

Collapse into Silence: Pirsig, Tao, and The Parmenides

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Abstract: Modern American mystic and writer Robert M. Pirsig struggled heroically with the question of how to interrogate the Unspeakable within the mental constraints of Western logic. This struggle took him on an internal journey far from his Midwest home, eventually pushing him into the unknown country of mental illness and involuntary commitment. What Pirsig was pursuing was not an empty Nothing, it was a full, even overfull Nothing, for which he tried in vain to find a name and a vocabulary. Pirsig would come to believe that the closest approach to what he was trying to articulate could be found in the Tao, and indeed, the Tao's mapping to this overfull Nothing was quite close. However, he failed to latch onto the full significance of something he noted in passing: the striking similarities to his thought in the words of the important Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides. We will look at what Parmenides actually said (and what he actually meant, which are two different things). Then we will look at the most influential investigation of this concept of overfull Nothing, the interrogation conducted by the young Socrates in *The Parmenides*. We shall discover that the young Socrates runs aground for the same reason that Pirsig would 2500 years later. Both of their attempts to encapsulate the overfull Nothing within language and logic eventually collapse into silence in the face of that about which nothing can be said.

Introduction

American mystic and writer Robert M. Pirsig struggled mightily with the question of how to interrogate the Unspeakable within the mental constraints of Western logical discourse. This struggle took him on an internal journey far from his

Midwest, mid-century home, eventually pushing him into the unknown country of mental illness and involuntary commitment. I believe that what Pirsig was pursuing was not an empty Nothing, a no-thing. It was a full, even *overfull* Nothing, for which he struggled in vain to find a name and a vocabulary. I have taken to calling it the ‘over-full Nothing’ and will continue to use that term here to indicate when we are speaking of Nothing as an ontological term. Pirsig would come to believe that the closest approach to what he was trying to articulate could be found in the Tao, and indeed the Tao’s mapping to the characteristics of this ‘over-full Nothing’ was quite close. However, he failed to latch onto the full significance of something he noted in passing: the striking similarities between his thought and the system of the important Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides. We will want to look in detail at the most influential deployment of the Parmenidean ‘*over-full Nothing*’, in Plato’s infamously obscure dialogue *The Parmenides*. Plato’s attempt to wrap it in logical discourse runs aground for the same reason that Pirsig’s attempt to do so ran aground 2500 years later. Both of their attempts to encapsulate the ‘*over-full Nothing*’ within language and logic eventually collapse into silence in the face of that of which nothing can be said.

American Mystic

There was a man once, who went insane trying to wrap the Unspeakable within the syntax of Western logical discourse. He lived in the seemingly mundane circumstances of Midwestern America, but his thoughts were off in another place, another time. Speaking of himself in the third person in his stunning work *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, he tells us that he ‘did not try to use his brilliance for general illumination. He sought one specific distant target and aimed for it and hit it. And that was all.’¹ As we shall see, the target that he aimed for and hit is what I am calling the ‘*over-full Nothing*’. A man possessed of (and eventually possessed by) a brilliant and incisive mind, Pirsig spent several years as a teacher of Rhetoric in Montana and Chicago. It was during this time that his mind took what many of his colleagues would come to think of as a

somewhat ‘peculiar’ turn. Pirsig stumbles across something that he knows is real, but that all of his logical and rhetorical gifts are unable to encapsulate. Forced to try and at least make an *effort* at formulating a discourse for describing his findings, Pirsig adopted the mundane and inadequate word ‘Quality’, but he makes it clear that, within his evolving system, the word is simply a placeholder for something that is full, erupting, but without any logical attributes. He attempts to capture the essence of this ‘*over-full Nothing*’ in the following formulation:

“Quality is not a *thing*. It is an *event* ... It is the event at which the subject becomes aware of the object...Quality is the event at which awareness of both subjects and objects is made possible This means that Quality is not just the *result* of a collision of subject and object. The very existence of subject and object themselves is deduced from the Quality event. The Quality event is the *cause* of the subjects and objects.”²

