

Parmenides of Elea, searching for the Truth

Stavros J. Baloyannis

Introduction

The unique light of the pre-Socratic philosophy irradiated through the centuries and penetrated deeply the Western philosophy and science up to our days, given that many contemporary philosophical doctrines are originated from the wisdom of the philosophers of the Ionian or the Eleatic schools, who attempted to approach the Truth, paving the way to the Absolute.

Concerning the human soul, the pre-Socratic philosopher tried to introduce and analyze concepts of supreme importance, such as Logos, Mind, Being, Philotis (virtue, kindness) Neikos (hostility, enmity), Noesis, and Truth, to open new horizons and to establish harmony in the thought and life of the human Being.

Parmenides of Elea

Among the pre-Socratic philosophers, Parmenides of Elea, son of Pyretus, according to Diogenes Laertius (Diog.IX,21), is the most prominent philosopher of the Eleatic school, including Zeno and Melissos. According to David Gallop, Parmenides could be described as a natural philosopher in the current sense of the term [1], as well as the father of logical thought and seeker of Truth [2] and one of the pioneers who opened new horizons in philosophical thought worldwide. He was born in Elea, an ancient Greek colony in Magna Graecia (now Castellamare di Stabia), in the first half of the fifth century BC.

Parmenides was a student of Xenophanes from Colophon, as Theophrastus mentions, and of Pythagorean Ameinius, who lived a simple and virtuous life, possibly exerting a strong influence on the Parmenides' personality and attitude of life.

Parmenides is characterized by a particularly advanced thought. Thus, it is reasonable that he always possesses a prominent position in pre-Socratic philosophy along with Heraclitus of Ephesus [3], strongly influencing the philosophical doctrines of his time as well as most of the philosophical streams furtherly, up to our epoch.

Parmenides' most significant contribution consists in accepting Being as the only existential entity and rejecting the concept of non-Being. At the same time, Heraclitus introduced the concept of reason (Logos), which is intelligible to the Mind (B2) and essentially directs everything, through which everything may be interpreted. Parmenides and Heraclitus' philosophical positions were pioneering for their time and became fundamental principles of Western philosophical thought.

There needs to be more extensive information about his life. In his youth, inspired by the idea of justice and Truth, according to Speusippus, he became involved in philosophy by enacting laws in his country, which would contribute to preserving honesty and the broader moral reform of society.

According to Plato, he followed an immaculate life, known as the Parmenidean life, and was regarded as a prototype of an honest and moral citizen and a genuine idealist philosopher (Theait.183e). He always inspired respect and veneration in his contemporaries and was distinguished for the nobility of his soul, the depth of his thought, and the dignity, the precision and politeness of his behavior.

In parallel with philosophy, Parmenides may have practiced Medicine, since an inscription in Elea mentions, "Parmenides of Pyretus, Ouliades physicist." This inscription allows us to assume that Parmenides was at the same time a mystic of the Art of Medicine, since Oulios Apollo was the honored God of Medicine, due to his beneficial therapeutic interventions, respected profoundly in Phocaea of Asia Minor, from which the family of Parmenides

may have come, establishing themselves in Magna Graecia.

Parmenides' writings

Of Parmenides' works, only one didactic poem of allegoric character, entitled "On Nature" [4, 5], survives today, of which 150 verses are written in Greek, and one abstract (B18) has survived in Latin translation. Several abstracts of the poem are cited in the works of Sextus Empiricus and the Alexandrian philosopher Siblicios [6].

More specifically, regarding the broader structure of the poem, it includes an introduction, particularly descriptive of the author's spiritual course (1,1-32), a first part (2,1-8,52), in which through the search for Truth, the theories about substance, being and non-being are presented, and a second part (8,53-19,3), in which the physical world is described, as it was perceived by Parmenides.

Georg Gustav Fülleborn, in his work "Fragmente des Parmenides" in 1795 [7] divided the poem into three parts, namely (a) the prolog, which includes the first passage, (b) the second part under the title "Beyond the conceivable or the first true" and (c) a third part under the title "The First Glory," which includes from extract 8.52 to 18.

Through his work, Parmenides argues, in essence, the value of the authority of reason and directs thought mainly to the search for Truth, always through a positive approach, which is the most direct and accurate way of thinking.

Parmenides' philosophical principle centers around accepting "Being" as the ultimate reality, the Truth, and rejecting the concept of "non-being" as a non-existent, ontologically unsubstantial idea. Most analysts consider Parmenides as a numerical monist, except for Barnes [8], who views Parmenides as introducing a fundamental unity, distinct from material unity.

In the preface of the poem, Parmenides refers to the course of his journey, describing him as being carried by a chariot from ignorance to knowledge, from Night to Day, led by the daughters of the Sun, which came out of the darkness of the night and carried into the light, through the "long-suffering" Trial to an anonymous Goddess who was waiting for him in her own environment to interpret his anxious quests and then show him the way to Truth.

