

PLATO'S PARMENIDES

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Several attempts at understanding the meaning of Plato's *Parmenides* were made but not very successfully. Though some of the best minds like Cornford, Russell, Ryle, and Owen have struggled with it, the interpretations are not always acceptable without some hesitation.¹ Edward F. Little gives the following conclusion of it with reference to Plato's own theory of Forms and distributing Parmenides' arguments under eight hypotheses:²

One with "O" capital refers to the form "O" and with "o" in small refers to its copies. Likewise "O" and "o" in "Others" and "others" respectively. The intent seems to be to teach Socrates how to reason efficiently in order to find the truth. The method is by deduction of consequences related to both the posited existence and also non-existence of a thing.

- (1) If there is a One, it does not exist.
- (2) If there is a one, it is many.
- (3) If there is a one, the others are one(s).
- (4) If there is a One, the Others have nothing to do with it.
- (5) If there is not a one, there is an idea of the One.
- (6) If there is not a One, the one is not in any way whatsoever.
- (7) If there is not a one, there are others.
- (8) If there is not a One, there are no others. There is nothing.

The conclusion would then go, accordingly, that nothing can exist without the existence of the Form of One. Therefore, the Form of One exists.

Since, in the earlier section Parmenides has ended with the question of what is going to happen to philosophy if the Ideas do not exist, it follows that Ideas or Forms have a role to play in the dialogue about the one. Words like "partaking" and "participating in" "being," "sameness," "inequality" etc. give evidence of this view. Secondly, with reference to his own assertion in the *Fragments*,³ the unthinkable and the unspeakable path must be relinquished; therefore, whenever there is a conclusion against any possibility of thought, that path of argument is relinquished for an other. Finally, Parmenides' dialogue must be seen as taking into consideration not only the theory of Forms but also common sense realism, with which is the dialogue in order to show the absurdity of denying the existence of reality as one. The dialogue can be paraphrased as follows (for the sake of brevity part 1.AA. and part 2. AA. of the argument have been left out):

1. A. The consequences of the existence of the one; if the one is:

1. A. 1. The one cannot be many and, therefore, not a whole because a whole is composed of parts making it not one but many.

1. A.2. The one is unlimited since it cannot possess parts such as a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, it is continuous as being is contiguous to being.

1. A.3. The one is formless; for either round or straight form involves many points equidistant or intercepted from the centre.

¹ "Parmenides (dialogue)," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parmenides_\(dialogue\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parmenides_(dialogue))

² Edward F. Little, *The Structure of Plato's Parmenides*, WordPerfect Text, 1989

³ "Parmenides: Fragments & Commentary," <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/presoc/parmends.html>

1. A.4. The one has no location; for being located implies it having parts that touch different places.

1. A.5. The one has no motion; for motion implies change and change makes the one a different other than itself, thus, destroying its unity.

1. A.6. The one cannot come into being in anything; for coming into being in anything involves successive entrance of its parts which the one doesn't possess; therefore, it cannot come into being in anything.

1. A.7. The one is never at rest; for rest implies location and the one cannot be in location as has already been seen.

1. A.8. The one can neither be same with itself or unlike itself or other; for sameness or likeness both are of distinct nature from oneness; to be same with itself would mean to be one and also not one at the same time, which is impossible.

1. A.9. The one is not equal or unequal or older or younger to itself or other; for all such measurements involve partaking of the other form of sameness (with the measures) which the one cannot without becoming two.

1. A.10. The one is not in time; for to be in time means to become older than itself which is impossible if it were one: to be one and at the same time older to itself means also to be younger than itself which is a contradiction.

1. A.11. The one is not (i.e., having the temporal dimensions of 'being' and 'becoming'); for it doesn't participate in time.

In other words, phenomenally speaking, all existence is confined to a 'where' and 'when' (space & time), but since the one does not participate in time; phenomenally, reality as one is not perceived.

1. A.12. The one is neither named, nor expressed, nor opined, nor known, nor perceived; for it is not and, therefore, admits of no attribute or relation.

Conclusion: That the one cannot be known or expressed cannot be true.⁴ The result has been for the unthinkable and the unspeakable; therefore, the argument must be restarted. However, the point of rationality versus phenomenal experience has already been made. The rational nature of singular reality as spaceless, timeless, motionless, but continuous and complete has already been shown. But, it has also been shown that it cannot phenomenally exist since it does not participate in phenomenal time. The argument must then be restarted to show whether phenomenal plurality can exist in case singular reality does not exist.

1. B. The consequences of the existence of the one; if one is:

1. B.1. The one is both a whole and has a part; since for it to be implies partaking of being which is different from the one; therefore, the one is a whole which has being as a part.

