senses provide a clue to reality but only to appearance was proved by Zeno in the following paradox (Zeno speaks to Protagoras, the sophist): "'Tell me, Protagoras,' he said, 'if a bushel of millet-seed - or the ten-thousandth part of a millet-seed make a sound when they fall, or not?' Protagoras said that it did not. 'But,' he said, 'does a bushel of millet make a sound when it falls or not?'

When he replied that a bushel does make a sound, Zeno said: 'Well, then, what is the ratio between the bushel of a millet-seed and the single seed - or the ten-thousandth part of a single seed?' He agreed. 'Well, then,' said Zeno, 'will there not be the same ratios between the sounds? For as the sounders so are the sounds. And in this case, then, if the bushel of millet-seed makes a sound, the single seed as a part of a single seed will also make a sound.' That was Zeno's argument. (Simplicius, Commentary on Physics, 1108.14-28)

To evince that motion and change is an illusion, Zeno presented the following paradoxes:

1. The Racecourse. Imagine a racecourse of a given length, say 100m. The runner starts at the beginning of the racecourse and reaches the goal in a given time. As an example of motion, the runner traverses a series of units of distance, for example, 1/2 foot, 1/4 foot, 1/8 foot and so on, until at last we have an infinite number of distances. How can the runner traverse an infinite number of distances in a finite amount of time?

2. Achilles and the Tortoise. The swift Achilles and the tortoise hold a race. Because Achilles is a sportsman, he gives the tortoise a head start. While the tortoise is already moving towards the goal, Achilles starts and pursues the tortoise. In a few seconds he reaches exactly the point, where the tortoise has been when Achilles started. However, during this time the tortoise has moved forward and it is now at the point where Achilles started. Achilles must now give the tortoise a certain amount of time to make up for this distance. Again, the tortoise has moved on in that time and Achilles needs another, smaller amount of time to reach the point where the tortoise has moved on to. The distance between Achilles and the tortoise will always be closed as in the case of the racecourse, no point can be reached before the previous point has been reached, thus Achilles can never overtake the tortoise.

3. The Arrow. Does the arrow move when the archer shoots it at the target? If there is a reality of space, the arrow must at all times occupy a particular position in space. At its length is precisely what is meant when one says that the arrow is at rest. The arrow must always occupy such a position on its trajectory which is equal to its length, the arrow must be always at rest. Therefore motion is an illusion.

There are more of Zeno's paradoxes; almost all involve dichotomy and the mathematical problem of infinity. Although these paradoxes are confusing, it is evident to us that the conclusions derived from them are nonsensical. Yet this was not obvious to Zeno's contemporaries. In the early beginnings of philosophy, logical pitfalls presented a major obstacle to progressive thought, and Parmenides maintained a significant influence on Greek thought for some time.

The paradoxes illustrate the sort of problems we encounter in language and logic. Zeno's arguments are fallacious and may be refuted, once the correct premises are applied, yet the correct premises are less than obvious. Therefore, Parmenides. Zeno can be credited with having demonstrated, contrary to their intentions, that alone is no sure-fire way to attain meaningful knowledge. They have instead shown that the opposite is occasionally true and that we must beware of logical fallacies. Philosophical reasoning is only as sound as the premises it rests on.