

A Critique of Anicca (Impermanence) From the Position of Parmenides' Concept of Being*



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Abstract

This current research is interested in a comparison between the concept of No-Change from the philosophy of Parmenides and the doctrine of *annica* (impermanence) within Theravāda Buddhism.

A modal interpretation of being as expounded by Parmenides will be touched upon and then contrasted with a detailed explanation of *annica* as taught by the Buddha, particular in his lessons on the Paṭiccasamuppāda, the Buddhist cycle of suffering. This cycle is used as the main example of *annica* to show a consistency in the flow of existence from life to life as change conditions change. It is the opinion of this paper that the concept of Buddhist impermanence (*anicca*) based on the law of becoming or dependent origination implies a concept of being and is consistent with Parmenides' concept of being. Showing a coherence between Buddhist doctrine and Parmenides' concept of being calls into question much current interpretation and opens new vistas in comparative study between philosophies of the East and West.

Keywords: Parmenides; Being; Anicca; Paṭiccasamuppāda; Eternal

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Introduction

Parmenides was the first philosopher to understand that philosophy depends on proof of argument rather than statements of belief regarding what reality was made of. He insisted that change is impossible and that Being is infinite. A common interpretation is that, for Parmenides, reality is one, timeless, and unchanging. This claim is, as Anscombe says, “incredible”. Can he really have meant that the particulars of reality don’t move and that there is in fact, only one particular? I take it rather, and shall argue, that he was writing about reality as a whole, or more accurately, about Being as such. Parmenides was struggling to construct the first ontological system.

In many ways, Parmenides was responding to Heraclitus who believed in reality as a state of chaos and turmoil, and that things were in constant flux. He uttered the famous phrase “No one steps into the same river twice,” as an explanation of existence. He believed chaos to be a fundamental part of nature, and so, concluded that the only constant was inconsistency. He called this constant Logos, which means something akin to guidance in this context. He also believed that strife in the face of chaos was justice and that ethics should be understood from within this struggle.

The insistence of Heraclitus is important to the thought of Parmenides, as it acts as the foundation from which Parmenides responds causing him to question the foundation of reality. Ironically enough, this leads to topic of this paper, which is concerned with the Buddhist concept of change and whether or not it is coherent with Parmenides’ concept of Eternal Being.

Many interpretations of Parmenides tend to focus on Parmenides’ insistence that what *is*, is and therefore cannot change is often interpreted as an assertion that nothing changes, the world and the things in the world are a single monolithic, unmoving, limitless, and timeless entity.

Fragment 8 in Parmenides’ poem explains this unchanging nature of Being:

One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that *it* is. In this path are very many tokens that what is is uncreated and indestructible; for it is complete, immovable, and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now it is, all at once, a continuous one. (Parmenides, Fr 8, Burnnet, 1929).

What does the “it” and the “is” in “Is it or is it not?” etc. consist in? What is it that Parmenides claims is timeless, unchanging, one, i.e. that is characterized by what I shall call “No-Change”?

This paper suggests that the idea of No-Change by Parmenides has to do with Being-as-such while *anicca* has to do with the impermanence of entities that reside in Being-as-such, or the beings within Being. Are these two concepts combatable or are they two very different descriptions of nature? This question is not seeking whether or not these concepts are equal, they are not, rather whether or not these two descriptions are compatible. The question is concerned with these two concepts as metaphysical qualities and if they can exist together or if they are mutually exclusive. There is no doubt that on the surface these two concepts appear to be a contradiction but on a deeper level of investigation these concepts may be consistent; consistent in this context means that these two concepts are true at the same time. Can both sides of this apparent contradiction be true at the same time? To reply to this question one must look at each concept from two different perspectives.

The answer presented is that the concept of Buddhist impermanence (*anicca*) based on the law of becoming or dependent origination is consistent with Parmenides’ concept of Being. These two descriptions of reality operate on two different ontological levels, and so are true at the same time, but in different senses. Parmenides is concerned with Being itself, or Being-as-such which I will define as the fact of existence, while the Buddha’s teaching of *annica* with beings, that being the entities that exist.

