

Plato's Metaphysics as a Modification of Parmenides

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As one begins to study the metaphysical claims made by Plato it is helpful to view his work as a modification of the metaphysical views of Parmenides. These modifications were made in order to make Parmenides' metaphysics more able to defend against criticism. Furthermore, Plato wanted to allow for virtue, freedom, and change in human nature. In a vacuum, Plato's writings seem odd to modern students, but when understood in the light of this new context his views appear far more rational. Most philosophical thinkers build upon the work of previous generations, their views are influenced by what they read and hear. Plato should be seen as an excellent model of this trait. He found what worked, and built upon it.

Plato was born into a wealthy Athenian family and grew up rather well off. He would likely have been given philosophical instruction from a young age. The writings of Parmenides were circulating through Athenian society at this time and a young Plato would have almost certainly been very familiar with his thoughts. This familiarity would not only have influenced him consciously, but subconsciously as well. He would have implicitly believed, at least initially, much of what Parmenides taught. Plato grew and began to produce his own philosophical writings, many of which are clearly influenced by Parmenides. Two dialogues in particular mention Parmenides by name, "the Sophist" and "Parmenides". It becomes clear through these two writings that Plato has a great

deal of respect for Parmenides. However, Plato eventually builds a philosophical worldview that does not completely agree with that which Parmenides taught.

Plato was especially interested in the search for wisdom. Much of his writings involve the search for truth and enlightenment. The ultimate metaphysical reality according to Parmenides is an unchanging one, a total unity. Growth and change would be impossible in this view, and everything we perceive through our senses would be mistaken. If Parmenides was correct, and all reality was illusion, knowledge would not be at all attainable. In such a world, we have no access to true reality and only ever perceive that which is illusion. In contrast, Plato believed that a primary purpose of life was to cultivate and grow the soul. He thought that our purpose was to approach the Form of the Good by seeing reality as it truly is. We find the good by escaping the cave and viewing the world by the light of the Sun. These differences set Plato on a journey to reconcile what he believed with the teachings of Parmenides. Plato would likely have been concerned about completely rejecting Parmenides' thoughts because he felt that Parmenides was trustworthy and wise. Plato's works were designed to preserve the fundamental ideas from Parmenides, but with enough modification to allow Plato's personal views to become compatible with the system.

This is the context needed to understand the theory of Forms. Plato proposed a dualist view of reality, one world to allow the changeless state of existence claimed by Parmenides and one to enable the existence of knowledge, virtue, and growth. Many students find Plato's views odd because he seems to arbitrarily split reality into a sensible world and another intelligible world. Such a division is in no way obvious. Students rightly struggle to understand the motivation behind this belief. However, Plato

would have grown up learning the arguments that Parmenides used to provide evidence for his claims, and Plato would have found these arguments very convincing. His theory of Forms allows him to agree with the evidence presented by Parmenides without abandoning his belief in growth, virtue, or knowledge. Plato's metaphysics may appear to be designed arbitrarily, but they are actually a clever expansion on the metaphysics built by Parmenides. Plato was able to eat his cake and have it too.

Because of these changes made by Plato, his theory is also better able to defend against the claims of Heraclitus, whose views can be understood as the opposite of Parmenides. Many of the strongest claims that those who followed Heraclitus would have used to attack the theories of Parmenides are far less effective when used against the theory of Forms. Heraclitus famously claimed that one cannot step in the same river twice, each little bit of water would be different. Plato is able to easily counter this claim. While the bits of the water may be different, the river is not a sum of bits of water, a river is an Image of the Form of the river, and the exact bits of water don't matter much. The identity of the river is not found in specific drops, but in the unchanging Form.

Each generation of thinkers builds upon the previous. Plato was able to provide a substantive refutation to Heraclitus because he built upon a foundation laid by Parmenides. Plato was able to rationally justify free will, change, and virtue by building upon this foundation. Plato became western culture's most famous philosopher by building on this foundation. Plato's genius is not that he was totally original in his thoughts, but that he was able to improve that which was built before. Understanding Plato as someone who seeks to make things more perfect is fundamental if one seeks to see his work as it truly is. Plato believed that we should spend our lives reaching out

for the Good, growing closer and closer each day. His writings exemplify his beliefs, he searches for wisdom and builds upon it.

As students work to build a strong understanding of humanity's greatest thinkers, it's essential to consider their thoughts in the original context. If one doesn't understand why people thought what they did, it can be easy to underestimate the value and utility provided by those who came before us. In order to better understand the writings of Plato, it is of utmost importance to consider the theory of Forms primarily as a modification of Parmenides' earlier metaphysics. Doing so will enable students to build a far greater appreciation for the genius of Plato.