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FROM PARMENIDES' *TO MĒ EON* TO MELISSUS' *TO MĒDEN*

Abstract. Parmenides warns against inquiring on the dead–end way of non–being (*ouk esti*): it is impossible to know and speak of what–is–not (*to mē eon*). At DK 28 B 8.6–9, he denies that not–being can be treated as real, and that it can be considered in any reliable reasoning.

Melissus, in contrast, at DK 30 B 1 treats non–being as a possible state of affairs, as a possibility worth considering as a part of argumentation, though one from which generation remains impossible. This paper focuses on this radical shift regarding non–being between these two Eleatic thinkers, resulting in very different ways of seeing the world.

Keywords: Parmenides, Melissus, non–being, Eleaticism, Presocratics.

Introduction

Parmenides warns against a confusion made by *uncritical tribes* (ἄκριτα φῦλα) who lack a certain resource[1] (their νόος is directed by ἀμηχανίη, DK 28 B 6.5). These are in fact people who think that being and non–being are the same and not the same. The goddess of Parmenides' poem teaches how to make the distinction between being and non–being. It is a distinction that must be made in the mind[2], for it is a distinction between two ways of thinking: one way, where thoughts follow a path in which what–is (generally speaking, being) is not what–is–not (generally speaking, non–being); the other way, where thoughts follow a path in which what–is–not (non–being) must remain what–is–not (non–being), without any intersection with what–is.

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[1] See N. S. Galgano, Amēkhaniē *in Parmenides DK 28 B 6.5*.

[2] See N. S. Galgano, *Parmenides as psychologist – Part one: fragments DK 1 and 2* & N. S. Galgano, *Parmenides as psychologist – Part two: DK 6 and 7*.

Since Hegel, scholars of ancient philosophy have been interested more in the notion of being, and relegated non–being to a secondary place, usually in the shadow of being. However, Parmenides' poem engages with non–being more than with being. For this reason, I will consider non–being by itself, leaving aside being and its problematic. Having isolated Parmenides' notion of non–being, I will compare it with Melissus' notion of non–being. I will argue that there is a small difference between Parmenides' non–being and Melissus non–being. Although small, this difference will generate two very different ways to see the world.

Parmenides' *to mē eon*

The expression *non–being*, as a philosophical notion, appears for the first time in Parmenides. The history of philosophy tells us that non–being is not a trivial notion, as our common use of it may suggest. Since its first appearance, non–being has posed an aporia to which many of the greatest philosophers have sought a solution. However, from time to time it reappears, as a wound that opens again, suggesting that it never really healed. Parmenides was the first who tried to solve this aporia, which I will now describe in our modern terms. I will start with a question: what is what–is–not? If we give a positive answer, we must say that what–is–not is actually something. However, in this case we fall into the same confusion of the *akrita phyla*, because we assume a distinction between what–is and what–is–not and at the same time we say that what–is–not is something, i.e. what–is–not is what–is. Moreover, if we accept that what–is and what–is–not are in opposition we fall into what we may call the Eleatic paradox: if what–is and what–is–not are in opposition, what–is–not must be something, for if it is not, there is nothing to oppose to what–is and the opposition ends. However, if there is no opposition, this means that what–is and what–is–not are on the same side, which makes what–is and what–is–not the same. Again, we end up saying that what–is and what–is–not are the same and not the same.

Parmenides' Poem

Parmenides' poem is a didactic text, where an anonymous goddess teaches a young disciple, as she says at DK 28 B 1.28–30:

> [*Young man ...*] *You will learn all things*
> *Both the still mind of well–rounded truth*
> *And the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true*
> *conviction.*[1]

The goddess will teach two kind of explanations about *all things* (*panta*): there are explanations that leave no doubt in mind, and there are explanations that are doubtful and without a true conviction – these are followed by mortals, i.e. the common sense. *Panta* must be considered here a technical word indicating the general order of all things, a kind of precursor of *physis* (the title of Parmenides'

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[1] Almost all scholars translates ἦτορ with *heart*. However, ἦτορ refers to the chest, which was considered also the seat of reasoning powers, hence here the meaning is *mind*. A similar construction we find in fr. DK 28 B 6.5–6, where Parmenides employes στῆθος (*breast*) as the place of *wandering thought*, hence again *mind*.

poem is *Peri physeos*). There are explanations of *physis* that are trustworthy and explanations that are untrustworthy, she will teach both of them and, of course, a method for distinguishing them. In fact, at least since Xenophanes, there was an awareness of this problematic. In fr. DK 21 B 16, Xenophanes says: *Ethiopians say that their gods are snub–nosed and black; / Thracians that theirs are blue–eyed and red–haired.*[1] In this context we must remind ourselves that gods were depictions of natural phenomena; for example, the god of sun was the lord of that phenomenon and finally, he was the sun itself. When Xenophanes says that gods have different depictions in different cultures, he is saying that the same phenomena have different explanations in different cultures. Now, for the international marine culture of those wise men (Ionians, first Pythagoreans and Eleatics were fully merged in marine culture), explanations based on myths, which would put at risk their travels across the Mediterranean Sea, were unacceptable[2].

