

**The
Parmenides
Problem**

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William Call

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Preface

The “Parmenides Problem” is not difficult to understand. We think we experience actual objects and that those objects exist apart from us. We think they go on existing whether we experience them or not.

Apart from the objects we experience, we have ideas in our minds. I see the desk in front of me, but I also have the idea of desk in my mind. When I point to my desk and say, “This desk is flat,” I’m talking about the desk I experience with my senses (that I can see, touch, smell, etc.). When I say, “Desks are flat,” I’m talking about the idea of desk in my mind. The idea of desk isn’t something I experience with my senses; it is a thought in my mind. The desk I experience is a particular desk; the idea of desk in my mind is a general concept of desk.

The Parmenides Problem has to do with the relation between the things we experience and the ideas of things in our minds. They apparently correspond to each other, but how are they related?

People generally believe that the objects they experience are tangible and the thoughts in their minds are intangible. How do tangible objects that exist apart from us relate to corresponding intangible concepts that are in our minds?

In the course of our everyday lives we distinguish between *sensible* objects and *intelligible* ideas. An object is *sensible* because we experience it with our senses. An idea is *intelligible* because it has meaning in our minds. Cognition or knowing has to do with intelligibility—with what is intelligible to us. Sensibility has to do with the things we see, touch, hear, taste, and smell. An essential characteristic of sensible objects is that they are constantly changing. Everything we experience with our senses changes over time. Something that keeps changing isn’t knowable because it is continually becoming something new. We can’t know what is changing; we only know what is constant. For a changing object to be intelligible to us it *must* relate to one or more corresponding ideas that remain constant in our minds. Essential to knowledge is the relationship between changing objects and constant ideas. For knowledge to be pos-

sible the two must be related, but what is the basis or nature of that relationship?

As odd as it may sound to those unacquainted with this subject, no one has ever been able to satisfactorily answer this question. No one has been able to say what the relationship is between a sensible, changing, tangible object that exists apart from us and a corresponding intelligible, constant, intangible idea that is in our minds.

Plato, the famous Greek philosopher, recognized this problem in about 350 B.C. He discussed it at length in a dialogue he wrote called *Parmenides*. Parmenides was a philosopher who lived in Southern Italy about 450 B.C. Plato tells of a dialogue (perhaps real, perhaps imagined) between the aged Parmenides and the young Socrates (Plato's teacher and famous philosopher who was executed by the Athenian democracy). In their discussion Parmenides spells out the problem in detail. Neither Parmenides nor Socrates is able to find a solution to it. Their discussion, according to Plato, took place some 2400 years ago, and the impasse still remains intact today. Because Parmenides was the spokesman who clearly defined the problem, we refer to it as THE PARMENIDES PROBLEM.