



The Presocratics 3: The Eleatics

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1. XENOPHANES

Xenophanes was a native of Colophon, one of the Ionian cities of Asia Minor, but having been forced at the age of twenty-five to leave his native city owing to some political revolution, he wandered to various cities of Greece, and ultimately to Zancle and Catana, Ionian colonies in Sicily, and thence to Elea or Velia, a Greek city on the coast of Italy. This city had, like Miletus, reached a high pitch of commercial prosperity, and like it also became a centre of philosophic teaching. For there Xenophanes remained and founded a school, so that he and his successors received the name of Eleatics. His date is uncertain; but he seems to have been contemporary with Anaximander and Pythagoras, and to have had some knowledge of the doctrine of both. He wrote in various poetic measures, using against the poets, and especially against Homer and Hesiod, their own weapons, to denounce their anthropomorphic theology. If oxen or lions had hands, he said, they would have fashioned gods after their likeness which would have been as authentic as Homer's. As against these poets, and the popular mythology, he insisted that God must be one, eternal, incorporeal, without beginning or ending. As Aristotle strikingly expresses it, "He looked forth over the whole heavens and said that God is one, that that which is one is God." The favourite antitheses of his time, the definite and the indefinite, movable and immovable, change-producing and by change produced—these and such as these, he maintained, were inapplicable to the eternally and essentially existent. In this there was no partition of organs or faculties, no variation or shadow of turning; the Eternal Being was like a sphere, everywhere equal; everywhere self-identical.

His proof of this was a logical one; the absolutely self-existent could not be thought in conjunction with attributes which either admitted any external influencing Him, or any external influenced by Him. The prevailing dualism he considered to be, as an ultimate theory of the universe, unthinkable and therefore false. Outside the Self-existent there could be no second self-existent, otherwise each would be conditioned by the existence of the other, and the Self-existent would be gone. Anything different from the Self-existent must be of the non-existent, *i.e.* must be nothing.

One can easily see in these discussions some adumbration of many theological or metaphysical difficulties of later times, as of the origin of evil, of freewill in man, of the relation of the created world to its Creator. If these problems cannot be said to be solved yet, we need not be surprised that Xenophanes did not solve them. He was content to emphasise that which seemed to him to be necessary and true, that God was God, and not either a partner with, or a function of, matter.

At the same time he recognised a world of phenomena, or, as he expressed it, a world of guesswork or opinion ((Greek) *doxa*). As to the origin of things within this sphere he was ready enough to borrow [90] from the speculations of his predecessors. Earth and water are the sources from which we spring; and he imagined a time when there was neither sea nor land,

but an all-pervading slough and slime; nay, many such periods of inundation and emergence had been, hence the sea-shells on the tops of mountains and the fossils in the rocks. Air and fire also as agencies of change are sometimes referred to by him; anticipations in fact are visible of the fourfold classification of the elements which was formally made by some of his successors.

2. PARMENIDES

The pupil and successor of Xenophanes was PARMENIDES, a native of Elea. In a celebrated dialogue of Plato bearing the name of this philosopher he is described as visiting Socrates when the latter was very young. "He was then already advanced in years, very hoary, yet noble to look upon, in years some sixty and five." Socrates was born about 479 B.C. The birth of Parmenides might therefore, if this indication be authentic, be about 520. He was of a wealthy and noble family, and able therefore to devote himself to a learned leisure. Like his master he expounded his views in verse, and fragments of his poem of considerable length and importance have been preserved. The title of the work was *Peri Phueos—Of Nature*.

The exordium of the poem is one of some grandeur. The poet describes himself as soaring aloft to the sanctuary of wisdom where it is set in highest aether, the daughters of the Sun being his guides; under whose leading having traversed the path of perpetual day and at length attained the temple of the goddess, he from her lips received instruction in the eternal verities, and had shown to him the deceptive guesses of mortals. "'Tis for thee," she says, "to hear of both,—to have disclosed to thee on the one hand the sure heart of convincing verity, on the other hand the guesses of mortals wherein is no ascertainment. Nevertheless thou shalt learn of these also, that having gone through them all thou may'st see by what unsureness of path must he go who goeth the way of opinion. From such a way of searching restrain thou thy thought, and let not the much-experimenting habit force thee along the path wherein thou must use thine eye, yet being sightless, and the ear with its clamorous buzzings, and the chattering tongue. 'Tis by Reason that thou must in lengthened trial judge what I shall say to thee."