In his distinction between two types of explanation, Parmenides does not speak of explanations themselves. He speaks rather of two kinds of conduct of the human mind, which generate two kinds of explanation. In the first case, related with the well–connected (*eukykleos*) truth[3], the human mind stays still and firm. In the second case, the human mind – this time invoked as the opinions of mortals (*brotoi*) – has no true conviction; in this case it is not still, but wavers and oscillates in doubt. In other words, the goddess says that the disciple will learn how to achieve an uncommon knowledge, distinct from the uncertain opinions of mortals and characterized by a solid and firm conviction, that kind of persuasion that accompanies the truth (in fr. DK 28 B 2.4).

Let us summarize the *status quæstionis* presented by Parmenides:

i) human mind has convictions,

ii) however, to be persuaded of any conviction it does not suffice to ensure the reliability of that conviction (as Xenophanes taught), hence we do not know if convictions in our mind are or are not true,

iii) there is an objective method that makes our convictions (which are always subjective) reliable,

iv) after applying this method, we can distinguish true and untrue convictions; the first leave our mind still without any oscillation of doubt, whereas the

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[1] Transl. Lesher in: J. H. Lesher, *Xenophanes of Colophon ...* .

[2] In *L'ideazione del pinax, "mediale innovation" di Anassimandro*, a work on Anaximander's *pinax* – the first map of Mediterranean Sea – L. Rossetti, reminds us of the fact that Anaximander is thought to have made thousands of interviews with sailors in order to gather information about lands from Gibraltar to the Caspian Sea. The great development of commerce in the Mediterranean Sea suggests an international navigation culture that left aside local mythological descriptions of seas, lands and countries. In other words, a geography based on myths was entirely useless for real navigation, hence, among sailors there must have existed another kind of explanation for the many natural events linked to navigation. For example, a Phoenician ship needed real and reliable information to reach Alalia in Corsica, crossing all of the southern and central Mediterranean Sea. Rossetti says, and I agree, that there must have been among sailors an authentic *culture of reliability*. This culture should go beyond the mythological description of geography and give reliable descriptions of seas, lands, weather, and all kind of phenomena related to navigation. It is easy to see that this knowledge, going beyond myths, had the mark of reason. A further development of these ideas, this time strictly related to Parmenides, can be found in L. Rossetti, *Un altro Parmenide*.

[3] For *well–connected* for *eukykleos*, see N. S. Galgano, *DK 28 1.29 – A verdade tem um coração intrépido?*

second leaves our mind oscillating in doubt.
The goddess will teach this method.

The method

As we said, Parmenides presents a problematic of the subject, i.e. of the mind (ὁδοὶ νοῆσαι), more than a problematic of the object, i.e. the world (πάντα). This is confirmed by the method that the goddess teaches in fr. DK 28 B 2 and by another very important passage in fr. DK 28 B 6. I will start with the latter passage. In fr. DK 28 B 6.5–6 talking about *brotoi*, the goddess says:

ἀμηχανίη γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν
στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλακτὸν νόον

As we have seen, στήθεσιν (from στῆθος, chest) means *mind*. In this mind *a lack of resources* (ἀμηχανίη) guides a wandering thought (ἰθύνει πλακτὸν νόον). Because of this lack of resources, mortals do not make the right distinctions and believe that *to be* and *not to be* are the same and not the same. She instructs the disciple to stay away from this path. Hence, she is teaching exactly that μηχανή (resource) that will enable the disciple to make this distinction. If the ἀμηχανίη is a lack of resources in the mind, the μηχανή is also a resource in the mind. That means that the method that she teaches is a method for the mind. This is the reason why we shall read the method of fr. DK 28 B 2 as a method of mind, where the paths mentioned are paths in the mind and where the objects (*it is* and *it is not*) are objects in the mind[1]. Here is fr. DK 28 B 2:

Come now, I will tell you – and you who listen, pay
attention to my word –
The only paths of inquiry there are to think[2]:
One, [to think] that (it) "is", and that it is not possible
not to be
This is the path of persuasion (for it accompanies the
truth)
The other [to think] that (it) "is not", and that it is
necessary not to be;
This path, I tell you, is completely inscrutable
Since neither would you know what–is–not (for it
cannot be accomplished)
Nor say it.

The goddess teaches what are the only (two) paths of inquiry in the mind (*to*

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[1] For a complete account on *amēkhaniē*, see N. S. Galgano, Amēkhaniē *in Parmenides DK 28 B 6.5*.

[2] Since the seminal article by K. von Fritz, Nous*, noein and its derivatives ...* , the verb *noein* in Parmenides has been the object of many studies, articles and even a book, e.g. M. Marcinkowska–Rosół, *Die Konzeption des 'noein' bei Parmenides von Elea*. For this reason, it is impossible to engage in a critical discussion here. There are two main interpretative problems with it: the grammatical and the semantical problem. In my understanding, this infinitive *noēsai* is active and in a consecutive construction (*... to think that it is ...* and *... to think that it is not ...*), whereas most scholars choose the passive. In this interpretation I follow N.–L. Cordero, *By being, it is*, p. 40 & *passim. Contra* L. Tarán, *Parmenides*, p. 32, M. Untersteiner, *Parmenide, testimonianze e frammenti*, p. 129, J. Barnes, *The Presocratic philosophers*, p. 124, A. H. Coxon, *The fragments of Parmenides*, p. 52, D. O'Brien, *Le poème de Parménide – Texte, traduction, essai critique*, p. 16 & more recently, J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 365. There are also those who do not translate *noēsai*, as G. Colli, *Gorgia e Parmenide ...* , p. 137, who offers: *Suvvia, io ti dirò* [...] *quali sono le uniche vie di ricerca: la prima ...* etc.

think). From the second verse we learn that Parmenides, a fine observer of the human mind, points out that:

i) these are paths to think (so and so), i.e. they are not isolated thoughts, but some dynamic behavior of thoughts;

ii) they are paths of inquiry, i.e. they belong to a method for research, hence the other kinds of thoughts are out of consideration;

iii) there are only these paths, which means that Parmenides searched for others, but he found only these.

