

PARMENIDES' SEEMINGLY SELF-DEFEATING CONCLUSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Parmenides'in bilginin üç farklı yoluna ilişkin mistik şiiri yazıldığı tarihten itibaren felsefecilerin ilgisini çekmiştir. Parmenides'in dizelerinin en başarılı yorumlarından birini Montgomery Furth önermiştir. Parmenides'in şiiri doğruluğu nasıl öğrendiğimizin hikayesini anlatır. Buna göre doğru yolunda insana açık olan üç yoldan yalnızca birisi gerçekten doğruya giden yoldur; bu yol da "bir şey ne ise odur, ve o olmaması mümkün değildir." Furth'a göre Parmenides'in üç yolu insanların dil ve düşünme aracılığıyla dünyayı anlama çabalarına karşılık gelmektedir. O, Parmenides'in anlamlı ve anlamsız fikirler arasında ayırım yapmaya çalıştığını ileri sürmekte ve bu üç yolu anlamlı düşünmenin kapsayıcı bir modeli olarak değerlendirmektedir. Furth Parmenides'in bu görüşlerinin hiçbir olumsuz önermenin aynı zamanda hem anlamlı hem de doğru olamayacağı ve dolayısıyla da bizim sadece ne ise o hakkında konuşabileceğimiz veya düşünebileceğimiz şeklinde saçma bir sonuca vardığını söylemektedir. Parmenides'in bu şekilde değerlendirilmesine ilişkin ortaya konabilecek bir eleştiri öncüllerinin doğasının öncülleri temsil edilmekten alıkoymasıdır. Furth, bu eleştiriye cevap olarak, Parmenides'in fikirlerinin bu formda ortaya konmuş olmasının, kullandığı dilin doğasından kaynaklandığını söylemektedir. Furth, idealde Parmenides'in hiçbir şey söylememesi ve fikrini anlatmak için bir nevi olumsuz pekiştireçten yararlanması gerektiğini söylemektedir. Ancak Furth'un bu yorumu Parmenides'in sorununu sadece bir dereceye kadar çözmektedir. Parmenides sadece anlamlı konuşmayı tanımlamaya çalışıyor olsaydı, olumsuz pekiştireç kullanarak olmayan hakkındaki fikirlerini söylemezdi. Parmenides'in akılsal düşünme ile akılsal olmayan düşünme arasında yaptığı ayırım onun başlangıçta akılsal düşünmenin öyle olmayan düşünceleri içermeyeceğine inanmasıyla mümkündür. Parmenides bizim yalnızca anlamlı olan ve dolayısıyla "odur" olarak nitelendirilebilen düşünceler hakkında akılsal olarak konuşabileceğimizi anlamamızı istemektedir. Parmenides kendi olmayan düşünceler hakkında akılsal olarak konuşamayacağımız veya düşünemeyeceğimizi ifade etmekte sorun yaşamaktadır. Ancak Furth doğru fikirlere sahipmiş gibi görünmektedir. Yine de görüş Parmenides'in kendi olmayan hakkında düşünmeye sevk etmektedir. Furth Parmenides'in şiirinden kalan parçaları anlamlandırmakta

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büyük bir adım atmış olmasına rağmen Parmenides'in teorisini, hakkında akılsal olarak konuşabileceğimiz ve düşünebileceğimiz şeylere kısıtlayacak kadar kapsayıcı yapma çabasında başarılı değildir.

Parmenides' cryptic poem about the three different paths of knowledge has been a source of trouble for philosophers since it was first written. Countless philosophers have attempted to reconcile Parmenides' words and turn his poem into a cohesive, consistent philosophical theory. Perhaps the most successful of all interpretations was suggested by Montgomery Furth in his article "Elements of Eleatic Ontology".

Parmenides' poem presents three possible paths of thought, only one of which is meaningful: "it is." Furth proposes that Parmenides was looking to present a theory of meaningful thought and speech and "it is" is the only thing we can meaningfully think or say. Still, there exist opponents of Parmenides' method of discourse — and his conclusions therein. Their claim rests on the notion that the very nature of Parmenides' argument makes meaningless claims which he boldly proposes in his poem. This paper will lay out Furth's interpretation and investigate one of the most troubling aspects of Parmenides' poem.

