

Philosophy 21, Fall, 2004
Reconstruction and Criticism of Parmenides's Main Argument

Let us try to make precise Parmenides's main argument for the absolute unity of the universe.

1. It is impossible to think of what is not.
2. For any x, if x is a plurality, then x has at least two distinct components y and z.
3. For any x, y and z, if y and z are distinct components of x, then y is not z.
4. For any y and z, to think that y is not z is to think of what is not.
5. So, for any y and z, it is impossible to think that y is not z. [by 1 and 4]
6. So, for any x, y and z, there are no distinct components of x. [by 3 and 5]
7. So, there is no x which is a plurality. [by 2 and 6]
8. So, the universe is not a plurality, QED. [by 7]

This argument rests on four premises. If the premises are all true, and the argument is valid, then we must accept the conclusion. We do not accept the conclusion, so unless the argument is invalid, we must deny at least one of the premises. Should we deny one of the premises, or is the argument invalid?

It is hard to see anything wrong with premises 2 and 3, which seem to rest on the meanings of "plurality" and "distinct," respectively. Nor is there a flaw in steps 6 through 8. So we should direct our attention to premises 1 and 4 and (thus the conclusion 5). The standard objection to them is that although they may both be true when taken in a certain way, the ways of understanding "think of what is not" in each of the two premises are distinct and incompatible. Thus, the argument rests on an "equivocation," taking a phrase in different ways in distinct premises.

Let us begin with premise 4. The claim is that thinking that y is not z is thinking of what is not. This seems to be right. We must understand what it is for y not to be z (and for z not to be y) if we are to understand that they are distinct. Notice that we are thereby thinking something *specific*, not simply that "y is not," but concretely that "y is not z." For example, in thinking that I am not my father, I am distinguishing myself from a specific person, my father.

Or take Aristotle's way of explaining it. Suppose I try to think that my computer is not white. What I am doing, in his terminology, is separating (in thought) white from the object (my computer). As he puts it, "there is no other ground of separation except the fact that the white is different from the object in which the white exists."

On the other hand, suppose I were to say, without qualification, "My computer is not," rather than "My computer is not white." The only way to make sense of this would be that my computer is not an existing thing, or that it is not a "being," or that it is "nothing at all." As Aristotle put it, Parmenides "makes a mistake in assuming that being is to be spoken of absolutely." If we look at "thinking what is not" in this way, we might be able to make sense of Parmenides's claim that we cannot think what is not. If we try to think *absolutely nothing*, then we will fail. Our thought must be about something or it would not be a thought at all.

Now let us put this understanding of premise 1 together with our understanding of premise 4. Suppose we say that it is impossible to think of *absolutely nothing at all*. This is not the sense in which we would think that y is not z, because z could still be *something*. The restriction imposed by premise 1 is, as we say, very "weak." It does not rule out very much at all, and it certainly does not rule out what would need to rule out in order to make the argument valid. It seems that we *can* think of what is not something else, even if we cannot think what is not absolutely.