INTRODUCTION

In the first book of *De Generatione et Corruptione* (325a13–25), Aristotle criticises philosophers who follow arguments to conclusions in palpable contradiction with the evidence of the senses. From the context, it is clear that it is the Eleatics, and Melissus in particular, that Aristotle has in mind.[1] In what follows, we shall be chiefly concerned with how Melissus assumes his premises and from them, stubbornly on Aristotle's account, deduces his conclusions, which act to characterise Melissus' subject, i.e. nature, or what-is. The sophistication with which Melissus develops his picture of his subject and the importance of his disciplined deductive strategy are a large part of what I hope the reader takes away from what follows.

Aristotle's remark is hostile and Melissus would surely object to his insistence on the importance of the senses in philosophical enquiry. Yet in one very important respect, Aristotle recognises what will prove to be a fundamental contention of the present work: Melissus, beginning from the twin hypotheses that there is something and that *generatione ex nihilo* is impossible, pursues arguments to seemingly outrageous conclusions with a dogged determination that only one who not only ignores the evidence of the senses, but positively dismisses such data from his philosophical tool kit, could muster.

Aristotle's remark suggests something else important as well: philosophical positions specifically attributable to Melissus on the evidence of the extant fragments were often taken to be representative of the 'Eleatics' or 'Eleaticism' from the fifth century onwards.[2]

[1] Aristotle claims that these philosophers maintain that the whole is one, unmoved, and infinite. From this description, it seems highly likely that Melissus is the most relevant representative of the group. See Williams 1982: 128 and Rashed 2005: 138.

[2] See Reale 1970: 31–2 and Palmer 2009: 218–24. Brémond (2016: 23–48; see 47–8 in particular) argues strongly for the thesis that Aristotle takes Melissus to be the prime representative of Eleaticism and the main advocate of its signature monism.

This raises a host of questions about Melissus' connections, philosophical and otherwise, with the Eleans (i.e. those from Elea itself, modern-day Velia in southern Italy) Parmenides and Zeno, both in historical fact and in the depictions of these thinkers in our major sources from antiquity, e.g. Plato and Aristotle.

The outsized role, then, that Melissus seems to have played in the reception of the so-called 'Eleatics' in antiquity means that the philosopher must be taken seriously, if we are to get a fuller picture of any of those figures (Parmenides, Zeno, and Xenophanes) that are associated with the philosophy of Elea. We will soon have the opportunity to take a closer look at these associations in Plato and Aristotle.

First it is worth asking what we can say, if anything, with a fair degree of certainty about the historical details of Melissus' life. Three details are uncontested: he came from the island of Samos, fought valiantly and successfully (for a time) as an admiral in a battle against the Athenians in 441 BCE,[3] and wrote a philosophical treatise in Ionic prose. These facts, though few in number, do reveal something of Melissus' character and philosophy. That he wrote in prose immediately sets him apart from Parmenides, while Melissus' role as an admiral, a position won as a result of his political acumen according to Diogenes Laertius,[4] perhaps suggests a similarity, if we are to believe Diogenes' report (IX.23) of Speusippus' claim in his lost *On Philosophers*, that Parmenides was also a politically active citizen, in his case a law giver.[5]

The date of Melissus' philosophical work is more difficult to establish. Apollodorus (*apud* Diogenes, IX.24) gives Melissus' *floruit* as the 84th Olympiad (444–440 BCE), suggesting that his philosophical output was roughly contemporaneous with his position as admiral in the Samian fleet. Such a dating does, however,

[3] The battle was a part of a larger struggle with the Athenians, who, when approached by the Milesians, enemies of the Samians, sailed to Samos and established a democracy. The following year (probably 441) Melissus and other disaffected Samians attacked the Athenian navy, with great success, until the arrival of Pericles, who crushed the navy and besieged Samos. The Samians surrendered in 439. See Thucydides 1.115–17.

[4] IX.24.

