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# ἄρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL  
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

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EDITORIAL

## ***Peri tou (mē) ontos. Melissus and Gorgias at the ontological crossroad***

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The image of the bifurcation between two paths, indicating the uncertainty and risk of a choice between two alternative possibilities, was sometimes used in ancient Greek literature. Before the famous apologue of *Heracles at the crossroads* by Prodicus of Ceos (Xen. *Mem.* II.1.21-34), that image had already appeared in Homer (*Od.* XII, 55-58) and Hesiod (*Op.* 286-292). But the most significant philosophical example, standing out from the others in as much as it does not intend to communicate practical or ethical recommendations, dates back to the poem of Parmenides of Elea: in his fragment B2 DK the protagonist of the narration, a goddess, after having begun to speak, indicates to the listening *kouros* two ways of inquiry that open to thinking. The passage has been extensively discussed, giving rise to a conspicuous number of exegetical alternatives. However, roughly speaking, it can be said that the first of the two ways mentioned by the goddess concerns being, and is indicated as the path of truth, while the second concerns not being, and is presented as the path of ignorance. Therefore, Parmenides, through the mouth of the goddess, is inviting us to follow the first way and avoid the second one.

It is interesting to note that in post-Parmenidean philosophy there have been two thinkers who seem to have wanted to go both ways, in one case by accepting the indication of the goddess, and in the other by transgressing her prohibition. They are Melissus, who followed the first path, and Gorgias, who instead explored the second, reason why Melissus, who was from Samos, was recognized as an Eleatic *honoris causa*, while Gorgias, a Sophist from Leontini, has been interpreted as an opponent of the Eleaticism. Things are certainly less simple than they appear. It is by no means certain that Melissus can rightfully be considered a 'Parmenidean', not only because some characteristics of the entity he speaks of are different from those envisaged by the alleged master of Elea (the one always remembered is the spatio-temporal infinity of being, apparently denied by Parmenides and admitted by Melissus). Melissus' stylistic choices, the structure of his argument, as well as the overall vision of reality,

appear substantially different, and in some respects incompatible, with those of Parmenides. Despite all this, one fact remains indisputable: in his treatise – with the plausible title Περὶ φύσεως ἢ περὶ τοῦ ὄντος – Melissus has exposed a stringent linear deduction of the characters of being. Undoubtedly, he derives from it a doctrine of an absolute being that denies space to any other entity, and therefore (apparently and as most scholars interpret) also to the physical world in which we live: a form of strict monism which in all probability we do not even find in Parmenides (contrary to how it was thought in the past), as indicated by the absence of a section comparable to that in which the physical theories expounded by Parmenides are contained, the so-called *Doxa*. However, we can still say that Melissus followed, in his own way, the path indicated by the goddess, and although in this journey he deviated significantly from what Parmenides presumed to have found (to the point of detaching himself, perhaps, controversially), there is no doubt that his source of inspiration remains this Eleatic precedent.

But this crossroads (and the prohibition to follow one of the two paths) in some way seems to have also inspired the other thinker we have mentioned, Gorgias. As it is well known, he was the author, in addition to epideictic texts, of a successful treatise with an explicitly anti-Melissan title, Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἢ περὶ φύσεως, where the inversion and the insertion of the negation have a strong polemical (if not parodic) significance. Yet, following the three moments of the Gorgian argument, we note how its goal was to break the link between being, thinking and saying, which Parmenides had upheld precisely in B2, the fragment of the crossroads. The second way, that of not being – Parmenides said – is unthinkable and unsayable. Gorgias, on his part, says in a progression that not only nothing is, but that even if something were it would not be thinkable, and even if it were thinkable it would not be sayable. Whoever tries to walk Parmenides' way of being finds three successive obstructions: if he overcomes the first obstacle (if only he could do it), he finds another, and then another again. All that remains is, paradoxically, to follow the path of not being, an unsettling outcome, the meaning of which still engages interpreters today.

This is the thematic core of the *Archai* dossier that we present here and in which some specialists of the two authors participate, gathered to contribute to understanding this ontological crossroads and to examine some aspects of the original alternative explorations conducted by Melissus and Gorgias in their respective (and in a certain sense specular) treatises.

The series of articles opens with an essay by Sosseh Assaturian<sup>1</sup> entitled “What’s Eleatic about the Eleatic Principle?”, whose objective is to investigate the relevance of the ‘Eleatic’ attribute in the so-called ‘Eleatic Principle’: it is a tenet referred to in the metaphysical debate, whose first occurrence dates back to the Platonic *Sophist* (247d-e), and consists in the principle according to which only items that have the causal capacity to affect (or inversely to be affected) are. Assaturian specifies the three ways in which the principle is modulated in the Platonic text: as tangible contact, as a change in the relational properties, and as something which is responsible for something else’s being the way it is. After a long examination, she concludes that these three ways appear partially in Parmenides and Zeno, and in all three cases in Melissus, thus justifying the ‘Eleatic’ name given to this principle. Moreover, Assaturian reinterprets one of the most important fragments of the Melissan treatise, B8 DK, arguing – against the majority reading of the philosopher of Samos – that the characteristics of Melissan what-is are compatible with the existence of the sensible world.

