

*An Illustrated Brief History of*  
WESTERN  
PHILOSOPHY

FOR NORMAN KRETZMANN

*An Illustrated Brief History of*  
**WESTERN  
PHILOSOPHY**

ANTHONY KENNY



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# PREFACE

Fifty-two years ago Bertrand Russell wrote a one-volume *History of Western Philosophy*, which is still in demand. When it was suggested to me that I might write a modern equivalent, I was at first daunted by the challenge. Russell was one of the greatest philosophers of the century, and he won a Nobel Prize for Literature: how could anyone venture to compete? However, the book is not generally regarded as one of Russell's best, and he is notoriously unfair to some of the greatest philosophers of the past, such as Aristotle and Kant. Moreover, he operated with assumptions about the nature of philosophy and philosophical method which would be questioned by most philosophers at the present time. There does indeed seem to be room for a book which would offer a comprehensive overview of the history of the subject from a contemporary philosophical viewpoint.

Russell's book, however inaccurate in detail, is entertaining and stimulating and it has given many people their first taste of the excitement of philosophy. I aim in this book to reach the same audience as Russell: I write for the general educated reader, who has no special philosophical training, and who wishes to learn the contribution that philosophy has made to the culture we live in. I have tried to avoid using any philosophical terms without explaining them when they first appear. The dialogues of Plato offer a model here: Plato was able to make philosophical points without using any technical vocabulary, because none existed when he wrote. For this reason, among others, I have treated several of his dialogues at some length in the second and third chapters of the book.

The quality of Russell's writing which I have been at most pains to imitate is the clarity and vigour of his style. (He once wrote that his own models as prose writers were Baedeker and John Milton.) A reader new to philosophy is bound to find some parts of this book difficult to follow. There is no shallow end in philosophy, and every novice philosopher has to struggle to keep his head above water. But I have done my best to ensure that the reader does not have to face any difficulties in comprehension which are not intrinsic to the subject matter.

It is not possible to explain in advance what philosophy is about. The best way to learn philosophy is to read the works of great philosophers. This book is meant

to show the reader what topics have interested philosophers and what methods they have used to address them. By themselves, summaries of philosophical doctrines are of little use: a reader is cheated if merely told a philosopher's conclusions without an indication of the methods by which they were reached. For this reason I do my best to present, and criticize, the reasoning used by philosophers in support of their theses. I mean no disrespect by engaging thus in argument with the great minds of the past. That is the way to take a philosopher seriously: not to parrot his text, but to battle with it, and learn from its strengths and weaknesses.

Philosophy is simultaneously the most exciting and the most frustrating of subjects. Philosophy is exciting because it is the broadest of all disciplines, exploring the basic concepts which run through all our talking and thinking on any topic whatever. Moreover, it can be undertaken without any special preliminary training or instruction; anyone can do philosophy who is willing to think hard and follow a line of reasoning. But philosophy is also frustrating, because, unlike scientific or historical disciplines, it gives no new information about nature or society. Philosophy aims to provide not knowledge, but understanding; and its history shows how difficult it has been, even for the very greatest minds, to develop a complete and coherent vision. It can be said without exaggeration that no human being has yet succeeded in reaching a complete and coherent understanding even of the language we use to think our simplest thoughts. It is no accident that the man whom many regard as the founder of philosophy as a self-conscious discipline, Socrates, claimed that the only wisdom he possessed was his knowledge of his own ignorance.

Philosophy is neither science nor religion, though historically it has been entwined with both. I have tried to bring out how in many areas philosophical thought grew out of religious reflection and grew into empirical science. Many issues which were treated by great past philosophers would nowadays no longer count as philosophical. Accordingly, I have concentrated on those areas of their endeavour which would still be regarded as philosophical today, such as ethics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind.

Like Russell I have made a personal choice of the philosophers to include in the history, and the length of time to be devoted to each. I have not, however, departed as much as Russell did from the proportions commonly accepted in the philosophical canon. Like him, I have included discussions of non-philosophers who have influenced philosophical thinking; that is why Darwin and Freud appear on my list of subjects. I have devoted considerable space to ancient and medieval philosophy, though not as much as Russell, who at the mid-point of his book had not got further than Alcuin and Charlemagne. I have ended the story at the time of the Second World War, and I have not attempted to cover twentieth-century continental philosophy.

Again like Russell, I have sketched in the social, historical, and religious background to the lives of the philosophers, at greater length when treating of remote periods and very briefly as we approach modern times.

