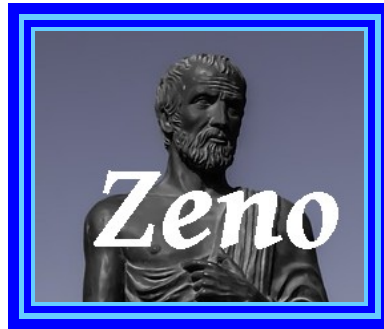


*Varitatio delectat.*¹
Classical Thought²
The Eleatics:³



Xenophanes 570-500BC

Like Heraclitus, Xenophanes had a pantheistic view of the world and disdained the popular religion of his day. He thought the idea of the old gods was just silly. There could not be, he argued, one god of the sea, another god of the mountains and so on. Rather, he argued all these are the forces of one god who is the whole of reality. Everything is god. “One is god, there is one god neither in form like mortals nor in thought,” he is reported to have declared. He taught a pantheistic⁴ oneness. Like Heraclitus he wanted to get rid of the ideas of anthropomorphic⁵ gods.

Parmenides 515-450BC

Parmenides also taught that everything is one. The universe, he said, is a single permanent substance. It is uncreated, indestructible and unchangeable. How did he come to these conclusions? He constructed his argument from the premise that there is no nothing. Why? Because everything you can think about has an existing objective referent.⁶ If you can think about something it exists. What about mythological beings such as the flying horse Pegasus? Yes, Parmenides would say, Pegasus exists in thought – at least the notion of Pegasus exists. An inconceivable object could not exist. Can we think about nothingness? If we can think about non-being then it exists. Therefore non-being has being! This is contradictory so non being must be inconceivable and does not exist. “Nothing exists” is self contradictory.

This may seem like puns and plays on words but Parmenides went further. If nothing does not exist there can be no “nothing” out of which the world came. Therefore the world has always existed. If the world were to be destroyed it would become nothing. Nothing does not exist so the world cannot be destroyed. If there is no nothing from which the world could have come or to which the world could be going then there can be no change either, for what would change be?

For example: something changes from hot to cold, your dinner, for instance, if you stop eating to contemplate the non-existence of nothing. But this could not really have happened because if it is

1 Change pleases i.e. variety is the spice of life.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 These philosophers lived in the Greek colony of Elea (now called Velea) in modern Italy.

4 Pantheism says that the whole of nature is God.

5 Like human beings.

6 Referent = the thing in the world that a word or phrase denotes or stands for.

cold now and was not previously cold then cold came out of nothing – and nothing does not exist. Hot itself cannot become cold – this is contradictory. So if cold could not have come from hot (its opposite) and it could not have come from nothing (because nothing does not exist) the change from hot to cold could not have happened! So Parmenides concluded that reality is a single, permanent substance in which there is no change, no beginning and no end. His theory was that reality does not consist of different elements: reality is all fundamentally the same substance.

Parmenides changed the pantheism of Xenophanes into a unchanging, indestructible, uncreated, undifferentiated, permanent substance. All motion is change. Because there can be no empty space (no nothing), Parmenides denied the reality of change and motion. If I ask you to move a chair to a different place in the room, you cannot do so in reality because there is no empty (no nothing) space into which it can be moved. Not only that but I could not even go through the motions of noticing the chair or move my mouth to speak to you. Parmenides was so rational that he made his own position impossible to express. If no motion, no change, and so no thought, is possible there can be no philosophy either. “The Real is the rational” a later philosopher would say, echoing Parmenides.⁷ In other words; it may seem from your senses that you are reading, thinking and so on but it is all an illusion.

We saw in Week 2 that there are two fundamentally different theories of epistemology: Empiricism and Rationalism.

One says we know by looking and seeing – seeing is believing.
The other says we know by stopping and thinking – we discover reality by mental reflection.

Parmenides is at the extreme end of of this second school of epistemological thought. Both he and Heraclitus thought that there is a difference between reality and appearance and you cannot just trust your senses. Both considered that the use of reason would reveal the truth about reality.

BUT

When they *did* apply their reason to the problem of reality Parmenides and Heraclitus disagreed. Heraclitus said everything is changing. Parmenides said there is no change. They agreed about the use of reason but came to *opposite* conclusions.

This situation comes up again in the history of philosophy. The Continental Rationalists Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz had a similar epistemological theory to Xenophanes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They said one should get away from common sense experience because it is misleading as a guide to reality. Instead one should rationally work out for oneself the nature of reality using clear and distinct ideas. On this they agreed but they did not agree in their conclusions.

Descartes thought that all reality was formed of two things: mind and body.
Spinoza thought all reality was one which he called god or nature.
Leibnitz thought all reality was made of an infinite number of what he called monads.

Plainly then, reason alone cannot give us the truth about reality. If it could, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz, would all have come to the same conclusion about the nature of reality. Why is this? The answer is that although there is nothing wrong with *reason*, human beings are fallen creatures and they cannot use reason in a faultless way. We are also finite creatures. Our reasoning powers are not infinite. Reason alone cannot give *human beings* the truth about reality. God's reasoning powers, however, are unbounded and faultless.

7 Hegel

Zeno⁸ d.425BC

This last Eleatic philosopher was a disciple of Parmenides and he is famous for inventing paradoxes to support Parmenides arguments about the impossibility of motion. The most well known paradox involves the shooting of an arrow at a target. Zeno said that the arrow is fired towards the target but before it can reach the target it must first reach the point halfway to the target. Before it reaches the point halfway to the target it must reach a point halfway to the halfway point. And before that it must reach a point halfway to halfway to the halfway point and so on *ad infinitum*.⁹ the arrow will thus never reach the target. The arrow is therefore not moving it is just an illusion. This of course applies to any movement so all motion is an illusion. He developed this paradox in a number of different forms.

A solution is that the number of fractions or proportions of the space is infinite not the space itself. The arrow goes through a finite amount of space not an infinite number of fractions.

If you have a Synchronological chart use it to find out where the Eleatics fit in with the rest of world history.

⁸ Not to be confused with another Zeno who lived later and founded the Stoic philosophy.

⁹ For ever.