In verses 3 and 4, Parmenides explicates the first of the only (two) paths of inquiry. Verse 3 has a very uncommon syntactical construction, in that it lacks a grammatical subject, and its interpretation has generated long and hard controversies.

Parmenides says that the first path (to think that it is and that it is not possible not to be) is a path of persuasion. Yet he does not mean just any sort of *persuasion*, here, but rather a special sort of persuasion since it accompanies (ὀπηδεῖ) the truth. Back at DK 28 B 1.29–30, Parmenides established the difference between true and untrue persuasion. Persuasion is foremost a path, i.e. a set of propositions that induces someone to accept an understanding. However, one can be also persuaded of untrue affirmations. Therefore, here Parmenides goes further, identifying an essential element for the sort of genuine persuasion he is concerned with developing. Parmenides here is explaining what the path of thought that accompanies the truth (in opposition to the path that runs without truth), *is*. In short, it is the path by which *it is and it is not possible not to be*.

Verses 5–6 are symmetrical to 3–4. So, as in 3, in verse 5 the goddess describes the second path of inquiry and qualifies it in verse 6. The path to think *'it is not' is necessary not to be*. She adds that this path is totally inscrutable. How does Parmenides know that this path is inscrutable? The answer is easy: he tried to scrutinize it and failed. We can see this try if we lay out the entire description of the second path and follow the argument step by step.

This is best accomplished by beginning at the end, with verse 7 and the verb γνοίης, an optative of γιγνώσκω. This verb refers to an activity of mind, the activity of knowing, and Parmenides is thus claiming that we cannot know what is not. In terms of logic, this seems reasonable; for how could I know something that is not? But Parmenides was a sophisticated thinker, and this kind of simple logical knowledge would be too trivial to him. For, of course, even though we may not have consciously considered it, we are immediately aware that is impossible to know what is not when the possibility is considered – for, how can there be any knowledge in the absence of any object for knowing? Thus, it is likely Parmenides wanted to say something more than just what is easily accepted by common sense.

The expression τὸ μὴ ἐόν means *the being that is not*. In ancient Greek as in our current languages (and in our scientific logic of languages), negation can only negate a positive affirmation (even in the case of double negation, where the first negation negates the affirmation of the second negation). There can simply be no pure negation, only negation in conjunction with affirmation.

Therefore, to Parmenides and to us, *the being that is not* means *the being that is being negated*. This is also the common meaning of our linguistic negation. If I say *not this, but that*, I mean that there is a *this* that I negate, in contrast to a *that* which I affirm. Therefore, in our common negation, there is always an implied something being negated. Understanding the affirmative ἐόν of the expression τὸ μὴ ἐόν in a very generic manner – i.e. all things (the πάντα of the verse 1.28), the Parmenidean negation makes sense. It is impossible to know (to accomplish that mental act that we call knowing) that which is the negation of all beings. This may take some further analysis to understand beyond the common sense of negation considered above.

Consider the following explication, which, though the process may not be exactly the same as that Parmenides followed for his understanding, leads to the same conclusion. Using reflective imagination, a cognitive subject begins by negating one object. Let us say that I am the cognitive subject. For instance, I have a book on my desk and I can imagine its annihilation, a non–book, i.e. a desk without the book. I can then expand this, and imagine a non–desk, i.e. my house without my desk, the city without my house (non–house), the planet without my city (non–city), the physical world without my planet (non–planet), and even the negation of the whole world, with all sensible and intelligible beings (non–world). Finally, after negating everything outside me, if I want to negate literally everything, I need to negate myself as a cognitive subject. What happens at this moment is the possibility of following two alternative paths:

a) First, my cognitive capacity negates itself, and I am aware that my cognitive capacity negates itself. That means that there is a new cognitive subject, which is aware that the former cognitive capacity was negated. Now, the new cognitive subject, with the new cognitive capacity, negates itself and, doing this, generates a new cognitive subject and so on *ad infinitum*. Hence, it is impossible to know the negation of all beings, for the act of negation is an affirmation (it is the affirmation of the act of negation) and the negation of everything always implies at least the affirmation of the act of negation. This process cannot be driven totally to the end, i.e. it goes on *ad infinitum*, and thus cannot be accomplished (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν). Of course, something that does not happen (to know what is not) cannot be pointed out, indicated or said (οὔτε φράσαις).

b) Second, my cognitive capacity negates itself, while lacking the awareness that it has itself been negated. This would require that my cognitive capacity suffers a blackout, a complete failure in, and cessation of all cognitive processes. As a result, the possibility for knowing negation vanishes, for the absence of support for any cognitive action makes negation impossible in this case too, just as I cannot point out, know, and say the negation of all things.

Similarly, verses 7–8 are describing the cognitive impossibility of negating all beings. Therefore, when we think *what is not*, we make a start at a process that cannot be completed. Either *what is* makes itself present again and cannot be negated, or the path abruptly breaks off as a consequence of total cognitive absence.

