MELISSUS AND ELEATIC MONISM

In the fifth century BCE, Melissus of Samos developed wildly counterintuitive claims against plurality, change, and the reliability of the senses. This book provides a reconstruction of the preserved textual evidence for his philosophy, along with an interpretation of the form and content of each of his arguments. A close examination of his thought reveals an extraordinary clarity and unity in his method and gives us a unique perspective on how philosophy developed in the fifth century, and how Melissus came to be the most prominent representative of what we now call Eleaticism, the monistic philosophy inaugurated by Parmenides. The rich intellectual climate of Ionian enquiry in which Melissus worked is explored and brought to bear on central questions of the interpretation of his fragments. This volume will appeal to students and scholars of early Greek philosophy, and also those working on historical and medical texts.

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PREFACE

This book offers a reconstruction of the preserved textual evidence for Melissus of Samos, along with an interpretation of the form and content of each of his arguments. One of the upshots of the reconstruction I offer is the contention that Melissus' fragments constitute a far higher proportion of his original book than is the case for any other Presocratic philosopher, including Parmenides. This situation makes Melissus' work uniquely valuable for the insights it provides into Eleatic thought and philosophical method in the Presocratics, more generally speaking.

The surviving fragments, two preserved paraphrases of his book, and the evidence of ancient commentators indicate that Melissus adopted a rigorously deductive method of argumentation. By 'deductive' I mean that he clearly identifies the premises of his arguments, the methods by which he proceeds from them, and the conclusions he establishes. The conclusions established, in turn, act as premises for arguments that follow, forming a neat, pellucid (within reason) chain of argumentation. So the structure of the treatise permits us to reconstruct the original arrangement by following the pattern of deduction to which Melissus adheres closely.

In addition, I tackle a number of interpretative problems that have emerged in the scholarly reception of Melissus. I argue that his treatise begins from an assertion of the hypothesis 'something is'. It is from this foundational claim that he proceeds to deduce that this 'something', which he identifies with 'nature', is sempiternal (i.e. temporally infinite in both directions), spatially infinite, unique, unchanging, incorporeal, and indivisible. It is how each of these predicates relates to the demonstration of the others that I have attempted to identify. In addition, I offer an interpretation of the argument for spatial infinity that preserves its validity in the face of vigorous criticism from Aristotle and subsequent critics. The reconstruction of the argument for monism, i.e. the thesis that what-is (nature) is unique and unified, significantly rearranges the order of the relevant fragments, with the upshot that each now has its own

easily identifiable role within the argument. Also developed is a proposed solution to Melissus' difficult demonstration of the assertion that what-is is without a body, a solution which preserves the whole of the quoted material in the face of demands for excision.

The above list should give some idea of the specifics of the interpretation this book aims to offer. There are a number of puzzles, including those philological and philosophical, that demand our attention when examining Melissus' fragments. I hope, however, to provide something more than a series of micro-arguments for the reader's consideration. This project began with a simple question: If Parmenides' poem is as significant an achievement in the history of philosophy as commentators maintain, why is Melissus, so clearly his early (if not earliest) advocate and expounder, so neglected? This question is made all the more immediate when we note that early reports in Plato and Aristotle closely associate the two philosophers, and that it is not unreasonable to think that it is Melissus' version of Eleaticism which becomes the dominant one in that philosophy's early reception.

If Melissus' claim to historical prominence is correct, and Parmenides' poem so fragmentary and often downright obscure, why is there no English monograph dedicated to Melissus and his fragments? This book is an attempt (however partial) to rectify an imbalance and give an oft-maligned philosopher his rightful due.

Yet a narrow focus on Melissus is not the exclusive aim of what is to follow. I have adopted a deliberate policy of avoiding taking positions on the many controversies in Parmenides' poem. In this task, I have not always been successful, but my hope is that readers concerned with Parmenides, wherever their loyalties may reside, will find there is more to learn from Melissus than they may have suspected. What Melissus contributes to Eleaticism may not definitively answer any puzzles in the study of Parmenides, but his work is far from irrelevant in this regard. Melissus' book, on any account, amounts to a provocative and suggestive response to Parmenides' monism. In this respect, I hope those with interests in Eleaticism and its reception in Plato and Aristotle will find something here enticing (even if it is only to disagree with).