In short, Pirsig’s Quality ‘is the *parent*, the *source* of all subjects and objects.’³ To Pirsig this ‘quality event’ was ‘the continuing stimulus to create the world in which we live. All of it. Every last bit of it ... He felt momentary fright and was about to strike out the words ‘All of it. Every last bit of it’. Madness there. I think he saw it.’⁴ As this passage suggests, Pirsig understood that he had just stepped outside the logical mythos that is ingrained into the very intellectual DNA of Western civilization, our gift from the Greeks. He was faced with ‘something’ that could not be denied and yet could not be described. Almost in despair, he found a place to anchor his sanity when he came across another attempted description of the ‘*over-full Nothing*’, this one found in the 2,400-year-old *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu.⁵ Listen as the Chinese sage wrestles with his own attempt to describe the indescribable, from within the somewhat more flexible bounds of a non-Western discourse:

Looked at but cannot be seen ... listened to but cannot be heard ... grasped at but cannot be touched. These three elude all our inquiries and hence blend and become one.

Not by its rising is there light.

Not by its sinking is there darkness.

Unceasing, continuous

It cannot be defined

And reverts again into the realm of Nothingness

That is why it is called the form of the formless

The image of nothingness

That is why it is called elusive

Meet it and you do not see its face.⁶

Note this description (or, what is the same thing, this *non*-description), and compare it to what we will discover later when we look at Parmenides' own efforts to articulate his own encounter with the '*over-full Nothing*'.

Indeed, Pirsig eventually came to suspect that the Greeks may have had a hand in muddying the waters regarding the permissibility of discussing his 'Quality', simply by virtue of the fact that the Greeks constructed a mode of discourse that made such discussion *structurally impossible*. Pirsig realized that the Greeks had loaded the deck right from the get-go: 'The world of underlying form is an unusual object of discussion because it is actually a *mode* of discussion itself. You discuss things in terms of their immediate appearance or you discuss them in terms of their underlying form, and when you try and discuss these modes of discussion you get involved in what could be called a platform problem. You have no other platform from which to discuss them other than the modes themselves.'⁷ This importance of Pirsig's insight into this limiting function of Western logical discourse will become obvious when we get to Parmenides.

We have evidence that Pirsig actually was close to realizing that Parmenides had more to teach him – certainly as a cautionary lesson – than did Lao Tzu, but it appears that Pirsig didn't really give Parmenides enough attention and never really grasped Parmenides' critical importance for his project. Here is all that Pirsig was able to get out of Parmenides:

“Parmenides made it clear for the first time that the Immortal Principle, the One, Truth, God, is separate from appearance and from opinion, and the importance of this separation and its effect upon subsequent history cannot be overstated. It's here that the classic mind, for the first time, took leave of its romantic origins and said, ‘The Good and the True are not necessarily the same,’ and goes its separate way.’ Pirsig spent an enormous amount of time puzzling over this separation, musing about the pre-Socratics: ‘Ancient Greece – strange that for them Quality should be everything while today it sounds strange to even say that Quality is real. What unseen changes could have taken place?’”⁸

He was so close to finding a Western kindred spirit here, but he didn't even know it. There is nothing in his writings or any of his public statements subsequent to the surprising success of *Zen* to suggest he ever suspected how close he had come to a precursor. He concluded that ‘further study there was unlikely to uncover anything concerning an apparently mystic term.’⁹ How wrong he was. He blew right past it. All he had to hang on to, at the end, was his belief that ‘the mythos that says the forms of this world are real but the Quality [*over-full Nothing*] of this world is unreal is insane...’¹⁰ He apparently never expected that if he had scratched harder at the pre-Socratics, he would have found that one of the most significant of them was saying essentially the same thing.

And what became of Pirsig, as his pursuit of the ‘*over-full Nothing*’ tapered out into a collapse into philosophical silence, then eventually into a literal silence? ‘Destroyed by an order of the court, enforced by the transmission of high-voltage

alternating current through the lobes of his brain...in a process known technologically as ‘Annihilation ECS’.¹¹ I believe that a large part of what drove him insane was living with the knowledge of ‘the unbelievable magnitude of what man, when he gained power to understand and rule the world in terms of dialectical truths, had lost.’¹²

We now need to look at one of the first struggles between this dialectical truth and the ‘*over-full Nothing*’.

Plato Fights for His Life

A battle took place shortly before the birth of Plato, a battle on the nature of ‘what is’. The protagonists in this battle exchanged broadsides that read like the pronouncements of sun-addled Zen Masters. Heraclitus makes oracular pronouncements that induce perplexity and challenge us to make sense of them. Parmenides and his followers argue, or seem to, in a long, strung-out series of what seem to the naïve eye to be logical propositions.¹³

Parmenides insists, obscurely, that one must choose between the way of ‘It Is’ and the way of ‘It Is Not’. We are literally incapable of conceiving of something as ‘not’, so our ‘*over-full Nothing*’ ‘is’ by default, and perhaps in its essence as well.

