

Parmenides

Parmenides, son of Pyres, came from Elea, a Greek foundation in southern Italy. It is reported that

he organized his own country by the best laws, so that each year the citizens still get the officials to swear that they will abide by Parmenides' laws.
(Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1126AB)

A passage in Plato (which will be quoted in the chapter on Zeno) suggests that Parmenides was born in about 515 B.C; but the Greek chroniclers put his birth at 540.

According to Diogenes Laertius,

he was a pupil of Xenophanes but did not follow him. He was also associated (as Sotion said) with Ameinias, son of Diochaites, the Pythagorean, a poor man but of good character. It was rather Ameinias that he followed: when Ameinias died he set up a shrine for him (he himself came from a famous and wealthy family); and he was led to calm by Ameinias and not by Xenophanes.

(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* IX 21)

The story about Ameinias has led scholars to look (in vain) for Pythagorean elements in Parmenides' thought.

Parmenides produced one short work written in ungainly hexameter verse. A substantial proportion of the poem survives. It opened with a fanciful prologue, after which the main body of the work divided into two parts: the first part, the 'Way of Truth', purported to offer a correct account of the nature of reality; the second part, the 'Way of Opinion',

professed a false account and followed the traditional Ionian pattern of works *On Nature*.

The prologue and most of the 'Way of Truth' survive; there are fragments of the 'Way of Opinion'.

Parmenides' poem is a bizarre production. The second half of it is confessedly 'deceitful'; but then why write it? The first half is not intended to be deceitful, but the views it advocates are paradoxical in the extreme. Moreover, *Parmenides* is not a friendly writer: his meaning is never plain at first glance, and several lines of his poem are obscure to the point of unintelligibility. None the less, *Parmenides* had, through the medium of *Plato*, an unrivalled influence on the course of Western philosophy.

The prologue is presented by *Sextus Empiricus*. (The passage continues with some lines which will be quoted a little later; and *Sextus* adds an allegorical interpretation of *Parmenides'* verses which I shall not transcribe.)

Parmenides, [*Xenophanes'*] associate, condemned the sort of reason associated with belief – I mean reason which has weak opinions – but supposed that the sort of reason associated with knowledge, or infallible reason, was a criterion of truth (for he also gave up trust in the senses). Thus at the beginning of *On Nature* he writes in this way:

The mares that carry me as far as my heart may reach
conveyed me: they had come and set me on the celebrated
road
of the goddess which carries a man of knowledge †ever
straight ahead†.

There was I being carried; for there the wise mares were
carrying me,
straining at the chariot, and young girls were leading the
way.

The axle in the axle-box shrilled in its socket,
blazing – for it was driven on by two whirling
wheels on either side – while they hastened to convey me,
the girls, daughters of the sun, who had left the house of
Night

for the light and pushed back with their hands the veils
from their heads.

Here are the gates of the paths of Night and Day,
and a lintel and a stone threshold enclose them.

They themselves, high in the air, are filled by great doors,
and punitive Justice holds the keys which fit them.

Her the girls appeased with soft words,
subtly persuading her to push back for them the bolted bar
swiftly from the gates. They flew back

and made a yawning gap between the doors,
swinging in turn in their sockets the bronze pivots,
fitted with pegs and pins. And through them
the girls held the chariot and mares straight on the
highway.

And the goddess graciously received me and took
my right hand in hers; and she spoke thus and addressed
me:

'Young man, companion to the immortal charioteers,
who come to my house with the mares who carry you,
welcome. For no evil fate sent you to travel

this road (for indeed it is far from the tread of men)
but Right and Justice. You must learn all things,

both the unwavering heart of persuasive truth
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true
warranty.' [28 B 1.1–30]

(*Sextus Empiricus*, *Against the Mathematicians* VII 111)

Simplicius adds two further lines which appear to have completed the
prologue:

Parmenides says:

You must learn all things,
both the unwavering heart of well-rounded truth
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true
warranty.

But nevertheless you will learn these things too – how what they believe would really have to be, forever traversing everything.

