ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

Samian Meontology. On Melissus, Non-Being, and Self-Refutation

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ABSTRACT: It is traditionally attributed to Melissus an absolute kind of monism, which we do not even recognize in his alleged master, Parmenides. For Melissus, there is only a unique, infinite, eternal, homogeneous and unchangeable entity. On this point, there is almost consensus among scholars. This implies that nothing else exists except this one entity, and therefore that our physical world, the objects of our experiences, do not exist. Everything we know and talk about is not real. There are some passages in Melissus' fragments that make this anti-Parmenidean consequence explicit.

This means that monistic ontology generates, like a shadow, a vast 'meontology' that surrounds every human naturalistic discourse, every theory about the world and therefore every possible object of knowledge (except for one). This, however, hides a problem: among the non-existent things assumed by this doctrine there are, indeed, even the humans, and so the philosopher himself, Melissus, and his book, and any human thought or speech. This would seem to make Melissus' doctrine self-refuting, denied by the very existence of the doctrine itself and of the one who proposes it, as well as by the experience of those who learn it. The inherent difficulties in strict monism have led not only to reassume the traditional critical judgments on Melissus' philosophy (dating back at least to Aristotle) but also, in recent times, to believe that he was not a serious philosopher, rather an eristic thinker.

In this essay, I propose to examine the dark side of Melissean ontology, his discourse on non-being, and to demonstrate not only how his doctrine – in Melissus' perspective – could escape the risk of self-refutation, but also that there is no compelling evidence that proves he should not be taken seriously.

KEY-WORDS: Eleatics; Ontology; Metaphysics; History of Philosophy; Ancient Philosophy.

RESUMO: Tradicionalmente, se atribui a Melisso um tipo de monismo absoluto que não reconhecemos naquele que se supõe ser seu mestre, Parmênides. Para Melisso há um ente, único, infinito, eterno, homogêneo e imutável. Esse ponto entre os estudiosos é quase consensual. Isso implica que, exceto esse ente único, nada mais existe e, portanto, que nosso mundo físico e os objetos de nossa experiência, não existem. Tudo que conhecemos e do qual falamos não é real, como é possível ver em algumas passagens nos fragmentos de Melisso que explicitam essa consequência anti-parmenidiana.

Isso significa que a ontologia monística dá origem, como uma sombra, a uma vasta 'meontologia' que envolve todo discurso naturalista humano, toda teoria sobre o mundo e, portanto, todo objeto de conhecimento possível (exceto um). Contudo, isso esconde um problema: entre as coisas não existentes pressupostas por essa doutrina há, com efeito, também os seres humanos e, portanto, o próprio filósofo Melisso, seu livro e todo pensamento e fala humanos. Isso parece tornar a doutrina de Melisso auto refutativa, negada pela existência da própria doutrina e daquele que a propõe, assim como da experiência daqueles que a aprendem. As dificuldades inerentes ao monismo estrito parecem ter levado não somente a uma volta aos juízos críticos tradicionais a respeito da filosofia de Melisso (ao menos desde Aristóteles), mas também mais recentemente a acreditar que ele seja não um filósofo sério, mas um pensador erístico.

Nesse ensaio, proponho um exame do lado escuro da ontologia de Melisso, o seu discurso sobre o não ser, e procuro demonstrar não apenas como sua doutrina – na perspectiva de Melisso – possa eludir o risco da auto refutação, mas também que não há evidência convincente que prove que ele não deva ser levado a sério.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Escola Eleática; Filosofia Antiga; Ontologia; Metafísica; História da Filosofia

<div align="right">*The challenge*</div>

In the fragments B5[1] and B6 of the treatise *On nature or on what is*, Melissus of Samos deduces the uniqueness of what was, is and will be (hereafter 'being') from its infinity, which he had previously demonstrated. In fact, if being were not unique it would find a limit in another being, and therefore would not be infinite. However, given that it is infinite, it must then be unique. Alongside this reasoning – which he intends as the greatest proof of the uniqueness of being (μέγιστον σημεῖον, B8.1) – in fragment B8 Melissus proposes some reinforcement arguments that challenge the empirical evidence of plurality through the invalidation of the reliability of the senses[2].

This implies that everything which the sensory experience testifies and that belongs to the world we live in is illusory. In critical literature this view, by tradition attributed to Melissus, is called 'strict monism'. All the things we know and talk about vanish in the face of the monolithic presence of the unique being. In fact, in fragment B8 Melissus refers precisely to the objects of the 'saying' and 'knowing' of men. He says that if there really were "earth and water and air and fire and iron and gold and what is alive and what is dead, what is black and what is white and all the other things men *say* to be true, if therefore all these things were"[3], then they should have characteristics which, according to testimony of the same senses revealing them, they have

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[1] In mentioning the fragments of the Presocratics I will follow the canonical numbering of the fifth edition of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (1934-1937) edited by Diels and Kranz.

[2] Mansfeld (2016, 104) denies that there is a criticism of the senses in Melissus. I discussed this interpretation in Pulpito (2016b): see the reply of Mansfeld (2016, 188-189).

[3] εἰ γὰρ ἔστι γῆ καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ ἀὴρ καὶ πῦρ καὶ σίδηρος καὶ χρυσός, καὶ τὸ μὲν ζῶον ὁ δὲ τεθνηκός, καὶ μέλαν καὶ λευκὸν καὶ τὰ ἄλλα, ὅσα φασὶν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι ἀληθῆ, εἰ δὴ ταῦτα ἔστι… (B8.2).

not. Without going into detail about the Melissean argument – whose validity may be questioned – Melissus clearly writes that men (all men, including Melissus himself who, in fact, will later use the first person plural: "*we* say"[4]) make utterances about things that really are not. Therefore, the first excerpt relevant to the purposes of this essay is the following:

(E1) καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα φασὶν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι ἀληθῆ

and all other things men say to be true

With this expression, with which he closes the list of entities that characterize our experience of reality (earth, water, air, fire, iron, gold, etc.), Melissus evidently refers to all the things that furnish the physical world: not only those listed, but everything we really believe to exist.

A little below (B8.3), we find another lapidary statement:

(E2) ὥστε συμβαίνει μήτε ὁρᾶν μήτε τὰ ὄντα γινώσκειν[5]

so that it follows that we neither see nor know things that are

Of course, when Melissus says that we do not see and know τὰ ὄντα he does not want to aver the epistemological unapproachableness of the real being (which he certainly would not indicate using the plural, τὰ ὄντα). There is at least one thing whose characteristics we can know: it is precisely the entity of which Melissus deduces a certain number of attributes (eternity, infinity, uniqueness, etc.). Indeed, this is not a perceptual 'knowledge' but a rational deduction; this, however,

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[4] φαμεν (B8.2) and φαμένοις (B8.4), but for the first person plural as a co-referent of 'men', see also ἡμεῖς ὁρῶμεν καὶ ἀκούομεν and ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν (B8.2), δοκεῖ δὲ ἡμῖν (B8.3), ἡμῖν δοκεῖ (B8.4), ἑωρῶμεν (B8.5).

5 E2 is taken from the quotation of the actual Melissean B8 in Simplicius, *In De Caelo* 559, 5. The phrase in the manuscripts seems to be misplaced, so that Bergk (1843, then 1886, 106) – later followed by all the editors of Melissus' fragments, including Diels – proposed to place E2 after the subsequent sentence, and this is how we read the fragment today. Barnes (1982, 500 n. 3), followed by others (most recently Brémond 2017, 527 n. 492), emphasized the problems of this passage, going so far as to state that E2 was an interpolated gloss to the text. However, the reasons given in favor of the athetesis are far from conclusive. I cannot dwell on the question here, so I will limit myself to following the text of B8 adopted by the main editions of the fragments, which accept E2 as authentic.

does not seem to involve a skeptical approach to knowledge *tout court*. On the other hand, Melissus certainly does not intend to deny that we see – and therefore we know, at least by sight – something: it is in this same fragment that he makes explicit reference to what we see. The verb ὁρᾶν appears in the whole fragment B8 five times: once paired with ἀκούειν (to hear), once together with ἀκούειν and συνιέναι (to understand), once only with γινώσκειν (in our E2), while twice on its own. It is clear, therefore, that Melissus lends a certain priority to visual perception. Of the examples of plurality and change that he presents in the fragment, many involve visible objects and observable phaenomena[6].