[5] For this aspect of Parmenides' biography, see Cosgrove 2014: 18–22. Cosgrove compares Parmenides' civic role with the tradition of Heraclitus' refusal to engage within the polis; this contrast takes on a particular relevance for Melissus if he did indeed come into contact with Heraclitus and the Ephesians, as Diogenes claims.

seem to demand an account of the relationships Melissus' work has with two groups of pluralists, the post-Parmenideans (Anaxagoras and Empedocles) and the atomists, both of which are reasonably understood to have been active by this date. For the former group, we might ask whether Melissus was aware of the pluralist response to Parmenides and, if so, how his work fits in within the debate. For the latter, the relative chronology seems crucial for assessing the veracity of two vital historical links: (a) the significant influence Melissus is often held to have had on the recognition of void as a precondition for motion; and (b) the impact of the supposed challenge Melissus issues at the conclusion of his B8, εἰ πολλὰ εἴη, τοιαῦτα χρὴ εἶναι οἷόν περ τὸ ἕν (if there were many, they ought to be of just the same sort as the One is), which is widely thought to have been accepted by Democritus.[6]

Giovanni Reale, seeking to interpret Melissus' work as entirely Parmenidean in influence, i.e. innocent of any trace of the pluralist response, moves to eliminate the motivation for such puzzles by proposing to date Melissus' birth to roughly 500 BCE. This attempt relies on a reading of Plutarch's *Life of Themistocles* 2, where the fifth-century historian and biographer Stesimbrotus is said to have claimed that Themistocles studied with Anaxagoras and interested himself in Melissus. Plutarch accuses Stesimbrotus of confusing Themistocles with the significantly younger Pericles, whom Melissus opposed in battle. Reale, taking Stesimbrotus to be a contemporary witness, and thus more reliable, dismisses Plutarch's criticism.[7] As Themistocles died in 459 BCE, Reale takes this as good evidence that Apollodorus' *floruit* is at least twenty years off the mark.

In principle, we might be sympathetic to Reale's criticism of Plutarch's correction; after all, Stesimbrotus is reputed to have written a biography of Themistocles (included in his Περὶ Θεμιστοκλέους, καὶ Θουκυδίδου καὶ Περικλέους) and Plutarch himself makes free use of this material in his *Lives.* The assumption that

[6] The direction of influence between Melissus and the atomists is openly contested. Those in favour of Melissus' priority include Kirk and Stokes 1960, Guthrie 1965: 117–18, and Furley 1967: 79–103; and, tentatively, Graham 2010: 462. See Long 1976: 647 for some reservations.

[7] Reale 1970: 8–9.

Melissus' age as admiral was approximately sixty years, making him only slightly older than Pericles (born *c.* 495 BCE), is also plausible.

We might ask, though, two questions about Reale's use of Stesimbrotus' contention. First, is it reasonable to believe that it was Themistocles and not Pericles who was the first Athenian statesman to come into contact with Anaxagoras?[8] The date of Anaxagoras' arrival in Athens and the length of his stay are both controversial. If we follow Jaap Mansfeld's (plausible) reconstruction of the Apollodorean evidence, Anaxagoras' arrived in Athens in 456/5 BCE and stood trial and left in 437/6.[9] This makes an Athenian acquaintance impossible, but it does not immediately discount Stesimbrotus' claim. Themistocles, of course, was ostracised from Athens in the late 470s and, after some time in Argos, made his way to Asia Minor and was made governor of Magnesia by Artaxerxes, the Persian king. As Magnesia was only a short distance from Anaxagoras' native Clazomenae, it is possible, although not likely, that Themistocles came into contact with the philosopher before Anaxagoras' move to Athens.

A more significant worry is whether Stesimbrotus' claim, even if true, does the work of eliminating a pluralist response from the context of Melissus' work, as Reale thinks it does. This is no hint, for instance, that Themistocles was specifically familiar with Melissus' book, as we have it today. Indeed, it is perfectly possible that Themistocles' association with Melissus, if accepted, involved discussion of ideas yet to take their final form, making the connection less telling about relative chronology than Reale seems to think. We might also wonder whether dating Melissus' book to the 460s is sufficiently early to entitle one to a confident claim that pluralist responses to Parmenides had yet to be formed.[10] Even if we were to accept Reale's dating of Melissus' birth, this would make him roughly coeval with Anaxagoras (on Mansfeld's reconstruction) and thus not give Melissus any significant claim to chronological priority.[11]

[8] Long (1976: 646) very much doubts that this is a reasonable claim.
[9] Mansfeld 1979. [10] Long (1976) also suggests points along these lines.
[11] I leave aside here Aristotle's puzzling remark in *Metaphysics* A (984a11–13) that Anaxagoras was *proteros* to Empedocles in age, but *husteros* in works. Whether Aristotle intends to claim that Anaxagoras wrote after Empedocles is a long-standing

Provisionally, I suggest that Reale's dating of Melissus' birth to 500 BCE is plausible enough, but that it in no way justifies his claim that this guarantees his work was free from a context in which Parmenides' work had already generated a pluralist response. My contention will be that nowhere in Melissus' fragments do we find something that is an obvious indication of a familiarity with a *specific* rival philosophical position. This is not to say that Melissus was unaware of the likes of Anaxagoras and Empedocles. Rather, I will maintain that Melissus' procedure (on my view, very much akin to what Parmenides does in the second half of his poem) is to diagnose what he takes to be the flaw in *any* pluralist account, philosophical or lay. Thus, in B8, pluralists of all stripes are taken to task for holding the results of sense perception to be philosophically relevant. Such a method need not involve a direct response to any one philosopher and perhaps benefits, dialectically speaking, from a refusal to distinguish the opinions of 'expert' theorists from those of ordinary people.

