

# On the Ultimate Nature of Reality

## Contrasting Parmenides and Heraclitus

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This paper will examine two alternative metaphysical theories, one by Parmenides, and one by Heraclitus. Both men seek to answer the same question: What is the Ultimate Nature of Reality. They seek to understand the world, not necessarily as we see it, but as it truly is. We will begin with an overview and analysis of Parmenides' worldview. We will discuss the evidence he provides, and study the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. We will then do the same for Heraclitus. After both theories have been discussed, we will continue a comparison. We will show how both theories interact and contradict. Finally, we will provide an analysis on both theories in the context of modern scientific knowledge. Overall, this paper aims to provide an introduction to ancient metaphysics and enable the reader to confidently continue research into this fascinating field.

Parmenides was among the most influential Pre-Socratic philosophers, in fact, some even split pre-socratic philosophers to Pre-Parmenides and Post-Parmenides. From the time of Parmenides to the time of Socrates, much of philosophy was in some sense a response to Parmenides. Unfortunately, there is only one known writing of Parmenides. His poem, *On Nature*, exists in fragmentary form, with only 160 lines surviving. Most of what we know about his theories comes from those responding to him, therefore, it is rather difficult to piece together his original claim. The explanation given here represents a careful study of all available sources, but it should be remembered that there will be a great deal of interpretation.

His arguments begin with a simple phrase, "What is, is; and what is not, is not." He claims that we can only rationally speak in terms of what exists, this idea seems uncontroversial at first glance, but his liberal definitions for existence and nonexistence lead to deeply controversial conclusions. He claims that empty space does not exist, for clearly, there is nothing there. This idea leads to a belief that space must be an illusion. Furthermore, to claim that two objects are separate, you must claim that there is non-being separating them. Parmenides says that this is incoherent, if there is

'non-being', or nothing separating them, then they must not be separated. He also claims that change of any kind implies some state coming into being, and another state coming out of being. But he argues that something cannot become nothing, nor can nothing become something. Using a rather simple beginning, he reaches a conclusion that neither space, change, nor distinctness exist at all.

Given its extreme implications, this argument was controversial in its time as it is rather difficult to identify a flaw in his reasoning. It certainly seems rather straightforward and simple. However, many philosophers did attempt to refute his claim. Many did so by focusing on the ambiguity present in his definition of being and non-being. Many attempts were made to redefine being in a way which prevented his arguments from working. Defining potential states as an existent part of an object allows change, defining void as an object that separates other objects allows both space and distinctness. Many different explanations were offered in an attempt to overturn the results of his logic.

However, not all contemporary theories arose in response to Parmenides. Heraclitus built an entirely different theory around the same time, building from fundamentally different grounds. Perhaps his most famous claim is that, "you cannot step in the same river twice." In his mind, to touch a river is to touch the individual drops of water as they pass. Therefore, every time you touch it, you are touching entirely different drops of water. He doesn't think there is any meaningful sense where a completely different set of water drops can be called the same object, or same river. This argument serves as an illustration for his main point, which is that reality is made of constant flux and change, and is defined by motion, not by objects.

He believed in a universal 'logos' governing all existence. An exact translation of this word is essentially impossible. Some have compared logos to a theistic definition of the mind, will, or word of God. Others claim it is more related to the modern scientific understanding of the laws of physics. Either way, Heraclitus believed in some sort of governing principle that explains the flow and flux of reality. It is often said that Heraclitus believed that the fundamental building block of reality is 'fire', however this claim is probably false. It is much more likely that he chose fire as an example of fundamental reality trapped in a constant state of change and transformation. He would

have believed that all other objects were similarly changing, but less noticeable or perhaps more slowly.

These two philosophers provided radically different conceptions of the nature of reality; the enormous difference likely comes from a disagreement on where to begin grounding metaphysics. The disagreement between Parmenides and Heraclitus can be viewed as an early example of rationalism vs empiricism. Parmenides begins with pure logical reasoning and shows that reality as we perceive it contradicts reason, he therefore concludes that it is an illusion. Heraclitus begins not with reason, but with observation. He notices everything we see as a distinctly existing object does, in fact, change. He then extrapolates that everything must be changing. He then builds a theory meant to explain his observation. Parmenides starts with reason and ends with reality, Heraclitus starts with reality and works backwards towards reason.

It is therefore difficult to judge which theory is stronger. The strength of both arguments rests on whether one is a rationalist or empiricist. Both arguments are incredibly strong in the epistemological context in which they are made. Therefore, if one is to decide which is more reasonable, the question leaves metaphysics and must be answered by selecting an epistemological foundation. Such a process will be left as an exercise for the reader.

However, if we venture past the borders of purely academic philosophy, we can attempt to compare both of these theories to modern scientific theories. If one assigns a great deal of weight to physics when studying metaphysics, perhaps this exercise may yield another method of determining which is more reasonable. Unfortunately, it seems that there are compelling reasons that both theories look compatible with modern science. Quantum mechanics defines systems in terms of probability, and those who study it may assign a great deal of value to Heraclitus' theory. His notions of constant flux and change appear completely natural in a world where everything is modeled by waves, not static particles. However, those who study relativity may be far more interested in the views of Parmenides. They often describe time, not as a flowing river, but as a static fourth dimension. Some interpretations of relativity are nearly identical to Parmenides' conception of a single unchanging one. These scientists may claim that change is indeed an illusion and that all remains as it is.

It seems that either using science or metaphysics, determining whose theory is a stronger explanation of reality is reducible to a commitment to a more fundamental theory. Rationalists and those who study relativity will likely agree with Parmenides, while empiricists and those who study quantum mechanics will likely agree with Heraclitus. Both philosophers provided strong compelling theories and each theory is nearly unassailable in its chosen domain. The goal of understanding the ultimate nature of reality will need further examination, and perhaps one day, we may know who indeed was able to see things as they truly are.