Melissus, therefore, does not deny that we see – and consequently know – something. After all, how could he do it? He would deny the evidence. What he says is that such things that are seen and known are *not* (μήτε) τὰ ὄντα. So what are they? Quite simply, by the immediate inference known as obversion, it derives that they are μὴ ὄντα[7].

Taken together, E1 and E2 imply that men know things that are

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[6] Many, but not all (consider for example heat and cold that mutually change in B8.3): which suggests that visual perception, certainly preeminent, stands as synecdoche for perception in general.

[7] A possible objection would be that the negation of *ta onta* is not equivalent to the affirmation of *mē onta*, because there would be a third intermediate possibility, i.e. that there are things that *are and are not* together. In this way, the strict monistic interpretation of Melissus approved by the majority of the interpreters and based on what clearly emerges from the fragments of the treatise would be rejected, in favour of a dualistic approach, difficult to maintain. But that is just one of the problems with this position. First of all, it must be said that only apparently this position rejects the 'principle of excluded middle', since it shifts the problem on a temporal level. This relies on the fact that admitting that there are things *being and not being* means recognizing that there are moments in which a certain thing *is* and moments in which the same thing *is not* (for example, before it comes to be it *is not*, and after it comes to be it *is*). This implies, therefore, that what is denied in the set of time (the validity of the excluded middle) is in fact admitted for every single moment: in any moment of time either a thing is or is not, *tertium non datur*. It is not possible that at the same moment a thing is and is not together and in the same respect (as Aristotle will then recognize in the formulation of the 'principle of non-contradiction'). But this implies that it is not true that such things are not *ta onta*, as Melissus says, since sometimes they *are*. To account for the refusal of *ta onta*, we should overinterpret this phrase not simply as an expression of mere being, but of being *always* (restricting his sense). In this case, the denial would make sense: if the phrase *ta onta* expresses being always, then the things that sometimes are and sometimes are not, are not *ta onta*. But this is an overinterpretation that has no justification in the fragments (I will return on this point in the main text). Secondly, if the alternative between *ta onta* and *mē onta* admitted an intermediate space of real things that in time *are and are not*, that is, changing and passing things, then our senses that show us such things, would not deceive us, because they would show a genuine reality. Yet, Melissus clearly says that we do not perceive "rightly" (ὀρθῶς, B8.2, 5), but "it seems" (δοκεῖ, B8.3, 4, 5) to us that things change and pass. But why should we be misled by the senses if the changing and passing things were real? Indeed, Melissus states that the senses deceive us exactly because they show us change and passage, which are therefore unreal. So he clearly excludes this alleged intermediate space between being and non-being. It is apparent: it seems to be, but actually it *is not*. Finally, at the beginning of the fragment B8 Melissus assumes *per absurdum* that the many things *are*: εἰ γὰρ ἦν πολλά... εἰ γὰρ ἔστι γῆ καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ ἀὴρ καὶ πῦρ κτλ. If these things *were* – Melissus says – they should be like the One. But since he will prove that they are not like the One, therefore they *are not*: which justifies labelling them as *mē onta*.

not and say that they really are. The interest of these highly paradoxical statements lies in the fact that they have a clear anti-Parmenidean nuance, on which, it seems to me, there has not been enough emphasis in the past. Since Plato (*Theaet.* 180d, 183e), tradition has associated Melissus with Parmenides of Elea, gradually turning their philosophical proximity (founded on undoubted formal analogies) into a true discipleship of Melissus to the Eleatic school, of which, however, we have no reliable testimonies. Over time, this 'eleatization' of Melissus (which actually turned up to be a 'melissization' of Eleatism) has led to the minimization of the divergences between the two thinkers, often reduced only to the most striking ones, e.g. with respect to the spatio-temporal limits of being (apparently affirmed by the Eleatic and denied by the Samian). In recent times, critics have revised this traditional interpretation, showing how the differences between the two authors are more numerous and significant than we were willing to admit in the past[8]. However, I daresay that this particular point (about the anti-Parmenideanism of E1-E2) has not been emphasized as it would deserve.

In B2.6-7 Parmenides' says: οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐὸν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν) / οὔτε φράσαις ("for you could not know that which is not (for it is unfeasible) / nor express it"). Hence, Parmenides had already used the same verb (γιγνώσκω) chosen by Melissus in E2 (and Melissus certainly knew Parmenides' Poem) to affirm the opposite thing. While Parmenides claimed that it is not possible to know what is not, Melissus declared in flagrant opposition to the Eleatic that the things we know are not things that are. Not only that: in these verses, Parmenides also says that what is not is inexpressible. The verb he employed is φράζω, but in another context he resorts to the same verb that Melissus uses in E1 (and in the other occurrences of B8), that is, φημί. In B8.8-9 Parmenides writes: οὐ γὰρ φατὸν οὐδὲ νοητόν / ἔστιν ὅπως οὐκ ἔστι

("for it is not sayable nor thinkable that it is not"). Parmenides denies the sayability of non-being. According to Melissus, however, this is precisely the condition of man, who *says* that non-being things really are (E1)[9].

Thus, Melissus seems to challenge the unsayability and unknowability of non-being established by Parmenides[10]. In order to understand this challenge to the Eleatic, we should first clarify the meaning of 'to be' involved in Melissus' expression *ta onta* of E2. It has often been disputed whether the value of Parmenidean 'to be' (in its 'absolute' use, i.e. without the predicative) was existential (to be = to exist) or copulative (to be something), or some form of semantic compromise between the two senses. As for Melissus, if at first glance we could presume that 'to be' has a copulative value (even when the predicative is unexpressed), this is due to the fact that the argument of the fragment B8 seems to presuppose the permanence of the characters of things, i.e. their immutability. Melissus apparently maintains that the senses are unreliable because they show us that things do not remain as we perceive them the first time, that is they are first X and then Y. If, however, we meant 'to be' in a merely copulative sense, then E2 would mean: "so that it follows that we neither see nor know things that are [something]". But this would make little sense because even changing entities still have some characteristics. The entity that changes possesses first the characteristic X and then the Y. It is obvious that here we are not talking about the mere possession of a characteristic, whatever it is. However, were we to interpret the copula as expressing the essential and constant nature of something – nature it cannot fail to have at any moment of time – it would be a different scenario. In such a case, the

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[9] I shall not delve into the complex question of whether Parmenides is affirming an impossibility or a prohibition. In any case, Melissus describes an inescapable human condition (so much to use the first person plural: even Melissus himself, who knows the truth, cannot avoid knowing and talking about things that in reality are not), condition which causes both impossibility and prohibition to lose meaning.

[10] Galgano (2009) suggestively titled his unpublished doctoral dissertation discussed in São Paulo "A transgressão de Melisso. O tema do não-ser no Eleatismo". He speaks of 'transgression' precisely with a view to adhering to the traditional canon according to which Melissus was a Parmenidean philosopher. Since I strongly doubt that Melissus was (or considered himself) a disciple of Parmenides (who nonetheless certainly inspired him to some extent), I prefer to speak of 'challenge'. In any case, in his work Galgano does not refer to E2, which I am considering here.

copula would indicate the single property that a truly existing thing must possess in a particularly strong way. If something is X, it can only be completely and always X. It is not, therefore, a predication whatsoever: if 'to be' indicates this type of strict characterization, it is clear that it cannot conform to changing entities[11].

But even this is not acceptable: the text itself rejects this reading. In B8.3, denying that things remain the same over time, Melissus writes: καὶ ὅ τι ἦν τε καὶ ὃ νῦν οὐδὲν ὁμοῖον εἶναι. In change, what *was before* is not at all the same as what it *is now*. It is evident that 'to be' here cannot be understood as *to be always*, immutably. Melissus refers to specific moments of time that do not last precisely because there is change. If 'to be' indicated immutability, Melissus would have used another verb to express something that changes. The fact that Melissus believes this apparent change to be in contrast with the immutability of being (as the main argument in this fragment is generally interpreted) does not imply that this immutability is already contained in the value of the verb 'to be'[12]. This would not only generate the bizarre reading we have just seen: it would fail to explain why Melissus feels the need to deduce the immutability of being in B7 (which instead by hypothesis should already be presupposed – however unjustifiably – in the same notion of 'to be'). Moreover, in B8.2 Melissus writes ἀεὶ εἶναι, an expression that would make little sense if the perpetual duration (ἀεὶ) of

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[11] Curd (1993) extended the predicational monism (the thesis according to which each real entity has only one predicate and possesses it in a particularly strong way, and which she had recognized in Parmenides' thought) to Melissus, though admitting that with the philosopher of Samos there would have been a transition to numerical monism (according to which there is only one entity in reality) that would be absent in Parmenides.