## PREFACE

I have not written for professional philosophers, though of course I hope that they will find my presentation accurate, and will feel able to recommend my book as background reading for their students. To those who are already familiar with the subject my writing will bear the marks of my own philosophical training, which was first in the scholastic philosophy which takes its inspiration from the Middle Ages, and then in the school of linguistic analysis which has been dominant for much of the present century in the English-speaking world.

My hope in publishing this book is that it may convey to those curious about philosophy something of the excitement of the subject, and point them towards the actual writings of the great thinkers of the past.

I am indebted to the editorial staff at Blackwells, and to Anthony Grahame, for assistance in the preparation of the book; and to three anonymous referees who made helpful suggestions for its improvement. I am particularly grateful to my wife, Nancy Kenny, who read the entire book in manuscript and struck out many passages as unintelligible to the non-philosopher. I am sure that my readers will share my gratitude to her for sparing them unprofitable toil.

*January 1998*

I am grateful to Dr D. L. Owen of the University of Minnesota and Dr I. J. de Kreiner of Buenos Aires who pointed out a number of small errors in the first edition of this work.

*January 2006*

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# I

## PHILOSOPHY IN ITS INFANCY

The earliest Western philosophers were Greeks: men who spoke dialects of the Greek language, who were familiar with the Greek poems of Homer and Hesiod, and who had been brought up to worship Greek Gods like Zeus, Apollo, and Aphrodite. They lived not on the mainland of Greece, but in outlying centres of Greek culture, on the southern coasts of Italy or on the western coast of what is now Turkey. They flourished in the sixth-century BC, the century which began with the deportation of the Jews to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar and ended with the foundation of the Roman Republic after the expulsion of the young city's kings.

These early philosophers were also early scientists, and several of them were also religious leaders. In the beginning the distinction between science, religion, and philosophy was not as clear as it became in later centuries. In the sixth century, in Asia Minor and Greek Italy, there was an intellectual cauldron in which elements of all these future disciplines fermented together. Later, religious devotees, philosophical disciples, and scientific inheritors could all look back to these thinkers as their forefathers.

**Pythagoras**, who was honoured in antiquity as the first to bring philosophy to the Greek world, illustrates in his own person the characteristics of this early period. Born in Samos, off the Turkish coast, he migrated to Croton on the toe of Italy. He has a claim to be the founder of geometry as a systematic study (see Figure 1). His name became familiar to many generations of European school-children because he was credited with the first proof that the square on the long side of a right-angled triangle is equal in area to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. But he also founded a religious community with a set of ascetic and ceremonial rules, the best-known of which was a prohibition on the eating of beans. He taught the doctrine of the transmigration of souls: human beings had souls which were separable from their bodies, and at death a person's soul might migrate into another kind of animal. For this reason, he taught his disciples to abstain from meat; once, it is said, he stopped a man whipping a puppy, claiming

to have recognized in its whimper the voice of a dear dead friend. He believed that the soul, having migrated into different kinds of animal in succession, was eventually reincarnated as a human being. He himself claimed to remember having been, some centuries earlier, a hero at the siege of Troy.

The doctrine of the transmigration of souls was called in Greek 'metempsychosis'. Faustus, in Christopher Marlowe's play, having sold his soul to the devil, and about to be carried off to the Christian Hell, expresses the desperate wish that Pythagoras had got things right.

Ah, Pythagoras' metempsychosis, were that true  
This soul should fly from me, and I be chang'd  
Unto some brutish beast.

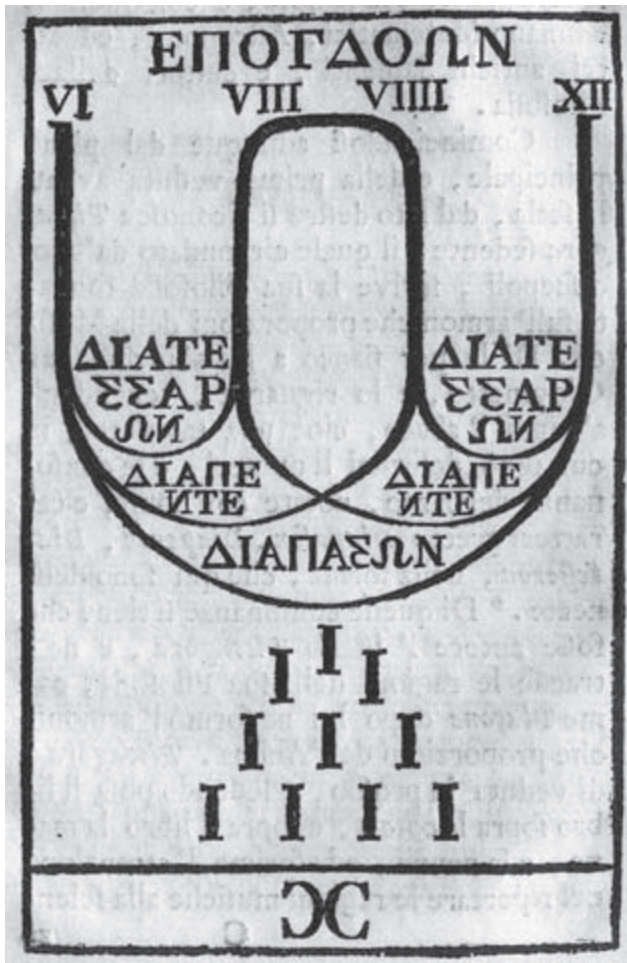
Pythagoras' disciples wrote biographies of him full of wonders, crediting him with second sight and the gift of bilocation, and making him a son of Apollo.

