

Parmenides and Heraclitus on the Problem of Change

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Ancient philosophy reached a major turning point when it moved from observation to logical argument. Parmenides' argument against change is the first account of this development. He proposes a means of understanding ultimate reality which he calls the Way of Truth. It posits that if change is defined as moving between states of what-is and what is not, what is not cannot exist. Specifically, it cannot be spoken nor thought about.¹ Scholars refer to this argument as Parmenides' Identity Thesis.² This leads to the conclusion that if what is not is without attributes, 'something' cannot come out of 'nothing', therefore change can never arise.³ By comparison, Heraclitus supported the idea of constant change. His belief that states are continuously alternating is known as the theory of flux. Constant change or 'flux' is a necessary component of the whole cosmos. The famous flowing river example, "you could not step twice into the same river" for it is not the same

1 G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263–85.

2 Mark Sentesy, "Being, Identity, and Difference in Heraclitus and Parmenides," *Ancient Philosophy Today* 8 (2022).

3 Robin Waterfield, trans., *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 166.

river and one is not the same person, illustrates this point. ⁴Parmenides' denial of non-being renders change logically impossible but at the cost of contradicting experience, whereas Heraclitus' doctrine of flux reconciles unity and change through the Logos; therefore, Heraclitus offers the more philosophically viable account of reality.

Change can be defined as the transition of a thing from being X to not being X. This requires that what-is becomes what-is-not in some respect. It is precisely this transition that Parmenides denies as unintelligible, and which Heraclitus attempts to preserve through the structure of opposites.

Parmenides' argument against change begins with the two ways of enquiry, the way of Truth and the way of Opinion (Doxa).⁵ The way of Truth is stated as “what-is is, but nothing it is not”, which implies the discovery of truth is concerned with only what-is.⁶ What-is (eoti) is simply all there is, was, and will be.⁷ It encompasses anything possessing observable attributes. The way of Opinion (Doxa) is “what-is is and what is not is not”, which implies dualistic thinking.⁸ However, problems emerge when attempting to identify what-is not, because Parmenides argues that what-is not cannot be thought of nor explained because it has no attributes.⁹ In other words, we cannot say that what is not *is* something because that would imply having properties. Change requires that what-is becomes what-is-not in some respect, a transition Parmenides rejects as impossible. This leads Parmenides to the conclusion that reality is permanent and change is illusory.

Some scholars argue that Parmenides is ultimately concerned with the epistemological claim that singularity is the only way to understand the world, rather than the ontological claim that only singularity exists.¹⁰ Parmenides termed this reality the One – a singular indivisible sphere, equidistant on all sides, not perceivable by the senses. If rational enquiry into being is the only

4 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 182.

5 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 263–85.

6 John Palmer, "Parmenides," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

7 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 263–85.

8 Palmer, "Parmenides."

9 Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, p. 124

10 Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, p. 124

means to understanding true reality, sense perception must be regarded as inferior, as seen in the way of Opinion. Even the Goddess in Parmenides' Poem labels those who want both being and non-being to be true simultaneously as "two-headed mortals", because they are fooled by their senses into contradicting the Identity Thesis.¹¹ However, despite it being illusory, the Goddess presents mortal cosmology to Parmenides so he can "lead thinkers off the false road", towards the truth.¹² She goes on to explain what-is as a sphere, and what-is not is quite literally beyond the sphere (of reality), therefore inexplicable.¹³

Understanding Parmenides' true philosophical position is difficult because his work only survives in fragments. Nevertheless, the strict monist, logical dialectic and meta-principle interpretations provide insight into his thinking. First, Parmenides' view of reality as a unified body is deduced from the idea that once you claim something is, you cannot claim it was or will be. This confines the definition of what-is to the unchanging singularity and nothing else. Parmenides rejects Milesian archê monism and therefore he can be classified as a strict monist.¹⁴ To think, we must think of *something*. Thoughts often refer to things outside themselves and we can think of multiple things in one thought.¹⁵ Thought must refer to something that exists, at least conceptually, but what does not exist (non-being) has no reference point for thinking. In other words, a non-thing is indefinable therefore unfathomable. Logically then, if a word or idea means something, it cannot mean nothing, therefore it must exist. This logical dialectical interpretation of Parmenides results in his argument being reduced to "non-being is not a valid concept". Non-being need not be understood as pure negation. Rather, it may mean "other than" or "different from" being. For example saying something is not beautiful, is not to say it is ugly, because it does not directly negate attributes, it