[B 1.28–32]
(Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 557.24–558.2)

The beginning of the 'Way of Truth' – or at any rate, the earliest of its surviving lines – is preserved by Proclus:

Plato explicitly distinguishes different types of reason and knowledge, corresponding to the different objects of knowledge. Parmenides too, though his poetry makes him obscure, nevertheless points in this direction when he says:

... both the unwavering heart of well-lit truth
and the opinions of mortals in which there is no true
warranty [B 1.29–30];

and again:

But come, I will tell you – preserve the account when you
hear it –
the only roads of enquiry there are to think of:
one, that it is and that it cannot not be,
is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it);
another, that it is not and that it must not be –
this I say to you is a trail of utter ignorance. [B 2.1–6]

And:

For you could not recognize that which is not (for that is
not to be done),
nor could you mention it; ... [B 2.7–8]
(Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* I 345.11–27)

The half-line at the end of B 2 can be completed, both metrically and philosophically, by a half-line preserved elsewhere:

Parmenides had already touched on this doctrine inasmuch as he identified being and thought and did not locate being in sensible objects. He said:

... for the same things can be thought of and can be. [B.3]
(Plotinus, *Enneads* V i 8.14–18)

The next surviving lines of the poem can be patched together from two separate passages in Simplicius. One of them, which assembles a few short quotations from Parmenides, includes these sentences:

That there is one and the same account of everything, the account of what is, Parmenides states in the following words:

What can be said and be thought of must be; for it can be,
and nothing cannot. [B 6.1–2]

Now if whatever anyone says or thinks is being, then there will be one account of everything, the account of what is.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 86.25–30)

The second passage begins by quoting B 2.3–8, and continues thus:

That contradictories are not true together [Parmenides] states in the verses in which he finds fault with those who identify opposites. For having said:

for it can be,
and nothing cannot. This I bid you ponder.

For from this first road of inquiry <I bar> you [B 6.1–3],
<he adds:>

and then from the road along which mortals who know
nothing

wander, two-headed; for impotence in their
breasts guides their erring thought. And they are carried along
both deaf and blind, bewildered, undiscerning crowds,
by whom to be and not to be are deemed the same
and not the same; and the path of all turns back on itself.

[B 6.4–9]
(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 117.2–13)

Next, a continuous passage of some sixty-six verses emerges from three different texts. The first two lines are quoted by Plato:

When we were boys, my boy, the great Parmenides would testify against [the view that what is not is] from beginning to end, constantly saying both in prose and in verse that:

Never will this prevail, he says: that what is not is —
bar your thought from this road of inquiry. [B 7.1-2]

(Plato, *Sophist* 237A)

The quotation is continued by Sextus (though Sextus himself cites the lines as though they were continuous with B 1.30):

Bar your thought from this road of inquiry,
and do not let habit, full of experience, force you along this
road,
directing unobservant eye and echoing ear
and tongue; but judge by reason the battle-hardened proof
which I have spoken. One story, one road, now
is left. [B 7.2-8.2]

(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* VII 111)

The quotation in Sextus is in turn continued by Simplicius:

And not to seem niggardly, let me append to this commentary Parmenides' verses (they are not many) on the one being, both to justify what I have said about the matter and because of the rarity of Parmenides' treatise. After he has done away with what is not, he writes:

One story, one road, now
is left: that it is. And on this there are signs
aplenty that, being, it is ungenerated and indestructible,
whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete.
Nor was it ever, nor will it be, since now it is, all together,
one, continuous. For what generation will you seek for it?
How, whence, did it grow? That it came from what is not I
shall not allow

you to say or think — for it is not sayable or thinkable
that it is not. And what need would have impelled it,

later or earlier, to spring up — if it began from nothing?
Thus it must either altogether be or not be.

Nor from what is will the strength of warranty ever permit it
to come to be anything apart from itself. For that reason
Justice has not relaxed her fetters and set it free to come
into being or to perish,

but she holds it. Decision in these matters lies in this:

it is or it is not. But it has been decided, as is necessary,
to leave the one road unthought and unnamed (for it is not
a true

road), and to take the other as being and being genuine.

How might what is then perish? How might it have come
into being?

For if it came into being it is not, nor if it is ever going to
be.

Thus generation is quenched and perishing unheard of.

Nor is it divided, since it all alike is —

neither more here (which would bar it from cohering)
nor less; but it is all full of what is.

Hence it is all continuous; for what is approaches what is.

And unmoving in the limits of great chains

it is beginningless and ceaseless, since generation and
destruction

have been banished far away, and true warranty has pushed
them back.

The same and remaining in the same state, it lies by itself,
and thus remains there fixedly. For powerful necessity
holds it enchained in a limit which bars it on all sides,
because it is right that what is be not incomplete.

For it is not lacking — if it were it would lack everything.

Thinking and a thought that it is are the same thing.

For without what is, in which it has been expressed,

you will not find thinking. For nothing else either is or will
be

apart from what is, since fate has fettered it

to be whole and unmoving. Hence all things are a name

which mortals have stored up, trusting them to be true – coming into being and perishing, being and not being, and changing place and altering bright colour.

And since there is a last limit, it is completed on all sides, like the bulk of a well-rounded ball, equal in every way from the middle. For it must not be at all greater

or smaller here or there.