1. B.2. Being also always involves one as its part even as one involves being as its part. And so the same principle goes on forever. Thus, one is always disappearing, and becoming two; one involving being which in turn involves one, and so on ad infinitum. Therefore, one, if it has being, turns out to be many.

Phenomenally speaking, the Idea of the One also involves the Idea of the Whole and the Idea of Being. Thus, One is more than one, evidently involving a contradiction.

1. B.3. The one is one and many, whole and parts, having limits and yet unlimited in number; for, since one and being are different, they together are two and individually

⁴ To Parmenides' question, "But can all this be true about the one," Aristoteles answers, "I think not."

one; but nothing that exists can be devoid of being as a whole, therefore the one attaches to every single part of being and thus is divided into parts by being, and, therefore, seen as many and infinite.

Here is implied another phenomenal contradiction which shows that the idea of One as one of the Forms necessitates its own division into the many.

1. B.4. The one is of (phenomenal) necessity both at rest and in motion; for having form and limit it is in itself, thus at rest; and being also in another in order to have being, it is in motion, since to be ever in other implies never to be in the same.

If it really partakes of the other, *viz.* being, it is both in one (at rest) and in the other (in motion) at the same time, which is a contradiction.

1. B.5. The one is same with itself and the others and also other than itself and the others; for it is already seen to be in relation as a part to a whole, or of a whole to a part.

1. B.6. The one partakes of time, since it partakes of being; the one, then, is always becoming older than itself, since it moves forward in time. To become older to itself also implies that it becomes younger to itself.

This shows that the existence of the one cannot be phenomenally possible; since by partaking of time it always is in change and becoming different from itself: thus, ending in the contradiction of being younger and older to itself at the same time, which is impossible. Complexly more, as will be seen below, it must also not become older or younger to itself; this, obviously, in order to remain the one in relation to which it was seen as becoming both older and younger.

1. B.7. The one also neither is nor becomes older or younger than itself or the others; since it only differs from the other by an equal number, the proportion equalized by its becoming younger and older at the same time on the opposite directions and, thus, in relation to the others. However, it must become older and younger than the others and the others than the one, as that which came into being earlier, *viz.* the one, and that which came into being later, *viz.* the others, must continually differ from each other by a different portion.

1. B.8. Thus, opinion and knowledge and perception of the one are had; and there is name and expression for the one.

1. B. 9. The one (particular copy) becomes and is destroyed by taking and giving up being (the Form), which it does at different times, for that is the only way in which it can partake and not partake of the same.

1. B. 10. But becoming involves change and change is impossible either when at rest (for then it is not coming into motion) or in motion (for then it is not coming into rest) or in time (for there cannot be a time in which a thing can be at once neither in motion nor at rest, as in change). Therefore, change must only occur in the moment which lies between rest and motion. Thus, while changing, the one is neither in time, nor at rest nor in motion.

1. B. 11. Thus, when changing from non-being to becoming or being to non-being, it passes between certain states of motion and rest, and neither is nor is not, nor becomes nor is destroyed.

Conclusion: Likewise, in the passage from one to many and from many to one, the one is neither one nor many, neither separated nor aggregated; and in the passage from like to unlike, and from unlike to like, it is neither like nor unlike, neither in a state of assimilation nor of dissimilation; and in the passage from small to great and equal and

back again, it will be neither small nor great, nor equal, nor in a state of increase, or diminution, or equalization. In other words, all change is only possible non-phenomenally, i.e., devoid of all phenomenal relations.

Thus, phenomenally speaking, though the only way unity in diversity of reality could be established is with reference to the theory of the Forms, yet as has been seen the view that the One is one of the Forms involves several contradictions. Consequently, phenomenal individualities (copies of the One) cannot change in phenomenal time and can only come into being or go out of being non-phenomenally, by which argument commonsense realism is not a satisfactory grid for interpreting reality.

1. BB. The consequences for the others if the one is:

1. BB.1. The others are neither one nor many; for if they were many, each part of them would be a part of the whole. But since they do not partake of the one, they are neither one nor many. That is, they are not numerable (countable) as two or three, if entirely deprived of the one.

1. BB. 2. The one and the others are never in the same, they are separated from each other. And so, the others are neither like nor unlike the one, nor is likeness and unlikeness in them; for if they were like and unlike, or had in them likeness and unlikeness, they would have two natures in them opposite to one another, which is a contradictory.

1. BB. 3. The others, being devoid of the one, are thus also devoid of two and three, and odd and even; thus, devoid of all affection, viz., sameness and otherness; motion and rest; becoming and destruction, etc.