The Basics

Parmenides' poem tells the story of how he came to know truth. He speaks of being carried in a chariot by maidens who brought him through the gates of Night and Day to the goddess who professed to know the way to the truth¹. Of this truth, she told him that there were three paths; only one of which was truth. The only path leading to truth is "that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be"². The second path, which the goddess claims is unlearnable, is "that it is not and that it is necessary for it not to be"³. The last path, also unlearnable, is that it both is and is not.

Of these three basic paths, the goddess tells Parmenides that the only path of truth is that "it is." To attempt to understand or explain the world in any other way would be unintelligible. So, the most basic Parmenidian conclusion is that "it is."

¹ Cohen, 2000, p. 36.

² *ibid.*, p. 37.

³ *ibid.*, p. 37.

Furth's Take On Parmenides

Furth explains Parmenides' three paths as the different ways we, as humans, attempt to understand the world through speech and thought. The basis of his interpretation is that Parmenides is attempting to lay out a model of appropriate language both for speech and thought. Furth explains that we are all moving through the world having misguided thoughts and meaningless conversations about the world. Parmenides, he says, is trying to distinguish between those ideas which are meaningful and those which are meaningless.

Furth interprets these three paths with clear attention to how they relate to a comprehensive model of meaningful thought. The last two — the two paths which are impossible — are presented as the way we think and talk about what is not: both where it is not possible for “what is not” to also be, and where “what is not” cannot both be and not be. The first, the only surviving path, is interpreted as that which we think and talk about such that “it is” and is impossible for it not to be.

The conclusion then, which Furth says follows directly from these premises, is that we are left with a lemma; that is, no negative statement can be both meaningful and true. In his article, Furth examines this reasoning as applied to both existential and predicative statements. His conclusions about the non-intelligibility of negative statements apply to both sets of statements. We are left now with a grim perspective on thought and speech: we are only able to intelligibly think or speak about that which is.

Objections to Parmenides

One very troubling objection to this view of Parmenides is that the very nature of its premises prohibits the premises from being presented. The premises and conclusion can be clearly viewed as follows:

- 1) Meaningful speech/language names something which exists
- 2) Names that attach to things which do not exist are meaningless

Now, apply these premises to the three paths of inquiry put forth in Parmenides' poem and one finds:

- 1) One may talk and think about what is
- 2) One may not talk or think about what is not

- 3) One may not talk or think about what is not with the sense that it both is and is not

Therefore,

- 4) All one may intelligibly think or say, is that it is.

Statements 2 and 3 which outline Parmenides' poem present the negative statements which explain what one may not talk or think about. In this case, he insists that it is incoherent to speak of a non-being. That is, one may not say "unicorns do not exist." Likewise, one may not say "this stalk of bamboo is not that tennis shoe." Parmenides' problem with the first statement is clear: if the unicorn does not exist, there is nothing there with which one could be acquainted. Hence, of this non-unicorn, nothing can meaningfully thought or said.

The problem with the second statement is much more subtle. The stalk of bamboo and the tennis shoe both exist. But, the tennis shoe and the stalk of bamboo are different. According to Parmenides, if one attempts to say that the stalk of bamboo is not that tennis shoe, one is attempting to attribute a characteristic of "not" to the bamboo. One is attempting to explain the bamboo in terms of something which the bamboo is not. Because Parmenides claims that one cannot meaningfully say or think anything which is not, one may not talk about what things the stalk of bamboo is not; one may only say that the stalk of bamboo is.

This distinction seems innocent enough. Unfortunately, when Parmenides makes the statement that one may not think or speak about that which is not, the statement itself becomes a sort of being. Meaningful thought and meaningful speech exist. He blatantly admits this when he allows us to make intelligible statements about "that which is". The inherent problem though, is that he takes his argument further. He goes on to specify what meaningful speech and thought are not: meaningful speech and thought are **not** thinking or speaking of "that which is not." The problem here, is that saying that we may NOT talk or think about "what is not" is, for intelligible thought and speech, the same as saying that the stalk of bamboo is not that tennis shoe — it is a meaningless statement. He claims that such negative statements are meaningless and unintelligible and yet he uses the same type of negative statement to explain his ideas. When these statements were applied to his own theory, they would themselves be meaningless and unintelligible.