For neither is there anything which is not, which might stop it from reaching

its like, nor anything which is in such a way that it might be more here or less there than what is, since it all is, inviolate. Therefore, equal to itself on all sides, it lies uniformly in its limits.

Here I cease for you the warranted account and thought about the truth. Henceforward learn mortal opinions, listening to the deceitful arrangement of my words.

[B 8.1–52]

These, then, are Parmenides' verses about the One. After them he discusses the objects of opinion, postulating for them different principles. (Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 144.25–146.27)

Another short fragment has been thought to come from the 'Way of Truth', though it is hard to see where the lines should be inserted.

Parmenides too, in his poem, riddles about Hope in these words:

Look at things which, though absent, are yet present firmly to thought;
for you will not cut off what is from holding to what is,
neither scattering everywhere in every way about the world nor coming together. [B 4]

For one who hopes, like one with faith, sees in thought the objects of thought and the things to come. (Clement, *Miscellanies* V iii 15.5)

There is also a stray verse, the middle of the three quoted in the following extract:

Parmenides, as I have said before, recognized being itself – I mean, that which transcends everything and is the highest of all beings, and in which being was primarily manifested; but he was not unaware of the plurality of intelligible objects. For it is he who says:

For what is approaches what is [B 8.25],
and again:

it is indifferent to me

whence I begin, for there again shall I return [B 5],
and elsewhere:

equal from the middle [B 8.43]

– in all these passages he shows that he takes there to be a plurality of intelligible objects.

(Proclus, *Commentary on the Parmenides* 708.7–22)

Now for the 'Way of Opinion', the first lines of which are preserved by Simplicius:

Having completed his account of the intelligible realm, Parmenides continues thus . . . :

Here I cease for you the warranted account and thought about the truth. Henceforward learn mortal opinions, listening to the deceitful arrangement of my words.

For they determined in their minds to name two forms, one of which they should not – and that is where they have erred.

And they distinguished them as opposite in kind and set up signs for them separately from one another: here the ethereal fire of flame,

gentle, very light, in every direction the same as itself and not the same as the other; and that too, by itself, opposite – unknowing night, dense in kind and heavy. All this plausible arrangement I recount to you so that no mortal may ever outstrip you in knowledge.

[B 8.50–61]

Now he calls this account a matter of opinion and deceitful not because it is simply false but because it has fallen from the intelligible world of truth into the perceptible realm of appearance and seeming. A little later, having discussed the two elements, he continues by mentioning the productive cause:

The narrower [bands] were filled with unmixed fire, and the next with night (but they emit a portion of flame), and in the middle of them, a goddess who governs all things. [B 12.1-3]

He says that she is actually the cause of the gods — **first of all the gods she devised Love** [B 13] etc. He says that she sends souls sometimes from light to darkness and sometimes in the other direction.

I am compelled to write at length on this point because people now are largely ignorant of the ancient writings.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 38.29-39.21)

Simplicius quotes the beginning of the 'Way of Opinion' in another passage:

In his remarks about opinion [Parmenides] makes hot and cold into principles, and he calls them fire and earth, and light and night or darkness. After his remarks about truth he says: . . . ([B 8.53-59]). And again a little later:

And since all things have been named light and night and their powers assigned to these things and to those, everything is full alike of light and invisible night, both equal, since nothing falls to neither. [B 9]

If nothing falls to neither, it is clear that they are both principles and that they are contraries.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 179.31-180.13)

Elsewhere Simplicius cites B 8.53-59 a third time; and he adds:

In the middle of the verses a short passage in prose is inserted which purports to come from Parmenides himself. It goes like this:

To this are assigned the rare and the hot and brightness and the soft and the light; and to the dense are given the names of cold and gloom and hard and heavy; for these have been separated off, each group in its own way.

Thus he clearly assumes two opposing elements.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 31.3-7)

(No doubt Simplicius is right to suggest scepticism about the authenticity of the prose fragment.)

Two further verses can be added to B 12:

Parmenides clearly speaks of a productive cause not only for bodies in the realm of becoming but also for incorporeal items:

The next with night (but they emit a portion of flame), and in the middle of them, a goddess who governs all things.

For everywhere she rules over hateful birth and union, sending female to unite with male and again conversely male with female. [B 12]

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 31.10-17)

The 'bands' of B 12 are described in more detail in a late report:

Parmenides says that there are bands encircling one another, one made of the rare, one of the dense, and others between them mixed from light and darkness. What surrounds them all, like a wall, is solid, and beneath it is a fiery band; so too is what is in the middle of them all, around which again is a fiery band. Of the mixed bands the middlemost is cause of all motion and coming into being for all of them: this he calls the governing goddess and the keyholder, and Justice and Necessity. Air is a secretion of the earth, vaporized by its more violent compression. The sun and the circle of the Milky Way are the breath of fire. The moon is a mixture of both — air and fire. The ether surrounds them, above everything; under it is arranged the fiery part we call the sky, and under that the regions around the earth.

