

THE FIRST STATEMENT AND KING OF STATEMENTS

It is common to me where I begin for there I shall come back again.
(Parmenides, DK 5)

Like the point on the circle which is the beginning and the end, the statement about contradiction is the beginning of Parmenides' thought and the end to which it resolves or by which he judges. Heraclitus most of all had insisted on following the common and the statement about contradiction is the most common statement. Hence, insofar as Heraclitus insisted on following the common and yet admitted (in words, at least) contradiction in change, Parmenides uses Heraclitus' words on following the common against his admission of contradiction as real in change.

It is necessary to say and think that what-is is. For it is able to be, but nothing is not able. These things I command you to consider: I hold you back from this first road of investigation and then besides from that road along which wander two-headed mortals, knowing nothing; for helplessness drives the wandering mind in their breasts. They are carried along like those deaf and blind, tribes without judgment, for whom to be and not to be are thought to be the same and not the same, and the road of all is turned back.
(Parmenides, DK 6)

It is necessary to think that what-is is and that what-is-not (or nothing) is not. It is impossible to think that what-is is not, or that what-is-not is because it is impossible for what-is-not to be, but what-is can be. But it is, contrary to what Parmenides says here, possible *to say* what you cannot think.

If one thought that *what-is* is not or that *what-is-not* is, one would both think that something is and not think that it is, which is impossible. Such thinking is impossible because it is impossible both to be and not be (at the same time and in the same way).

The first road which Parmenides commands us to avoid is perhaps a road that would begin with denying this axiom about contradiction. But the second road seems to be the road from the senses which leads men to contradictions. He says that two-headed mortals, knowing nothing, wander along this road.

He calls them *two-headed* because one and the same head could not think that something both is and is not. (One head could be *in doubt* as to whether it is or is not so, but it could not think that in fact it is both.) If one thinks then that something both is and is not, one must have two heads, one in which to think that it is and another in which to think that it is not. It is also against nature to have two heads so that Parmenides indicates that the statement about contradiction is *naturally* known.

He also says they *know nothing*. If one does not know the statement about contradiction, one cannot know any other statement because it is in all of them. Every other statement is either affirmative, saying that something is, or negative, saying, that something is not; but not saying both. Indeed, as Aristotle was to say in the fourth book of the *Metaphysics*, the alternative to accepting this statement is a return to the state of the vegetable (not even to the state of the other animals, since even the senses discriminate) which is a state of knowing nothing.

The Greek and Latin words for error come from the word to wander. Hence, when he calls them *wandering*, he indicates that they are in error.

In saying that *helplessness* drives their wandering mind, Parmenides indicates that their erring mind cannot be helped because there is nothing more known or more certain than the statement about contradiction from which one could reason. Hence, Aristotle was later to say that one cannot demonstrate the axiom about contradiction since there is nothing more known from which one could reason. One can only reason to someone from what they might accept even though less known.

They are also *tribes without judgment* for judgment is the separation of true from false. Even what it means to say that a statement is true or false depends upon the statement of contradiction. A statement is true when it says that what-is is or what-is-not is not and false when its say that what-is is not or what-is-not is. Further, we judge statements not known through themselves by statements known through themselves. And statements known through themselves rest upon the statement about contradiction in that to deny a statement known through itself is to fall into a contradiction. If we deny that a whole is greater than one of its parts, we are saying that what has parts does not have parts. If we deny the statement that *no odd number is even*, we are saying that something can both be and not be divisible into two equal parts.

For it is the same thing that can be thought and can be.
(Parmenides, DK 3)

This fragment is also translated as saying that to think (or to understand) is the same as to be. As it is translated above, it seems to mean that just as a contradiction cannot be in things (the same thing cannot both be and not be) so the mind cannot think that something both is and is not (at the same and in the same way; as Aristotle was to make explicit later). Translated the second way, it touches upon the knower being the known in some way. But is the way something is known the same necessarily as the way it is? This touches upon the central question of philosophy. Does truth require that *the way we know* be *the way things are*?

Observe how things absent are firmly present to the mind. For it will not cut off what is from holding fast to what is - neither scattered throughout the universe, nor brought together.
(Parmenides, DK 4)

If what is were divided, what would be separating its parts? Can nothing separate, as Democritus seems to think?