If one cannot think ‘Is Not’, then one will need to accept the ‘*over-full Nothing*’ that is ‘reality’ as containing no change, no generation or destruction, no difference, no imperfection. Why? Because – and this is key for Parmenides -- it is ‘full of what is’.¹⁴ For our purposes, the attack on Parmenides found in Plato’s immortal dialogue *The Parmenides* demands much more attention. It is a strange dialogue, unlike any other that Plato wrote. It comes at the end of his vaunted ‘middle period’, and indeed after the travail of wrestling with the issues in *The Parmenides*, Plato apparently steps away from writing for several years.

The Parmenides is the only dialogue in which Socrates is unequivocally beaten. Pimp-slapped, not to put too fine a point on it.¹⁵ Also important for us to understand is that, in this dialogue, Plato is *defending himself*. More, he is defending the cornerstone of his entire philosophy: the theory of Forms. Without the theory of Forms, Plato's ethical and political philosophies collapse for lack of a structure to prop them up – and the followers of Parmenides, the clever Zeno, deploys a set of arguments that leave the theory of Forms in pieces on the floor. In this part of the dialogue, Zeno demonstrates, with a light touch and a flair for the absurd, that logic cannot be trusted because it is insufficient to encapsulate his master Parmenides' Being, the One, the '*over-full Nothing*'. Zeno, and then Parmenides, use dialectic to tie Socrates up in precisely the sort of logical knots Socrates would inflict on so many interlocutors later in his career.¹⁶

I do not propose to drill down into the part of the dialogue in which Parmenides slices and dices the Forms; suffice it to say that most scholars agree that Parmenides lands several blows, most of them serious, on the Forms. As we will see, Plato's goal in the rest of the dialogue is so say, in effect, 'OK, my beloved Forms may be discredited, but look at the sort of incoherent Parmenidean madness you'll have to contend with if you give up the Forms! If we want to remain rational beings, *the Forms are all we have to work with!*' He uses the rest of the dialogue to demonstrate the logical absurdity of Parmenides and his followers. As we shall see, this is not difficult to do, since the Parmenidean system stands outside of dialectical discourse.

After laying the smack-down on young Socrates, Parmenides is invited to expound on his own ideas. Of course, he is asked to do so using dialectic. As Pirsig noted, this was a clever trap on Plato's part: 'How the hell do you ever justify, in terms of reason, a refusal to define something? Definitions are the *foundation* of reason. You can't reason without them.'¹⁷ Which is precisely the problem we run into in the second half of the dialogue. We are treated to 20 pages of an absurdist, Bizarro-World imitation of Socratic dialectic,

as Parmenides is shown forcing the *'over-full Nothing'* onto the Procrustean bed of dialectic. Plato is being mean-spirited and vengeful here, as could be expected from a man who is quite literally fighting for his philosophical life. Plato's goal is to make Parmenides look absurd, but what he winds up doing, unintentionally, is making dialectic and logic look absurd as a technique for encapsulating the *'over-full Nothing'*.

When we read Plato's funhouse filter of Parmenides in the second half of the dialogue, we find ourselves confronting something that reads almost exactly like the Tao as Pirsig encountered it. Look at this, and tell me if you don't agree with me that Parmenides' worldview looks more and more *Asian*, not really 'Western' at all.

Plato has Parmenides telling us that the One 'will have neither beginning, middle, nor end', it 'cannot be anywhere, either in itself or in another', and let us make no mistake that 'if one be the same with itself, it is not one with itself, and will therefore be one and also not one'.¹⁸

On a couple of levels, this is a delightful farce. The very density and duration of this kind of gibberish (and it goes on like this for over twenty pages) is a big part of the comedic value. Plato is working hard to make Parmenides look completely absurd, and Parmenides is happy to oblige. On another level, one certainly unintended by Plato, Parmenides is having his way with Plato as well: his long, bizarre deployment of 'dialectic' in the service of explaining his *'over-full Nothing'* serves the unexpected purpose of demonstrating that dialectic, logic itself, has surprising and damaging limitations.