1. Conclusion: Therefore, if one is, the one is all things, and also nothing, both in relation to itself and to other things.

2. A. The consequences of the non-existence of the one; if one is not:

2. A.1. The knowledge of one is impossible if one does not exist. The very meaning of the words, 'if one is not,' would not be known.

2. A. 2. The others differ from it, or it could not be described as different from the others.

2. A. 3. Since the one is not, it is not equal to the others; thus, the one partakes of inequality, and in respect of this the others are unequal to it, which in turn implies that the one has greatness and smallness. However, since equality lies between greatness and smallness, the one that is not also partakes of equality.

By this argument and others Parmenides demonstrates that the One cannot be spoken of as non-existent.

2. A. 4. The one can be spoken of so affirmably only if it is; therefore, the one, when it is not, is; that is, it has being: it partakes of the being of not-being to perfectly not be.

2. A. 5. To be implies to change; change implies motion; therefore, the one that is not has motion by which it moves from being to not-being.

2. A. 6. Change and motion imply alteration; therefore, the one that is not is altered when moved and not altered when not moved.

Conclusion: The one that is not, being altered, becomes and is destroyed; and not being altered, neither becomes nor is destroyed; and so the one that is not becomes and is destroyed, and neither becomes nor is destroyed.

2. B. The consequences of the non-existence of the one; if one is not:

2. B. 1. That which is not, by definition, cannot be, or in any way participate in being.

2. B. 2. The one that is not cannot have or lose or assume being in any way; thus, it neither perishes nor becomes.

2. B. 3. Then it is not altered at all; for if it were it would become and be destroyed; this also implies it neither moves nor stands.

2. B. 4. Since it does not partake of being, nothing that is can be attributed to it; therefore, neither smallness, nor greatness, nor equality, can be attributed to it.

Conclusion: The one that is not has no condition of any kind.

2.BB. The consequences for the others if the one is not:

2. BB. 1. The others will neither be one nor many; for if they were many, they would contain (the Form of the) one (for individuality that by multiplicity becomes many), but devoid of the (Form of the) one they will not be many. Thus, the many cannot be conceived to be without the one.

Conclusion: If one (as an absolute Form) is not, then nothing is. Thus, it can be inferred that the one cannot be considered not to exist. If spoken about, then being is predicated of it. If not spoken about, then nothing is spoken. However, if the one exists, then only it can exist; for then it would be continuous and filling all in all and be the one being as well. Therefore, reality or being is one, and nothing else is true.

There, then, seems to be implied here an argument for Parmenidean monism. Parmenides' argument, then may be seen as an attempt to prove that reality is one and not many in the following manner:

1. Reality is one (the reality of one is): neither whole nor parts – both terms don't apply to it.
2. Reality as one is spaceless, timeless, motionless, and formless; for the presence of any other in relation to the one reality would imply a second which the singular one does not allow.
3. If reality were plural (one, being, sameness, and all terms being different from each other),⁵ then self-contradiction would result. The simplest instance is that if the terms one and being are different, one would have to become two by partaking of being in order to be, which is to say that the one is one and the many – a contradiction of terms.
4. If reality is one, then only it exists. Reality as one is all things and nothing in relation to itself and others, i.e., it has no relations. In other words, nothing exists apart from the one reality and the one reality is all things.
5. To say that reality as one does not exist is contradictory. For if reality as the one does not exist, then it exists as possessing the attribute of non-existence, which again leads to the contradiction of attributes: it possessing the attributes of existence and non-existence at the same time. Thus, "the one that is not becomes and is destroyed, and neither becomes nor is destroyed."
6. The non-existence of the one is inconceivable; since, at the moment it is spoken, its existence is implied. In other words, one cannot speak

⁵ According to Plato reality was the Forms which were plural.

about nothing (non-existence) without speaking nothing or not speaking at all.⁶

7. If reality as one did not exist, then nothing can exist; for in the same manner that the many are made of individual ones and cannot exist if one did not exist, so reality cannot be plural without containing the one. But, the implied argument may be here that if reality were one, it can only be one and not plural or else it cannot be absolute in the same manner that goodness or sameness as absolutes cannot be regarded as many. But reality encompasses all and therefore, all plurality of absolutes is dissolved in the absoluteness of reality. Consequently, if singular reality was considered as non-existent then nothing else could be thought to be; however, if singular reality exists, only it and nothing else exists.

Therefore, only reality as one exists.

⁶ This interpretation is based on Parmenides' own argument elsewhere. Cf. "Parmenides: Stage 1," <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/parm1.htm>