**Heraclitus and Parmenides**

These two are important with regard to Plato.

**With Heraclitus: Think change, *becoming,* Logos, and “fire.” These are the key ideas to remember for Heraclitus. Plato will use Heraclitus’ description of the world in his *Divided Line* and in his *Allegory or Myth of the Cave* as well both of which are taken from *The Republic*, Plato’s greatest dialogue.**

**Parmenides** is a man Plato said is “to be feared and respected.” Parmenides’ thinking epitomizes the idea of logical consistency running head on into common sense.

Parmenides assumes that: 1) you can’t make something from nothing. And 2) if something changes, then it becomes something different. (There’s nothing too exciting about that right?) Well, with these two he rejects Heraclitus’ answer that reality is one of constant change. Parmenides analyzes the concept of change and concludes that change is logically contradictory; thus it is an illusion.

A way to think about it is as follows. (**Parmenides never quite says this, but it captures his meaning.**) ‘If there is one thing (monism) underlying everything else, whatever it is, it is Being.’

**{For fun, try thinking of nothing. It’s a contradiction, you may think of something named “nothing.” You can’t find thinking without some Being to which it refers. (You admit to Being if you think of something.)}**

Thus, whatever exists must Be (existing) absolutely, or not (existing) at all. We know that if something changes, then it becomes something different. So if Being changes, the only change, logically, is to say Being becomes Non-Being. Non-Being is not. So Being cannot have ever changed because we’re here existing, so Being is.

As he’s already noticed, if the phrase *Being Is*, is logically true, then some things must also be true, and they are deduced from the logic of the phrase“Being is.”

Being cannot come from Non-Being. (You can’t make something from nothing.) Thus coming into being is absurd – logically. Being ultimately has the following characteristic: it is one thing: it is motionless, uncreated, eternal, indestructible, unchangeable, and spherical. (*I know the last one is odd. Parmenides was probably trying to find some perfect item, like the sun’s roundness to link to Being.)*

Since Reality is Unchanging, the changes we see with our eyes are actually illusions for logical reasons. Reality is unchanging, eternal etc. while our senses must then show us the *appearance* of reality because common sense shows us a changing world. (Here he distinguishes rational knowledge from sensory knowledge. That makes *sense* right? There are truths of pure rationality like mathematical theorems. And there is knowledge of the hardness of the table.)

Parmenides concludes that the change we witness with our eyes represents the confusion of *appearance* for

Is he cray-cray?

Think of modern physics. It tells us that the atomic level, there are no solid objects. Yet we experience a world of solid objects. What gives? As far as I’ve heard, we don’t have a good model to explain the details yet. (We also lack a complete explanation for how consciousness arises out of the brain. And we may never.)

Parmenides concludes that appearance breeds opinions about what’s true. We get to the truth about Reality by using rational reflection not on data gathered via sensation.

 See what looks like two faces in the cows face? Is it really there or do you see it? (I also may have been photo shopped. I don’t know.)

Quick Recap:

“Becoming” - Heraclitus - sensation

“Being” - Parmenides – rational thought

Parmenides’ ideas were not generally accepted. It seems bizarre to claim that there is no motion whatsoever: look around you! Well Parmenides had a defender named *Zeno of Elia.* (there were a couple of men named Zeno of some import, back in the day.)

Zeno develops a series of Paradoxes. “… a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true.” ([1](https://www.google.com/search?q=paradoxes&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8))

He uses the “[Reductio ad absurdem”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reductio_ad_absurdum) argument. It entails using an opponents’ ideas and showing the ideas lead to absurd conclusions.

Zeno and Parmenides argue that we need to not only look at the world, but we need to **think** about it to understand it. If we take a conclusion from people like Heraclitus, that the world is not one thing, but many things, then we can use mathematics to prove not only that motion is absurd, but that it’s absurd to think that something like a pile is really a pile after all.

Zeno used paradoxes like the Race Course, the Millet Seed ([The argument of the heap](http://lafavephilosophy.x10host.com/open_and_closed_concepts1.html)) and [Achilles and the Tortoise](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skM37PcZmWE&feature=relmfu). (Cute video.)

The basic idea is that Zeno exploits a cool idea.

In math, if I asked you about how many points are on a line, you would say that there are an infinite number of points. If I asked you, can you find the half way mark on the line even though there are an infinite number of points on the line? Yes of course you say.

For example, let’s say we have a line which starts 100 meters long: after cutting it in half it’s 50 meters. I ask if you can cut at length in half, you say yes: now it’s 25 meters long. How long will we keep on doing this? Any length of a line, has an infinite number of points. (Points have no dimension, they only show location.)

Back to Zeno: He says we ought to imagine that there is a runner in the Olympics. The race is 100 meters. The race begins and the runners get half way to the finish line. Now they have 50 meters left. They cut that in half, 25: then half again - 12 ½ meters. Then there is only 6 ¼ meters to go. Then there’s only to go, and so on: *To infinity and beyond*. The runners never make it to the finish line: that’s absurd.

Zeno has argued that if he starts with a premise that the world is made up of many things, and not one thing, Being, we reach absurd conclusion. [Modern logicians /mathematicians think there is math that Zeno didn’t have which accounts for the paradoxes: be warned, controversy lies this way.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno%27s_paradoxes#The_paradoxes_in_modern_times)

Heraclitus and Parmenides seem to lead to incomplete conclusions. It’s the collision between common sense and logic.