(Stobaeus, *Anthology* I xxii 1a)

There are further fragments of an astronomical nature:

[Parmenides and Melissus] clearly refer to the generation of perceptible objects – Melissus when he says that the cold becomes hot etc., and from water earth and stone come about [cf. 30 B 8]; and Parmenides, at the beginning of his remarks about perceptible objects, says that he will tell

**how earth and sun and moon
and ether common to all and the Milky Way and outermost
Olympus**

**and the hot force of the stars were moved
to come into being.** [B 11]

And he describes the generation of things that come into being and perish, right down to the parts of animals.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 559.18–27)

Once he has attained to the true teaching [of Christ], let who will listen to the promises of Parmenides of Elea:

**You will know the nature of the ether and all the signs in
the ether**

**and the bright sun's pure
torch and its destructive deeds and whence they came into
being.**

**and you will learn the revolving deeds of the round-eyed moon
and its nature, and you will know too the sky which**

encloses them –

**whence it sprang and how necessity led and fettered it
to hold the limits of the stars.** [B 10]

(Clement, *Miscellanies* V xiv 138.1)

Someone who denies that red-hot iron is fire or that the moon is a sun – thinking it rather, with Parmenides,

night-shining, wandering about the earth, another's light
[B 14]

– does not abolish the use of iron or the nature of the moon.

(Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1116A)

As a star or a light or a divine and celestial body, [the moon], I fear, is shapeless and indecent and disgraces her noble name – if indeed of the things in the heavens, numerous as they are, she alone goes about in need of another's light, as Parmenides says,

always gazing at the rays of the sun. [B 15]
(Plutarch, *On the Face in the Moon* 929AB)

Parmenides in his poem called the earth **water-rooted**. [B 15a]

(Scholia to St Basil, *Sermons on the Six Days of Creation* I 8)

Two brief reports are worth adding:

[Parmenides] was the first to declare that the earth is spherical and lies in the middle [of the universe].

(Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* IX 21)

Parmenides places the Morning Star first in order in the ether (he thinks that it is the same as the Evening Star). After it comes the sun, beneath which are the stars in the fiery region which he calls the sky.

(Stobaeus, *Anthology* I xxiv 2e)

Next, two fragments on biology, the second of which survives only in a Latin translation.

Others of the older generation have also said that the male is conceived in the right-hand part of the womb. Parmenides put it like this:

In the right-hand parts boys, in the left girls. [B 17]

(Galen, *Commentary on Hippocrates' Epidemics* Book 6
XVIIA 1002)

In the books he wrote *On Nature* Parmenides says that as the result of conception men are sometimes born soft or smooth. Since he wrote in Greek verse, I too shall put the point in verses – I have composed some Latin verses, as close to his as I could, so as to avoid a mixture of languages:

When a woman and a man together mix the seeds of Love,
then a formative power from the different blood in the
veins,

if it preserves proportion, fashions well-built bodies.
But if when the seed is mixed, the powers conflict
and do not produce one power in the mixed body, then
cruelly

will they trouble the nascent sex with a twin seed. [B 18]

(Caelius Aurelianus, *Chronic Diseases* IV ix 134-135)

Theophrastus gives an account of Parmenides' ideas about thought.

Parmenides determined nothing at all [about perception] – only that there are two elements and that knowledge depends on the dominant one. For if the hot or the cold dominates, thought becomes different – better and purer when it depends on the hot, though this too requires a certain proportionality.

For as on each occasion, he says, is the blending of the
wandering limbs,

so stands thought for men; for it is the same
thing which thinks – the nature of the limbs –

for each and every man; for what exceeds is thought. [B 16]

For he speaks of perceiving and thinking as the same thing – that is why memory and forgetfulness derive from these things through their blending. But he said nothing further about what happens if they are equal in the mixture – whether or not it will be possible to think, and what the disposition will be. That he makes perception too occur by opposites in their own right is clear from the passage where he says that corpses do not perceive light or heat or sound because of the deficiency of fire, but that they do perceive their opposites – cold and silence and so on. And in general, everything which exists has some knowledge.

(Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 3-4)

Finally, Simplicius preserves three lines from the end of Parmenides' poem:

Having described the world of perception, he adds:

Thus, according to opinion, these things sprang up and now
are,

and then, hereafter, having been nourished they will cease
to be:

and on them men have set names, a mark for each. [B 19]

(Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 558.8-11)