Melissus' fragments also touch on the intellectual culture of the fifth-century Mediterranean, both inside and outside of what we would now classify as the strictly philosophical. His fragment B9, for example, devoted to demonstrating that what-is is without a body, has long been

a centre of controversy. The difficulties of construing both the Greek and the structure of the argument we will examine in detail; however, the discussion of the nature of bodies and, in B7, the non-susceptibility of what-is to pain and anguish, suggest clear links with the Hippocratic corpus and, I will submit, with considerations about the divine nature of the world. Melissus' work then has a broad scope which touches on much within and outside of traditional philosophical concerns.

Partly this is the result of the intellectual context in which, I will argue, Melissus is properly situated: this is the world of the broad-ranging fifth-century enquiries by Ionic Greek speakers. Melissus is a product of the culture that produced not just the natural philosophers Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Anaxagoras, but also Herodotus, Hecataeus, and the Hippocratics. As such, Melissus has much to offer even to those interested in fifth-century intellectual life outside of philosophy, and this book is intended to embrace readers with concerns not primarily philosophical, as well as those whose are.

The nature of Melissus' place in the development of philosophy outside of Eleaticism is difficult to discern. In the Introduction to follow, we will have the opportunity to examine the relevant evidence of the details of Melissus' life; however, whatever tentative conclusions we may reach there, the details are too uncertain to make any confident claims about Melissus' chronology relative to figures such as Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and the atomists. My conclusions will echo Reale's contention that, to make good sense of the arguments, we need not assume these non-Eleatic philosophers to have influenced Melissus. The question will be considered closely in the chapter devoted to Melissus' fragment B8 on sense experience and plurality.

What I will suggest is that this conclusion is not a suggestion of Melissus' ignorance or an indication of the absence of historical relationships or influence. Rather my suggestion will be that a deliberate *diagnostic* strategy is in play, with the intention of exposing the failure of rival philosophical positions, and ordinary practice, to come to grips with the danger of relying on the evidence of sense experience. It is here, in the discussion of B8, that further strategic connections between the Eleatics will be explored, and where I will suggest what I take to be crucial strands that tie Parmenides and Zeno with Melissus. B8, in any case, offers a fascinating case of philosophical practice and method with implications well beyond those associated with the philosophy of Elea.

Preface

Thus it is my hope that readers take away not only some ideas about Melissus and the philosophical strategy he adopted in his book but something more as well. This is my suggestion that the study of Melissus opens up a window on to fifth-century intellectual enquiry that enriches our understanding not only of the philosophical developments of the period but also of the the broader-ranging pursuit of knowledge that is its hallmark.

This book is a product of my PhD research and its existence is due to the extremely generous community working on ancient philosophy in Cambridge. I arrived in Cambridge with enthusiastic but wholly jejune thoughts on Greek philosophy and have benefited from innumerable seminars both within the Faculty of Classics and throughout the university. Members of the 'B' caucus, including Nick Denyer, Robert Wardy, and Myrto Hatzimichali, have provoked and inspired many thoughts that find their final form here. Gábor Betegh and Catherine Rowett examined my thesis, suggested helpful clarifications and additions, and saved me from many errors. I am indebted to them. James Warren helped supervise my doctoral work and raised a practised eyebrow at much that was loose or ill-considered, or needed rethinking. Malcolm Schofield had the highly dubious privilege of supervising my work when I first arrived in Cambridge. He provided a model of clarity, wisdom, and good humour, and didn't laugh when I suggested Melissus as a topic for my research.

David Sedley acted as my primary supervisor throughout my time in Cambridge. Most of those reading this will know the contribution David has made to the study of ancient philosophy and to the progress of his students; I am very grateful for this because it would be exceedingly difficult to express how much he has given to me over the years.

As the manuscript for this book was being completed, the publication of Jaap Mansfeld's lectures on Melissus at *Eleatica* 2012 appeared in print.[1] Unfortunately, I have not been able to take account of his stimulating arguments in the following. However, it is worth remarking that we arrive at strikingly similar conclusions on several issues, including the interpretation of Melissus' B9 – a long-standing puzzle in the fragments. I have committed further thoughts to print on Mansfeld's book in a forthcoming issue of *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie.* I hope the following work plays some small part in the renewed interest in Melissus.

[1] Mansfeld 2016.