Thus, like Xenophanes, Parmenides draws a deep division between the world of reason and the world of sensation, between probative argument and the guess-work of sense-impressions. The former is the world of Being, the world of that which truly is, self-existent, uncreated, unending, unmoved, unchanging, ever self-poised and self-sufficient, like a sphere. Knowledge is of this, and of this only, and as such, knowledge is identical with its object; for outside this known reality there is nothing. In other words, Knowledge can only be of that which is, and that which is alone can know. All things which mortals have imagined to be realities are but words; as of the birth and death of things, of things which were and have ceased to be, of here and there, of now and then.

It is obvious enough that in all this, and in much more to the same effect reiterated throughout the poem, we have no more than a statement, in various forms of negation, of the inconceivability by human reason of that passage from *being* as such, to that world of phenomena which is now, but was not before, {36} and will cease to be,—from *being* to *becoming*, from eternity to time, from the infinite to the finite (or, as Parmenides preferred to call it, from the perfect to the imperfect, the definite to the indefinite). In all this Parmenides was not contradicting such observed facts as generation, or motion, or life, or death; he was talking of a world which has nothing to do with observation; he was endeavouring to grasp what was assumed or necessarily implied as a prior condition of observation, or of a world to observe.

What he and his school seem to have felt was that there was a danger in all this talk of water or air or other material symbol, or even of the *indefinite* or *characterless* as the original of all,—the danger, namely, that one should lose sight of the idea of law, of rationality, of eternal self-centred force, and so be carried away by some vision of a gradual process of evolution

from mere emptiness to fulness of being. Such a position would be not dissimilar to that of many would-be metaphysicians among evolutionists, who, not content with the doctrine of evolution as a theory in science, an ordered and organising view of observed facts, will try to elevate it into a vision of what is, and alone is, behind the observed facts. They fail to see that the more blind, the more accidental, so to speak, the process of differentiation may be; the more it is shown that the struggle for existence drives the wheels of progress along the lines of least resistance by the most commonplace of mechanical necessities, in the same proportion must a law be posited behind all this process, a reason in nature which gathers up the beginning and the ending. The protoplasmic cell which the imagination of evolutionists places at the beginning of time as the starting-point of this mighty process is not merely this or that, has not merely this or that quality or possibility, it *is*; and in the power of that little word is enclosed a whole world of thought, which is there at the first, remains there all through the evolutions of the protoplasm, will be there when these are done, is in fact independent of time and space, has nothing to do with such distinctions, expresses rather their ultimate unreality. So far then as Parmenides and his school kept a firm grip on this other-world aspect of nature as implied even in the simple word *is*, or *be*, so far they did good service in the process of the world's thought. On the other hand, he and they were naturally enough disinclined, as we all are disinclined, to remain in the merely or mainly negative or defensive. He would not lose his grip of heaven and eternity, but he would fain know the secrets of earth and time as well. And hence was fashioned the second part of his poem, in which he expounds his theory of the world of opinion, or guess-work, or observation.

In this world he found two originative principles at work, one pertaining to light and heat, the other to darkness and cold. From the union of these two principles all observable things in creation come, and over this union a God-given power presides, whose name is Love. Of these two principles, the bright one being analogous to *Fire*, the dark one to *Earth*, he considered the former to be the male or formative element, the latter the female or passive element; the former therefore had analogies to Being as such, the latter to Non-being. The heavenly existences, the sun, the moon, the stars, are of pure Fire, have therefore an eternal and unchangeable being; they are on the extremest verge of the universe, and corresponding to them at the centre is another fiery sphere, which, itself unmoved, is the cause of all motion and generation in the mixed region between. The motive and procreative power, sometimes called Love, is at other times called by Parmenides Necessity, Bearer of the Keys, Justice, Ruler, etc.

But while in so far as there was union in the production of man or any other creature, the presiding genius might be symbolised as *Love*; on the other hand, since this union was a union of opposites (Light and Dark), *Discord* or *Strife* also had her say in the union. Thus the nature and character in every creature was the resultant of two antagonistic forces, and depended for its particular excellence or defect on the proportions in which these two elements—the light and the dark, the fiery and the earthy—had been commingled.