Melissus' connection with philosophers associated with Elea in antiquity is a more trying issue and one unlikely to be settled with any great confidence. Claims of influence, even in contexts where the evidence is clearer, are difficult to assess. It is worth, however, simply marshalling the evidence we have from Plato and Aristotle and deciding whether any provisional conclusions might be drawn. I intend this not as an exhaustive or novel examination, but rather as an overview that may help flesh out the character of the reception of Melissus.[12] I do claim, however, that too often a

controversy. Some, beginning with Alexander of Aphrodisias *in Met.* 27–8, have interpreted *husteros* qualitatively as 'inferior' with no temporal element implied. Curd (2007: 96 n.17 and 133–4) suggests that Aristotle is using the adjectives to explain why Empedocles is considered before Anaxagoras, even though the latter was older. On such an account, we need not assume either one's chronological priority in activity. Kahn (1960: 163–5) offers a similar explanation of Aristotle's text, though without drawing the same conclusion about either's chronological priority.

[12] Brémond (2016: 23–48) covers much the same ground with a helpful survey of Aristotle's presentation of Parmenides, Melissus, and the nature of Eleaticism. There is much to say for her conclusion that it is Melissus who should properly be considered the prime representative of Eleatic monism for Aristotle. I avoid, however, taking her strong position (at 34–5) that the sort of monism attributed to Melissus by Aristotle is improperly retroactively ascribed to Parmenides. It is certainly true that, as Jonathan Barnes has argued, Parmenides' B8 does far less to commit him to numerical monism than many interepreters would have us believe. This is different, however, from saying

polarising tendency is evident in attempts to assess the relationship between Melissus and Parmenides. Melissus is presented either as slavish imitator, or an eristic charlatan perverting the majesty of Parmenides' innovative metaphysics. The evidence suggests a more nuanced picture.

In modern accounts the philosophical association between Parmenides and Melissus is often said to be characterised, generally speaking, by doctrinal consistency.[13] The understanding that Melissus and Zeno were faithful followers and defenders of Parmenides is a familiar claim found throughout standard histories of Greek philosophy.[14] This consensus has more recently been challenged, in some respects persuasively. In the case of Zeno, for instance, Jonathan Barnes has argued that Plato's suggestion in his *Parmenides* that Zeno defended Parmenides from the mockery his counterintuitive claims provoked should be countered. Zeno *did* attack those who mocked Parmenides by arguing that the implications of pluralism are as absurd as or even more absurd than those of monism; however, it was not for any substantive doctrinal reason. Zeno is an intellectual dazzler on Barnes' account, a thinker more attracted to the bright spark of eristic debate than to a systematic, consistent philosophy.[15]

John Palmer has suggested a reading of Melissus and his relationship with Parmenides along similar lines. He helpfully catalogues the formal differences between their fragments, e.g. the use of prose and the absence of a proem and of a cosmological section in Melissus,[16] and points out that the evidence of Plato and Aristotle does *not* confirm or even suggest, on his account, that the views of Parmenides and Melissus were assimilated by them.

that Parmenides is not, in the final analysis, so committed, or that Melissus did not believe him to be so.

[13] Reale (1970) for instance finds no substantial philosophical divergence from Parmenides in Melissus' work. He even goes so far as to argue that the usual view of Melissus' B1 and B2, as maintaining that what-is is sempiternal, should be overturned in favour of a reading of a sort of non-durational eternity akin to what is found, on Reale's account, in Parmenides' B8.

[14] See Guthrie 1965 and Burnet 1930 for two prominent examples. See Makin 2014 for a more recent example.

[15] Barnes 1982: 234–7. See his *Zenone e l'infinito* (2011: chapter 1) for the further claim that Zeno is 'a philosopher without philosophy'.

[16] Palmer 2009: 208–10.