These further qualifications of verses 7–8 can now be considered in relation to the entire fragment. Back in verses 3–4, the goddess has said that the first path for inquiry is: *that it is and that it is not possible not to be*. The interesting

part of this affirmation is that the path *it is* is simultaneously a path in which *it is impossible not to be*. In my example of the meditation that attempts to know *what is not* (τὸ μὴ ἐόν), it was determined on the first alternative that it is impossible to think the negation of all beings; for something always remains, which is not able to be negated. Hence, it is not possible not to be. Moreover, when the goddess says that the second path is *it is not and that it is necessary not to be*, this corresponds to the second alternative, whereby the complete negation of all things includes the negation of cognitive thinking and thus the elimination of the necessary apparatus for knowing anything. This is why verse 6 literally says: *I tell you that this is a path entirely inscrutable* – i.e. you can negate almost everything but not everything, not entirely, not totally (παναπευθέα).

Therefore, when we try to think τὸ μὴ ἐόν, we realize that we can only think that *it is* or that *what–is–not is impossible*, and that one who believes that *what–is–not* would be possible is in error. Of the two paths, the second is an illusory path – though we may initially have the naïve idea that we can negate everything, a little investigation quickly demonstrates this to be impossible. In contrast, the first path is a genuine path which we can follow, for *it is* cannot be absolutely negated. This is a truth of our thinking and it is path of that Persuasion that goes in the company of truth, because its negation is impossible.

In this meditation, we find the nucleus of Parmenidean philosophy, which regrettably I cannot examine here further. However, I believe that the meaning is clear: to think (absolute) *non–being* is impossible because *non–being* is never an object of thinking, hence it would never be known. Now we may ask: given these two paths, why would they be a method for the trustworthy discourse? The reason is simple: they do not cross one another, because the second does not offer any course; to think non–being is a path that does not lead anywhere, it is a promise that will never be kept. When someone makes use of the expression *non–being*, he believes he is saying something, but he is utilizing an expression without any meaning. Hence, any discourse implying *non–being* ends up contaminated by contradiction, for *non–being* has no meaning.

For this reason, what–is–not should not be employed in scientific statements. Parmenides says this in many ways:

in fr. DK 28 B 2.7–8: *because you could not know or say what–is–not* (οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἐὸν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν) οὔτε φράσαις.);

then in fr. DK 28 B 6.1–2: *It is necessary to say and to think that what–is is, for it is being and nothing is not* (χρὴ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἐὸν ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι, μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν);

then in fr. DK 28 B 7.1–2: *for this shall never prevail: that things that are not are; but you hold back your thought from this path* (οὐ γὰρ μήποτε τοῦτο δαμῆι εἶναι μὴ ἐόντα· ἀλλὰ σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήσιος εἶργε νόημα).

Brief discussion

As we see in many passages of the poem, Parmenides is talking about thinking and saying, where saying is the expression of thinking. Hence, the whole poem is about how to think reality correctly. In other words, from contradictory occurrences in saying reality (as we saw in Xenophanes fr. DK

21 B 16), Parmenides deduces the occurrence of contradictions in mind. The word *psyche* (ψυχή) does not occur in the poem[1], however a thematic of mind is present in his poem, as we see in fr. DK 28 B 16 with reference to the body and the whole first part (fragments DK 28 B 1 to B 8) with reference to the abstract thought. I believe that this escaped the notice of many scholars and they ended being misguided in their analysis of non–being. In fact, if we run along old and recent interpretations, we find contradictory interpretations side by side with very strange ideas attributed to Parmenides. The main reason for this is the fact that scholars interpreted non–being as an object in reality, i.e. outside the mind, whereas Parmenides talks of non–being as an object in the mind, a kind of non–being in itself, which he considers the basic contradiction, the mother of all contradictions in the world[2].

The literature is vast, so I will limit myself to three interpreters. Let us start with G. E. L. Owen. For him, as for many others, the problem is to understand whether *it is* and *it is not* are existential or predicative. Owen opts for the existential interpretation and his *Eleatic questions* was a very influential article[3]. In a later paper he summarizes his argument in this way:

> *Parmenides argues* [...] *that any denial of existence is nonsense: the nonexistent cannot be thought or spoken of (B2.7–8), denials of existence are "not sayable or thinkable" (B8.8–9). (More exactly, they are either self–refuting if they have a genuine subject or senseless if they have not).*[4]

Owen says that this is an incoherence that *lies at the heart of the reasoning*[5]. To the extensive criticism of Owen's interpretations in O'Brien[6], I will add just that this *incoherence* disappears if we consider the thought of what–is–not (i.e. what–is–not as an intelligible object itself and not as a reflex of something that is not) as an object external to the mind. It is easy: just try to think what–is–not in itself. There is no incoherence, because it is impossible to think what–is–not. We can say it in another way, substituting what–is–not with its synonym (for Parmenides, at least) *non–being* (μὴ εἶναι). *Non–being* may be absolute or relative. The relative non–being is that of Plato's *Sophist*, where he refuses Parmenides' notion of non–being, substituting it with relative non–being. Then, Plato's non–being is relative whereas Parmenides' non–being is absolute; in fact, Plato's refusal would be useless if Parmenides' non–being were relative too. Hence, Owen is mistaken, and any other scholar who forgets that Parmenides is talking about absolute non–being.