[12] The problem is not avoided by admitting that 'to be' implies only the expression of the *essential* nature of something but not necessarily its *constant* nature. If this were the case, there would be no difficulty when Melissus claims that what *was before* and what *is now* are completely different. In fact, this would only mean that the essential nature of something differs over time, and therefore the same thing would be and would not be itself, aspect on which Melissus' criticism would focus. But this in turn would be at odds with E2, where Melissus claims that we do not see nor know *things that are*. If the verb 'to be' means to have an essential nature, to say that we do not see nor know things that are would mean to deny that we have experience of things having an essential nature whatsoever. But this is a *non sequitur*, since Melissus would be denying that the nature of things is constant and not that we do not experience essential natures, and by hypothesis we have excluded that the meaning of constancy was contained in 'to be', which would then make the statement in E2 inexplicable. Of course, this objection of mine does not apply to those who believe that E2 is not authentic but, as I said in n. 5, this is a position that I deem to be unfounded.

the permanence of predicate were already contained in εἶναι[13].

So, all that remains is to understand 'to be' in a merely existential sense. The things we say to be really (E1) and that we see and know (E2) do not exist and therefore are unreal, apparent, illusory. Thus, we understand the sense of Melissus' challenge to Parmenides. In the latter, in fact, the refusal of the possibility of 'knowing' non-being was compatible with a doctrine of being open to the description of the physical world. In Melissus, by contrast, the radical eliminativism that discards physical entities is the immediate result of the strict monism, according to which in reality there is only one entity *and nothing else*. Experience, therefore, puts us in front of things that seem to exist but, in reality, are not. Their explanation, which characterizes the naturalism of the early Greek physicists (including Parmenides[14]), is suddenly blown away: cosmology becomes a meontology[15].

Non-existence, Nothingness, and Void

The existential value is implicated in all references to non-being ('to be not', devoid of the predicative) present in all the known remains

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[13] This is the reading that was proposed by Loenen (1959). For Loenen the verb 'to be' should not be understood as an indication of existence *sic et simpliciter*, but as being *stricto sensu*: "to Melissus ἔστιν implies immutability, irrespective of the context in which it occurs" (136). If therefore the expression of 'to be' involves immutability and not mere existence, then the things that 'are not' (*mē onta*) will not be non-existent, but only the things that change. So, while today we speak of 'strict monism' indicating the doctrine traditionally attributed to Melissus, Loenen instead recognized in his thought "a strict dualism between two kinds of reality, *viz.* the world of change, about which (unlike Parmenides) he does not speak any further […], and absolute reality, not perceptible by the senses" (132). This interpretative perspective, however, not only was unsuccessful among scholars, but also opens a number of problems on which I cannot linger here.

[14] The fragments of the last section of Parmenides' poem denote patent naturalistic interests, since there are displayed not popular beliefs, but real cosmological and physiological theories. Theories of this kind are completely absent in Melissus' fragments and testimonies. Traditionally it was believed that in the last section Parmenides rejected the epistemic value of such theories, considering them false. In recent decades, there has been (according to me, correctly) a reassessment of this part, to the point of believing that Parmenides expressed there his point of view on the physical world. As it is not possible for me to delve into the matter here, I shall refer to Pulpito (2011 and 2018), wherein I examined the issue in detail.

[15] As Galgano (2009, 135-136) efficaciously wrote: "O resultado porém é singular e, aparentemente, totalmente inesperado: Parmênides rechaça o não-ser como origem da geração e corrupção, por ser contraditório, mas de alguma forma aceita os fenômenos, como é testemunhado pela segunda parte do Poema; Melisso, de alguma forma, aceita o não-ser como rechaça os fenômenos é testemunhado pela operatividade que lhe atribui, e rechaça os fenômenos tornando-os apenas fruto de uma profunda distorção da percepção e do pensar humano a ela atrelado".

of the treatise. In three instances (B7.2, B7.5, B8.6)[16] Melissus treats change not as a passage from one characteristic to another, but as a corruption of what is and generation of *what is not*. In this case, non-being evidently has an existential value: before coming to be, what comes to be did not exist. In one case (B10)[17], the meaning of the reference to non-being would seem analogous to the attribution of non-existence of E2: Melissus denies the divisibility of being, since it would imply movement. But Melissus has already shown in B7 that being is immobile: therefore, if it moved, it would not be 'being' (that is, it would not be at all). But this is what happens to the objects of our experience which move and at the same time *are not*.

The most interesting reference is once again the one we find in fragment B7 and concerns precisely the denial of the void, from which immobility is deduced. Here, in B7.7[18], Melissus infers *ex abrupto*[19] that there is no void on the grounds that a void is nothing, and what is nothing cannot be. The classical translation interprets the first proposition of this passage (οὐδὲ κενεόν ἐστιν οὐδέν) as expressing something that does not concern the entity representing the object of the deduction. Melissus has shown that it is eternal, infinite, one, all the same, immutable, without pain and suffering. However, according to the traditional reading of the passage, having said what this thing is, i.e. having deduced its properties, Melissus deduces something that does not directly concern the thing itself: *there is no void* (or *nothing is empty*). From this premise, and therefore indirectly, the immobility of the only

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[16] εἰ γὰρ ἑτεροιοῦται, ἀνάγκη τὸ ἐὸν μὴ ὁμοῖον εἶναι, ἀλλὰ ἀπόλλυσθαι τὸ πρόσθεν ἐόν, τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἐὸν γίνεσθαι (B7.2); οὐδ' ἂν τὸ ὑγιὲς ἀλγῆσαι δύναιτο· ἀπὸ γὰρ ἂν ὄλοιτο τὸ ὑγιὲς καὶ τὸ ἐόν, τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἐὸν γένοιτο (B7.5); ἢν δὲ μεταπέσηι, τὸ μὲν ἐὸν ἀπώλετο, τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἐὸν γέγονεν (B8.6).

[17] εἰ γὰρ διήιρηται τὸ ἐόν, κινεῖται· κινούμενον δὲ οὐκ ἂν εἴη (B10).

[18] οὐδὲ κενεόν ἐστιν οὐδέν· τὸ γὰρ κενὸν οὐδέν ἐστιν· οὐκ ἂν οὖν εἴη τό γε μηδέν. οὐδὲ κινεῖται· ὑποχωρῆσαι γὰρ οὐκ ἔχει οὐδαμῆι, ἀλλὰ πλέων ἐστίν. εἰ μὲν γὰρ κενεὸν ἦν, ὑπεχώρει ἂν εἰς τὸ κενόν· κενοῦ δὲ μὴ ἐόντος οὐκ ἔχει ὅκηι ὑποχωρήσει (B7.7).

[19] *Ex abrupto* to such an extent that Solmsen (1969, 228) did not rule out the possibility of a gap here. Also favouring this interpretation is the rift in the argumentative chain that this passage seems to generate. On this latter point, however, see *infra*.

existing entity would be derived (since motion implies void which, however, is not there).

The wording with which Melissus presents this negation is particularly refined because it borders on the paradoxical and seems to betray a rhetorical taste for wordplay[20]: οὐδὲ κενεόν ἐστιν οὐδέν· τὸ γὰρ κενεὸν οὐδέν ἐστιν (literally: "and not void is nothing: in fact the void nothing is"). The contradiction that would generate the paradox is, however, only apparent: 'nothing' and 'void' appear with distinct meanings in the two propositions[21]. In the first proposition (οὐδὲ κενεόν ἐστιν οὐδέν) 'nothing' seems to have distributive value and to stand for 'no thing' as subject, while 'void' is a predicative expression; on the contrary, in the second 'void' is subject and is conceptualized with an article, while 'nothing' seems to function as a predicative expression to indicate the absence of any quality that would make something existing.

The assumption underpinning this argument against the void is, therefore, the non-existence of nothing. Here, however, there is a problem of no small importance, since this argument breaks up the deductive sequence of the treatise that derives every attribute of being from the previous one in an unjustified way and without any warning from Melissus. In this wording, no previous attribute seems to be recalled, or at least not explicitly. A deduction that leaves the property of immobility *unbound*, without foundation in the deductive chain, would then be an eccentric one.