He suggests that 'the characterization of Melissus' purpose as essentially one of eristic controversy has the ring of truth' and that 'it is at any rate clear that he belongs to an intellectual milieu quite different from that of Parmenides'.[17] I take it that there are, at least, two distinct claims here that ought to be investigated: (1) Plato and Aristotle make a clear and unequivocal distinction between the positions of Parmenides and Melissus; (2) The differences between the two are so prominent that we should think that the latter pursued a project very much apart from, and perhaps at odds with, what the former aimed to achieve. It is clear enough, as well, that Palmer's second claim is meant to follow, at least partially, from the first.[18]

On the first claim, at least, Palmer does make an important point, although his conclusions extend beyond the letter of the text. Both Plato and Aristotle make it clear that there are differences between the two; whether these amount to the substantial divide Palmer sees, we shall have to investigate. Consider Plato's discussion of Parmenides and Melissus in the *Theaetetus*. At 183e–184a, Socrates responds to Theaetetus' insistence that they discuss the partisans of the view that the universe is at rest, a position attributed to certain 'Melissuses' and 'Parmenideses' at 180e. Socrates dismisses Theaetetus' demand in the following celebrated passage:

> I respect those who say that the universe is one and at rest, so I wouldn't want to investigate them in a crude way – and still more than Melissus and the rest, I respect one being, Parmenides. Parmenides seems to me to be, as Homer puts it, venerable and awesome. I met the great man when I was quite young and he was very old, and he seemed to me to have a sort of depth which was altogether noble. So I'm afraid, not only that we'll fail to understand what he said, and get still more left behind on the question of what he had in mind when he said it; but also – this is my greatest fear – that the theories that keep jostling in on us will, if we listen to them, make us lose sight of what our discussion has been aimed at, the question what, exactly, knowledge is. (Trans. by J. McDowell)

[17] Palmer 2009: 217. See Brémond 2016: 23–4 for the important point that Palmer is, of course, considering the historical relationship between Parmenides and Melissus primarily, if not exclusively, for the sake of interpreting the former and not the latter.

[18] It is, of course, not only on their characterisation in Plato and Aristotle that Palmer grounds his account. Alleged differences, contestable or not, in the fragments themselves are also prominent.

Socrates is clearly made here by Plato to pick out Parmenides as of an especial philosophical interest that Melissus does not merit, though, if it is intended in earnest, Socrates does encourage us to give the latter our respect. Yet there seems to be no hint that Socrates' hesitancy indicates a concern that the positions of the venerated Parmenides might be conflated with Melissus and the rest of the monists, as Palmer suggests. It is not that, were we to take up and criticise Melissus, Parmenides would, in turn, be tarnished by association. Is it not rather that, were we to consider Parmenides' position, we might fail to grasp him properly and thus fail to live up to his nobility? Conflation or assimilation does not seem to be the most pressing concern for Socrates, but the respect due to Parmenides, first won by the personal acquaintance between the two depicted, fictionally or not, in the *Parmenides*.

Indeed the treatment of Parmenides and Melissus in the *Theaetetus* points to the very opposite conclusion. In the passage containing the striking pluralisation of their names, we learn that these philosophers maintain 'that everything is one and motionless, having no place in which to move'.[19] This argument, tackling the impossibility of motion through the impossibility of void, is a distinctively Melissan contribution.[20] Those who hold that such an argument is to be attributed solely to Melissus face the difficulty of explaining why Parmenides, even if the pluralised names are to be taken as roughly equivalent to 'those like Parmenides and Melissus', would be associated with an argument not original to him. It is noteworthy, as well, that Aristotle follows suit. In the passage from *De Generatione et Corruptione* discussed above, Aristotle marshals the same argument targeting motion and attributes it to some of the ancient thinkers (ἐνίοις τῶν ἀχραίων), suggesting a similar assimilation between the positions of Parmenides and Melissus.[21]

[19] ὡς ἕν τε πάντα ἐστὶ καὶ ἕστηκεν αὐτὸ ἐν αὑτῷ οὐκ ἔχον χώραν ἐν ᾗ κινεῖται (180e3–4).

[20] I will maintain that this sort of argument is original to Melissus, without insisting that Parmenides' fragments indicate that he had *no* conception of void, as Kirk and Stokes (1960) and Tarán (1965: 110–13 and 196) claim.

[21] Edward Hussey (2004: 249) makes this point. Aristotle is quick to note, at 325a15–16, that some add that the universe is infinite (i.e. Melissus).

