The Atomists’ Solution

The theories of the atomists evolved directly from the ideas of Parmenides. Because of this, both philosophies are very similar. However, even relatively small differences can mean a whole lot, especially when it comes to understanding the fundamental nature of reality. The differences between the atomists and Parmenides patch up many of the problems plaguing Parmenides beliefs and lead to a much more credible and accurate depiction of the nature of reality.

At their cores, the atomists and Parmenides believed the same thing. They thought that reality and being could be distilled down to one singular sort of entity. That the complex world of many varied sights, sounds, feelings and the like were all just artificial, and not the true nature of reality. However, they split in two important areas. Parmenides believed the whole of being was one homogenous existence. The atomists on the other hand took the whole to be made of many different parts, different atoms. In addition, the atomists included a void in their model of the world. In this way, the atomists preserved the portion of Parmenides model that is logical and based upon reason, while tying it back to the real world of experiences and providing an explanation for the world that we perceive.

What many people applaud Parmenides for is his fully rational approach to reasoning about the nature of reality. From one law, the law of noncontradiction, he is able to describe the set of properties that the true nature of being by necessity possess, and “from this point remarkable conclusions follow” (pg. 28). Zeno goes on to help cement this belief by proving that our senses are unreliable, and that common sense perceptions of reality are self contradictory. However, the problem with this fully rationalistic approach is that in order to follow a line of reasoning, you must start with some base assumption, and that base assumption is almost always derived by our senses. In the case of Parmenides concept of being, his fundamental assumption is the law of noncontradiction. And indeed, this law can only be verified by our senses, and nothing else.

This is why a fully rational explanation for reality is not possible. Our senses cannot reconcile Parmenidean beliefs that “the manyness of things, their changeableness, and their motion are all illusory” (pg. 33). Instead, an explanation that takes observation and combines it with logic is preferable. And this problem exactly is what is solved by the introduction of many “ones” and a void. Parmenides weakness was that his belief system completely discounted the world of experience as fake and false, and so did not provide any sort of explanation of what we were seeing, feeling, and experiencing. And atomism has the perfect solution.

By breaking down being into multiple different copies, you are able to preserve the best parts of Parmenides philosophy, namely the extreme rationalism, while providing a bridge between the world of perception and the world of truth. By having the different atoms of reality interact in varying ways, the world of perception is created, without defying the world of reality. In addition to breaking the world up, adding a void makes it such that the multiple beings are capable of motion and interaction within this world. It is in this way that the addition of many “beings” and voids that the atomists belief is able to reconcile observed reality with logical thought.

Atomism preserves the rationality of Parmenidean thought, while managing to bridge the gap between reality and perception effectively. In recent years, the atomic model of the universe has provided even more evidence to support this theory. And this is why atomism is a more accurate view of the world.

*All information taken from* The Great Conversation: Volume I, *and information given in class*