The relationship between Melissus’ being and the physical world is also called into question by the presence, among the surviving fragments of the philosopher, of what appeared (starting from the same source, Simplicius) as an unequivocal attestation of the incorporeality of being (fragment B9 DK). It is evident that an infinite incorporeal being can, in a purely theoretical line, coexist with the material world. Mathilde Brémond<sup>2</sup> returns to the problem of the correct interpretation of B9 in an article entitled “Corporeality

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<sup>1</sup> See Assaturian (2020).

<sup>2</sup> See Brémond (2017).

and Thickness: Back on Melissus' Fragment B9". Presenting the *status quaestionis*, Brémond shows that faced with the potential tension between the negation of corporeality and thickness (*pachos*), on the one hand, and the affirmation of infinite greatness and fullness, on the other, the interpreters have assumed various positions, either by reinterpreting one or the other of the contradictory characters or by questioning the authenticity of B9, in whole or in part. Brémond judges all these proposals insufficient and focuses her attention on the concept of *pachos* rather than on that of the body, showing how thickness implies divisibility into parts. For the Presocratics, one of the characteristics that distinguish the soul from the body is the thinness of the former, understood as indivisibility: it is to this notion that, according to Brémond, Melissus would refer, paving the way towards the conceptualization of incorporeality that will occur with Plato.

As we have said, an incorporeal (or quasi-incorporeal) being could – purely theoretically – coexist with the sensible world. If, on the other hand, Melissus's being was considered as a single matter, dense and infinite in size, then there would be no space for the existence of the physical world, unless we consider it as a single substantial matter that underlies the different fundamental elements of things. The latter was the interpretation advocated by Galen (CMG V 9, 1, 17, 16) in the commentary on a passage from the Hippocratic treatise *De natura hominis*. Benjamin Harriman<sup>3</sup> dedicates his contribution entitled "Establishing the Logos of Melissus: A Note on Chapter 1, Hippocrates' *De natura hominis*", to the correct interpretation of this Hippocratic passage, which offers the most ancient testimony on Melissus. Here the author, probably Polybus, a proponent of the theory of the four humors (and therefore of a multiplicity of constituents of man), disputes the interference of philosophers in medical debates, in particular of monists who recognize only one material constituent at the base of nature (and therefore also of man). In doing so, however, the author argues that in some way these

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<sup>3</sup> See Harriman (2018).

thinkers refute each other, ending up by establishing (or set right) the *logos* of Melissus. Harriman traces the main interpretations of the passage, showing how the argumentative strategy of Melissus is at stake there, rather than his monistic stance. Polybus would refer to the strategic use of a supplemental argument by Melissus (in B8) as well as by the material monists, betraying the underlying weakness of their theses.

Just as the study of Melissus' reception can help us understand his doctrine, in the same way Melissus himself can be understood from the perspective of Parmenides' reception, which justifies his belonging to the so-called Eleaticism. Livio Rossetti in "Superare Parmenide. Zenone, Melisso e Gorgia impegnati a fare 'meglio di lui'", shows which are the points (especially of a methodological nature) on which Melissus tried to go beyond the results achieved by the master from Elea<sup>4</sup>. More than on a strictly doctrinal level, Melissus would have grasped that one of the strengths of Parmenides' reflection consisted in the formal scheme underlying his argument. The Samian thinker would therefore have tried to surpass his master, meanwhile freeing himself from the poetic and imaginative means used by Parmenides; he would also have perfected the logical structure of the demonstration through better ordered arguments. But he was not the only one in this venture; in the agon, Rossetti also sees two other important post-Parmenidean thinkers involved: Zeno, to whom a series of valuable conceptual innovations must be recognized, and Gorgias, who, while following closely the argumentative method of Melissus, used it to deconstruct the theses of Parmenides, as the first cornerstone of his treatise already demonstrates programmatically: nothing is.

But what does that 'not being' the Siceliot Sophist puts as the object of his reasoning consist in? In the article "What is Gorgias' 'not being'? A brief journey through the *Treatise*, the *Apology of*

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<sup>4</sup> Rossetti analyses the relation between Parmenides and Melissus also in the recent Galgano, Giombini, Marcacci (eds.) (2020).