According to Sextus Empiricus, the daughters of the Sun symbolize the eyes and possibly the eyes of Intellect or conscious thought; they could express at the same time the freedom of thought, the brightness of the soul, and the inner joy of man in his effort to find the Truth. The horses of the chariot, according to the same author, symbolize "the horses of the soul rush and appetites" (Mathematicians 7.112). It would be reasonable to characterize them as the selfish tendencies or impulses in terms of analytical psychology.

Upon his arrival at the place of the Goddess and the successful end of his course, the Goddess, who obviously symbolizes the Truth and the correctness of philosophical reflection, gladly welcomed him, greeted him warmly, and reminded him that Themis and the Trial had led his steps there.

The Goddess, symbolizing the Truth, could be paralleled with the concept of Philotis (friendship, kindness) according to Empedocles, which leads to Truth and unity and contributes substantially to the harmony of coexistence and harmonious functionality of everything. The Goddess emphasized that the choice of the path that leads to Truth is the best possible decision since this is the path of Persuasion (2.4).

Parmenides' philosophy

Parmenides argues through the verses of his poem that the path to genuine inquiry [9] leads directly to Truth, which expresses Being, which has a clear substance since non-being is devoid of meaning.

The Truth is always unique; for this reason, it does not fall into oblivion, while falsehood or errors due to misconception are always many and often reasonably fall into oblivion. The Truth is ignorant of most men, as the Goddess underlined, who usually think incredibly, directed mainly by the senses, which lack credibility and are therefore unable, as a rule, to maintain the objectivity of their judgment and to receive, the correct decisions, through a clear conscience.

Being remains essentially always solid, non-divisible, and retains its wholeness, having its inner power unchanged. In terms of homogeneity, under which it is characterized, the Being parallels a sphere whose center maintains equal distances from all points on its surface.

Being is also immobile and restless, since movement encompasses the possibility of variability, while pause contradicts the concept of continuous functionality and the potential activity of Being.

Parmenides emphasizes that it is a significant achievement for a man to know the Truth and apply it in his life, a fact which is achieved through the constant search for Being, that is, the essence of things, after thorough analysis and understanding of all aesthetic experiences.

The approach to Being is known to be the fruit of persistent mental effort since Being and Mind are ultimately identical. Therefore, to be clear and accurate, cognition must be based on objective reality and proper knowledge without being based solely on the senso-sensorial perception.

The identification of Intellect with Being, that is, with Truth, is the highest philosophical conception of all time, which becomes the pedestal of scientific thought and the essential motive of scientific research.

Descartes' expression "I think, therefore I am" (Cogito, ergo sum) is well known [10]. It emphasizes the value of the mental process in the conscious life of the individual and argues that rational reason, determined by the Intellect, takes a dominant place in the life of the man.

On the contrary, the path of thought, which is directed towards the acceptance of "non-being" [11] is fundamentally slippery since non-being does not exist, expressing this complete denial, the lack of everything, and therefore the thought objectively enters a labyrinthine dead end, unable to find and identify non-Being as non-existent.

Parmenides' views have particular philosophical weight and existential value throughout the ages. The rejection of non-being ensures the avoidance of the drift of

thought and inner life into the negative space of nothingness and non-existence from which sorrow, anguish, and insecurity arise.

Plato expressed particular respect for Parmenides, whose views he mentions at length in the dialogue of the same name. It is well known that Plato, in his dialogues, often emphasized his appreciation for the pre-Socratic philosophers, referring to Heraclitus, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Protagoras, Prodicus, and Hippias, while not referring to Democritus. He appreciated Parmenides, as a philosopher having an exemplary life and purified views. He placed him, after Heraclitus, in a leading position among philosophers, accepting that Being is the supreme Truth.

In the philosophical reflection of some of the modern and contemporary philosophers, including Leibniz [12] and Heidegger [13], it is found that while non-being lacks pragmatism, its rejection is nevertheless called into question even though no objective criteria are converging on the conscious acceptance of non-being [13]. Since absolute lack, "non-being," i.e., nothing or absolute emptiness, does not exist even under the modern perspective and perception of science [14,15].

However, the concept that everything is temporary, transient, ephemeral, without ontological stability, composing non-Being, initially supported by Gorgias, lacks any basis and has been accepted only partially and temporarily within a limited philosophical space, arguing that non-being is partly negative and partly different and perhaps the most prevalent form of Being [16].

According to Sartre, non-being exists in the consciousness of the individual, who encapsulates denial and carries with his non-existence. Aware of Parmenides' absolute attachment to the exclusive acceptance of Being, Sartre extracts from the imagination the concept of non-existence and locates in it all the tragedy of man, who thinks in denial and carries a constant sense of nothingness throughout his life [16].

However, the combination of the objective elements of the physical space with the theoretical experiences of the inner sense connects Being with non-Being, transcending the limits and criteria of phenomenological assessment, since there are no limits to the thinking and knowledge of emotions and concepts, which, despite their theoretical value, assume an objective measurement for the individual [17], as it is understood in Plato's theory of ideas [18].

