

Parmenides (On Reality)

Born around 515 BC., Parmenides, was a citizen of Elea, a small town in the south of Italy. His poem "On Reality" was probably comprised of three parts of which we have only the first two largely intact.

The first part takes the form of an allegorical poem in which we see the poet, impelled by a strong desire, travel toward the domain of the Goddess, in a chariot pulled by powerful runners. After unveiling their faces for him, the Maidens of light guide him to the "threshold where the roads of Night and of Day converge", and he is allowed to cross it as a result of their intercession. He is then welcomed with benevolence by the Goddess who takes his right hand in hers and commences her teaching.

The second part, translated here, is the metaphysical section and contains the teaching of the truth.

The third, which is fragmentary, is the physical part. It represents ignorant public opinion according to which reality is the physical universe which came into existence in the past, exists today, and is destined to disappear one day.

Now then, I will instruct you; hear what I say:

Two paths are open to investigation.

The first says: being is and non-being is not.

It is the path of certainty, because it follows the truth.

The other says: being is not, therefore non-being is.

This misdirected path, I tell you, cannot lead to a sound conviction

For, if this statement were true, it would not be possible for you to conceive of non-being, nor to name it.

Speaking and thinking necessarily arise from being, because being is.

And non-being is not. I invite you to reflect deeply on this point,

And to move away, in your search, from that other path

As from the one traveled by those ignorant mortals

Who are the men of two minds: the uncertainty which resides in their hearts

Misleads their wavering reason. They are swept along,

Deaf and blind, benighted, the masses without discernment

Who pretend that being and non-being are simultaneously identical

And different, they for whom, for any statement, the opposite is equally true.

No power will ever bring non-being into existence.
So direct your thinking away from this path of exploration.
May habit, so often resumed, not force you to return to it,
With eyes blinded, ears filled with noise
And mouth with words, and may your intelligence alone resolve this contentious issue.

Only one path remains for us to pursue:
Being is. And countless signs prove
That being is free from birth and death
Because it is complete, immutable and eternal.
It never was, it never will be, because it is completely whole in the now,
One, endless. What beginning, indeed, should we attribute to it?
Whence would it evolve? Whither?
I will not allow you to say or to think that it comes from nothingness,
Nor that being is not. What exigency would have brought it forth
Later or earlier, from non-being?
Thus, it can only be, absolutely, or not at all.
Our firm innermost conviction will never admit
That something can spring forth from nothingness.
In this way the goddess of Justice, forbidding birth and death,
Preserves without respite the existence of being. Whereas the question was to resolve
Whether being is or is not. We must therefore decide to abandon as false
The second hypothesis, the path which can neither be thought nor formulated,
And to hold to the first, which is the path of the truth.
How could what is, one day cease to be? How could it have, one day, come to be?
What is born, is not, neither what is to be born.
Thus dies birth and thus dies death.
Within being there remain no differences because it is completely identical to itself.
There is not, here, something more that comes to break continuity
Neither, there, something less: but everything is filled with being.
Thus it is all continuous: being adjoined to being.
On the other hand, maintained motionless by powerful links,
It is without beginning and without end, since birth and death
Have been rejected as contrary to our intuition of truth.
Remaining itself, existing within itself, supported by itself,
Thus, immutable, it remains in the same place because the powerful necessity,
Hemming it in from all sides, keeps it firmly unified.
That is why it is not permitted that being be unfinished,
Because there is nothing missing in it; unfinished, it would be missing everything!
Thought is identical to being, and so it is for the object to which thought refers;
Thus there is nothing, and there will never be anything, outside of being
Which Destiny compels to an eternal bliss. Thus,
To be born and to die, to be or not to be,

To change place or appearance,
All of these events are but names superimposed by man's ignorance.
Being the ultimate, it is everywhere complete.
Just as an harmoniously round sphere
Departs equally at all points from its center.
Nothing can be added to it here nor taken away from it there.
What is not, cannot interrupt it's homogeneous existence.
What is, cannot possess it more or less. Out of all reach,
Everywhere identical to itself, beyond all limits, it is.