**Plato synthesizes their ideas.**

Rational thinkers like Parmenides and Plato have two main assumptions:

1. The world is a knowable thing for a human mind.
2. The test of knowledge is logical consistency.

As we’ve seen, each new philosopher corrected previous arguments using reason and not merely new empirical data. Plato takes Parmenides and Heraclitus’ reasoning and enfolds them into a system. Plato also relies on the kind of thinking that the Pythagoreans employed.

But there is trouble on the horizon. Not all people think that this reason and logic thing is the way humans should make decisions. Using reason, and concepts like *Logos* and *Being*, led some people, the especially the **Sophists,** to think that **reason itself**  was the problem.

**The Sophists**

Who are they you ask? They are itinerate teachers in ancient Greece. They offer to teach Rhetoric – a technique for making arguments appear strong: they don’t ultimately care about whether or not there is Ultimate truth. The truth is relative. The sophist named Protagoras is famous for his phrase “Man is the measure of all things.” Everything is relative.

Another sophist, Gorgias, said three things about truth. 1. There is nothing. 2. If there were anything, no one could know it. 3. If anyone could know it, no one could communicate it.

The sophist Thrasymachus, also a character used in Plato’s *Republic,*  believed that “might makes right.” The person with the biggest stick makes the rules. (He is a favorite of Tyrants.)

Callicles and Critias believed that rational morality shackles the individual. What matters is power, not justice. Power is good because it allows survival – it allows us to seek pleasure. (The clever leader controls people by encouraging their fear of nonexistent gods.)

These kinds of ideas can be seen as problematic for a society. Sophism concerns subjectivism, skepticism and nihilism. Its adherents argue that there is no objective reality.

Socrates disagreed. He worried that if there is no absolute truth, how can one teach morality to the young? He also argued that “The unexamined life is not worth living.” We ought to carefully consider what we do and how we live our lives.

Consulting the Oracle at Delphi is an important ancient ritual. People came to ask the God for answers to their questions. (There is a long back story.) One of Socrates’ friends asked the oracle who was the wisest person in Athens; the Oracle said there was no one wiser than Socrates.

**Socratic *Ignorance***

Socrates didn’t understand how the Oracle could say that so we asked questions in the market place. Since other people seemed wiser, Socrates asked them about their wisdom. They all come across as kind of dumb. Socrates determines that his wisdom resides in his willingness to admit he doesn’t know things. Others believe they know, and are mistaken.

Socrates asked people: What is piety? What is justice? What is meaning? What is love?

He followed a procedure: Step 1: Pose the question Step 2: Find minor flaws in the definition. Step 3: Agreement is reached to search for the truth.

Socrates made many powerful people angry. He was accused of teaching false doctrines, impious actions, and corrupting the youth of Athens.

[The Apology](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html) is Plato’s written version of the trial. Socrates is found guilty and then sentenced to death by a jury of his peers. (We believe that the Apology was Plato’s first dialogue. Since people who were at the trial would have most likely read Plato’s version, we believe that had it been significantly different than what happened, it would not have lasted.)

Remember that Socrates wrote nothing down: ever! Most of what we know about Socrates comes from Plato who is a biased writer. He loved Socrates as a mentor.



Plato (428 – 348 B.C.E.) was a young disciple of Socrates. He is one of the most important and influential thinkers in history. (When I went to college, I heard that A.E. Whitehead, an important contemporary British Philosopher, wrote that “All of Western Philosophy is a footnote to Plato.” In my opinion, the quote incorrectly paraphrases his real words. He actually wrote “*The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”*)

Plato wrote a series of what are known as his Dialogues. Socrates appears as a “character” of the dialogues. Maybe Socrates said something like what Plato wrote. Clearly the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues changes ideas over the history of Plato’s writing. Plato’s career as a Philosopher lasted 50 years.

He taught at his Academy in Athens. His greatest work is The Republic.

Here is the text of the *Republic*: Book 1

**Socrates begins speaking: “I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston, that I might offer up my prayers to the goddess; and also because I wanted to see in what manner they would celebrate the festival, which was a new thing.**

**I was delighted with the procession of the inhabitants; but that of the Thracians was equally, if not more, beautiful. When we had finished our prayers and viewed the spectacle, we turned in the direction of the city; and at that instant Polemarchus the son of Cephalus chanced to catch sight of us from a distance as we were starting on our way home, and told his servant to run and bid us wait for him. The servant took hold of me by the cloak behind, and said: Polemarchus desires you to wait.**

**I turned round, and asked him where his master was.**

**“There he is,” said the youth, “coming after you, if you will only wait.”**

**“Certainly we will,” said Glaucon; and in a few minutes Polemarchus appeared, and with him Adeimantus, Glaucon's brother, Niceratus the son of Nicias, and several others who had been at the procession.**

**Polemarchus said to me: “I perceive, Socrates, that you and your companion are already on your way to the city.”**

**“You are not far wrong,” I said.**

**“But do you see, he rejoined, how many we are?”**

**“Of course.”**

**“And are you stronger than all these? For if not, you will have to remain where you are.”**

**“May there not be the alternative, I said, that we may persuade you to let us go?”**

**“But can you persuade us, if we refuse to listen to you?” he said.**

**“Certainly not,” replied Glaucon.**

**“Then we are not going to listen; of that you may be assured.”**