

Chapter 1 Questions of Philosophy

Section 3 The Opposing Theories of the World

9 Parmenides

* The development that follows the thought of primordial principles is carried out by Heraclitus and Parmenides. Specifically, we see the opposition between the two ideas, the “world as one” and “everything becomes and changes.”

* Their writings have only survived in poetic fragments, among which we identified three major doctrines as the originals of Parmenides:

(1) “There are two ways of inquiry: the one that *it is*, and it is not possible *for it not to be*, the other that *it is not*, and that *it is* bound *not to be*.” The latter is impossible for humans, for they could neither recognize nor express that which is not.” (Freeman 1948 p. 42)

(2) “For it is the same thing to think and to be.” (ibid. p.42) or otherwise, “To think is the same as the thought that It Is; for you will not find thinking without Being, in (regard to) which there is an expression.” (ibid. p.44)

(3) “Thus Coming-into-Being is quenched, and Destruction also into the unseen. Nor is Being divisible, since it is all alike.” (ibid. p.44)

These can be paraphrased as follows:

First, what there is alone exists (what there is not does not exist. The whole of what there is is to be called “One.”

Second, one can think of only what exists.

The conclusion from the above statements: There is neither a becoming of being out of nothing and nor a dissolving from being into nothing. Therefore, the One that exists is neither subject to becoming nor to ceasing; it is not divisible nor combinable.

* Against Parmenides' doctrine that thinking and being are one and the same because thinking is always about some being, Bertrand Russell argues, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, from the logical point of view that the conclusion deducing being from thinking cannot be maintained as apodictic. Overall, Russell's view of the history of philosophy pales in comparison with Hegel's historical observations of Western philosophy. It is not appropriate to judge the importance of philosophical thought from the standpoint of logic.

Parmenides' idea that thinking and being are one and the same is neither a conventional theory of idealism nor a notion of the nature of Being correlative to thinking. The essence of this idea is that the events of becoming and ceasing are merely the *appearances* that appear to the senses of human beings, so that Being itself must be considered autonomous and independent of these appearances.

* Plato, in his work *Parmenides*, provided an exhaustive interpretation of the teachings of this philosopher. Most of Parmenides' discourses, however, have been presented here as examples of argumentation in the form of “reductio ad absurdum,” with little reference to the authentic nature of Parmenides' thought. I find Hegel's brief remark more convincing. “Since in this an advance into the region of the ideal is observable, Parmenides began Philosophy proper.” (Hegel 1892 p. 254) By advancing beyond the *imaginary presumption* of the original or primordial elements of the world, Parmenides succeeded in directing his thinking toward idealizing the totality of the universe and enabling the expression of this ideal nature. Hegel notes that this way of thinking is of profound significance. Whether this proposition is valid in terms of logical inference is irrelevant here.

What could be derived from the philosophical turn of Parmenides are: firstly, the oneness of the whole being of the world and secondly the impossibility of going from nothing to being or vice versa, as a consequence of which the world is unchangeable and imperishable, with only the apparent appearances of becoming and perishing. Obviously, these conclusions of Parmenides set a crucial tone for the thought of subsequent Greek philosophers.

* We have the following statement written by Melissus, who is believed to have been a student of Parmenides and who seems to have endorsed Parmenides' oneness of being.

That which was, was always and always will be. For if it had come into being, it necessarily follows that before it came into being, nothing existed. If however, nothing existed, in no way could anything come into being out of nothing. (Freeman, 1948 p. 48)

Melissus' argument boils down to a single explicit thesis that nothing can come into being out of nothing, which later became almost a matter of fact in the rational worldview since modern times. Many people today believe that Being neither comes from nothing nor disappears into nothing. However, this idea cannot be derived spontaneously from our everyday physical experience. It is only possible when the concept of Being is subjected to abstraction and idealization. This way of thinking then took the Greek philosophers a step further into another dimension of the concept of Being. They arrived at a new terrain of opposition between Being and Becoming.

10 Heraclitus

* Another important contemporary of Parmenides is Heraclitus, whose surviving writings are even more fragmentary than those of Parmenides. What we know of his philosophy, therefore, is mostly based on the testimony of later philosophers. The following is generally accepted as his claim:

- (1) Everything is constantly flowing and moving;
- (2) Consequently, any permanent existence is an appearance; the world is not, but is constantly becoming; incessantly;
- (3) Every Becoming is the result of oppositions (or disputes) between two opposite elements, or the unity of opposites and the resulting harmony and integration.