Response To This Objection

Furth, and others⁴ have responded to this anticipated problem. There are multiple suggestions for avoiding this self-destruction, though none seem to do so adequately. Furth suggests that it is merely inherent in the nature of language that his ideas be presented to us in this form. Ideally, he says, Parmenides should say nothing, and rather, administer some sort of negative reinforcement to get his point across (1968, p. 131). Others have suggested that Parmenides uses the negative expressions as purgative means to an end. Here, I will look at the details of the two primary responses and evaluate how effective they are.

Furth's negative reinforcement is a moderately successful way to evade the problem of speaking/thinking about Parmenides' seemingly unintelligible ideas. This method suggests that instead of telling us what we cannot think/say (namely that we cannot think or speak about that which is not — Parmenides should get that idea across to us in another manner. Furth suggests that Parmenides do something like hit us over the head whenever we attempt to say something unintelligible.

There lies in this suggestion, an inherent problem. Parmenides could hit us over the head whenever we say something unintelligible until we grasp the idea that we cannot meaningfully think/say anything beyond “that which is.” By doing this he would avoid speaking about his notions of what meaningful speech or thought are not. However this does not change the fact that his theory is attempting to enlighten us about the differences between meaningful and meaningless thought. His theory rests on the notion that meaningful speech and thought are not a certain way.

Furth's negative reinforcement interpretation merely removes half of Parmenides' problem. Were Parmenides simply attempting to define meaningful speech, he would avoid having to speak about his ideas of not being by using negative reinforcement. The problem with this method of evasion lies in Parmenides' conclusion that we may not intelligibly say or think about “that which is not.” While he is able to side-step around speaking about “that which is not”, he is not able to rid his theory of the inherent ideas distinguishing intelligible from unintelligible thought. There is no way for

⁴ Furth, 1968; Miller, 1999; Crystal, 2002.

Parmenides to communicate his distinction without first possessing the idea that intelligible thought may not include thoughts about that which is not as such; if Parmenides is right that one may not intelligibly think or speak about “that which is not” his theory distracts the very moment he makes the distinction between meaningful and unintelligible thought.

The next important attempt to reconcile the self-destructing premises problem suggests that Parmenides’ statements about “what is not” be used as a sort of self-purging tool. That is, Parmenides uses the language as a way to specify the notion; once the point has been made, he disregards the original statements. This implies using his statements about what is not as a sort of ladder to get where he wants to be; then, once he is there, kicking the ladder aside.

Here though, we run into a problem similar to the problem with the notion of negative reinforcement. The idea is that once he has established the idea that we cannot think or speak about what is not, he is able to toss aside the statements which tell us that we cannot think or speak about that which is not. However, in order to have established an idea, he and others have to possess a certain understanding of that idea. In this case though, that idea is the distinction between what meaningful thought/speech is and what it is not.

It seems as though Parmenides is unable to take his argument further than to say that all we are able to think or speak intelligibly about is that which is. Though here too, we run into the problem of the idea of “that which is not.” Parmenides wishes for us to understand that the only thoughts we can meaningfully have or speak about are those which identify that “it is.” However, in order to understand the significance of only being able to intelligibly speak and think about that which is, we must also understand how that is different from “what is not” — thereby introducing the meaningless idea of “that which is not.” Human understanding works by classifying. To know that meaningful thought and speech can go no further than “what is”, one must understand “what is not.” One must understand why “what is not” is meaningless. And so, as difference necessarily involves that which something is not, Parmenides is unable to get away from using a notion that he deems unintelligible.

Final Thoughts

We have then, run into the proverbial brick wall. Parmenides is unable to say, imply, or in any other way present the idea that we are unable to intelligibly think or speak about that which is not. Furth, though seems to have some of the right ideas. If Parmenides as intending only to say something about a theory of meaningful language then his theory does not entirely self-destruct. He would be able to present the idea of what you may and may not speak intelligibly about without using language. It is, of course, the most efficient way to get the point across to humans, but it could be accomplished through other means — namely the negative reinforcement which Furth suggests. It is important to note though, that he has then limited his theory to that which you may or may not speak about. As Furth says: “It is not the doctrine itself that forces Parmenides to say “what is not” in his own right, nor even the fact that he wishes to explain it; it is that he is anxious to explain it to mortals, short in life and shorter in patience, so that they will understand.”⁵. We are still left with the fact that the doctrine itself forces Parmenides to think about that which is not. Furth takes a large step in making sense of fragments left by Parmenides, but he flounders when he attempts to make his theory so inclusive that it restricts both that which we can intelligibly say or think.

⁵ Furth, 1968, p. 132.

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