No character in Greek antiquity, at least in the succession of philosophic teachers, held a more honoured position than Parmenides. He was looked on with almost superstitious reverence by his fellow-countrymen. Plato speaks of him as his “Father Parmenides,” whom he “revered and honoured more than all the other philosophers together.” To quote Professor Jowett in his introduction to Plato's dialogue *Parmenides*, he was “the founder of idealism and also of dialectic, or in modern phraseology, of metaphysics and of logic.” Of the logical aspect of his teaching we shall see a fuller exemplification in his pupil and successor Zeno; of his metaphysics, by way of summing up what has been already said, it may be remarked that its substantial excellence consists in the perfect clearness and precision with which Parmenides enunciated as fundamental in any theory of the knowable universe the priority of Existence itself, not in time merely or chiefly, but as a condition of having any problem to inquire into.

He practically admits that he does not see how to bridge over the partition between Existence in itself and the changeful, temporary, existing things which the senses give us notions of. But whatever the connection may be, if there is a connection, he is convinced that nothing would be more absurd than to make the data of sense in any way or degree the measure of the reality of existence, or the source from which existence itself comes into being.

On this serenely impersonal position he took his stand; we find little or nothing of the querulous personal note so characteristic of much modern philosophy. We never find him asking, "What is to become of *me* in all this?" "What is *my* position with regard to this eternally-existing reality?"

Of course this is not exclusively a characteristic of Parmenides, but of the time. The idea of personal relation to an eternal Rewarder was only vaguely held in historical times in Greece. The conception of personal immortality was a mere pious opinion, a doctrine whispered here and there in secret mystery; it was not an influential force on men's motives or actions. Thought was still occupied with the wider universe, the heavens and their starry wonders, and the strange phenomena of law in nature. In the succession of the seasons, the rising and setting, the fixities and aberrations, of the heavenly bodies, in the mysteries of coming into being and passing out of it, in these and other similar marvels, and in the thoughts which they evoked, a whole and ample world seemed open for inquiry. Men and their fate were interesting enough to men, but as yet the egotism of man had not attempted to isolate his destiny from the general problem of nature. To the *crux* of philosophy as it appeared to Parmenides in the relation of being as such to things which seem to be, modernism has appended a sort of corollary, in the relation of being as such to *my* being. Till the second question was raised its answer, of course, could not be attempted. But all those who in modern times have said with Tennyson—

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
Thou madest man, he knows not why;
He thinks he was not made to die;
And Thou hast made him: Thou art just,

may recognise in Parmenides a pioneer for them. Without knowing it, he was fighting the battle of personality in man, as well as that of reality in nature.

3. ZENO

The third head of the Eleatic school was ZENO. He is described by Plato in the *Parmenides* as accompanying his master to Athens..., and as being then "nearly forty years of age, of a noble figure and fair aspect." In personal character he was a worthy pupil of his master, being, like him, a devoted patriot. He is even said to have fallen a victim to his patriotism, and to have suffered bravely the extremest tortures at the hands of a tyrant Nearchus rather than betray his country.

His philosophic position was a very simple one. He had nothing to add to or to vary in the doctrine of Parmenides. His function was primarily that of an expositor and defender of that doctrine, and his particular pre-eminence consists in the ingenuity of his dialectic resources of defence. He is in fact pronounced by Aristotle to have been the inventor of dialectic or systematic logic. The relation of the two is humorously expressed thus by Plato; "I see, Parmenides, said Socrates, that Zeno is your second self in his writings too; he puts what you say in another way, and would fain deceive us into believing that he is telling us what is new. For you, in your poems, say, All is one, and of this you adduce excellent proofs; and he, on the other hand, says, There is no many; and on behalf of this he offers overwhelming evidence." To this Zeno replies,

admitting the fact, and adds: "These writings of mine were meant to protect the arguments of Parmenides against those who scoff at him, and show the many ridiculous and contradictory results which they suppose to follow from the affirmation of the One. My answer is an address to the partisans of the many, whose attack I return with interest by retorting upon them that their hypothesis of the being of many if carried out appears in a still more ridiculous light than the hypothesis of the being of one."