* As mentioned earlier, Heidegger explains that both of Heraclitus and Parmenides were the successors of Anaximander's ontological thought when they came up with the ideas of Logos and Moira, respectively. According to Heidegger, the following episode about Heraclitus suggests that he was a profound thinker of ontology.

The story is told of something Heraclitus said to some strangers who wanted to come visit him. Having arrived, they saw him warming himself at a stove. Surprised, they stood there in consternation – above all because he encouraged them, the astounded ones, and called for them to come in, with the words, "For here too the gods are present." (Heidegger 1998 p.269)

Just like Heidegger himself, his comments on this story are enigmatic. The visitors find Heraclitus sitting by a bread oven, surely a common and insignificant place. Everything around him, including things, states, behaviors and thoughts, is familiar, intimate and desirable to us. It is in the very "sphere of such intimate and desirable matters" that the gods are present.

This "enigma" is not particularly indecipherable to those who are familiar with Heidegger's existentialistic account that contemplation of the "meaning of Being" should begin with the essential insight into the nature of "care" involved with the anonymous "das Man" (the They) just living their everyday lives. By implicitly pointing to the affinity of his ontological maxim with the story of Heraclitus, Heidegger tries to present Heraclitus as a pioneer of the speculation of the "meaning of Being." Once we remove his peculiar enigmatic language, however, there seems to be little plausible reason for this affinity.

Here, too, Hegel's discovery of a precursor of "dialectic" in the idea of Heraclitus' idea is much more convincing, since the Greek philosopher taught that matters and things always exist in opposition, unification and coordination of the manifold.

* Heraclitus considered fire to be the most fundamental element. In one of his fragments he wrote that all things are an interchange with fire, and vice versa, like goods for gold and gold for goods. Hegel notes that for Heraclitus, fire is a mediator of the transformation, becoming and change of everything: Heraclitus is generally said to have regarded fire as a principle, but he probably did not; what is important is that with him a definite idea of "temporal momentum" emerged with regard to the appearance of the world and of things in it.

Heraclitus declares that "there is only one that remains, and from out of this all else is formed; all except this one is not enduring). This universal principle is better characterized as Becoming, the truth of Being." (Hegel 1892 p. 283)

Hegel regarded Heraclitus as the first philosopher to define the nature of Being as Becoming, which transcends the conceptual opposition of Being and Non-Being. (Note that Nietzsche expressed a similar thought.)¹ That Becoming arises out of Being and Non-being, or otherwise that Becoming is the true nature of Being and Non-Being, is the fundamental theme of Hegel's ontological principle elaborated in his *Science of Logic*. Hegel quoted Heraclitus, so to speak, to reinforce his own idea. Beyond the

¹ To grasp order in the world as the essence of the world, the most painstaking and slowest achievement of amazing evolution — Heraclitus (Nietzsche 1884)

similarity to Hegel's philosophy, however, Heraclitus had already grasped the necessity of the movement of the "thought of thought."

* Greek philosophers initially sought to find the basic principle of the world in sensory matter (*hyle*), but later in something abstract or formal. The philosophical shift of Parmenides and Heraclitus indicates that Greek philosophy evolved from this initial stage of thinking toward a dichotomous view between the sensory and phenomenal and some supersensory entity (or intelligible totality).

* Where the question of knowledge focuses on the opposition between the sensory and the supersensory, the question of *temporality* in knowledge definitely arises. The process of knowing objects inherently transcends the phase of apparent identity, creating a distinct new phase with the passage of time (becoming=change). However, it is not necessarily obvious that the two fundamental momenta of Being, – Oneness and Becoming – are derived from the nature of the temporality of knowledge. They then appear as two opposing concepts of Being and Becoming for the moment. Hegel was the first philosopher who logically expounded this idea using the concept of dialectic. For Hegel, dialectic is the idea of *Aufheben*, or sublation, which should overcome the opposition between Being and Becoming. (The twentieth-century epistemology of contemporary logicians largely ignores this dynamic of *temporality*.)

11 Becoming and Change

* Since the time of Heraclitus and Parmenides, the following two ideas have definitely become non-negligible elements in the philosophy of primordial principles: (1) nothing comes from nothing, and nothing goes into nothing and (2) the root cause of the becoming and change of things. Philosophers who followed these two great figures including Empedocles, Democritus and Anaxagoras necessarily undertook the task of exploring Parmenides' doctrine of the unchanging nature of existence – summarized in the expression that nothing comes from nothing – as well as Heraclitus' search for the root cause of the change of everything.

* Here again, Hegel's view is quite significant.