## THE MILESIAANS

Pythagoras' life is lost in legend. Rather more is known about a group of philosophers, roughly contemporary with him, who lived in the city of Miletus in Ionia, or Greek Asia. The first of these was **Thales**, who was old enough to have foretold an eclipse in 585. Like Pythagoras, he was a geometer, though he is credited with rather simpler theorems, such as the one that a circle is bisected by its diameter. Like Pythagoras, he mingled geometry with religion: when he discovered how to inscribe a right-angled triangle inside a circle, he sacrificed an ox to the gods. But his geometry had a practical side: he was able to measure the height of the pyramids by measuring their shadows. He was also interested in astronomy: he identified the constellation of the little bear, and pointed out its use in navigation. He was, we are told, the first Greek to fix the length of the year as 365 days, and he made estimates of the sizes of the sun and moon.

Thales was perhaps the first philosopher to ask questions about the structure and nature of the cosmos as a whole. He maintained that the earth rests on water, like a log floating in a stream. (Aristotle asked, later: what does the water rest on?) But earth and its inhabitants did not just rest on water: in some sense, so Thales believed, they were all made out of water. Even in antiquity, people could only conjecture the grounds for this belief: was it because all animals and plants need water, or because the seeds of everything are moist?

Because of his theory about the cosmos Thales was called by later writers a physicist or philosopher of nature ('*physis*' is the Greek word for 'nature'). Though he was a physicist, Thales was not a materialist: he did not, that is to say, believe that nothing existed except physical matter. One of the two sayings which have



**Figure 1** The Pythagoreans discovered the relationships between frequency and pitch in the notes of the octave scale, as shown in this diagram held up for Pythagoras in Raphael's *School of Athens*.

(© Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts)

come down from him verbatim is 'everything is full of gods'. What he meant is perhaps indicated by his claim that the magnet, because it moves iron, has a soul. He did not believe in Pythagoras' doctrine of transmigration, but he did maintain the immortality of the soul.

Thales was no mere theorist. He was a political and military adviser to King Croesus of Lydia, and helped him to ford a river by diverting a stream. Foreseeing an unusually good olive crop, he took a lease on all the oil-mills, and made a fortune. None the less, he acquired a reputation for unworldly absent-mindedness,

as appears in a letter which an ancient fiction-writer feigned to have been written to Pythagoras from Miletus:

Thales has met an unkind fate in his old age. He went out from the court of his house at night, as was his custom, with his maidservant to view the stars, and forgetting where he was, as he gazed, he got to the edge of a steep slope and fell over. In such wise have the Milesians lost their astronomer. Let us who were his pupils cherish his memory, and let it be cherished by our children and pupils.

A more significant thinker was a younger contemporary and pupil of Thales called **Anaximander**, a savant who made the first map of the world and of the stars, and invented both a sundial and an all-weather clock. He taught that the earth was cylindrical in shape, like a section of a pillar. Around the world were gigantic tyres, full of fire; each tyre had a hole through which the fire could be seen, and the holes were the sun and moon and stars. The largest tyre was twenty-eight times as great as the earth, and the fire seen through its orifice was the sun. Blockages in the holes explained eclipses and the phases of the moon. The fire within these tyres was once a great ball of flame surrounding the infant earth, which had gradually burst into fragments which enrolled themselves in bark-like casings. Eventually the heavenly bodies would return to the original fire.

The things from which existing things come into being are also the things into which they are destroyed, in accordance with what must be. For they give justice and reparation to one another for their injustice in accordance with the arrangement of time.