A way to avoid this argumentative flaw could be to think, *more parmenideo*, that this property hinges on the fundamental premise of the entire deduction and, since the non-existence of nothing is evoked here, to think that this premise can be the negation of non-being. In actual

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[20] This aspect is usually neglected. An exception is Harriman (2019, 181).

[21] Incidentally, I note that no substantial difference runs between οὐδέν and μηδέν, as evidenced by the continuation of Melissus' reasoning. More than semantics, the difference in their use seems to be syntactic, seeing that Melissus prefers οὐδέν to express factual data or definitions (κενεόν ἐστιν οὐδέν) and μηδέν to present hypothetical conditions (οὐκ ἂν οὖν εἴη τό γε μηδέν). *Contra* Vitali (1973, 164-166), who proposes a sophisticated but not very perspicuous difference between the two terms.

fact, we have something that comes very close to such a premise. This is the initial interrogative sentence of a passage transmitted to us by Simplicius (*In Phys.* 103, 15-23), in which the first moments of the Melissean deduction are expounded. In the first editions of treatise's fragments, it was construed as an authentic fragment. It was Pabst (1889) who demonstrated that the passage was not, as it had until then been thought, a fragment but only a paraphrase (with modifications and additions). Nonetheless, Burnet (1892) believed that the question that opens the paraphrase should still be considered a textual quote[22]: εἰ μὲν μηδὲν ἔστι, περὶ τούτου τί ἂν λέγοιτο ὡς ὄντος τινός;

The alleged fragment (which we will call B0 after Reale 1970, 369) poses a question that is rhetorical since it implicitly contains its answer: "If nothing is, what could be said about it as if it were something?". Said implicit answer is, quite obviously: "nothing". Now, how does this linguistic impossibility allow us to conclude that something exists instead, and therefore that it is not true that nothing exists? The solution is self-reflective: the negation of this impossibility lies in the very fact that it is expressed anyway. As Reale (1970) wrote: "Se nulla fosse, non si potrebbe parlare di nulla (non si potrebbe parlare del nulla come se fosse; e se d'altra parte noi parliamo, ciò implica che qualcosa è)" (44). The pivot of the argument is given by the performative function of 'saying'. The implicit answer to the question posed by the text is: if nothing were, we could not say anything; but we, while affirming this, *are still saying something*! From this it follows that it is not true that nothing is. Loenen (1959) had recognized it too and, even if he did not go so far as to accept the question as an authentic fragment, he believed that it reproduced the content of something actually present in the text of Melissus, placed before the fragment that Diels numbered as B1. According to Loenen, it is precisely in B0 that the assumption of the entire deduction is justified. He conjectured that

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[22] This proposal was accepted by Reale (1970, 34-45), Vitali (1973, 159-162) and Harriman (2019, 37-56).

the original text could have been: εἰ οὐκ ἔστι τι, πῶς ἂν λέγοιτο ὡς ἔστι τι (140 n. 28), which he proposed to translate as follows: "if there is not something, how could one speak of it (of that 'something') as of something that is?". And he continued so:

> [F]rom the fact that we can say 'something is' it appears that there is actually something. Melissus thus makes an inference from the sphere of language (and thought) to the sphere of being. […] The fact that it is thought and said that 'something is', i.e. that the existence of an absolute Being is conceived by the mind, by Melissus is considered to present sufficient evidence for its actual existence. Looking back at the history of philosophy, we may say that this is the oldest instance of an inference from the sphere of thought to the sphere of being, similar in character to that found later in the so-called ontological argument (for the existence of God) which from the idea of the highest conceivable Being infers its real existence. There are unmistakably some important differences, but a certain resemblance is also undeniable. (141-142)

However that may be understood[23], the fragment B0 (or, if it is not a literal quotation, the testimony it contains) would document how, at the beginning of his deduction, Melissus, in line with Parmenides, would make a connection between what can be said (and, implicitly, thought) and what can be. To return to our problem on how to justify the denial of the void, from this premise Melissus would have derived two lines of reasoning: the main chain, which begins from eternity and, proceeding through infinity, uniqueness, sameness, immutability, would come up to the absence of pain and suffering (B1–B7.1-6); and a secondary chain that, proceeding through the denial of the void, would reach fullness, immobility (B7.7-10) and indivisibility (B10).

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[23] Little changes (and indeed perhaps the situation becomes more complicated) if we accept the predicative construction proposed by Harriman (2019, 64), according to which B0 should be rendered in this way: "If it (i.e. what is) is nothing, what could be said about it as if it were something?". He writes: "The point is that if you hold both that what-is is nothing and that you could say something about it ὡς <ἐ>όντος τινός, your position is self-contradictory. That is to say, the reason why you could not speak of that which is nothing is that to do so would be to predicate something of it, whereas its being nothing rules out its having predicates. […] the acceptance of the fact that 'something is' follows from our agreement that we can talk about it" (54-55).

Even if it can be admitted that the argument of B0 justifies the thesis that 'something exists', it is doubtful that it instead played a role in the subsequent deduction. Take the fragment B1. Here Melissus denies that being (which he actually calls ὅ τι ἦν, "what was") may have had a beginning since before coming to be it would have been nothing. And here Melissus explicitly affirms the principle that would go on to have a long history in philosophical thought: the *nihil ex nihilo*, οὐδὲν ἐκ μηδενός. For Melissus, therefore, the problem at the beginning of the main chain that starts from eternity does not lie in the fact that the genesis presupposes the ineffable non-being (as Parmenides had done, B8.7-9).

We might think that, in reality, Melissus needed to indicate another problem for the genesis from nothing because B0 would have excluded that there had been absolutely nothing (that is, that nothing had ever existed), while here in B1 it is assumed that there is something and that is supposed to come to be. However, before its coming to be there would have been absolutely nothing, therefore B0 (which denies nothing) would have been enough to exclude beginning. If, however, we mean B0 in a more restricted sense, i.e. as an argument that requires that at least *in some time* there has been something, the hypothesis of the genesis from absolute nothingness would not open any problem because it would not be in contrast with the assumption of B0. This, furthermore, would justify the fact that Melissus addresses another principle, the *nihil ex nihilo*, rather than the mere ineffability evoked by B0.

But if this were the case, one would not understand in what sense then B0 succeeds (in the secondary chain) in justifying the denial of the void. Of course, an argument that demonstrates that 'something exists' does not exclude that 'something does not exist', as in the case of the void. But the fact that it is not excluded is certainly not enough: we need an argument that justifies the refutation of void and not just one that admits the non-existence of something. So what would justify it?

Where would that denial of void come from? The 'unbound' character of immobility would remain thus.

Yet another possibility could be to interpret B0 in a different manner, namely reading οὐδέν not in a distributive sense ('anything') but as a negation of every property ('what is nothing'). The question "If nothing is, what could be said about it as if it were something (implied: that exists)?" could mean trivially that we cannot understand what is nothing as something existing. What is nothing simply is not[24]. And this actually appears to be what is presupposed in the denial of void and the following claim of immobility. In this case, the reference to saying should be understood in a purely 'logical' sense: what cannot have any being cannot be *attributed* to what is.

But this would mean compounding the problem further, because if we understood B0 in this way there would be no justification for the existence of something that would start the entire reasoning: in other words, we would weld it to the secondary chain, while still unhitching it from the main one. In fact, if we cannot talk about what is nothing as something that exists, then *we can talk about it* as something that does not exist. Thus the 'performative' denial of the fact that nothing exists (since one would still be saying something), and therefore the justification that something exists, is lost. But if something is not shown to exist, B0 will perhaps justify the denial of the void but it will no longer be at the beginning of the deductive chain because it would not justify the existence of being rather than the fact that there is nothing, and it is not clear why it should have been, as some interpreters believed, the *incipit* of the treatise. So, to prevent immobility from being an 'unbound' character, we end up making B0's question an 'unbound' argument, paying in some ways an even higher price.