11 Palmer, "Parmenides."

12 Palmer, "Parmenides."

13 Jonathan Barnes, ed. and trans., *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 77.

14 Palmer, "Parmenides."

15 Palmer, "Parmenides."

merely implies difference. The non-being Parmenides refers to is therefore, “what is other than being” or difference itself, rather than the negation of existence.¹⁶

Heraclitus’ core doctrine is that everything is in constant change, this is the theory of flux. Flux is not merely constant but constitutive of being itself. In the same way the human organism is one whole process made of smaller changing parts, everything in its changing state constitutes the entire universe. Heraclitus says “you cannot step into the same river twice”, because not only is the water moving, but the one stepping into the river is no longer the same person.¹⁷ If the whole cosmos is in constant flux, the Logos is the unchanging principle behind all cosmic order. The Logos contains the coincidence of opposite pairs, such as alive-dead, awake-asleep etc. Opposite pairs exist on a binary continuum whereby properties become their inverse, for example night becomes day, then day becomes night.¹⁸ Heraclitus believed there must be ‘strife’ in opposites for the Logos to maintain balance.¹⁹ War is a fitting example, as strife between opposite forces results in significant change. Fire represents the process of transformation itself, symbolizing the continual exchange between opposites governed by the Logos. In the context of Heraclitus, fire may be a symbolic representation of change rather than a strictly physical phenomena. Change, then, is argued to exist as the sole constant of reality because all things are in flux and opposites are at war.

Heraclitus regards every opposite pair as interconnected with all other pairs. It is obvious that day essentially *goes-with* night. But less obviously, the separate entities within the pairs entail a plurality distinct from unity. After all, night is apart from day. When Heraclitus says “[out of] all things there comes a unity and out of unity all things” it is implied that unity is paired with plurality and is itself an opposite pair.²⁰ This idea is also expressed as “one forms the many, but many also forms the one”.

²¹ What Heraclitus calls unity, then, is the chain of opposite pairs in succession, or the totality of

16 Sentesy, "Being, Identity, and Difference in Heraclitus and Parmenides,"

17 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 182.

18 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 182.

19 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 182.

20 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 182.

21 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 182.

their coexistence. Heraclitus viewed the concepts as mutually generative, this allows Heraclitus to be interpreted as reconciling monism and pluralism, rather than strictly endorsing either. The change in state between unity and plurality is itself its own phenomenon and thus, monism is inseparable from pluralism.²²

Heraclitus and Parmenides offer fundamentally incompatible solutions to the problem of change, despite sharing a commitment to rational explanation. Both disregard Anaximander's view that opposite forces existed in apeiron prior to separation. Parmenides said this is a false unity as opposites cannot 'exist' in what is not and thus, assuming Parmenidean logic, cannot come into existence. Anaximandian change is cyclic, rhythmic, yet a cosmic "penalty (*dikē*)" needed to recompense "injustice (*adikia*) in accordance with the ordering of time".²³ Heraclitus disputed this because to him cosmic strife is a necessary constant, not an injustice to be reprimanded.²⁴

Furthermore, neither thinker looked favourably upon Pythagoreanism, despite Parmenides being native to Elea. The Pythagoreans believed in abstractions such as the void, however, Parmenides explicitly rejects this as what is not.²⁵ Heraclitus describes Pythagoras as a "collector of facts rather than a possessor of true wisdom", implying factual knowledge is separate from an understanding of the Logos.²⁶ Heraclitus also alludes to a rationalistic position as he is skeptical about obtaining truth from the senses, saying it requires "judicious judgment."²⁷ This predilection for Rationalism is shared with Parmenides, as the way of Truth necessitates a strictly rational enquiry into what-is.