*Palamedes and the Encomium of Helen*”, Erminia Di Iulio<sup>5</sup> conducts an investigation on the possible definition of not being in Gorgias through a comparison between the Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος (PTMO) and part of his remaining epideictic production. The PTMO shows that not being turns out to be contradictory inasmuch in the moment in which it is affirmed, it is denied as well: therefore, Gorgias recognizes its contradiction from a mere linguistic point of view. At the same time, he had also questioned the validity of attributing being to reality, and therefore its linguistic expression. The epideictic texts, however, seem to move in another direction, especially the *Apology of Palamedes* which, while on the one hand seems to consolidate the hypothesis that what has not happened cannot be said, on the other hand it establishes the impossibility of judging both what is and what is not: in the book, in fact, they are associated with the criterion of the true (what really is) and of the false (what has not occurred and therefore cannot be said, proved or witnessed) through the introduction of the concept of opinion. To a certain extent, therefore, the *Palamedes* confirms the PTMO, but at the same time it goes beyond the latter, establishing a new connection through the true-false pair. The same seems to be valid for the *Encomium of Helen*, where it is stated that it is not possible to say what really happened to the woman, and Gorgias offers four (likely) possibilities for reconstructing what occurred. Di Iulio concludes that in the Gorgias works there remains a certain internal inconsistency regarding the question of not being, to the point that its univocal definition does not seem to be identifiable.

In any case, the PTMO remains the text of choice for the investigation into not being in Gorgias. It has arrived to us in two versions, that of the anonymous author of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De Melisso Xenophane et Gorgia* (MXG) and that reported by Sextus Empiricus in *Adversus mathematicos*. Marina Volf<sup>6</sup> in “Gorgias’ revising of ancient epistemology: *On Non-Being* by Gorgias and its paraphrases”

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<sup>5</sup> See Di Iulio (2020).

<sup>6</sup> See Volf (2014).

faces the issue of correspondences and divergences between these two versions, proposing a synoptic framework of the arguments developed in them and noting their considerable differences. This analysis leads the author to try to establish the distance between the Gorgian stance and the Parmenidean and Protagorean doctrine, understood as true ‘counterparts’ of the PTMO, also through the lens of contemporary linguistic theories. The conclusion to which Volf comes is that both versions are able to express the overall philosophical position of Gorgias, since they integrate each other: in this sense, they can be considered equally informative.

One of the differences between the two versions of the Gorgian treatise is the presence in the MXG of an argument against the movement. In her contribution entitled “Between Eleatics and Atomists: Gorgias’ argument against motion”, Roberta Ioli<sup>7</sup> focuses precisely on this topic. The investigation starts from the analysis of not being that is found in the two versions of the book, and this allows her to justify Sextus’s lack of transmission of the argument against the movement as a deliberate choice: for Sextus, indeed, such argument would not have been essential for his purposes, while he would have considered more useful to concentrate on other aspects of Gorgias’ argument (also, Ioli notes, for a reason of a formal nature, namely the respect of symmetries between the antinomies). Coming then to the specific analysis of the argument against the movement, the author remarks the connections with the deduction drawn by Melissus in his treatise and does not fail to highlight a fruitful link with the Atomists’ doctrine. Ultimately, for Ioli, Gorgias would have intended to show the weaknesses of both Eleaticism and Atomism, in line with his aptitude to analyse and deconstruct the theories of other thinkers, leading them to a contradiction.

However, the ontological deconstruction in the PTMO does not fail to be accompanied by lateral reflections of a different nature, but equally functional to the Gorgian demonstration. Pilar Spangenberg<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Ioli (2010).

<sup>8</sup> See Díaz - Spangenberg (2011).



in her article “El paradigma de la sensibilidad y la fragmentación en el PTMO de Gorgias” examines the treatise from a gnoseological perspective, and in particular in the light of the notion of ‘knowing subject’. The subject appears in the work as ‘fragmented’ with respect to the various functions of the human senses. Gorgias does not outline a unified theory of knowledge, but ceases at the deconstructive moment: this fragmentation, however, does not prevent Gorgias’ analyses, refined and well set up, from being of extreme interest, offering an indirect contribution to the theme of knowledge that Plato and Aristotle will not fail to point out. Indeed, they will later try to reunify in the subject what the Sophist had broken down.

The critical debate today seems to be oriented not only in the direction of a re-evaluation of the two treatises by Melissus and Gorgias, and their interconnection, but also in that of a rethinking of their function of transmission of Parmenidean doctrine (as well as Protagorean and Democritean, called, even tacitly, into question by Gorgias).

This dossier, thus, aims to offer itself as a contribution to this debate by outlining an evocative and articulated historiographical framework, showing how this crucial moment in the post-Parmenidean thought deserves further attention on the part of scholars of ancient philosophy.

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