Does this mean that we must give up justifying the denial of the void and therefore the character of immobility? In reality, we can

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[24] Cf. B7.7.

understand the construction of B7.7 in a different form, as Loenen[25] first recognized (for obvious reasons). In fact, we can restrict the denial of emptiness to the being alone (which is still the only reality and is the underlying subject of the whole chain), and therefore intend οὐδέν in the adverbial sense[26]: [it] is not empty in anything (that is, nowhere and in no way). This would make the statement consistent with what precedes it (the deduction of the characters of being) but also with what follows it (since, right after it, Melissus resumes talking about being as a subject, stating that it is full, cannot be more or less empty, and does not move). In this case, then, the exclusion of the void *in* the unique and infinite being would derive from its previously demonstrated sameness: since it is entirely homogeneous, it cannot have any void. It must be all equally existing, and therefore completely full. Indeed, the void *is not*, and therefore does not find space in what is all equally *being*. It goes without saying that we could reach the same conclusion even if we maintained the traditional rendering ('nothing is empty', since the only reality is always the infinite being), albeit in a way less coherent with the context.

In this way, fullness and immobility would depend on sameness and would be fully included in the deductive chain. In the order of presentation of the characters, actually, the immediately preceding property is that of the absence of pain and suffering. This violates the rule according to which Melissus deduced every character from the preceding one. But this would not be the only case. Without going into the issue of the deductive order of the treatise, Melissus' argumentative sequence, more than a single rigid and orderly chain, seems to follow a linear order only for the first four characters, i.e. those which are not by chance summarized at the beginning of B7. At this point, it is as if Melissus deduced a sunburst of characters that all depend on sameness-

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[25] Loenen (1959, 163). So also Sedley (1982, 178 n. 7) and Harriman (2019, 182).

[26] Cf. B8.3: καὶ ὅ τι ἦν τε καὶ ὃ νῦν <u>οὐδὲν</u> ὁμοῖον εἶναι ("and that what was and what is now are not at all the same").

homogeneity and, therefore, cascading from the preceding ones (it is no coincidence that in B7 the ungeneratedness and uniqueness are recalled). One of these rays, the one *not* announced at the beginning of B7 (after recapitulating the previous characters), is longer because it opens a new sequence (fullness > immobility > indivisibility) but nonetheless descending from the main one.

Self-refutation

What about B0? Although some scholars have welcomed the proposal for the admission of B0 among the authentic fragments recognizing in it the beginning of the treatise, there are many reasons for excluding the validity of this hypothesis and instead identifying fragment B1 as the probable opening of the book[27]. The salient reason in the context of this essay concerns the implications of the acceptance of this alleged fragment for the coherence of the argument. If we admitted that the foundation of the Melissean deduction was the thesis that it is not possible for nothing to exist because otherwise we could not talk about anything (as we effectively do), an argumentative short circuit would be generated. The reason at the base of B0 is that *we cannot talk about what does not exist*. The point is, however, that we do not talk only about the unique being (which is eternal, infinite, all the same, and immutable) but also about all the other things that, as E2 reminds us, we see and know but *do not exist*. In E1 Melissus clearly says that men *say* something about things that do not really exist. However, this belies B0, according to which we could not talk about what does not exist. If therefore B0 were authentic it would be the premise of a reasoning that is later denied by its own conclusions, in other words a self-refuting argument.

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[27] In Pulpito (2017) I reviewed the *status quaestionis* and advanced some arguments that not only prevent us from recognizing the authentic *incipit* of the treatise in the Simplicius' paraphrase, but lead us to reject this alleged fragment altogether.

Moreover, in B8 Melissus reaches the conclusion that every experience is fallacious: what we see and hear – but also what we understand and know starting from a certain experience – is not reliable. Well, the fact that we are saying something, which is the basis of B0, is precisely an experience. We find empirically that we are saying something: we cannot deduce it, we can only experience it. But B8 tells us that the experience is fallacious. In this way, the premise would establish a conclusion that contradicts it. Even in this respect, the argument would prove to be self-refuting.

B0 is extraneous to Melissean doctrine. It is no coincidence that it belongs to a paraphrase in which there is not only a rewriting of Melissus' ideas with other words, but also some argumentative additions, missing in the original treatise, that are driven by a need for systematization. The inclusion of B0 at the beginning of the Simplician paraphrase as the foundation of Melissean reasoning tacitly responds to the desire *to normalize* Melissus, forcing it to fit exactly into the Parmenidean sulcus which, instead, on closer inspection, he criticizes. In fact, B0 is completely in line with the philosophy of Parmenides, and Melissus for tradition *can only be* a Parmenidean thinker[28].

But does keeping B0 outside the series of authentic fragments perhaps protect Melissus' doctrine from self-refutation? Is a doctrine that promotes a strict monism like the Melissean one and condemns the entire world of experience to non-existence truly free from this risk? Mourelatos (1965, 362-363) wrote: "When Melissus says 'if there *were* earth and water' does not, of course, intend the paradoxical and self-contradictory thesis that this to which I point (the earth, the sea) does

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[28] As Palmer (2004, 37) wrote: "It seems, therefore, that the beginning of the paraphrase of Melissus reproduced in Simplicius reflects its anonymous author's own dilemmatic schematization rather than any actual argument attributable to Melissus. Anonymous has set up his own contrast between the possibilities that something is (τι ἐστίν) and that nothing is (μηδὲν ἔστι). Finding nothing in Melissus' treatise corresponding to this second possibility, he imported an argument against it with a properly Eleatic pedigree in Parmenides". Galgano (2019), in perfect solitude on the critical landscape, has commendably focused his attention on the differences between Parmenides' and Melissus' conceptions of non-being; yet, oddly enough, he is reluctant to reject B0, if not as an authentic fragment, at least as evidence of a Melissean argument.

not exist. The verb 'to be' here has a special sense". Mourelatos adopts the strategy used six years earlier by Loenen to avoid the eliminativist outcomes of monism: limiting the semantic field of 'to be' to what is *stricto sensu*[29]. The eliminativist outcomes are certainly paradoxical (in a literal sense). But are they also self-contradictory? Barnes (1982, 500 n. 4), responding to Mourelatos and adopting a fully monistic perspective, wrote: "The thesis is not self-contradictory, and Melissus surely did intend it: it is paradoxical – but what is Eleaticism if not paradoxical?".

How are things really? The interesting thing is that the point Mourelatos makes seems to reproduce a Parmenidean pattern of reasoning. The argument that "this to which I point does not exist" is unacceptable seems to replicate to some extent Parmenides' B2 argument[30]. Not so Melissus, who, as we are trying to show, does not reason in Parmenidean terms, and for which therefore the attribution of non-existence is not in itself problematic. Thus, it would seem that Barnes is right. Yet, to fully account for Barnes' claim, we still need to aim for a 'special ontology'. The attribution of non-existence is not problematic and is fully sensible if it refers exclusively to extra-mental realities (such as when I say that 'the Chimera does not exist').

But things are not that simple. Limiting the attribution of non-existence to the sole domain of extra-mental realities presupposes the existence of the mind. But Melissus' monism is by no means generous from this point of view. If there is nothing else besides the only being, then even the individual who proposes this theory (i.e. Melissus himself) does not exist (excluding, of course, the possibility that the being he refers to is himself, also because the individual in question would be one who does not think anything, implying, strictly speaking, that there would be no mental plane). Thus, admitting that the statement "this to which I point does not exist" is not self-contradictory, can we say the

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[29] See *supra* n. 13.

[30] The precise terms of the Parmenidean stance, however, were and still are greatly debated, but I cannot delve into the question here.

same for the statement "I myself do not exist"? Melissus' doctrine is literally self-refuting, in the sense that through it Melissus refutes the existence of himself: but is it also self-refuting in an argumentative sense?

If Loenen implicitly referred to Descartes' ontological proof of the existence of God (derived from Anselm) thinking about the consequences of monism, another Cartesian argument comes to mind, albeit in reverse: a sort of counter-cogito, *cogito ergo non sum*[31]. As Matson (1988) wrote about Parmenides' classic monist interpretation: "If Parmenides held that all motion and plurality are illusory, by inescapably obvious inference he held that he *himself* was an illusion: 'I think, therefore I am *not*'" (313). Actually, Matson did not only recognize that there are no preconditions for such a conclusion in Parmenides – and he was right about this – but he believed that Melissus too does not reach this outcome – and this is more questionable. Matson stated that since he ruled out that Parmenides averred the illusory nature of change and plurality partly on the basis of the untenability of this "bizarre view" (331), he needed to demonstrate that that view was not supported by Melissus either. However, by doing so he actually returned to the *stricto sensu* interpretation of the verb 'to be', understood as 'to be immutably' (like that of Loenen), some of the limits of which I have already mentioned.

