MELISSUS OF SAMOS

HARRIMAN (B.) *Melissus and Eleatic Monism*. Pp. xii + 242. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Cased, £75, US$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-41633-7.

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In antiquity and in our modern literature on Presocratic philosophy Melissus of Samos is often discussed alongside Parmenides of Elea. So close is the association that one would be hard-pressed to find a book-length scholarly treatment focused on Melissus – barring the present work. In what is currently the only English-language monograph on Melissus, H. delivers on the promise to treat the Presocratic as an interesting, rigorous philosopher in his own right. We therefore find H. in the scholarly tradition of G. Reale (1970), R. Vitali (1973), J. Barnes (1979), J. Palmer (2004), J. Mansfeld (2016) and others who have attempted to vindicate Melissus from his centuries-long reputation as a lesser Parmenides who tarnished the master's thought with a simple-minded imitation cheapened by elementary logical mistakes.

H. approaches reconstruction and commentary by providing a treatment of each of the extant fragments, the sum of which, he suggests, constitutes Melissus' work, *On Nature or On What-is*. Using the evidence that Melissus composed only one work from which Simplicius quotes, and in which (with some exceptions) we find confirmation of paraphrases from secondary works, H. suggests that the extant fragments, with some minor tweaking, can be reconstructed to produce what can be considered the whole (or most) of Melissus' writings. This suggestion is among the work's many exciting contributions, along with the proposal of rearranging the traditional Diels-Kranz ordering of the fragments, so that the treatise reads B1–B3, B5, B4, B6, B9, B7, B10, B8, though the structure of the monograph itself as proceeding fragment-by-fragment deviates somewhat from this reordering.

The project of rehabilitating Melissus' reputation takes particular prominence in H.'s reconstruction of B2 – the fragment that contains the argument famously attacked by Aristotle for both its faulty logic and its false premise.

In the *De Sophisticis Elenchis* (167b13f., 168b35f., 181a27f.) Aristotle accuses Melissus of committing the fallacy of denying the antecedent: if what-is is generated, then it began to be generated at some time and ceased being generated at some time (i.e., it has spatial beginnings and ends). But what-is is not generated, so what-is does not have spatial beginnings and ends. H. undermines the criticism by arguing for what is essentially an amended version of the H. Cherniss (1935) / W.J. Verdenius (1948) reading of B2. For Melissus generation entails both a temporal and a spatial beginning and end. He draws the exclusive connection between generation and spatial beginnings and ends only as a product of what H. calls 'hypothetical charity' (p. 71) – i.e., if there were a spatial beginning and end of what-is, it can only be rationally conceived of as a product of generation. The upshot is that H.'s reconstruction purportedly escapes Aristotle's charge, but does so without saddling Melissus with the incoherent view of generation yielded by the original Cherniss/Verdenius reading, in which B2 is merely an explication of generation. So much for the logical form of the argument. What about the content?

H. argues that at *Physics* 186a10–16 Aristotle also denies the truth of Melissus' premise that what has come to be must have a spatial beginning and end. To vindicate Melissus and explain the elimination of spatial beginnings and ends, H. introduces what he calls the 'Completeness Assumption' (p. 82), that what is not entire cannot be always. Melissus'

claim that what-is is all-embracing, he argues, should be understood as a claim that what-is is infinitely extended, which is necessary for its sempiternality. First, H. contends that Aristotle's criticism boils down to his own view of limits as ensuring completeness (a view shared by Parmenides), whereas for Melissus limits imply incompleteness. Second, H. argues that Melissus operates in accordance with the notion that the only rational explanation for hypothetical spatial limits would be a process of generation, with the important emphasis on this being a weaker thesis than the one purportedly ascribed to him by Aristotle – i.e., that generation entails a spatial beginning and end.

In offering a reading of B2 that might assuage worries about fallacious reasoning and in explaining why Aristotle would think the premise of Melissus' argument is false, H. is cautious to avoid dismissing Aristotle's reception of the argument and does so on terms that are recognisably Aristotelian. However, without providing an explicit argument to this end, he ultimately leaves it up to the reader to decide whether the reconstruction on offer in fact addresses Aristotle's criticisms.

Circling back to the connection with Parmenides, throughout the monograph, H. claims to avoid taking a stance on the many interpretative puzzles raised by Parmenides' poem. He also claims to avoid assumptions about philosophical coherence or influence between the two thinkers and references Parmenides only as a possible route for illuminating the sources of inspiration for Melissus. However, to maintain, even in passing, that the fragments of Melissus are best understood as clarifications or developments of the positions of Parmenides already implies taking an interpretative stance on the latter. For instance, H. points out that while the sempiternality and spatial infinity of the Melissan what-is both seem incompatible with Parmenides' suggestion of a limited what-is in 28B8, both philosophers aim to show that what-is is complete and invariant, albeit by means of different assumptions. But to explain these apparent divergences by appealing to these assumptions is to stake an interpretative claim as to the logical motivations behind Parmenides' arguments. The same is true of H.'s striking strategy in presenting Melissus as developing 'a demonstration that is clearer and more transparently deductive (its premises and the means by which conclusions follow are clearer) than what Parmenides' fragments contain' (p. 15). Again, such a strategy is tacitly packed with assumptions about the nature of Parmenides' poem. In this particular instance, it oversimplifies on the divisive question about the extent to which logical considerations should constrain our interpretation of the nature of what-is at 28B8, which is (with very few exceptions) widely considered in the scholarship to be clearly derived by means of a series of rigorous deductions.

Despite the methodological concerns that are par for the course in studies of the history of philosophy, H. succeeds in offering a thoughtful and judicious work which, while not for beginners, is certainly essential for those with interests in Early Greek thought and in the reception of the Eleatics in Aristotle. He shows us that Melissus is, by himself, a sophisticated and regimented thinker whose arguments are, in fact, quite good. Whether or not we can say for certain that Melissus is, in the end, exonerated from Aristotle's criticisms, there comes a time in every tradition where we must reassess our narratives, and H.'s treatment of Melissus invites us to do just that.

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