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[1] This is the main reason, I believe, for the absence of Parmenides in books of history of ancient psychology. See N. S. Galgano, *Parmenides as psychologist – Part one: fragments DK 1 and 2* & N. S. Galgano, *Parmenides as psychologist – Part two: fragments DK 6 and 7*.

[2] In fact, Plato could not accept such a contradictory form, a non–being in itself, as one of the main forms discussed in *The Sophist*. Hence, he rejected it and substituted with the form of relative non–being.

[3] G. E. L. Owen, *Eleatic Questions*.

[4] G. E. L. Owen, *Plato and Parmenides on the Timeless Present*, p. 275.

[5] G. E. L. Owen, *Plato and Parmenides on the Timeless Present*, p. 275.

[6] See D. O'Brien, *Le poème de Parménide – Texte, traduction, essai critique*, p. 187 & *passim*.

Another influential scholar in Parmenides studies is C. H. Kahn. He has conducted important research on the verb *to be* in ancient Greek, with very high merits. At the same time, he devoted several studies to Parmenides (although he never wrote a book on him, as he did with Anaximander and Heraclitus). His work on Parmenides has become famous mainly for his proposal of a *veridical* interpretation of ἔστι: since Kahn, interpretations of the Parmenidean ἔστι are often categorized as existential, predicative or veridical. Kahn's interpretation of Parmenides is complex and a proper account of it requires analyses of the whole first part of the poem. Here, I will confine my remarks to a few passages on non–being[1]. In a passage of *Being in Parmenides and Plato*, Kahn says:

> [...] *it is simply false to say that you cannot think or talk about (point out in speech,* phrázein*) what does not exist. And the falseness of this would be obvious to any Greek who reflected for a moment on the profusion of monsters and fantastic creatures in traditional poetry and myth, from Pegasus to the children of Gaia with a hundred arms and fifty heads apiece (Hesiod,* Theogony *150). Neither Parmenides nor his followers would imagine for a moment that Hesiod's description (and some hearers' naive belief) might suffice to usher such items into existence.*[2]

Some pages afterwards he says:

> *Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the corresponding negative notion of* what is not*. For Not–being (*to mē eon*) is a fatally confused notion, combining in a specious unity a number of quite diverse, logically unconnected ideas. Depending upon which function of* is *is negated, not–being can represent either falsehood, negative predication, nonidentity, nonexistence, or nonentity, i.e. nothing at all. The combination of all these forms of negation in a single notion is a conceptual monster, as Plato was finally to point out.*[3]

All the problematic conclusions of this second quotation would be avoided if Kahn had considered how problematic the first quotation is. In fact, if it is false to say that you cannot think or talk about what does not exist, and that would be evident to any Greek who reflected on the profusion of monsters in traditional myth, he should have suspected that his interpretation of non–being as referring to external objects does not belong to Parmenides' philosophy. Again, Parmenides' non–being refers to an intelligible object, an object of mind, and whoever tries to think this mental object, realizes that it is impossible to do

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[1] For a complete account of my criticism on Kahn, see N. S. Galgano, [a review of:] Ch. H. Kahn, *Essays on Being.*

[2] Ch. H. Kahn, *Essays on being*, p. 172.

[3] Ch. H. Kahn, *Essays on being*, p. 180.

it. Non–being is a virtual object of mind with no reference to any object of the external world; it points out exactly this complete absence of reference and belongs to those many concepts with no real reference, which draw the outline of the real: non–being, impossibility (itself), contradiction (in itself) and so on. On this side of the line, what we think and say is real; on the other side, it is just invention of mortals. Kahn aimed at the wrong target and, of course, missed the point. Obviously, Parmenides knew very well of the profusion of monsters that do not exist, and it is surprising that many scholars can even imagine such a naivety on Parmenides' part. Then, Kahn's interpretation fails regarding non–being but also regarding Parmenidean being, for being and non–being are not existential, predicative, veridical or some fusion of them referred to extra–mental object of reality, but objects of mind, with which researchers may follow the right paths of thought, the right reasoning.

The last scholar whom I want to discuss is John Palmer, who belongs to a new generation of interpreters of Parmenides. In his recent book, Palmer engages with many interpretations of fr. DK 28 B 2, finding problems with their approaches and their solutions[1]. He discusses in depth many sophisticated arguments about the two ways of fr. DK 28 B 2, and finally gives his own interpretation with a modal reading of the three ways that he finds in the poem[2]. In a paragraph dedicated to the second way of fr. DK 28 B 2, Palmer offers an acceptable analysis of verses 5–8. However, the common error of interpreting the two ways in terms of the behavior of a researcher rather than the behavior of mind forces Palmer into an incongruence that he solves in an unjustified manner. The incongruence shows up after his questioning:

> *Why is 'that* [it] *is not and that* [it] *must not be' (fr. 2. 5) presented as a way of inquiry at all? And how can it be presented as a way to achieve the goal of understanding when the goddess says one can have no apprehension of what is not?*[3]

Then, he answers:

> *Inquiry along the second way involves, first, keeping in mind that what one is looking for is not and must not be, and thereby trying to discover what an entity that is in this way must be like. It is immediately evident, though, what an entity that is not and must not be is like: nothing at all. It is therefore perfectly intelligible that the goddess should warn Parmenides not to set out on the second path. One will never find what must not be.*[4]

Once again, Parmenides is considered a naïve thinker and his goddess someone

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[1] See J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*.

[2] A. P. D. Mourelatos, *Two Neo–Analytic Approaches ...* , raises serious objections to Palmer's modal interpretation.