Here physical cosmogony is mingled not so much with theology as with a grand cosmic ethic: the several elements, no less than men and gods, must keep within bounds everlastingly fixed by nature.

Though fire played an important part in Anaximander's cosmogony, it would be wrong to think that he regarded it as the ultimate constituent of the world, like Thales' water. The basic element of everything, he maintained, could be neither water nor fire, nor anything similar, or else it would gradually take over the universe. It had to be something with no definite nature, which he called the 'infinite' or 'unlimited'. 'The infinite is the first principle of things that exist: it is eternal and ageless, and it contains all the worlds.'

Anaximander was an early proponent of evolution. The human beings we know cannot always have existed, he argued. Other animals are able to look after themselves, soon after birth, while humans require a long period of nursing; if humans had originally been as they are now they could not have survived. He maintained that in an earlier age there were fish-like animals within which human embryos grew to puberty before bursting forth into the world. Because of this thesis, though he was not otherwise a vegetarian, he preached against the eating of fish.

The infinite of Anaximander was a concept too rarefied for some of his successors. His younger contemporary at Miletus, **Anaximenes**, while agreeing that the ultimate element could not be fire or water, claimed that it was air, from which everything else had come into being. In its stable state, air is invisible, but when it is moved and condensed it becomes first wind and then cloud and then water, and finally water condensed becomes mud and stone. Rarefied air, presumably, became fire, completing the gamut of the elements. In support of his theory, Anaximenes appealed to experience: ‘Men release both hot and cold from their mouths; for the breath is cooled when it is compressed and condensed by the lips, but when the mouth is relaxed and it is exhaled it becomes hot by reason of its rareness’. Thus rarefaction and condensation can generate everything out of the underlying air. This is naive, but it is naive science: it is not mythology, like the classical and biblical stories of the flood and of the rainbow.

Anaximenes was the first flat-earther: he thought that the heavenly bodies did not travel under the earth, as his predecessors had claimed, but rotated round our heads like a felt cap. He was also a flat-mooner and a flat-sunner: ‘the sun and the moon and the other heavenly bodies, which are all fiery, ride the air because of their flatness’.

## XENOPHANES

Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes were a trio of hardy and ingenious speculators. Their interests mark them out as the forebears of modern scientists rather more than of modern philosophers. The matter is different when we come to **Xenophanes** of Colophon (near present-day Izmir), who lived into the fifth century. His themes and methods are recognizably the same as those of philosophers through succeeding ages. In particular he was the first philosopher of religion, and some of the arguments he propounded are still taken seriously by his successors.

Xenophanes detested the religion found in the poems of Homer and Hesiod, whose stories blasphemously attributed to the gods theft, trickery, adultery, and all kinds of behaviour that, among humans, would be shameful and blameworthy. A poet himself, he savaged Homeric theology in satirical verses, now lost. It was not that he claimed himself to possess a clear insight into the nature of the divine; on the contrary, he wrote, ‘the clear truth about the gods no man has ever seen nor any man will ever know’. But he did claim to know where these legends of the gods came from: human beings have a tendency to picture everybody and everything as like themselves. Ethiopians, he said, make their gods dark and snub-nosed, while Thracians make them red-haired and blue-eyed. The belief that gods have any kind of human form at all is childish anthropomorphism. ‘If cows and horses or lions had hands and could draw, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, making their bodies similar in shape to their own.’

Though no one would ever have a clear vision of God, Xenophanes thought that as science progressed, mortals could learn more than had been originally revealed. 'There is one god,' he wrote, 'greatest among gods and men, similar to mortals neither in shape nor in thought.' God was neither limited nor infinite, but altogether non-spatial: that which is divine is a living thing which sees as a whole, thinks as a whole and hears as a whole.

In a society which worshipped many gods, he was a resolute monotheist. There was only one God, he argued, because God is the most powerful of all things, and if there were more than one, then they would all have to share equal power. God cannot have an origin; because what comes into existence does so either from what is like or what is unlike, and both alternatives lead to absurdity in the case of God. God is neither infinite nor finite, neither changeable nor changeless. But though God is in a manner unthinkable, he is not unthinking. On the contrary, 'Remote and effortless, with his mind alone he governs all there is'.

Xenophanes' monotheism is remarkable not so much because of its originality as because of its philosophical nature. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah and the authors of the book of Isaiah had already proclaimed that there was only one true God. But while they took their stance on the basis of a divine oracle, Xenophanes offered to prove his point by rational argument. In terms of a distinction not drawn until centuries later, Isaiah proclaimed a revealed religion, while Xenophanes was a natural theologian.