The arguments of Zeno may therefore be regarded as strictly arguments *in kind*; quibbles if you please, but in answer to quibbles. The secret of his method was what Aristotle calls Dichotomy—that is, he put side by side two contradictory propositions with respect to any particular supposed real thing in experience, and then proceeded to show that both these contradictories alike imply what is inconceivable. Thus "a thing must consist either of a finite number of parts or an infinite number." Assume the number of parts to be finite. Between them there must either be something or nothing. If there is something between them, then the whole consists of more parts than it consists of. If there is nothing between them, then they are not separated, therefore they are not parts; therefore the whole has no parts at all; therefore it is nothing. If, on the other hand, the number of parts is infinite, then, the same kind of argument being applied, the magnitude of the whole is by infinite successive positing of intervening parts shown to be infinite; therefore this one thing, being infinitely large, is everything.

Take, again, any supposed fact, as that an arrow moves. An arrow cannot move except in space. It cannot move in space without being in space. At any moment of its supposed motion it must be in a particular space. Being in that space, it must at the time during which it is in it be at rest. But the total time of its supposed motion is made up of the moments composing that time, and to each of these moments the same argument applies; therefore either the arrow never was anywhere, or it always was at rest.

Or, again, take objects moving at unequal rates, as Achilles and a tortoise. Let the tortoise have a start of any given length, then Achilles, however much he excel in speed, will never overtake the tortoise. For, while Achilles has passed over the originally intervening space, the tortoise will have passed over a certain space, and when Achilles has passed over this second space the tortoise will have again passed over some space, and so on *ad infinitum*; therefore in an infinite time there must always be a space, though infinitely diminishing, between the tortoise and Achilles, *i.e.* the tortoise must always be at least a little in front.

These will be sufficient to show the kind of arguments employed by Zeno. In themselves they are of no utility, and Zeno never pretended that they had any. But as against those who denied that existence as such was a datum independent of experience, something different from a mere sum of isolated things, his arguments were not only effective, but substantial. The whole modern sensational or experiential school, who derive our 'abstract ideas,' as they are called, from 'phenomena' or 'sensation,' manifest the same impatience of any analysis of what they mean by phenomena or sensation, as no doubt Zeno's opponents manifested of his analyses. As in criticising the one, modern critics are ready with their answer that Zeno's quibbles are simply "a play of words on the well-known properties of infinities," so they are quick to tell us that sensation is an "affection of the sentient organism"; ignoring in the first case the prior question where the idea of infinity came from, and in the second, where the idea of a sentient organism came from.

Indirectly, as we shall see, Zeno had a great effect on subsequent philosophies by the development of a process of ingenious verbal distinction, which in the hands of so-called sophists and others became a weapon of considerable, if temporary, power.

4. MELISSUS

The fourth and last of the Eleatic philosophers was Melissus, a native of Samos. His date may be fixed as about 440 B.C. He took an active part in the politics of his native country, and on one occasion was commander of the Samian fleet in a victorious engagement with the Athenians, when Samos was being besieged by Pericles. He belongs to the Eleatic school in respect of doctrine and method, but we have no evidence of his ever having resided at Elea, nor any reference to his connection with the philosophers there, except the statement that he was a pupil of Parmenides. He developed very fully what is technically called in the science of Logic the *Dilemma*. Thus, for example, he begins his treatise *On Existence* or *On Nature* thus: "If nothing exists, then there is nothing for us to talk about. But if there is such a thing as existence it must either come into being or be ever-existing. If it come into being, it must come from the existing or the non-existing. Now that anything which exists, above all, that which is absolutely existent, should come from what is not, is impossible. Nor can it come from that which is. For then it would be already, and would not come into being. That which exists, therefore, comes not into being; it must therefore be ever-existing."

By similar treatment of other conceivable alternatives he proceeds to show that as the existent had no beginning so it can have no ending in time. From this, by a curious transition which Aristotle quotes as an example of loose reasoning, he concludes that the existent can have no limit in space either. As being thus unlimited it must be one, therefore immovable (there being nothing else into which it can move or change), and therefore always self-identical in extent and character. It cannot, therefore, have any body, for body has parts and is not therefore one.