[3] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 100.

[4] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 101.

who warns against the useless search for something that is not. Palmer believes that this interpretation has *the decided advantage of making it possible to understand the fragment's last two verses as making a sound philosophical point rather than as containing a fallacy, however famous or interesting that fallacy might be.*[1] In fact, even on this interpretation, the goddess' warning against proceeding along the second way would be incongruent with the reason she gives for it: he could neither apprehend nor indicate *what is not*; for, if *what–is–not* indicates *what does not exist*, then the fallacy of saying the unthinkable and unsayable what–is–not remains. Here Palmer introduces a hermeneutical strategy in order to achieve what he calls *a sound philosophical point*[2]. On his interpretation, *what–is–not* is a shorthand of *that [it] is not and that [it] must not be* because it would be cumbersome to employ this long formula whenever he wishes to refer to the subject of the second way (but he says the same for the first way). *What–is–not* refers only to those objects that are not and must not be; for example, a round square. Those are impossible objects, which are unthinkable and unsayable. However, there are objects that are not in one circumstance but may be in another. Palmer gives the example of *the present king of France*[3], of which *failure of apprehension may change just in case there should ever again be a king of France*[4]. Hence, *what–is–not* does not refer to just any *what–is–not*, such as the necessary and the contingent, but only to the necessary; for this reason the expression *what–is–not* of fr. DK 28 B 2.7 is just a shorthand to avoid the cumbersome complete formula of fr. DK 28 B 2.5.

This ingenious interpretation is based on many arbitrary assumptions: the presence of three paths, the weight on the modal interpretation, the translation of νοῆσαι as *understanding*, and many others that make Palmer's approach problematic, although really attractive, even to one who, like me, disagrees with him. I cannot discuss all of them here and I am compelled to extract just one point of Palmer's argument. I think that considering *what–is–not* as a shorthand for *that [it] is not and that [it] must not be* is an unconvincing solution. For the sake of argument, let us call *that [it] is not and that [it] must not be* X. In fr. DK 28 B 2.2 the goddess says that she will speak of two paths, which includes X; then, in fr. DK 28 B 2.5 she says X; in next verse, fr. DK 28 B 2.6, she adds that X (ἀταρπόν) is παναπευθέα; and one more time, in fr. DK 28 B 2.7, she would say – now in Palmer's interpretation – *for X is so and so*. In my opinion, Palmer stresses the construction, while there is no need for this. Parmenides is simply giving the reason for which this path is παναπευθέα, as the construction of fr. DK 28 B 2.6 followed by a γάρ in fr. DK 28 B 2.7, suggests. There is no need for this complex and arbitrary construction, because τὸ μὴ ἐόν is a linguistic invention of Parmenides, for which Parmenides gives an explanation of its qualifications. It is not a fallacy, because would be very hard to imagine a new expression τὸ μὴ ἐόν referring to *what–is–not now but may be in the*

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[1] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 101.

[2] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 102.

[3] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 101.

[4] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 101.

future, a very complex abstraction that will appear only with Plato[1]. Hence, it is simple: what–is–not is unthinkable and unsayable because it refers to a thought and not to an object. In fact, Palmer's translation of νοῆσαι as *understanding* compels him to translate fr. DK 28 B 2.2 *ways of inquiry for (achieving) understanding*, which leads one to ask whether there is an inquiry for not achieving understanding. Of course, the notion of understanding is implied in *inquiry*; hence, νοῆσαι means just *think (inquiring thoughts). What–is–not* is a virtual thought, which cannot be thought or said, any more than a round square. Both of them seem to be something, but they belong to the kind of mental object that has no referent in reality. There is no fallacy in speaking of what–is–not to point out an impossibility just as there is no fallacy in speaking of a round square to point out another impossibility. The fallacy would be to deploy what–is–not (or round square) on a path of inquiry, i.e. in an argument, believing that they mean something, whereas they have no meaning[2].

Back to Parmenides

Let us return to Parmenides. He ends fr. DK 28 B 2 warning against the deployment of what–is–not in scientific statements. Afterwards, he gives an example of what he means when he says to hold back thought from that path. In fact, in fr. DK 28 B 8.6–9, he says:

τίνα γὰρ γένναν διζήσεαι αὐτοῦ;
πῆι πόθεν αὐξηθέν; οὐδ' ἐκ μὴ ἐόντος ἐάσσω
φάσθαι σ' οὐδὲ νοεῖν· οὐ γὰρ φατὸν οὐδὲ νοητόν
ἔστιν ὅπως οὐκ ἔστι.
what generation will you seek for it?
How, whence did it grow? From non–being I shall not
                                              allow
you to say and to think, because what–is–not is not
sayable or thinkable.

Here, we are in the middle of an investigation. Questions about the most important topic for these earlier thinkers – the generation of everything – were made before, and the inquiry begins with a methodological precept: what is the generation of *eon*? The disciple is not allowed to consider non–being as a possible answer. Why? Because non–being cannot be thought, hence it has no real meaning and should not be said. For this reason non–being is not a possible answer for the inquiry.

This passage about non–being and what–is–not is the only part of the fragment 8 where the disciple is personally adverted about a methodological error. Of course, the order given by the goddess in her imperative speech represents a law of the world; it is the same in many other passages of the poem.

