

Lecture 3

Parmenides and Anaxagoras

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Introduction

- He was from Elea in Italy; [see map](#). Probably born about 515 BC.
- We have fragments of a poem he wrote. In this poem, he travels in a chariot to meet a goddess and she tells him what he reports in the poem.

What exists is eternal

- Why it can't come into existence:
 - It can't come from what exists, because then it would already exist and not be coming into existence.
 - If it comes from nothing: *What necessity would have stirred it up to grow later rather than earlier, beginning from nothing? ... Nor will the force of conviction ever permit anything to come to be from what is not, besides it [i.e., what is not].* [38]
- Why it can't go out of existence:
 - Parmenides doesn't say much about this.
 - A possible reason: If things go out of existence but never come into existence, eventually there would be nothing left.
 - Empedocles, who follows Parmenides closely, says: *Nor do they leave off, for if they were perishing continuously, they would no longer be.* [50]

In this way, coming to be has been extinguished and destruction is unheard of. [39]

What exists is uniform

- Statement of the view: *Nor is it divided, since it is all alike.* [39]
- I can't see any real argument for this. Perhaps he thought that since it is alike in existing it is totally alike.

What exists is unchanging

- *Unchanging in the limits of great bonds, it is without start or finish, since coming to be and destruction were banished far away and true conviction drove them off.* [39]
- The argument is that change involves creation and destruction, e.g., if wood is burned, the wood ceases to exist and ashes come into existence. But what exists is eternal.
- *Remaining the same in the same and by itself it lies and so stays there fixed.* [39]

The senses are deceptive

- We see diversity and change all around us. But reason proves that this is false. Therefore, the senses are deceptive.
- *Do not let habit born from much experience compel you along this way, to direct your sightless eye and sounding ear and tongue, but judge by reason the heavily contested testing spoken by me. [38]*

Introduction

- He was about 15 years younger than Parmenides.
- He was from Ionia, the general area that included Miletus. But he lived in Athens for much of his life.
- He shared the Milesians interest in explaining the world by ingredients. But he also was influenced by Parmenides.

Initial state of the universe

- Anaxagoras says all substances that exist have always existed: air, water, earth, fire, wood, flesh, . . .
- Originally they were all mixed up together, so thoroughly that every part of matter contained some of every substance.
- This mixture consisted mostly of air and ether (a substance less dense than air that fills “empty space”). Hence the other substances weren’t visible then.
- Besides the usual substances there is a special one called *Mind*.
 - It doesn’t have other substances mixed with it.
 - It knows everything and rules other things.

Rotation and separation

- Mind started the initial mixture rotating. This caused the ingredients of the mixture to separate out.
 - Dense, cold, wet things go to the center.
 - Rare, hot, dry things go away from the center.
 - Bits of earth came together to form fields. Bits of flesh and bone and blood came together to form animals. Etc.
- Despite this, everything (except Mind) still contains bits of all things: *Nothing is being completely separated off or separated apart one from another except Mind.* [45]
- The rotation is still visible in the heavens.
- Mind is contained in some things: *Mind rules all things that possess life—both the larger and the smaller.* [45]

Comparison with Parmenides

- Anaxagoras denies that what exists is uniform.
- He agrees that everything that exists is eternal.
- He allows for a kind of change, namely, mixing and separating.
- What we ordinarily call coming to be and perishing is not that but mixing and separating.

Example: If a piece of wood burns, we ordinarily say wood perishes and ash comes to be. Anaxagoras would say bits of wood and fire separate into the air leaving behind bits of ash.

- *The Greeks are wrong to accept coming to be and perishing, for no thing comes to be nor does it perish, but they are mixed together from things that are and they are separated apart. And so they would be correct to call coming to be being mixed together, and perishing being separated apart.* [46]
- The senses aren't as misleading as Parmenides thinks (seeing wood burn isn't a total delusion), but: *On account of [the senses'] feebleness we are unable to discern the truth.* [46]

Questions

- 1 According to Parmenides:
 - (a) What are the properties of what exists?
 - (b) Why can't there be generation?
 - (c) Why can't there be change?
- 2 Does Parmenides regard the senses as a source of knowledge? Explain.
- 3 In what respect does Anaxagoras agree with Parmenides about the properties of what exists? In what respects does he disagree?
- 4 When water evaporates from a boiling pot of water, what is happening according to Thales, Parmenides, and Anaxagoras? Which is correct according to modern science?
- 5 When condensation forms on a cold object on a humid day, what is happening according to Thales, Parmenides, and Anaxagoras? Which is correct according to modern science?

-  S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve, editors.
Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle.
Hackett, 1995.