Under a certain understanding, Parmenides’ conclusion that there is no movement, no change may not only be consistent with Buddhism’s manifestly conflicting teaching of universal change, but the two may complement and clarify each other. I shall attempt to explicate such an understanding of each, showing that such understandings are not outliers, and showing that accepting the Buddhist doctrine of *anicca* forces us to understand Parmenides as referring to Being as such and moves us toward a better understanding of the meaning of “Being as such”. Conversely, accepting Parmenides’ conclusions in this sense may help to clarify Buddhist doctrine of *anicca*. I shall attempt to show that the following syllogistic argument (modeled on Parmenides’ logic) for the proposed compatibility is not only valid, but that it represents in logical form a real complementarity.

The logical argument that Being is No-Change:

Reality consist of entities, entities can be conscious and/or the objects of consciousness

Experience, that being conscious contact with entities, is existence.

Existence exists.

The existence of the existence of conscious entities is Being.

In other words, the fact of existence is Being-as-such.

The existence of the existence of conscious entities does not change.

Therefore, Being is No-Change (Concept of Parmenides).

Then taking a description of *anicca*:

Anicca is the doctrine that all entities change.

A further development of the logical argument can follow:

Change occurs in a fundamental and determinate way.

In other words, entities change according to laws

These laws are the unchanging structure of experience

Therefore, these laws are a constancy of existence

The unchanging fact of these laws suggest the unchanging fact of existence

Therefore, these laws suggest Being-as-such or the fact of existence.

As the Paṭiccasamuppāda is the main framework with which *anicca* itself will be explained, it is important to clarify that the ethics of the Paṭiccasamuppāda as well as Buddhist ontological questions such as rebirth and liberation should be should be taken as Buddhist teachings and not that of Parmenides. The focus is on *anicca* and No-Change and in no way supports a position that the Teachings of the Buddha and the philosophy of Parmenides are similar in any other way except the issue at hand- whether or not impermanence from the Buddhist perspective is compatible with the idea of Being from Parmenides.

Anicca

According to Buddhism, there is a quality of existence that the conditioned and created adhere to, that being *anicca*. This quality of impermanence is an extremely important element in the Buddha's teachings. He tells his students to look for it in every condition of existence, to observe it in phenomenon that arises into and out of existence.

The Buddha explains *anicca* as an eternal law of existence:

- (1) "Bhikkhus, whether Tathagatas arise or not, there persists that law, that stableness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: 'All conditioned phenomena are impermanent/ A Tathagata awakens to this and breaks through to it, and then he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, discloses it, analyzes it, and elucidates it thus: 'All conditioned phenomena are impermanent [*annica*].'" (AN, Bodhi, p. 363).

In this context the following description can be safely said:

Anicca is the Buddhist doctrine that all entities change.

Anicca is a fundamental quality of existence according to Buddhist doctrine; a state of impermanence characterizing all conditioned reality. It is one of the most important concepts to Buddhism, from both a preliminary understanding of the Buddha's teachings to more profound explanations of Buddhist ontology. The whole of lived existence can be stated in two concepts within Buddhist philosophy- *nāma* (consciousness) and *rūpa* (objects of consciousness). These two concepts are foundational to the Buddha's teachings as they represent experience itself. This experience is always changing, coming into contact with one object after another. According to Theravāda Buddhism, this lived existence of momentary experiences is a cycle of suffering that never ends known as the *Paṭiccasamuppāda*.

These three elements of the Buddha's teachings, the mind, the objects of the mind and the causal conditions will be explained to show the parts of the whole that is the cycle of suffering known as the *Paṭiccasamuppāda*. In understanding the cycle of suffering as well as the factors that flow through it, the importance of *anicca* within Buddhist ontology will be made clearer. It is important to remember that the particulars explained in Buddhist ontology are beings, which are impermanent. That being said, a detailed analysis of these particulars will be done and then compared with the whole of existence, which is unchanging according to Parmenides.