The pattern that the *Theaetetus* suggests is that Parmenides is to be distinguished from Melissus but not dissociated. Crucially, as well, Melissus is nowhere made to be a pupil or follower of Parmenides in any obvious way. This is significant if we put this omission in context with Aristotle's report, at *Metaphysics* A5 (986b22), that Parmenides *is said* to have been Xenophanes' pupil.[22] In the passage, Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Melissus are all considered as advocates of the One and, though Aristotle repeats the qualitative distinction between Parmenides and Melissus familiar from *Physics* I, the three receive what appears to be their closest association anywhere in Plato or Aristotle. That Melissus is not, in turn, mentioned as Parmenides' pupil is significant, and suggestive of the former's independence. Yet this confirmation of independence is only found within a context in which the relations, however they are to be characterised, between the philosophers of Elea are taken for granted.

This passage from the *Metaphysics* offers a further example of the assimilation of 'Eleatic' thinking that finds no support in the extant fragments. We learn that Xenophanes maintained, 'with his eye on all of heaven', that the One is god, suggesting quite clearly that god is to be taken to be coextensive with the world. This is done, according to Aristotle, despite Xenophanes' failure to grasp either Parmenides' conception of the 'One' as being so in account,[23] or Melissus' understanding as it being so materially. Such a view is in palpable tension with Xenophanes' extant fragments,[24] but is a plausible interpretation (as I shall suggest) of the positions of both Parmenides and Melissus. What we find, then, once again is an Aristotelian confirmation of a Platonic assimilation, this time following on from Plato's claim in the *Sophist* 242d5–6 that Xenophanes was the founder, or at least an early representative, of the 'Eleatic Tribe': τὸ δὲ παρ' ἡμῖν

[22] Brémond (2016: 32–3) rightly notices how unusual such a claim is in Aristotle: 'Aristote offre l'image d'une école au sens plus strict d'une succession de maître à disciple, démarche pour le moins rare dans le corpus aristotélicien.' She offers *Meteorology* 342b36–343a1 on Hippocrates as a rare parallel.

[23] This points to Aristotle's criticism in *Physics* I.3 that Parmenides fails to understand that being is said in many ways and not simply in the category of substance.

[24] It is difficult to see, for example, how God can both remain stationary perpetually (B26) and shake things with his thought (B25), if he is identical with the world.

Ἐλεατικὸν ἔθνος, ἀπὸ Ξενοφάνους τε καὶ ἔτι πρόσθεν ἀρξάμενον (And the Eleatic tribe in our region, beginning from Xenophanes and even earlier . . .). Yet, as in the case of Melissus, Aristotle's assimilation is far from total. Parmenides is picked out as being of considerably more worth than either Xenophanes or Melissus, both of whom are said to be a bit crude or rustic (μικρὸν ἀγροικότεροι).

The question now is whether the associations, suggested by Plato and Aristotle, between Xenophanes, Parmenides, Melissus, and Zeno are historical or classificatory. What I mean by this is to ask whether any of these four were working within an intellectual context where the influence of one or more of the others played an active role, acknowledged or not. One might think, alternatively, that the associations and assimilations we have canvassed are the product of the imposition of an interpretative schema, intended to group disparate philosophers into dichotomous classifications.[25] Thus, we might think, as Palmer argues, that such a schema structures Aristotle's division of earlier thinkers in *Physics* I.2 (184b15–25).[26] Here Aristotle divides the *endoxa* about *archai* into branching dichotomies: the *arche* is said either to be one or to be many; if one, it is either changeable or not; if changeable some make it air and some water. In turn, if the *archai* are many, they must be either limited or unlimited; if the latter, either they are all the same and differ only in shape, or they are different and even opposed.

This schema, traceable back to Gorgias' *On What-Is-Not, or On Nature*, on Palmer's account,[27] certainly has the potential to obscure or to conflate philosophical positions. Yet, even if we were to agree that such a classification is a relevant element behind the association of Parmenides and Melissus in Aristotle (or Plato),

[25] See Mansfeld 1986, for his classic study of early, pre-Platonic, classificatory schemata, based on the number and nature of philosophical principles. See also Brémond 2016: 30–1.

[26] Palmer 2009: 220–1.

[27] Palmer (2009: 220) argues that this classification is original to Gorgias, on the evidence of what he calls the 'doxographical preface' to *On What-Is-Not, or On Nature* found in *MXG* 979a15ff. Certainly the *form* of the classification is dichotomous in both, but it is not so clear that Aristotle's classification, which makes different distinctions than those found in Gorgias, is destructive in the same manner. Indeed Aristotle, at 184b22–5, fits his own project of natural philosophy within the terms of the classification.