Convergence on the belief in a universal unity is also observed across both philosophers.

Parmenides identifies a universal unity he calls 'the One'. While Heraclitus disagrees on its permanence, he also sought a unified reality under the Logos.

22 Sentesy, "Being, Identity, and Difference in Heraclitus and Parmenides,"

23 "Presocratic Philosophy," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

24 Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

25 Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 263–85

26 Graham, "Heraclitus."

27 Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, fragment reference F24–25

Parmenides and Heraclitus differ fundamentally on the problem of change. Parmenides advocates for a singular, invisible and timeless “One” reality.²⁸ Yet Heraclitus advocates for an impermanent reality, in constant flux, governed by the Logos. Additionally, there is a fundamental disagreement on the properties of a metaphysical unity. Heraclitus’ unity exists only in relation to plurality as its opposite. Unity and plurality, as part of the coincidence of opposites, are constantly changing processes of the Logos. But Parmenides rejects plurality on the premise that nothing can be said of non-being, including even that it is not, meaning difference and opposition cannot be associated with non-being. As a consequence, he denies coincidence or change in unity.²⁹

The problem of change debate marked a significant shift in Greek philosophy toward questions concerning the nature of reality itself. Previous Milesian thinking was overly concerned with *what* reality is made of (the archê) and *how* its appearance in the world is brought about.³⁰ Heraclitus extended this by positing fire as the archê and developing an argument for universal change. Parmenides responded by denying the existence of change entirely, while providing a framework for arguments to be challenged, redeveloped and analysed through logical reasoning. This transformed Western philosophy from a field preoccupied with mere observation and shifted its direction towards structured, logical arguments. The influence of this debate extends beyond the Pre-socratics, heavily shaping the work of Plato and Aristotle, and remaining a recurring theme in modern philosophical conversations.

Parmenides' argument achieves logical consistency only by eliminating the very phenomenon it seeks to explain. By denying the intelligibility of non-being, he removes the possibility of change entirely, but this comes at the cost of contradicting the evident plurality and motion of experience. Heraclitus, by contrast, preserves both unity and change by re-conceiving stability as a structured process rather than a static state. Through the Logos, change is not irrational but ordered, allowing

28 Waterfield, *The First Philosophers*, 124

29 Senteny, “Being, Identity, and Difference in Heraclitus and Parmenides.”

30 Philip Wheelwright, *Heraclitus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 39.

opposites to coexist within a coherent system. In this sense, Heraclitus resolves the problem of change without collapsing into the rigid monism that undermines Parmenides' account.

The conflict between Parmenides and Heraclitus ultimately turns on whether change can be made intelligible without invoking non-being. Parmenides argues that nothing can come from non-being, this is known formally as the identity thesis. If non-being is a philosophical non-starter, being (what-is) is all there is, thus reality is a timeless and inseparable singularity which Parmenides termed 'the One'. With this understanding, Parmenides can be categorised as a monist, although there are diverse scholarly interpretations. Heraclitus' philosophical position is harder to categorise. He disputes notions of an intelligible view of the world associated with permanence, and appears to be arguing that "intelligibility is to be found only in what is multiple and changing — only in strife itself." ³¹ The coincidence of opposites under the force of the Logos is the catalyst for universal motion. He agrees reality is unified, but simultaneously recognises its plurality, as one unity-plurality opposite pair. Opposite forces, or the 'strife' between them, is what generated flux and it is physically represented by the Heraclitean archê *fire*. Although its meaning may be purely symbolic.³² While the true positions of both philosophers are ultimately unknowable due to the fragmentary nature of their works, they converge in their commitment to rational inquiry and their search for a unified account of reality. Heraclitus' account succeeds because it preserves intelligibility without eliminating the reality of change, whereas Parmenides' system achieves logical consistency only by denying the world of experience.

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³¹ *Wheelwright, Heraclitus, 10.*

³² *Wheelwright, Heraclitus, 37.*

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