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[1] See R. Waterfield, [a review of:] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 149, affirms: *Some readers of this review will not be surprised to find Palmer's Parmenides emerging as an epistemological dualist on Platonic lines.*

[2] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and the Presocratic Philosophy*, p. 106, thinks differently: *Despite her admonitions to Parmenides, then, not to stray onto the path along which mortals normally wander, it is apparently not altogether wrong to follow it.* See also M. R. Cosgrove, [a review of:] J. Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy.*

In the same fragment 8, there are forces and chains of goddesses that do not allow certain behaviors; all of them are laws of the world. But in our passage, the anonymous goddess speaks personally, employing the second person of singular, in other words, being didactical. It is an advice, it is a warning, it is a law: non–being is a path of our mind which does not take anywhere, because we think that we think non–being, but we do not think it.

How can this be possible, that we believe we think what we do not really think? Actually, it is a kind of trick of our mind, which relies on habits: at the normal speed of our mind, I think of a triangle and I know that there is a triangle (a triangular thing); I think of a circle and I know that there is a circle (a circular thing); I think of a circular triangle and I know that there is a circular triangle ... Wait, are we sure that there is such a thing, a circular triangle? To test the existence of a circular triangle we need to make a great effort in our mind, trying to think of such an object. After many tries, generally, we give up, and it requires a very complex tool to understand that a circular triangle is actually an impossible thing: that it cannot be, cannot have existence. In fact, ontology – the complex tool required – tells us that the essence of circle does not belong with the essence of triangle so they keep out one another. Habits of speech might make us believe that such a thing as a circular triangle exists, and if we fall in this error we might state: *the world has a shape of a circular triangle*. Our mind, uniting the two things in one speech, may trick itself and make us believe in its existence. It is easy to see that we can say *circular triangle*, but we cannot ever think of it and, if we are engaged in scientific discourse, we should never employ such an expression.

I believe that this visual example makes clearer what Parmenides says about non–being. Even if we can say *non–being*, the truth is that it is unthinkable, so we should not use it in scientific speech. Thus, in searching for principles of the world, in asking how and whence did the ἐόν grow, we can say many things, but there is one thing that we are not allowed to say: that it is from non–being. Why? Because it is not thinkable, hence not sayable in precise (scientific) language.

Melissus

Melissus is generally considered an Eleatic thinker. However, this has been contested since the second half of the 20th century. It is not my aim to recount this history here and I think that we can put in this way: Melissus is not an unquestioning follower of Parmenides but an Eleatic who criticizes Parmenides and even has his own autonomous thought.

Melissus has often been relegated to a secondary position among Presocratics. However, recently we are witnessing a kind of revival of his importance and philosophy. New monographs and even new editions and trans-lations allow for new debates. One of them – the debate around fr. B 0 – is important for the goal of my paper here.

This fragment takes the number B 0 in Reale's edition because it was not considered authentic by Diels himself. In fact, it belongs to a passage from Simplicius that is currently considered a paraphrase. However, the paraphrase

is introduced with an expression that seems to indicate the exact words of
Melissus:

> Νῦν δὲ τὸν Μελίσσου λόγον ἴδωμεν, πρὸς ὃν πρότερον
> ὑπαντᾷ. τοῖς γὰρ τῶν φυσικῶν ἀξιώμασι χρησάμενος
> ὁ Μέλισσος περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς ἄρχεται τοῦ
> συγγράμματος οὕτως. "Εἰ μὲν μηδὲν ἔστι, περὶ τούτου
> τί ἂν λέγοιτο ὡς ὄντος τινός; εἰ δέ τι ἐστίν, ἤτοι
> γινόμενόν ἐστιν ἢ ἀεὶ ὄν."
>
> *Let us now look at the argument of Melissus, which he
> [i.e. Aristotle] earlier opposed. For Melissus used the
> axioms of the natural philosophers, and began his
> writing on coming to be and passing away thus: "If
> there is nothing, what could be said about that as if it
> were existent? But if there is something, either it has
> come to be or it has always existed."*[1]

The words *Melissus ... began his writing ... thus* strongly suggest a
quotation from Melissus' book. However, it has been clearly demonstrated
(since Pabst, at least) that the whole passage is a paraphrase, except maybe the
first line and some few words more. This line is the fragment B 0 (a number
that does not change Diels' ordering): *If there is nothing, what could be said
about that as if it were existent?*

The debate about the authenticity of this fragment recently received two
opposite contributions. A British researcher, Harriman, has published an article
trying to reconstruct the *incipit* of Melissus' book, and he defends the inclusion
of fragment B 0 in it[2]. Contra, there is an article of Pulpito, which tries to
demonstrate that this inclusion is wrong, i.e. that fr. B 0 is not a fragment and
Melissus' treatise begins with fr. DK 30 B 1[3].

I am very interested in this debate and I will return to it in detail on another
occasion. Here I just want to state my understanding and the way I see this
question. I think that even if fr. B 0 is not an exact quotation, it is at least a
genuine Melissean point and its place is exactly at the beginning of the treatise.
In what follows, I will focus on the *pars construens* of my own account. Of the
pars destruens, I shall simply ask: if fr. B 0 is not a direct quotation, is it a
paraphrase? And if it is a paraphrase, would it be a paraphrase of what
argument, in which place of the treatise? If is not a paraphrase, what is it? Is it
a creative invention of Simplicius? I leave these questions to those who say that
fr. B 0 is not a genuine fragment.