Strictly speaking, the prerequisites for a counter-cogito seem to be missing. We certainly find the conclusion ('I am not', i.e. 'I do not exist') which, although not explicit, is immediately obtained from strict monism ('if only the One exists, and I am not the One, I do not exist'). What we do not find is the premise ('I think'), forasmuch as in the remaining fragments there is no reflective, even implicit, reference to

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[31] The reference here is clearly the classical Cartesian *cogito* (*Principia philosophiae* I, 7); but remember also the *si fallor sum* of Augustine (*De civitate Dei contra Paganos* XI, 26).

'thinking'[32]. If we had accepted B0 we would have, instead, a reflective reference to the performative plane of 'saying' already at the beginning of the treatise. B0 acknowledges that something exists because we are talking about it (since if nothing existed, how could we talk about it?). So, since I am saying something, something exists. But given that the deduction will show that this 'something' is eternal, infinite, unique, all the same, immutable, etc., and thus that it is the only existing entity, and since this being is not me, it follows that I myself do not exist. The result would be a bizarre *loquor ergo non sum*, whose self-contradiction is evident. But, as shown above, B0 does not belong to the list of authentic fragments of Melissus[33].

Nonetheless, monism appears *prima facie* problematic in itself. The outcome of the denial of the existence of oneself, in any case, seems to entail a performative self-refutation regardless of the reflective premise on one's mental or linguistic act. How sensible (and therefore credible) is a thesis that presupposes the non-existence of those who propose it, as well as their own thoughts, their words, the treatise in which said thoughts and words are presented, and the same listeners and readers of

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[32] The only partial exception is the fleeting mention of seemingly cognitive (but actually always pertaining to the perceptive sphere) verbs such as συνιέναι and γινώσκειν in B8. Anyway, these are references that are certainly not in an initial position of the treatise and therefore cannot function as a premise of the deduction: moreover, they do not have a reflective use, as in the case of Descartes' *cogito*.

[33] It could be argued – on the other hand – that B0 is not the only occurrence in which Melissus uses a *loquor*. After all, it is still Melissus who used the expression: εἰ γὰρ ἦν πολλά, τοιαῦτα χρὴ αὐτὰ εἶναι, οἷόν περ ἐγώ φημι τὸ ἓν εἶναι ("if there were many things, they would have to be such as *I say* the one is" B8.2). But here Melissus does not refer to the *utterance* (which he, as well as his listeners and readers, experiences). He rather uses an anaphoric reference to the *propositions* that express the already deduced characteristics of being. That the performance is not involved in the argument (that is, the tenet is not the act of saying, but just what has been said) it is showed by the conclusion of the fragment, in which Melissus reaffirms the same concept but without any reference to 'saying', which therefore proves to be not functional to the argument: οὕτως οὖν, εἰ πολλὰ εἴη, τοιαῦτα χρὴ εἶναι, οἷόν περ τὸ ἕν ("so, therefore, if there were many things, they would have to be such as the one is", B8.6).

the treatise and their whole world?[34]

In the history of ancient philosophy there have appeared some refutative arguments which, through a *peritropē*, highlighted the intrinsic contradiction of the so-called 'Eleatism'[35] (especially its extreme outgrowth, such as the Melissean doctrine) with its implicit assumptions. It is certainly singular (but perhaps significant) that this type of argument was not used by the Epicurean Colotes, who – as we know thanks to Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem* – contested Parmenides (in fact assimilated to Melissus) clearly identifying the alleged eliminativist outcome of his theory: φησι πάντ' ἀναιρεῖν τῷ ἓν ὂν ὑποτίθεσθαι τὸν Παρμενίδην (*Adv. Col.* 1114D). We do not know exactly how far this elimination went according to Colotes, but the examples of abolished things reported by Plutarch are the "fire", the "water", the "ravine", the "cities of Europe and Asia" (*Adv. Col.* 1114B). It is a short, heterogeneous and to some extent curious list. It would seem possible to exclude that in this Colotean list there were more shocking examples of elimination, such as that of Parmenides himself, since Plutarch – it is to be assumed but not at all taken for granted – would probably not have glossed them over, just as he did not for Colotes' criticism of Empedocles.[36] A mention of a possible self-contradiction is in the treatise of the Pseudo-Aristotle, *De Melisso Xenophane et Gorgia*. There, in the critical section, the author states that the premise from which the

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[34] Matson (1980, 346), showing the limits of Parmenides' monist interpretation (but unwittingly contesting Melissus' philosophy) wrote: "[I]f there is no plurality and no difference, then the goddess does not exist, her words do not exist, Parmenides does not exist, he has no audience, there are no arguments (for arguments require premisses), hence no such thing as reason. Never would anyone have more catastrophically sawed off the limb he sat on than this primordial logician". So, instead, Gallop (1984, 27-28): "Parmenides himself would not, on strict Eleatic principles, even exist as a discrete individual, and so presumably could not really be speaking or thinking. His belief that he was doing so would be no less illusory than his other beliefs about the phenomenal world". Of the opposite opinion is Cordero (1999, 285), for whom, from Parmenides' perspective, it can be disputed whether the answer to the question on the *archē* may be water or air, but one cannot deny *being as a fact*: "La realidad misma de quien formula la pregunta da la respuesta".

[35] As I said, I do not think that Melissus could be called 'Eleatic'. The common historiographic use, however, means for Eleatism the school of thought that includes Parmenides and Melissus (and partly also Zeno, but with an eccentric and purely critical role). In the past it was believed that Xenophanes was also part of this alleged school. The current trend is to exclude him from the ranks of the Eleatic philosophers.

[36] "τί κόπτομεν" φησίν "ἡμᾶς αὐτούς, σπουδάζοντες ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν καὶ ὀρεγόμενοι τινων πραγμάτων καὶ φυλαττόμενοι τινα πράγματα; οὔτε γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν οὔτ' ἄλλ' οἷς χρώμενοι ζῶμεν" (*Adv. Col.* 1112D).

reasoning of Melissus starts, that is the principle *ex nihilo nihil* from which he will come to contest the senses, is actually taken from the sensory experience of the many things (ἐκ τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι ἐπὶ πολλῶν, MXG 974b 10). Aristocles goes in this direction too (we draw from Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* XIV 17,7). He maintains that Melissus would demonstrate that what falls under our senses does not really exist, making use of exactly what the senses attest to us. So, the Samian would be forced to trust the senses in order to deny the senses' trustworthiness[37]. Simplicius came much closer to the recognition of monistic self-refutation. Although he did not go so far as identifying the inconsistency between the monism and the thoughts of the monist, he nevertheless dragged something of the person who proposes that doctrine in his reasoning. As for the much earlier Neoplatonic, i.e. Plutarch, the purpose of Simplicius is not to accuse Melissus but to save Parmenides from the contradictions of monism, defending the interpretation that recognizes a sort of Platonic dualism in Eleatism. Simplicius (*De Cael.* 559,27 - 560,1) excludes that Parmenides denied the generation and the plurality of things on the grounds that "he did not ignore that he himself was generated and that he had two feet, when he claimed that being is one"[38]. But the one to put forward the argument of self-refutation against the most radical outcomes of Eleatism, first and best among all, was Aristotle (*Phys.* VIII, 254a27-30), who recognized a performative contradiction not in the monistic critique of plurality, but in the denial of change: even if the opinion according to which the movement exists were false, it would still be an opinion (*doxa*), and even if it were only imagination (*phantasia*), there would still be movement, since both opinion and imagination are

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[37] This recalls the situation outlined in Democritus' fragment 68 B125, in which the Senses, personified, accuse the Reason addressing it with these words: τάλαινα φρήν, παρ' ἡμέων λαβοῦσα τὰς πίστεις ἡμέας καταβάλλεις; πτῶμά τοι τὸ κατάβλημα ("Wretched mind, you get your evidence from us, and yet you overthrow us? The overthrow is a fall for you", trans. Taylor 1999, 13).

[38] δῆλον δέ, ὅτι οὐκ ἠγνόει Παρμενίδης, ὅτι γενητὸς αὐτὸς ἦν, ὥσπερ οὐδέ, ὅτι δύο πόδας εἶχεν, ἓν λέγων τὸ ὄν.

movements[39].