Xenophanes' philosophy of nature is less exciting than his philosophy of religion. His views are variations on themes proposed by his Milesian predecessors. He took as his ultimate element not water, or air, but earth. The earth, he thought, reached down beneath us to infinity. The sun, he maintained, came into existence each day from a congregation of tiny sparks. But it was not the only sun; indeed there were infinitely many. Xenophanes' most original contribution to science was to draw attention to the existence of fossils: he pointed out that in Malta there were to be found impressed in rocks the shapes of all sea-creatures. From this he drew the conclusion that the world passed through a cycle of alternating terrestrial and marine phases.

## HERACLITUS

The last, and the most famous, of these early Ionian philosophers was **Heraclitus**, who lived early in the fifth century in the great metropolis of Ephesus, where later St Paul was to preach, dwell, and be persecuted. The city, in Heraclitus' day as in St Paul's, was dominated by the great temple of the fertility goddess Artemis. Heraclitus denounced the worship of the temple: praying to statues was like whispering gossip to an empty house, and offering sacrifices to purify oneself

from sin was like trying to wash off mud with mud. He visited the temple from time to time, but only to play dice with the children there – much better company than statesmen, he said, refusing to take any part in the city's politics. In Artemis' temple, too, he deposited his three-book treatise on philosophy and politics, a work, now lost, of notorious difficulty, so puzzling that some thought it a text of physics, others a political tract. ('What I understand of it is excellent,' Socrates said later, 'what I don't understand may well be excellent also; but only a deep-sea diver could get to the bottom of it.')

In this book Heraclitus spoke of a great Word or Logos which holds forever and in accordance with which all things come about. He wrote in paradoxes, claiming that the universe is both divisible and indivisible, generated and ungenerated, mortal and immortal, Word and Eternity, Father and Son, God and Justice. No wonder that everybody, as he complained, found his Logos quite incomprehensible.

If Xenophanes, in his style of argument, resembled modern professional philosophers, Heraclitus was much more like the popular modern idea of the philosopher as guru. He had nothing but contempt for his philosophical predecessors. Much learning, he said, does not teach a man sense; otherwise it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras and Xenophanes. Heraclitus did not argue, he pronounced: he was a master of pregnant dicta, profound in sound and obscure in sense. His delphic style was perhaps an imitation of the oracle of Apollo, which, in his own words, 'neither tells, nor conceals, but gestures'. Among Heraclitus' best-known sayings are these:

The way up and the way down is one and the same.

Hidden harmony is better than manifest harmony.

War is the father of all and the king of all; it proves some people gods, and some people men; it makes some people slaves and some people free.

A dry soul is wisest and best.

For souls it is death to become water.

A drunk is a man led by a boy.

Gods are mortal, humans immortal, living their death, dying their life.

The soul is a spider and the body is its web.

That last remark was explained by Heraclitus thus: just as a spider, in the middle of a web, notices as soon as a fly breaks one of its threads and rushes thither as if in grief, so a person's soul, if some part of the body is hurt, hurries quickly there as if unable to bear the hurt. But if the soul is a busy spider, it is also, according to Heraclitus, a spark of the substance of the fiery stars.

In Heraclitus' cosmology fire has the role which water had in Thales and air had in Anaximenes. The world is an ever-burning fire: all things come from fire and go into fire; 'all things are exchangeable for fire, as goods are for gold and gold for goods'. There is a downward path, whereby fire turns to water and water



to earth, and an upward path, whereby earth turns to water, water to air, and air to fire. The death of earth is to become water, and the death of water is to become air, and the death of air is to become fire. There is a single world, the same for all, made neither by god nor man; it has always existed and always will exist, passing, in accordance with cycles laid down by fate, through a phase of kindling, which is war, and a phase of burning, which is peace.

Heraclitus' vision of the transmutation of the elements in an ever-burning fire has caught the imagination of poets down to the present age. T. S. Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, puts this gloss on Heraclitus' statement that water was the death of earth.

There are flood and drouth  
Over the eyes and in the mouth,  
Dead water and dead sand  
Contending for the upper hand.  
The parched eviscerate soil  
Gapes at the vanity of toil,  
Laughs without mirth  
This is the death of earth.

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a poem entitled 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire', full of imagery drawn from Heraclitus.

Million fueled, nature's bonfire burns on.  
But quench her bonniest, dearest to her, her clearest-served spark,  
Man, how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone!  
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, death blots black out . . .

Hopkins seeks comfort from this in the promise of the final resurrection – a Christian doctrine, of course, but one which itself finds its anticipation in a passage of Heraclitus which speaks of humans rising up and becoming wakeful guardians of the living and the dead. 'Fire', he said, 'will come and judge and convict all things.'

