

Logic and Faith

Parmenides was an ancient Greek/Italian Philosopher from the city of Elea, born around 515 BCE (Cohen et. all, 40). He is notable for his use of logical reasoning in investigating the nature of reality, change, and existence. In this paper I will explain Parmenides' views when it comes to questions of reality, change, and existence, and then go into why I think it is that we should be careful about accepting Parmenides' views.

Parmenides was known for the view that while things may appear to change, the truth (or reality) is that things do not change. In his words, the truth is that "what-is... is... whole and changeless" (Cohen, 45). For us to understand this claim, we must first understand Parmenides' definitions of appearance, reality, and change. Appearance is what we perceive with our five senses, while reality is something that we know is true because of logic or reason (*logos*), regardless of whether our senses confirm it or not. Parmenides suggests that while to our five senses it may appear that things change, using reason we clearly see that things fundamentally cannot change.

What is the definition of change? To Parmenides, for something to change is for something to come into being, or for something to stop being. For example, a tree is changed into smoke and embers when it is burned is to say that when the tree is burned it stops being, and simultaneously smoke and embers come into being. This idea of what it means to say that

something has changed is central to Parmenides' argument for the idea that things cannot possibly change. Also central to Parmenides' argument is the use of logic or reason.

Parmenides thinks that we can know certain things about the world by using reason. He goes so far as to explicitly implore the reader to "judge by reasoning (*logos*)" when considering what he has to say (Cohen, 43). His logical argument goes like this. Using reason, we can know that existing things exist, and that things that do not exist do not exist. We can also know that existing things are not things that do not exist, and things that don't exist are not things that exist. This is clear just by looking at the definitions of the terms involved. Non-existence is only non-existence if it does not exist! If non-existence exists, then it is not non-existence. As Parmenides himself says, "in no way may this prevail, that things that are not are" (Cohen, 43).

Parmenides takes things a step further when he asserts that things that exist cannot come into being from non-being, and things that exist do not go out of being into non-being. This is logical, because non-being does not exist, so how could anything come from it? Existence must come from existence, because existence could not come from something that does not exist. Thus, existence must be eternal, for it could not have come from anything but existence. This means that things that exist have always existed, and will always exist.

Keeping this in mind, we approach the idea that what it is for a thing to change is for it to go out of existence, or come into existence. While it may appear that the tree goes out of existence (is changed) when it is burned, the truth is that the matter and energy that made up the tree still exists. Thus it does not change according to Parmenides' definition of change. If Parmenides were around today, he would claim that while the tree appears to have changed, in reality the matter and energy that composed the tree still exists, so fundamentally, change has not

really occurred. These claims that existence is “whole and changeless” are true simply because of logical necessity (what Parmenides calls “mighty Necessity”), and the definitions involved (Cohen, 45; 44). As Maharaji Neem Karoli Baba said, “Sub Ek” or “all one!” (<https://www.ramdass.org/sub-ek-all-one/>)

As we can see, Parmenides gives a very logical argument in favor of understanding existence as something that is whole and changeless. In the following section, I argue that we should be careful about accepting Parmenides’ logical approach (and thus, the conclusions that it implies). My reasoning is as follows. When we ask the question, ‘why ought we accept that what reason tells us is true’, we are compelled respond with reasons. If we use reason to answer this question, we can come up with lots of good reasons that we should trust in reason. Unfortunately, for us to affirmatively answer the question with reasons, we must have *already* affirmatively answered the question. Thus there can be no reason that we should accept that what reason tells is true. If we are to accept reason as telling us the truth, it cannot be for reasons. Rather, it must be because of faith. Once we have faith in reason, we can begin to justify our faith in reason with reasons. The fact is, however, that the leap of faith is necessary prior to the justification. Perhaps our evolutionary biology pre-disposes us to take this leap of faith, and also hides from us the fact that it indeed is a leap of faith that we are taking. The fact is though that the only reason that we believe that reason tells us the truth is because we have taken a leap of faith.

Only if we take a leap of faith can we use logic to show that non-existence cannot exist. Parmenides errs when he claims that we are using logic and logic alone to show that non-existence cannot exist, for fundamentally, we are using faith. This error is what inspired Nietzsche to comment that “indeed, nothing has yet possessed a more naïve power of persuasion

than the error concerning being, as it has been formulated by the Eleatics [Parmenides]... Even the opponents of the Eleatics [the Pluralists and the Atomists] still succumbed to the seduction of their concept of being” (Nietzsche, 483). Heraclitus, another ancient Greek philosopher, claimed that only “a fool is excited by every word (logos)”, perhaps because he saw that logic was merely faith in disguise (Cohen, 33).

This is exactly why we should be careful about accepting Parmenides’ logical approach, and the conclusions that it implies. Just as we should be careful about accepting any conclusions that are based on faith, so too must we be careful about accepting conclusions based on logic, because logic itself is based on faith.

But, what other option do we have other than to embrace faith in logic and move from there? Nietzsche suggests an alternative: we go back to the initial distinction between appearance and reality, and reject Parmenides’ notion of reality in favor of an affirmation of appearance. As Nietzsche says, “the ‘apparent’ world is the only one: the ‘true’ world is merely added by a lie” (Nietzsche, 481). If we are to know anything about existence without taking a leap of faith, we must rid ourselves of rationality and embrace our bare experience of the world. When we do this, Heraclitus’ ideas about how “we step into and we do not step into the same rivers. We are and we are not” suddenly make perfect sense (Cohen, 34). A leap of faith is not necessary in order to experience the world. This is one alternative to taking a leap of faith and trusting in reason.

Works Cited

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