Undeniably, only a tiny part of the physical world is perceived through the senses. Thus, in reality, darkness does not exist since visible light is only a small part of the photon beam spectrum. What is characterized as non-existent, based on sensory and sensorial experiences, is far from the Truth. Parmenides is fully justified by arguing that only Being has ontological substance and non-being does not exist and is rightly not perceived by cognition. Since, the sensation is not identical with cognition, which is outside the narrow stranglehold of phenomenological perception.

The Being, as the only unchanging and existing substance, places Parmenides' philosophy in a highly advanced existential space, superior to the reflections of Empedocles, who accepted that rhizomes are the primary generative structures of Nature [19]. As a matter of fact, the rhizomes of Empedocleus are in harmonious unity and functionality within the mitochondria, which are primary organelles of the cell, having their genetic material, playing an essential role in the life, aging, and death of the cell [19].

Parallel to the Parmenidean view is Melissos' assertion that Being, Eon (εόν), has no beginning and no end, since if it had an end, it would become non-Eon and would fall into non-existence, devoid of objective identity, while it is eternal and unchangeable and remains "One" not divided and not fragmented [20].

According to Parmenides, time has only the dimension of the present, which moves towards eternity. All functional moments are a perpetual presence in which the individual's functioning, behavior, emotions, and expectations develop. The present, as Parmenides understands it, is not characterized by statism. On the contrary, it conceals clear potential, since it expresses the anxious search for Truth, the continuous march towards virtue and spiritual values, having faith (Persuasion) as a pedestal and justice (Trial) as a guide.

Parmenides, like Heraclitus, rejected all the prevailing views in mythological times and sought the primacy of Truth in thought and life [21-23]. It is significant that Parmenides, through his acceptance of Being as the supreme and unique Truth, approached the basic principle of Christianity, according to which God is the fundamental Truth, which remains unchanged and absolute and the source of all good.

In conclusion

The human being, accepting the Being as the unique entity is freed from the multiform doctrines, which have only dialectical significance, without giving a proper answer to his existential and metaphysical quests. The Truth becomes the only irreversible guide in man's spiritual course and his constant quest for good, extending his horizons beyond the world of the senses to the world of eternity, where unchanging values prevail [24]. As Heidegger [13] states, "the deepening of Parmenides will never cease, since all the points of his didactic poem deserve constant thorough analysis and multidimensional reflection."

References

1. Gallop, D. (1984). *Parmenides of Elea. Fragments*, Toronto; Buffalo.
2. Guthrie WK. *A History of Greek Philosophy Volume II*.
3. Baloyannis SJ. Heraclitus from Ephesus on the strength of Mind. *J Neurol Stroke*. 2021; 11(2):41–43.
4. Diels H, Kranz W. *The Fragments of the Pre-Socratics*, 6th ed. Berlin:Weidmann, 1951–1952.
5. Kirk, G. S., J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, 1983. *The Pre-socratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Chapter VIII: "Parmenides of Elea."
6. Conche M. *Parménides. Le Poème: Fragments*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1996.
7. Fülleborn, Georg Gustav, *Parmenidou tou Eleatou leipsana*. Züllichau 1795.
8. Barnes J. "Parmenides and the Eleatic One," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1979; 61: 1–21.
9. Giannantoni G. The two "ways" of Parmenides. *The Word of the Past*, Naples, 1988; 43: 207-221.
10. Descartes, René *Discours de la Méthode Pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*. 1637.
11. Nehamas A. On Parmenides' three ways of inquiry. *Deucalion*, Paris 1981; 33: 97-111.
12. Leibnitz GW. *The philosophical works of Leibnitz*, Tuttle, Morehouse New Haven, 1890.
13. Heidegger M. *Introduction to Metaphysics, Complete Edition*. II. Department: *Vorlesungen 1923-1944*, vol. 40, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1950.
14. El Naschie MS. On the philosophy of being and nothingness in fundamental physics. *Nonlinear Science Letters B*, 2011; 1: 4-5.
15. Genz H. *Nothingness: the science of empty space*. Hachette UK 2009.
16. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness (1943)*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.
17. Priest G. *Towards non-being*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
18. Cavendish AP. "Early Greek Philosophy" in D. J.O'Connor (Ed.). *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. New York: The Free Press, 1964.
19. Baloyannis SJ. Empedocles: Neurophilosophy and Neurosciences- Prophecy and Reality. *J Neurol Stroke*(2014) 1(6): 00037. DOI:10.15406/junk.2014.01.00037
20. Sedley D. Parmenides and Melissus. In A. A. Long (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (pp. 113–33). Cambridge: Cambridge University.
21. Lindberg DC. *The Beginnings of Western Science*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
22. Cavendish AP. "Early Greek Philosophy" in D. J.O'Connor (Ed.). *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. New York: The Free Press, 1964.
23. Mourelatos APD. *The Route of Parmenides*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1971.
24. Wiesner J. *Parmenides: the beginning of the Aletheia*. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1996.
25. Baloyannis SJ. A message from Parmenides of Elea to the universal man. *Encephalos* 2004;41:1-10.