Modern critics have shared the idea that strict monism is an unsustainable philosophical position. Loenen (1959, 134) judged it "too absurd", Barnes (1979, 2) "at best absurd and at worst unintelligible", Matson (1988, 331) "bizarre", Bredlow (2018, 14) "grotesque" and "extravagant". More recently, Palmer (2009) agreed with this devaluing standpoint. He, like Barnes and unlike Loenen, admitted that strict monism is undoubtedly what we can conclude from the Melissean fragments. However, not being able to deny, so to speak, the *verbum* (as Loenen did), Palmer deemed possible to question its *spiritus*. Given that the treatise of Melissus presents a clear monist thesis, one may wonder what the real intention of the thinker of Samos was. According to Palmer, there are elements that should lead us to think that Melissus' thesis and arguments were in some ways eristic[40]. We can recognize four distinct reasons put forward by Palmer in favour of this interpretation. 1) The already mentioned absurdity of the thesis: Palmer defines this vision of things as "wildly paradoxical" (49, 216) and adds, in an even more drastic way, that "the thesis that just one thing exists […] is the position that Melissus advocated and that no serious metaphysician should want to adopt" (38). 2) The invalidity of the arguments: Palmer points out that the thesis that there is only one thing is without foundation. He writes: "If there were such an entity, its existence would indeed leave no room for anything else; but there is not, because Melissus' arguments involve fallacies of equivocation so that his conclusions do not follow" (224). Palmer, for example, sees such fallacies in two passages in particular: in the deduction of spatial boundlessness from the temporal one[41], and of homogeneity from being 'one' (210-211). 3) The philosophical milieu: Melissus would have been "active during the

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[39] εἴπερ οὖν ἔστιν δόξα ψευδὴς ἢ ὅλως δόξα, καὶ κίνησις ἔστιν, κἂν εἰ φαντασία, κἂν εἰ ὁτὲ μὲν οὕτως δοκεῖ ὁτὲ δ' ἑτέρως· ἡ γὰρ φαντασία καὶ ἡ δόξα κινήσεις τινὲς εἶναι δοκοῦσιν.

[40] See in particular the paragraph "Melissus as an eristic" (Palmer 2009, 216-224).

[41] It is a passage that, in all probability, would be targeted already by Gorgias 82 B3 DK. = Sext. *Adv. Math.* VII 69 using the same line of reasoning, but in an anti-Melissean spirit.

period of the sophists' rise to prominence in the latter half of the fifth century" (217). For this reason, "[it] makes good sense to place him alongside those figures of the sophistic era who developed certain Presocratic ideas in novel and, at the same time, intensely problematic directions" (218). Palmer compares Melissus to a figure like Cratylus, who is thought to have radicalized Heraclitus' ideas: Melissus, he argues, did the same with Parmenides. 4) The testimonies: both Aristotle and Isocrates document that Melissus' thesis was associated with that of those thinkers who propose conceptions that are paradoxical in the literal sense, i.e. contrary to common opinions. Aristotle explicitly speaks of λόγον ἐριστικόν (*Phys.* 185a 8), while Isocrates associates Melissus with Protagoras and Gorgias. All this would be sufficient to consider Melissus a thinker interested more in controversy than in the truth of his theses.

In light of all this, of the risk of self-refutation, of the accusations of absurdity, and of the suspicion that it was a mere eristic operation, the question we must ask ourselves is: was Melissus serious?

How to be a Melissean metaphysician
(and be taken seriously)

To answer the question about Melissus's lack of seriousness, I shall make a brief digression here. In an article entitled *Parmenides' Dilemma*, Mackenzie (1982) attributed to Parmenides the strict monism (which she called 'strong monism'), outlining it in these terms: "what there is, is eternal, complete, immovable and unvarying, one and homogeneous (DK 28B 8.3-6). All the rest, the world of perceptible things, is contradictory – or an illusion" (1). Aside from the erroneous rear-projection of a Melissean monism to Parmenides, the prominent issue of Mackenzie's article is the recognition in that thesis of an evident case of self-refutation. The author clearly writes: "[C]ircularity characterises the argument to establish monism, for it is self-refuting" (5); "The argument

of the *Alētheia* is backward-turning because it relies on a premiss which is falsified by the conclusion. Thinkers are committed to *peritropē* because, by discriminating, they cancel out all distinctions, including their own identity" (6); "If we can think, we, as independent persons, cannot exist" (7).

Starting from an observation suggested to her by Burnyeat, Mackenzie explores a possible objection. If Parmenides was aware that the discourse on being that characterizes the first part of the poem is self-refuting, why did he call it *Alētheia*? Mackenzie admits that this could be an indication of a line of reasoning that, in principle, avoids self-refutation: "It may be that truth is not an epistemological, but a metaphysical matter – that is, states of affairs are true if and only if they are the case, irrespective of whether there is anyone there to describe them". However, she then excludes that this may be true in the case of Parmenides also on the basis of the Greek notion of *Alētheia*, which is not strictly metaphysical but would have to do with "*telling* the truth" (8). As it may be, this alleged counter-objection does not concern Melissus, who does not speak of *Alētheia*[42], and does not begin from epistemological (or 'dialectical', according to Mackenzie) premises such as those of Parmenides. Therefore, there is no obstacle to the idea that the aforementioned observation ("truth is not an epistemological, but a metaphysical matter – that is, states of affairs are true if and only if they are the case, irrespective of whether there is anyone there to describe them") could apply to Melissus.

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[42] To be more exact, in Melissus' B8 we can find some cognates of ἀλήθεια: the adjectives ἀληθής and ἀληθινός. But even in this case, the differences with Parmenides are significant. Although Parmenides also uses at least in one case ἀληθής in the same sense in which we read it in Melissus (it is the Parmenidean verse B8.39, which has strong analogies with the Melissian E1, see *supra*), in the poem the many occurrences of ἀλήθεια or ἀληθής mostly have an epistemological value: the main λόγος of the poem concerns ἀλήθεια (B1.29, B8.51); ἀλήθεια is accompanied by πειθώ, the persuasion (B2.4); πίστις, the trust is called ἀληθής (B1.30, B8.28), and so even the ὁδός itself, the way of research (or rather, negatively, Parmenides excluded the wrong way to be ἀληθής, B8.17-18). All these epistemological values are absent in Melissus (as far as we can judge from the remains of his treatise). He never attributes ἀληθής e ἀληθινός to his discourse or his path of research, or to forms of trust and persuasion, but to entities: men erroneously judge ἀληθῆ things that in reality are not (B8.2), since if they were ἀληθῆ they would not change (B8.5); nothing is stronger – that is permanent – than what is ἀληθινός (B8.5). With Melissus these notions assumes all their metaphysical depth, indicating not what appears epistemologically certain, well founded, persuasive, but what is metaphysically genuine, real.

From a strictly metaphysical point of view, is strict monism really self-refuting? To say that there is only one, eternal, infinite, and immutable thing implies that there are not many, temporary, finite, changeable things (just like this same statement and myself). But to imply that I do not exist is not necessarily contradicted by my *saying* (my performance) the assertion of my non-existence. It would be so if the truth of that statement depended on being expressed (and therefore existing as an expression) and being said by someone (someone who, it is implied, exists). But this is not the case. That the weather is nice is independent of my saying: "The weather is nice". It could not be said by anyone and would remain true and, vice versa, someone could say it while the weather is bad.

To be clear, the problem seems to be that this view of the relation between assertions and truth is not valid in the case of monism, for a trivial reason. Saying "the weather is nice" does not imply the non-existence of those who utter this statement, of words, of the weather, etc. It refers to an extra-mental reality and does not have a self-reflective semantics. The case of monism is different, inasmuch it seems to be denied at the very moment in which it is affirmed. However, it is good to note that this denial is only performative, and Melissus has a powerful countermeasure against this form of refutation. If the inference is logically derived, the performance is empirically gathered. But Melissus has argued (convincingly or not, this is not important here) that we do not experience correctly; what happens on the performative level has no title to act as a denial. In Melissus the break between the epistemological and the ontological plane – which in Parmenides were still held together – is definitely carried out.