Socrates' new invention, the dialectic, breaks up against Parmenides' extended *koan*, reducing the attempt to articulate Parmenides' ideas to broad comedy. Parmenides is using dialectic as a cudgel to beat dialectic itself to a bloody pulp. To embarrass logic into silence, in effect.

On yet another level – and *The Parmenides* may well be the most multi-layered of Plato’s dialogues -- we are given a stunning demonstration of the fact that, in the face of the ‘*over-full Nothing*’, language itself begins to *collapse*. All that ‘is’ is not real. Anything you can describe is not real. The One, Being, the ‘*over-full Nothing*’ ‘is’. But not really, not in any sense we can imagine. It is unthinkable, unspeakable, and unknowable. Inside this singularity, nothing is preserved; it is a naked opening-upon.

We try and apply Plato’s beloved dialectic, his clever little parlor trick of categorizing and discriminating, and we find ourselves sinking, and fast. We see:

‘over-full Nothing’ is.

But we can’t even say ‘is’ in this context, because we could then also say ‘not-is’, and that not-is would be equally ‘true’. So we are reduced to being able to say:

‘over-full Nothing’.

But even that is too much discrete ‘content’, and dialectic sets itself up for a situation where all dialectic allows us to say is:

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Singularity. No content. No thing. Dialectic has failed – miserably, one should note – to enable us to come to terms with the ‘*over-full Nothing*’. Beyond the rim of this singularity, logic has no place and dialectic will not stand. Plato knows this, which helps explain his fury at Parmenides. Plato understands that his theory of Forms has been

skewered on his own dialectic, but he turns away from the Parmenidean alternative with the same shudder of instinctive revulsion with which the Greeks reacted to the concept of the Unbounded. Plato forces us to confront the brute

fact that Parmenides' ontology is logically absurd. Parmenides (who either reinvented or encountered the same ontological concepts that fed into the *Tao*), was not really Western at all, and was in fact *trapped* in the straitjacket of Western reason.

'We've a real intellectual impasse. Our reason, which is supposed to make things more intelligible, seems to be making them less intelligible, and when reason thus defeats its own purposes something has to be changed in the structure of our reason itself.'¹⁹ Reason has failed us, indeed *language itself* has failed us, and at the end of any attempt to penetrate the Parmenidean ontology, our discourse suffers a catastrophic *collapse into silence*.

Time Tunnel

Imagine with me a long temporal tube, a tunnel. In places it is poorly lit, but in other parts of it we see bright, cold, fluorescent lights. Occasionally, the tunnel pulls a sudden sideways turn or dead end, but for the most part it is as straight and as forthright as a mathematical proof. At one end of this tunnel sits Plato, shouting the good news of the birth of Reason into the tunnel's maw. At the far end of this tunnel lurks Pirsig, gazing in horror at Reason's death.²⁰ Pirsig pursued the ghost of this dead Reason 'because he wanted to wreak *revenge* on it, because he felt he himself was so shaped by it.'²¹ After Pirsig, facts become fables again. Looking at Parmenides and Pirsig, do we not get the suspicion that the long reign of dialectic and logic was perhaps just an interlude?

The '*over-full Nothing*' will always remain absurd and inarticulate within the confines of logical discourse. Parmenides didn't make any serious attempt to wrap the '*over-full Nothing*' in logical discourse, and Pirsig went mad trying. Perhaps the '*over-full Nothing*' should be simply *left alone*.

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- ¹ Pirsig, Robert M, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam New Age Books, 1988), 74
- ² Pirsig, 214
- ³ Pirsig, 22
- ⁴ Pirsig, 225
- ⁵ Pirsig, 226
- ⁶ Pirsig, 227
- ⁷ Pirsig, 60
- ⁸ Pirsig, 302
- ⁹ Pirsig, 302
- ¹⁰ Pirsig, 318
- ¹¹ Pirsig, 77
- ¹² Pirsig, 341
- ¹³ Grayling, A.C. (ed)., *Philosophy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 347
- ¹⁴ Grayling, 348
- ¹⁵ Plato, *The Parmenides*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 488
- ¹⁶ Plato, 491
- ¹⁷ Pirsig, 192
- ¹⁸ Plato, 493
- ¹⁹ Pirsig, 117
- ²⁰ Pirsig, 150
- ²¹ Pirsig, 75