Being incapable of change one might perhaps conclude that the absolutely existing being is incapable of any mental activity or consciousness. We have no authority for assuming that Melissus came to this conclusion; but there is a curious remark of Aristotle's respecting this and previous philosophers of the school which certain critics have made to bear some such interpretation. He says: "Parmenides seems to hold by a Unity in thought, Melissus by a Material unity. Hence the first defined the One as limited, the second declared it to be unlimited. Xenophanes made no clear statement on this question; he simply, gazing up to the arch of heaven, declared, The One is God."

But the difference between Melissus and his master can hardly be said to be a difference of doctrine; point for point, they are identical. The difference is a difference of vision or mental picture as to this mighty All which is One. Melissus, so to speak, places himself at the centre of this Universal being, and sees it stretching out infinitely, unendingly, in space and in time. Its oneness comes to him as the *sum* of these infinities. Parmenides, on the other hand, sees all these endless immensities as related to a centre; he, so to speak, enfolds them all in the grasp of his unifying thought, and as thus equally and necessarily related to a central unity he pronounces the All a sphere, and therefore limited. The two doctrines, antithetical in terms, are identical in fact. The absolutely unlimited and the absolutely self-limited are only two ways of saying the same thing.

This difference of view or vision Aristotle in the passage quoted expresses as a difference between *thought* ((Greek) *logos*) and *matter* ((Greek) *hule*). This is just a form of his own radical distinction between Essence and Difference, Form and Matter, of which much will be said later on. It is like the difference between Deduction and Induction; in the first you start from the universal and see within it the particulars; in the second you start from the particulars and gather them into completeness and reality in a universal. The substance remains the same, only the point of view is different. To put the matter in modern mathematical form, one might say, The universe is to be conceived as a *sphere* (Parmenides) of *infinite radius* (Melissus). Aristotle is not blaming Melissus or praising Parmenides. As for Xenophanes, Aristotle after his manner finds in him the potentiality of both. He is prior both to the process of thought from universal to particular, and to that from particular to universal. He does not argue at all; his

function is Intuition. “He looks out on the mighty sky, and says, The One is God.”

Melissus applied the results of his analysis in an interesting way to the question already raised by his predecessors, of the trustworthiness of sensation. His argument is as follows: “If there were many real existences, to each of them the same reasonings must apply as I have already used with reference to the one existence. That is to say, if earth really exists, and water and air and iron and gold and fire and things living and things dead; and black and white, and all the various things whose reality men ordinarily assume,—if all these really exist, and our sight and our hearing give us *facts*, then each of these as really existing must be what we concluded the one existence must be; among other things, each must be unchangeable, and can never become other than it really is. But assuming that sight and hearing and apprehension are true, we find the cold becoming hot and the hot becoming cold; the hard changes to soft, the soft to hard; the living thing dies; and from that which is not living, a living thing comes into being; in short, everything changes, and what now is in no way resembles what was. It follows therefore that we neither see nor apprehend realities.

“In fact we cannot pay the slightest regard to experience without being landed in self-contradictions. We assume that there are all sorts of really existing things, having a permanence both of form and power, and yet we imagine these very things altering and changing according to what we from time to time see about them. If they were realities as we first perceived them, our sight must now be wrong. For if they were real, they could not change. Nothing can be stronger than reality. Whereas to suppose it changed, we must affirm that the real has ceased to be, and that that which was not has displaced it.”

To Melissus therefore, as to his predecessors, the world of sense was a world of illusion; the very first principles or assumptions of which, as of the truthfulness of the senses and the reality of the various objects which we see, are unthinkable and absurd.

The weakness as well as the strength of the Eleatic position consisted in its purely negative and critical attitude. The assumptions of ordinary life and experience could not stand for a moment when assailed in detail by their subtle analysis. So-called facts were like a world of ghosts, which the sword of truth passed through without resistance. But somehow the sword might pierce them through and through, and show by all manner of arguments their unsubstantiality, but there they were still thronging about the philosopher and refusing to be gone. The world of sense might be only illusion, but there the illusion was. You could not lay it or exorcise it by calling it illusion or opinion. What was this opinion? What was the nature of its subject matter? How did it operate? And if its results were not true or real, what was their nature? These were questions which still remained when the analysis of the idea of absolute existence had been pushed to its completion. These were the questions which the next school of philosophy attempted to answer. After the Idealists, the Realists; after the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of matter.

John Marshall. *A Short History of Greek Philosophy*. Chapters 4-5. London: Percival and Co., 1891.

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