Paṭiccasamuppāda

The Paṭiccasamuppāda is how the Buddha described this existence that flows from life to life in a barrage of impermanent phenomena. As stated, this cycle of suffering contains consciousness, the qualities of consciousness and the objects of consciousness. In fact, the Paṭiccasamuppāda can be understood as the way in which the consciousness and its objects exist.

In Buddhism, there is no original creation, all that arises is dependent on something else, nothing comes into being without being conditioned to become by something that has already been conditioned into being. There is no other idea in Buddhism that is more important in describing this cycle of conditioning than the Paṭiccasamuppāda, and an attempt to understand it should be made by all serious students of the Dhamma.

The Paṭiccasamuppāda explains the cycle of suffering, a process that is foundational to the Buddha's teachings. This wheel of samsara that keeps within the cycle of rebirth is the very cycle one wants to escape when starting down the path the Buddha laid out. In order to escape the cycle, one must be familiar with it. An understanding that it is desire that leads to the continuation of suffering is necessary and it is Paṭiccasamuppāda that is that continuation as explained by the Buddha.

The Paṭiccasamuppāda not only explains experience, and the phenomena of such experience, but the suffering that experience leads to. This cycle is so important because it shows that suffering leads to experience which leads to more suffering. There is no way to understand this innate nature of suffering without understanding its role in one's existence. It is a difficult teaching, one that requires deep care and investigation, the Buddha warned of not taking the Paṭiccasamuppāda seriously enough and was firm in reminding his students of its complexity and its importance.

Anicca is an intricate quality of the Paṭiccasamuppāda involving both *nāma* and *rūpa* as experience passes through existence from one life to the other. The Paṭiccasamuppāda is a cycle that is in constant flux as the results of past *kamma* are perceived and reacted to producing new *kamma* from a foundation of ignorance. The mind (*nāma*) is changing as it interacts and makes contact with various objects, both mental and physical (*rūpa*), these interactions condition a cycle of suffering that never ends until one becomes enlightened and breaks the chains of the Paṭiccasamuppāda.

The Buddha explains the quality of impermanence while teaching the Paṭiccasamuppāda in the Mahānidāna Sutta as the result of a cause or causes is impermanent (*anicca*) liable to perish, to pass away, to become extinct, to cease. (DN II, Ryes Davids, p. 52)

Parmenides

W.K.C. Guthrie offers a traditional interpretation of No-Change in A History of Greek Philosophy:

Parmenides here asserts with all the force of language at his command that reality is totally immovable. The banishment of becoming and perishing substantiates only the impossibility of beginning or ceasing.... reality is one and indivisible, homogenous and continuous. And “all is full of being”. So his reason is not far to seek. If all that exists is a single continuous plenum, there is nowhere for it to move as a whole, nor has it any part which could change places internally. The complete immobility of the real, the impossibility of movement in any sense of the word, is for Parmenides the climax of his message (Guthrie, 1979, p. 36).

As you can see, the explanation of the quality of no-change is completely focused on the entities that make up the world. This description of no change through materiality expounds description through literal change in space and time fully dependent on the empirically observable objects within that space and time.

This standard explanation of Parmenides seems to be the most widely accepted description of his ontology, though there are critiques of it. Charles Kahn in his essay “The Greek Verb “To Be” and the Concept of Being” points out that this modern western explanation of Parmenides is dependent on a distinction of essence and existence. This fundamental distinction is dependent on how Being is translated in the poem of Parmenides (Kahn, 1966).