In the ancient world the aspect of Heraclitus' teaching which most impressed philosophers was not so much the vision of the world as a bonfire, as the corollary that everything in the world was in a state of constant change and flux. Everything moves on, he said, and nothing remains; the world is like a flowing stream. If we stand by the river bank, the water we see beneath us is not the same two moments together, and we cannot put our feet twice into the same water. So far, so good; but Heraclitus went on to say that we cannot even step twice into the same river. This seems false, whether taken literally or allegorically; but, as we shall see, the sentiment was highly influential in later Greek philosophy.



## THE SCHOOL OF PARMENIDES

The philosophical scene is very different when we turn to **Parmenides**, who was born in the closing years of the sixth century. Though probably a pupil of Xenophanes, Parmenides spent most of his life not in Ionia but in Italy, in a town called Elea, seventy miles or so south of Naples. He is said to have drawn up an excellent set of laws for his city; but we know nothing of his politics or political philosophy. He is the first philosopher whose writing has come down to us in any quantity: he wrote a philosophical poem in clumsy verse, of which we possess about a hundred and twenty lines. In his writing he devoted himself not to cosmology, like the early Milesians, nor to theology, like Xenophanes, but to a new and universal study which embraced and transcended both: the discipline which later philosophers called 'ontology'. Ontology gets its name from a Greek word which in the singular is '*on*' and in the plural '*onta*': it is this word – the present participle of the Greek verb 'to be' – which defines Parmenides' subject matter. His remarkable poem can claim to be the founding charter of ontology.

To explain what ontology is, and what Parmenides' poem is about, it is necessary to go into detail about points of grammar and translation. The reader's patience with this pedantry will be rewarded, for between Parmenides and the present-day, ontology was to have a vast and luxuriant growth, and only a sure grasp of what Parmenides meant, and what he failed to mean, enables one to see one's way clear over the centuries through the ontological jungle.

Parmenides' subject is '*to on*', which translated literally means 'the being'. Before explaining the verb, we need to say something about the article. In English we sometimes use an adjective, preceded by the definite article, to refer to a class of people or things; as when we say 'the rich' to mean people who are rich, and 'the poor' to mean those who are poor. The corresponding idiom was much more frequent in Greek than in English: Greeks could use the expression 'the hot' to mean things that are hot, and 'the cold' to mean things that are cold. Thus, for instance, Anaximenes said that air was made visible by the hot and the cold and the moist and the moving. Instead of an adjective after 'the' we may use a participle: as when we speak, for instance, of a hospice for the dying, or a playgroup for the rising fours. Once again, the corresponding construction was possible, and frequent, in Greek; and it is this idiom which occurs in 'the being'. 'The being' is that which is be-ing, in the same way as 'the dying' are those who are dying.

A verbal form like 'dying' has, in English, two uses: it may be a participle, as in 'the dying should not be neglected', or it may be a verbal noun, as in 'dying can be a long-drawn-out business'. 'Seeing is believing' is equivalent to 'To see is to believe'. When philosophers write treatises about being, they are commonly using the word as a verbal noun: they are offering to explain what it is for something *to be*. That is not, or not mainly, what Parmenides is about: he is concerned with *the being*, that is to say, with whatever is, as it were, doing the be-ing. To distinguish

this sense of ‘being’ from its use as a verbal noun, and to avoid the strangeness of the literal ‘the being’ in English, it has been traditional to dignify Parmenides’ topic with a capital ‘B’. We will follow this convention, whereby ‘Being’ means whatever is engaged in being, and ‘being’ is the verbal noun equivalent to the infinitive ‘to be’.

Very well; but if that is what Being is, in order to make out what Parmenides is talking about we must also know what being is, that is to say, what it is for something to be. We can understand what it is for something to be blue, or to be a puppy: but what is it for something to just be, period? One possibility which suggests itself is this: being is existing, or, in other words, to be is to exist. If so, then Being is all that exists.

In English ‘to be’ can certainly mean ‘to exist’. When Hamlet asks the question ‘to be or not to be?’ he is debating whether or not to put an end to his existence. In the Bible we read that Rachel wept for her children ‘and would not be comforted because they are not’. This usage in English is poetic and archaic, and it is not natural to say such things as ‘The Tower of London is, and the Crystal Palace is not’, when we mean that the former building is still in existence while the latter is no longer there. But the corresponding statement would be quite natural in ancient Greek; and this sense of ‘be’ is certainly involved in Parmenides’ talk of Being.