To say nothing

I myself accept fr. B 0 at least as a genuine point of Melissus treatise.
Maybe it is not a genuine fragment, since for some other quotations Simplicius
says that he is reproducing Melissus' archaic language. But the topic is there: *If*

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[1] Translation of P. Huby & C. C. W. Taylor, *Simplicius, On Aristotle Physics 1.3–4*, p. 16.

[2] See B. Harriman, *The Beginning of Melissus' On Nature ... .*

[3] See M. Pulpito, *On the Incipit of Melissus' Treatise.*

there is nothing, what could be said about that as if it were existent? This matter is genuinely Parmenidean, for the description of the impossibility of non–being is given by the impossibility of thinking, and for this reason, of saying non–being. This is a central point of Parmenides' philosophy and it is recalled by Melissus (in fr. B 0), Gorgias, and Plato. However, to give a complete account of fr. B 0, I will focus on fr. DK 29 B 1, where the notion of non–being, or nothing, is employed in a complete and coherent sentence:

ἀεὶ ἦν ὅ τι ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται. εἰ γὰρ ἐγένετο, ἀναγκαῖόν
ἐστι πρὶν γενέσθαι εἶναι μηδέν· εἰ τοίνυν μηδὲν ἦν,
οὐδαμὰ ἂν γένοιτο οὐδὲν ἐκ μηδενός [...].
*What was, always was, and always will be. For if it
came to be, it is necessary that before it came to be
there was nothing. Now if there was nothing, in no way
could anything come to be from nothing* [...][1].

In this passage, we can identify an archaic form of reasoning. If in Aristotle, the statement is a conclusion, i.e. the result of two premises, in archaic form the statement comes first: *What was always was, and always will be*. This is the conclusion of his reasoning and it echoes the mythological form, where such statements were given by gods as orders to be followed. We find the same for-mal structure in Parmenides, where the goddess first states and then gives her reasons. But in Melissus there is no god, just Melissus in a very formal and dry prose. What was always was. Why? Because if it is and was not, i.e. if it was generated, this means that it should come from nothing, but, of course, nothing can come from nothing, hence *what was, always was, and always will be*.

If we make a comparison with Parmenides' reasoning, we see the different role played by non–being. In Parmenides, non–being is not a part of any argument and the disciple is explicitly forbidden from appealing to it. But in Melissus, non–being is the first point of the argument, that which supports it. In fact, says Melissus, what was always was, because, on the contrary assumption, we would have had (the) nothing. In other words, *nothing* is central to the reasoning of the argument. *Nothing* has a place in the argument as something that has the precise character of being unable to generate anything. Since *nothing* generates nothing, what was always was.

Parmenides says: non–being is unthinkable; hence, it should not be a part of reasoning. Melissus says: nothing is unable to generate anything, hence what was always was. The difference is essential. With Melissus, *nothing* receives a hypostatization and becomes a null object, completely different from Parmenides' nonsensical notion. Melissus, for the first time, employs a notion of nothing very close to our notion of zero. In fact we may say he is the inventor of nothingness, not as a mathematical quantity but as complex philosophical notion, of which the mathematical notion is just one aspect.

With very few exceptions (in the second half of twentieth century), scholars have not realized this difference between notions of non–being in Parmenides and Melissus. Of course, the reason might be found in their great interest in the

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[1] Translation of P. Huby & C. C. W. Taylor, *Simplicius, On Aristotle Physics 1.3–4*, p. 16.

notion of being, relegating non–being to a secondary place. However, this difference exists and is important. Leaving for another opportunity a detailed analysis of it, here I just want to show a little bit of this difference at work. The method is very simple; I am going to apply Parmenidean criteria to Melissus' reasoning in fr. DK 29 B 1. If the two notions are different, employing one instead of the other will reveal a bad reasoning or, perhaps, no reasoning at all.

Let us recall the Parmenidean criteria: non–being is unthinkable and unspeakable. Now I just apply them to fr. DK 29 B 1 of Melissus: *What was always was and always will be. For if it came to be, it is necessary that before it came to be there was (nothing)* what is unthinkable and unspeakable. *Now if there was (nothing)* what is unthinkable and unspeakable*, in no way could anything come to be from (nothing)* what is unthinkable and unspeakable.

Actually, the reasoning makes no sense, because already at the first *nothing*, the clause is impossible because it would imply what is unthinkable and unspeakable. How can a reasoning that was not thought be a reasoning? How can an unspeakable reasoning be spoken? At the second *nothing* we have the hypostatization of non–being, completely forbidden by Parmenides. So, here too the clause has no meaning. Finally, the third clause makes no sense too. The reason is obvious, Melissus employs a notion that Parmenides holds as a nonsense. Hence, from a Parmenidean point of view, Melissean reasoning has no sense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to go back to fr. 0 and try to answer the (apparently rhetorical) question: *If there is nothing, what could be said about that as if it were existent?* Melissus begins supposing that nothing exists. On this supposition, he must think of it as if it were existent. We may put this in other words (without question mark) in the first clause: *This is a hypothesis: nothing exists. Now, what could be said of it?* In this form, it is very clear that since his first statement Melissus offers a different notion of non–being (or nothing): somehow, he thinks the existence of nothing and gives it some theoretical meaning. In fact, he employs it in the rest of his treatise, not as a wrong path (as in Parmenides) but as a fundamental passage of many of his reasoning and demonstration. In this case, *pace* Pulpito, I must agree with Mansfeld when he says that B 0 *constitutes the most important epistemological reflection*[1] of Melissus.

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