Martin J Hen expands on Kahn:

These standard interpretations argue that Parmenides intended to distinguish very subtle differences of meaning by the verb for instance:

- (1) [Being] as existential “is,” expressing the fact of a thing’s presence: E.g., B 2.3: “that it is,” where “it” implies unqualified existence.
- (2) [Being] as the “is” expressing the possibility of a thing’s presence: E.g., B 6.1: “since it is possible to be,” where the phrase “it is possible” has the infinitive “to be” as subject, and the ideas of possibility and existence are inseparably linked.
- (3) [Being] as the copula “is” linking predicate to subject: E.g., B 8.48: “since all is inviolate.”

Although these distinctions between the various uses of [Being] are obvious in later Attic prose, it is much more difficult to argue that Parmenides had uses (1) and (2) clearly distinguished (Henn, p. 32).

Henn is suggesting that Parmenides thought of the Truth of Being as essence equaling existence; Being-as-such “whatness understood as *ens transcendentalis*, that which exists in the world beyond ordinary sense-experience” (Henn, p. 32). This is in contrast to the specific essence of what-a-thing-is found in ordinary sense perception.

According to Henn, the modern distinctions between (1) and (2) are causing many interpretations of No-Change to imply entities. These interpretations seem to focus on the actuality of an entity as being the qualifications of an entity to be. However, if we take (1) and (2) and assume Henn’s conclusion that Parmenides thought that essence equaled existence, one can see that Parmenides may have been talking about something beyond the entity of ordinary sense experience, that being Being-as-such. By Being-of-such, I take that to mean the fact of existence, or the existence of the existence of conscious entities.

For example, though an apple has a specific essence of its own individuated existence, it also has the essence of a being, and furthermore, the essence of Being. That essence of Being is the same essence all other things that exist, or particular beings, share in. This essence of Being, as a thing that exists having the quality of a thing that exists, is the same for all beings that are things that exist. In this way, a more nuanced understanding of being as the essence of all things that are beings, one can begin to see how the concept of No-Change does not entail a literal interpretation of the material world being a monolithic unchanging physical blob. Instead, these particulars of the world, these entities, these beings are in fact changing, but that they are beings that they are entities that they do *exist* is in-itself being. This Being-as-such is the fact of existence, and this does not change.

The Fact of Existence

This section of the paper is concerned with Martin J Henn's interpretation of Parmenides' use of being as an unchanging, unconditioned oneness that should be understood as referring to Being-as-such, as the fact that there is existence.

In this context being can be explained as follows:

Reality consist of entities, entities can be conscious and/or the objects of consciousness

Experience, that being conscious contact with entities, is existence.

Existence exists.

The existence of the existence of conscious entities is being.

In other words, the fact of existence is Being-as-such.

There is a linguistically subtle but fundamental difference between existence and the fact of existence. Let us take a common definition of existence- the lived and experienced world. This world would be perceived through empirical observation of sensible objects that exist outside of the observer. That there is existence, or rather, the fact of existence, is a truth of existence as a whole yet a separate truth from the experienced entities in the world.

Taking this experienced world as existence itself one sees a whole reality. Let us further assume that this reality exists in temporal flux constantly conditioning more and more change. To say that this reality does not change would be absurd. However, that this reality exists does not change, in other words, the fact of existence does not change.

Let us further assume that the external world is not knowable and we take a more Humean approach in terms of conditions. Let this reality's nature be unknowable, one can even go so far as to say this existence may be a solipsistic imagination. Here too, the same approach to Being applies, the fact of existence, even if its nature is unknowable or mere imagination, is true.

One could argue that existence itself does not exists as a more extreme objection. One can say that there is not existence is true. However, one problem arises, this statement is assuming that the existence one is talking about is beyond the very statement being made. That the statement was made (or that statements are being made) is true, therefore the statement(s) exist in the fact of their being made. Here we can apply the same concept of Being- the fact that there is existence.