If this were all that was involved, then we could say simply that Being is all that exists, or if you like, all that there is, or again, everything that is in being. That is a broad enough topic, in all conscience. One could not reproach Parmenides, as Hamlet reproached Horatio, by saying:

There are more things in heaven and earth  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

For whatever there is in heaven and earth will fall under the heading of Being.

Unfortunately for us, however, matters are more complicated than this. Existence is not all that Parmenides has in mind when he talks of Being. He is interested in the verb ‘to be’ not only as it occurs in sentences such as ‘Troy is no more’ but as it occurs in any kind of sentence whatever – whether ‘Penelope is a woman’ or ‘Achilles is a hero’ or ‘Menelaus is gold-haired’ or ‘Telemachus is six-feet high’. So understood, Being is not just that which exists, but that of which any sentence containing ‘is’ is true. Equally, being is not just existing (being, period) but being anything whatever: being red or being blue, being hot or being cold, and so on *ad nauseam*. Taken in this sense, Being is a much more difficult realm to comprehend.

After this long preamble, we are in a position to look at some of the lines of Parmenides’ mysterious poem.

What you can call and think must Being be  
For Being can, and nothing cannot, be.

The first line stresses the vast extension of Being: if you can call Argos a dog, or if you can think of the moon, then Argos and the moon must be, must count as part of Being. But why does the second line tell us that nothing cannot be? Well, anything that can be at all, must be something or other; it cannot be just nothing.

Parmenides introduces, to correspond with Being, the notion of Unbeing.

Never shall this prevail, that Unbeing is;  
Rein in your mind from any thought like this.

If Being is that of which something or other, no matter what, is true, then Unbeing is that of which nothing at all is true. That, surely, is nonsense. Not only can it not exist, it cannot even be thought of.

Unbeing you won't grasp – it can't be done –  
Nor utter; being thought and being are one.

Given his definition of 'being' and 'Unbeing' Parmenides is surely right here. If I tell you that I am thinking of something, and you ask me what kind of thing I'm thinking of, you will be puzzled if I say that it isn't any kind of thing. If you then ask me what it is like, and I say that it isn't like anything at all, you will be quite baffled. 'Can you then tell me anything at all about it?' you may ask. If I say no, then you may justly conclude that I am not really thinking of anything or indeed thinking at all. In that sense, it is true that to be thought of and to be are one and the same.

We can agree with Parmenides thus far; but we may note that there is an important difference between saying

Unbeing cannot be thought of

and saying

What does not exist cannot be thought of.

The first sentence is, in the sense explained, true; the second is false. If it were true, we could prove that things exist simply by thinking of them; but whereas lions and unicorns can both be thought of, lions exist and unicorns don't. Given the convolutions of his language, it is hard to be sure whether Parmenides thought that the two statements were equivalent. Some of his successors have accused him of that confusion; others have seemed to share it themselves.

We have agreed with Parmenides in rejecting Unbeing. But it is harder to follow Parmenides in some of the conclusions he draws from the inconceivability of Unbeing and the universality of Being. This is how he proceeds.

One road there is, signposted in this wise:  
 Being was never born and never dies;  
 Foursquare, unmoved, no end it will allow  
 It never was, nor will be; all is now,  
 One and continuous. How could it be born  
 Or whence could it be grown? Unbeing? No –  
 That mayn't be said or thought; we cannot go  
 So far ev'n to deny it is. What need,  
 Early or late, could Being from Unbeing seed?  
 Thus it must altogether be or not.  
 Nor to Unbeing will belief allot  
 An offspring other than itself . . .

'Nothing can come from nothing' is a principle which has been accepted by many thinkers far less intrepid than Parmenides. But not many have drawn the conclusion that Being has no beginning and no end, and is not subject to temporal change. To see why Parmenides drew this conclusion, we have to assume that he thought that 'being water' or 'being air' was related to 'being' in the same way as 'running fast' and 'running slowly' is related to 'running'. Someone who first runs fast and then runs slowly, all the time goes on running; similarly, for Parmenides, stuff which is first water and then is air goes on being. When a kettle of water boils away, this may be, in Heraclitus' words, the death of water and the birth of air; but, for Parmenides, it is not the death or birth of Being. Whatever changes may take place, they are not changes from being to non-being; they are all changes within Being, not changes of Being.

Being must be everlasting; because it could not have come from Unbeing, and it could never turn into Unbeing, because there is no such thing. If Being could – *per impossibile* – come from nothing, what could make it do so at one time rather than another? Indeed, what is it that differentiates past from present and future? If it is no kind of being, then time is unreal; if it is some kind of being, then it is all part of Being, and past, present and future are all one Being.