According to Hegel, Parmenides established the idea of Being as the abstract universal, while with Heraclitus Becoming=Change indicated the principle of the temporal process of becoming; then it was Leuchippos who first considered positive Being as the self-existent one and the negative Being as empty. However, when humans determine things to be self-existent, what is essentially important is that "I" as Being for itself is simply related to itself, but through the negation of the other Being.

The principal point of consideration is the One, existent for itself: this determination is a great principle and one which we have not hitherto had. [...] Becoming existed only as the transition of Being into nothing where each is negated; but the view that each is simply at home with itself, the

positive as the self-existent one and the negative as empty, is what came to consciousness in Leucippus, and became the absolute determination. (ibid. p. 302)

Hegel's explanation is important: There is nothing like the self-existent One. It is a mere positing in any respect. The idea of the One existent for itself arises from the nature of the mind, which, with its negativity, posits the self as alien to everything else. Note that Hegel's system itself is supported by the notion of the One as the totality of the world. This One, produced by the negativity of the self, is what it shares with the oneness of the Absolute. Hegel's scheme would not be affected by removing the idea of oneness of the Absolute.)

* Empedocles explained the becoming and perishing of things by using the idea of the mixing and separation of the four elements: fire, water, air and earth. For Empedocles, these four are autonomous elements which are, divisible, but neither derivative nor deductive from others. They grow and change due to two external forces: love, which mixes and strife, which separates. Here we see two newly inspired notions, the multiplicity of elements, and the “force” that motivates the changes of these multiple elements. These notions of *hyle* (matter) and motive force are precursors to the modern scientific, especially the chemical view of matter. In the case of the ancient atomists such as Leuchippus and Democritus, the idea of “atomon” (indivisible) was created by further dividing the four basic principles of Empedocles to reach something that is no longer divisible. As mentioned by Albert Schwegler (1819 – 57), the universe is an aggregate of innumerable elements that are qualitatively equal but not quantitatively equal.

* The thought of Greek atomism can be summarized in the following three points. It was presented as a theory that would transcend the opposition between Parmenides and Heraclitus:

- (1) The atom is the smallest unit of a plenum (being) that is no longer divisible.
- (2) The diversity and change of things depend on the variation of the forms, arrangements and spatial relations of atoms. What causes the variations is a certain (motive) force.
- (3) There must be a void (non-being) along with a plenum (being) to grow and change.

* In regard to Anaxagoras, Aristotle remarked the following: “When one man said, then, that reason was present – as in animals, so throughout nature – as the cause of order and of all arrangement, he seemed like a sober man in contrast with the random talk of his predecessors.” (Aristotle. *Metaphysics* Book 1 Part 3)

Aristotle evaluated him as follows: Thinkers had gone so far as to separate the principle of things and their becoming and changing (the principle of cause) from the universal principle of the world, and then to integrated them together, but this was not sufficient to generate the *physis* (nature) of all existing entities, because the cause of entities being good or beautiful, or becoming good or beautiful, can never be derived from these physical principles, such as fire and water. Thus, Anaxagoras was distinguished from earlier philosophers when he said that *nous* (mind) was the cause of order in nature and the whole arrangement.

Aristotle clearly identified Anaxagoras' notion of *nous* as the *ultimate cause that makes the Being of existing entities possible*. We see that this was later be taken up by Thomas Aquinas with his concept of Being in itself and then by Heidegger with his own concept of Being.

* In contrast, Plato argued against Anaxagoras that the earlier philosopher failed to properly grasp the essence of the idea of *nous* (*Phaedrus*). According to Plato (or Socrates), Anaxagoras not only pursued the principle of the physical beings of the universe, but also sought to comprehend why it was associated with the values such as truth, goodness and beauty. However, he lacked the true language required to express them, merely juxtaposed the idea of *nous* with the existing primordial principle, and thus lost sight of the central significance of his findings.

This seems to have led to the emergence of the idea of "truth, goodness and beauty" as the authentic theme of Socrates's and Plato's philosophy.

* It must be kept in mind that the fundamental doctrines of the accounting of the world, which dawned on humans with cosmogony, have philosophically developed, on the one hand into the theories of the ultimate cause of the world and, on the other, into the principles of values while delving into the mysteries of Being. Which of these paths can lead to solving those deep-rooted philosophical questions of Being and taking a further step beyond? The answer to this question itself will be a helpful guide for the course of our philosophical thinking.

In any case, by the time Plato and Aristotle introduced a new dimension to the philosophical inquiry, the "thought of thought" movement in Greek philosophy had produced two other important problems, the "question of language" and the "question of knowledge."