As soon as a judgment is uttered about existence, concluding that said judgment holds a presupposition that “there is existence” does not appear to be faulty. If one were to say that apples exist, this statement is presupposing a world where a judgment may be expressed, in this case, apples exist. Consider the inverse, making a judgment that apples do not exist also makes similar presuppositions about truths being communicable. These judgments are qualities of an existence that is not only presupposed to exist, but actually exists in that these are statements being considered, i.e. there is the existence of the judgment whether or not the apples exist and this existence of the judgment happens within Being- the fact that there is existence, and this fact does not change.

Keeping the distinction between existence and the fact of existence in mind, a logical argument can be shown to support Being as a oneness that does not change:

Being is a most difficult concept to define and that state that it is difficult to define is one of the driving points of this present thesis. Being can be understood as what it, but not what particularly is. It is my contention that the Buddhist doctrine of *anicca* can help us better to define “Being”.

Anicca Suggests Being- the Fact of Existence

The purpose of this section is to present an argument that states that *anicca* as a quality of existence is consistent with the concept of No-Change- the unchanging Being of Parmenides philosophy.

The conditioned and created are objects within reality that are subject to change, this change being the quality of impermanence. However, this quality can be understood as existing within the unchanging Being of Parmenidean thought with the understanding that the unchanging Being is on a different level of reality which reflects the totality of existence from the level of *annica*, which reflects the particulars of beings that are impermanent. As Parmenides inferred, What can be considered- *is*. If we accept the Buddhist doctrine and take Parmenides to be correct then he cannot have been referring to entities.

One can make a similar inference with *anicca*. *Anicca* is a part of an existence, in that at the very least *anicca* exists itself. That there is this existence is something that is not changing within the mode of change that is *annica*. In other words, that there is existence which contains *annica* does not change.

Remembering the argument for Being as No-Change:

Reality consist of entities, entities can be conscious and/or the objects of consciousness

Experience, that being conscious contact with entities, is existence.

Existence exists.

The existence of the existence of conscious entities is Being.

In other words, the fact of existence is Being-as-such.

The existence of the existence of conscious entities does not change.

Therefore, Being is No-Change (Concept of Parmenides).

And remembering the description of *annica* is the doctrine that all entities change, The following argument can be further inferred within the mode of reasoning within Buddhist Logic as explained by Khemananda:

Change occurs in a fundamental and determinate way.

In other words, entities change according to laws

These laws are the unchanging structure of experience

Therefore, these laws are a constancy of existence

The unchanging fact of these laws suggest the unchanging fact of existence

Therefore, these laws suggest Being-as-such or the fact of existence.

In the same respect that we can say – the fact of existence does not change, we can say – the fact of impermanence does not change. Being contains these entities that are impermanent; that containment is unchanging. The impermanent entities are part of a whole that makes their existence possible. This represents the two different ontological level of reality: the unchanging being which we call thee the fact of existence, and the entities, or the particular beings of the experienced world, which are impermanent. This impermanence, *anicca*, is a quality of existence according to the Buddha’s teaching of the *tilakhana*. The fact of existence, or Being, makes these ontological levels possible. If the possibility of these impermanent entities of being existing themselves were to change, then entities themselves would be impossible.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this research is that the concept of Buddhist impermanence (*anicca*) based on the law of becoming or dependent origination is compatible with Parmenides' concept of being.

It is the hope of the researcher that the reader now understands how Being can be explained through the concept of No-Change in the Philosophy of Parmenides as well the importance of *anicca* (impermanence) within the philosophy of Theravāda Buddhism. In this context, being can be defined as the fact of existence. *Anicca* being understood as the impermanence of entities, both conscious and unconscious, and experience being understood as conscious contact with entities- this being defined as existence, Being can be understood as the existence of the existence of conscious entities, this can be further understood as the fact of existence. Furthermore, considering these definitions, it is suggested that *anicca* (impermanence) not only does not contradict with an explanation of being in the philosophy of Parmenides but is compatible with No-Change. An understanding of this relationship between the two can lead to new questions and investigations of possible connections between the philosophies of the East and West as well as a more complete understanding of the concepts of No-Change and *annica*.

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