By similar arguments Parmenides seeks to show that Being is undivided and unlimited. What would divide Being from Being? Unbeing? In that case the division is unreal. Being? In that case there is no division, but continuous Being. What could set limits to Being? Unbeing cannot do anything to anything; and if we imagine that Being is limited by Being, then Being has not yet reached its limits.

To think a thing's to think it is, no less.  
 Apart from Being, whate'er we may express,  
 Thought does not reach. Naught is or will be  
 Beyond Being's bounds, since Destiny's decree  
 Fetters it whole and still. All things are names  
 Which the credulity of mortals frames –

Birth and destruction, being all or none,  
Changes of place, and colours come and gone.

Parmenides' poem is in two parts: the Way of Truth and the Way of Seeming. The Way of Truth contains the doctrine of Being, which we have been examining; the Way of Seeming deals with the world of the senses, the world of change and colour, the world of empty names. We need not spend time on the Way of Seeming, since what Parmenides tells us about this is not very different from the cosmological speculations of the Ionian thinkers. It was his Way of Truth which set an agenda for many ages of subsequent philosophy.

The problem facing future philosophers was this. Common sense suggests that the world contains things which endure, such as rocky mountains, and things which constantly change, such as rushing streams. On the one hand, Heraclitus had pronounced that at a fundamental level, even the most solid things were in perpetual flux; on the other hand, Parmenides had argued that even what is most apparently fleeting is, at a fundamental level, static and unchanging. Can the doctrines of either Heraclitus or Parmenides be refuted? Is there any way in which they can be reconciled? For Plato, and his successors, this was a major task for philosophy to address.

Parmenides' pupil **Melissus** (*fl.* 441) put into plain prose the ideas which Parmenides had expounded in opaque verse. From these ideas he drew out two



**Figure 2** Parmenides and Heraclitus as portrayed by Raphael in the *School of Athens (detail)*.  
(Vatican, Stanza della Segnatura; photo: Bridgeman Art Library)

particular shocking consequences. One was that pain was unreal, because it implied a deficiency of being. The other was that there was no such thing as an empty space or vacuum: it would have to be a piece of Unbeing. Hence, motion was impossible, because the bodies which occupy space have no room to move into.

**Zeno**, a friend of Parmenides some twenty-five years his junior, developed an ingenious series of paradoxes designed to show beyond doubt that movement was inconceivable. The best known of these purports to prove that a fast mover can never overtake a slow mover. Let us suppose that Achilles, a fast runner, runs a hundred-yard race with a tortoise which can only run a quarter as fast, giving the tortoise a forty-yard start. By the time Achilles has reached the forty-yard mark, the tortoise is still ahead, by ten yards. By the time Achilles has run those ten yards, the tortoise is ahead by two-and-a-half yards. Each time Achilles makes up the gap, the tortoise opens up a new, shorter, gap ahead of him; so it seems that he can never overtake him. Another, simpler, argument sought to prove that no one could ever run from one end of a stadium to another, because to reach the far end you must first reach the half-way point, to reach the half-way point you must first reach the point half way to that, and so *ad infinitum*.

These and other arguments of Zeno assume that distances are infinitely divisible. This assumption was challenged by some later thinkers, and accepted by others. Aristotle, who preserved the puzzles for us, was able to disentangle some of the ambiguities. However, it was not for many centuries that the paradoxes were given solutions that satisfied both philosophers and mathematicians.

Plato tells us that Parmenides, when he was a grey-haired sixty-five-year-old, travelled with Zeno from Elea to a festival in Athens, and there met the young Socrates. This would have been about 450 BC. Some scholars think the story a dramatic invention; but the meeting, if it took place, was a splendid inauguration of the golden age of Greek philosophy in Athens. We shall turn to Athenian philosophy shortly; but in the meantime there remain to be considered another Italian thinker, Empedocles of Acragas, and two more Ionian physicists, Leucippus and Democritus.

## EMPEDOCLES

**Empedocles** flourished in the middle of the fifth century and was a citizen of the town on the south coast of Sicily which is now Agrigento. He is reputed to have been an active politician, an ardent democrat who was offered, but refused, the kingship of his city. In later life he was banished and practised philosophy in exile. He was renowned as a physician, but according to the ancient biographers he cured by magic as well as by drugs, and he even raised to life a woman thirty days dead. In his last years, they tell us, he came to believe that he was a god, and met his death by leaping into the volcano Etna to establish his divinity.