Does this imply that eliminative monism is a convincing thesis? Far be it from me to defend this doctrine, certainly difficult to accept then as it is today, 'philosophically'. The interest here is only historical, and since the alleged absurdity of monism has been adduced for interpretative purposes, even purely theoretical observations have

become necessary. It is highly probable that monism is not philosophically sustainable, but to prove it one must already enter into a *seriously* metaphysical discussion, which implies that the absurdity of this thesis is not taken for granted to the point that considering it true is necessarily a sign of low seriousness (above all for Melissus and his contemporaries). As for the complex question of the validity of the arguments put forward by Melissus, which I cannot delve into here, assuming that they were vitiated by real fallacies (which is not at all obvious), this is not inevitably a sign of scarce metaphysical seriousness and eristic desire to impress but, more trivially, it can betray mere logical errors. Even the praiseworthy principle of charity in some cases has to capitulate to the irreducible human fallibility, from which philosophers, even the most serious ones, are certainly not immune.

Moreover, Melissus' contemporaries and successors seem to have taken his doctrine seriously, appreciating him[43] and often associating him with Parmenides. The examples given by Palmer are partial: Aristotle constantly pairs Melissus with Parmenides, and when he does discriminate between them he does so because he considers Melissus rougher than Parmenides, but in levelling this charge he associates him to Xenophanes (*Metaph.* 986b 25-27), who certainly was not an eristic nor was judged to be one by Aristotle[44]. On the other hand, Aristotle writes that both Melissus and Parmenides ἐριστικῶς συλλογίζονται (*Phys.* 186a 6-11). It is evident that this is a philosophical judgment on the value of doctrines, not on the intentions of the two philosophers. As for the *Topics* (104b 19-22), to which Palmer gives much emphasis, Aristotle clearly speaks of theses contrary to the common opinion, that is literally paradoxical (and condemned by Aristotle himself), but even

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[43] The contempt for Melissus and his reduction to a crude thinker begins only with Aristotle (without, however, immediately becoming commonplace). In the ancient references to Melissus (from the Hippocratic *De Natura Hominis* 1, to the Platonic *Theaetetus* 180d, 183e, up to Palaephatus *De Incredibilibus* 2,1) not only there is no trace of disdain, but sometimes true appreciation. It is known that for a short period it was precisely the Melissean doctrine that offered the key to understanding the so-called 'Eleatism' (see Pulpito 2016a and 2018).

[44] Rather, in *De Cael.* (294a 21-24) Aristotle treats him as a physicist.

here this does not tell us anything about the alleged eristic purposes of Melissus. So much so that in this passage of the *Topics* Melissus is associated with Heraclitus. Palmer believes that behind Heraclitus there is actually the extreme version of the doctrine of flux put forward by Cratylus. However, the fact that Aristotle mentions the Ephesian suggests that the issue here is not the pure controversialist intention of these philosophers but their serious metaphysical theses (which contrast common sense). As for Isocrates, it is true that at the beginning of *Encomium of Helen* he referred to all those who support paradoxical theses and engage in meaningless disputes, naming Protagoras, Gorgias, Zeno and Melissus. However, it is also true that among the examples of the unsustainable theses appeared the idea that all the virtues were one, clearly Socratic and certainly not reducible to an eristic product. The same group of thinkers mentioned by Isocrates should lead to caution as it betrays again more a philosophical judgment than a document on the historical nature of the respective theories. To think that eristic is what gathers the relativism of Protagoras, the rhetorical art of Gorgias, the physical paradoxes of Zeno (so serious as to engage mathematicians for millennia) and the metaphysical monism of Melissus is a hyper-simplification very unreliable. Besides, the rest of Melissean doxography does not support this eristic interpretation[45].

The fact, then, that Melissus undoubtedly "belongs to an intellectual milieu quite different from that of Parmenides" (Palmer 2009, 217), a milieu in which there were also the 'Eristics', tells us very little about the nature of Melissean doctrine. There were also other intellectual options at the time of Melissus. For example, as far as we know, within the school that was inspired by another and more ancient philosopher of Samos, Pythagoras, the discovery of the incommensurable had already been reached. It is the discovery of non-recurring infinite decimals, the so-called irrational numbers, attributed

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[45] On this see the excellent work of Brémond (2017).

to Hippasus, who would have opened a crisis in the Pythagorean school. Although it is information whose precise details are not certain, and although we do not know anything about Melissus' belonging or proximity to this current (even though Iamblichus inserts him in his catalogue of Pythagoreans), it seems far from implausible that within the research on the cosmos, which included mathematical studies, a hiatus between reason and experience had opened up at the time of Melissus. The discovery of the incommensurable creates a gap between what we can experience and what is mathematically true. In Melissus there is no mathematical reasoning, but in an ontological-deductive way he works on a gap of the same type. In any case, the Naturalists, with whom Melissus evidently polemicized (among them, in particular, with Parmenides, perhaps his main target) were also still at work in the same milieu: these are approximately the years of Archelaus, Diogenes of Apollonia, Leucippus, not to mention the early Hippocratic medicine. It could perhaps be said that it was an atmosphere not hostile to radical theses, but to characterize it as dominated by the eristic and the unserious controversies would be misleading.

We, therefore, have no compelling reason to think that Melissus was an eristic. We should treat him in the same way as all the other philosophers who have proposed paradoxical theses from antiquity to the present day (solipsism, immaterialism, atemporalism, etc.), but not for this reason have not been taken seriously.

At this point, there remains only one question to ask. Can one live whilst convinced of the truth of a thesis like that of Melissus? Invoking the timelessness of a logical truth or its independence from what we can say about it clashes with the trivial fact that Melissus lived as a man among men. And certainly not as a mystic hermit. Not only did he write a book, but we know he was admiral of the Samian fleet, and particularly skilled, if it is true that he had defeated the Athenian

fleet of Pericles[46]. How can this be reconciled with a thesis that derealizes everything? As we said, monism is a thesis that does not explain anything: it does not (and cannot) explain what appears to us and within which we live, all of which is downgraded to mere illusion. But if it is an illusion – it could be said – it is still something: exactly, an illusion! In the monistic perspective, this 'something' is actually 'nothing'. Given his removal of the epistemological value of the experience, in Melissus there can be no explanation for this discrepancy. This, however, certainly constitutes a problem for monism; not so much, perhaps, for its logical coherence, as I said above, but for its explanatory power and persuasiveness[47].

Now, asking ourselves what Melissus thought about what he perceived and the world in which he lived, we enter a biographical plane on which, evidently, we cannot say anything as historians. We can only make assumptions[48]. It seems to me that this theory can be somehow tolerated only if reality is understood as an impenetrable mystery, a world whose meaning is, to put it with Wittgenstein, *unaussprechlich*, since impossible in the light of reason. The only thing that can be said about this life is, therefore, its inconsistency – except perhaps the grasp of the truth of being, the only form of wisdom that, in this perspective, surpasses the uselessness of human affairs. We have a potential evidence of this Melissean attitude. There is, in fact, a short text attributed to Melissus reported in a Syriac gnomology (uncertain date[49]), which Diels inserted among the falsified fragments (B12). There is certainly no way to ascertain its reliability, however Calogero[50] argued that this doubtful

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[46] Plut. *Per.* 23. 2-3.

[47] For Obertello (1984), the understanding of seeming in the absolute being is the real theoretical problem of Melissus.

[48] In a recent paper Piergiacomi (2020) hypothesizes that the inconsistency of reality could have been the source of Melissus' courage as a soldier: a man is more bold if he thinks that every men and everything are nothing but harmless shadows.

[49] Brémond (2017, 478-479).

[50] "E che possa forse esserci qualcosa di buono è reso meno inverosimile anche dal fatto che, mentre idealmente esso non disdice a Melisso, d'altra parte non vi sono altri frammenti su cui esso risulti materialmente calcato" (Calogero 1977, 103 n. 19).

text is somewhat Melissean in spirit.

Melissus said, "I am deeply troubled by people's futile efforts. They exhaust themselves by staying awake at night for arduous journeys. They voyage through sea storms, and are tossed up and down, hanging between life and death. As strangers, they stay far away from their homes to amass money, although they do not even know who will inherit their money when they die. Yet they do not desire to acquire the glorious treasures of wisdom, of which they cannot be robbed: they can bequeath it to their friends, it accompanies them to the Underworld, and it is never away from them. Intelligent people testify to this by saying, 'The wise man has died, not his wisdom'".[51]

If Melissus, as it seems probable, was seriously a monist, it is possible (but certainly indemonstrable) that, as a seafarer but also as a philosopher, what he thought of life was not so far from what these words say.

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[51] I adopt the translation in Laks-Most (2016, 315 = Melissus R30).

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