

## Melissus

*In 441 BC Athens declared war on Samos and despatched a fleet to the island. During the protracted operations, Pericles, the Athenian commander, led some of his ships away on an expedition:*

When he had sailed off, Melissus, son of Ithagenes, a philosopher who was then in command at Samos, despising the small number of their ships or the inexperience of their commanders, persuaded his fellow-citizens to attack the Athenians. In the battle that followed, the Samians were victorious. They captured many men and destroyed many ships, thereby gaining control of the sea and acquiring war-supplies of which they had previously been short. Aristotle says that Pericles himself had earlier been defeated by Melissus in a sea-battle.

(Plutarch, *Pericles* xxvi 166CD)

*The Samians were beaten in the end; but Melissus had made his mark on history.*

*The year of the battle gives us the only known date in Melissus' life. In philosophy, he was a follower of Parmenides. Indeed, his book is a version in clear prose, revised and modified, of Parmenides' 'Way of Truth'. Substantial fragments have survived, all of them preserved by Simplicius. In addition, there are two paraphrases of his argument, one in the essay On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias, falsely ascribed to Aristotle, and the other in Simplicius' commentary on Aristotle's Physics. Here is the latter.*

Melissus uses the axioms of the natural philosophers and begins his treatise on generation and destruction as follows:

If it is nothing, what could be said about it as though it were something? If it is something, either it came into being or it has always existed. But if it came into being, it did so either from the existent or from the non-existent. But it is not possible for anything to come into being either from the non-existent (not even some other nothing, let alone something actually existent) or from the existent (for in that case it would have existed all along and would not have come into being). What exists, therefore, has not come into being. Therefore it has always existed. Nor will what exists be destroyed. For what exists can change neither into the non-existent (the natural scientists agree on this) nor into the existent (for in that case it would remain and not be destroyed). Therefore what exists neither has come into being nor will be destroyed. Therefore it always has existed and will exist.

Since what comes into existence has a beginning, what does not come into existence has no beginning. But what exists has not come into being. Therefore it has no beginning. Again, what is destroyed has an end, and if something is indestructible it has no end. Therefore what exists, being indestructible, has no end. But what has neither beginning nor end is in fact limitless. Therefore what exists is limitless.

If it is limitless, it is one. For if there are two they cannot be limitless but will have limits against one another. But what exists is limitless. Therefore there is not a plurality of existents. Therefore what exists is one.

If it is one, it is also changeless. For what is one is always similar to itself, and what is similar will neither perish nor become larger nor change its arrangement nor suffer pain nor suffer anguish. For if it undergoes any of these things it will not be one. For anything which undergoes any change of whatever sort moves from one state into a different one. But nothing is different from what exists. Therefore it will not change.

Again, nothing is empty of what exists. For what is empty is nothing; and hence, being nothing, it will not exist. Hence what exists does not move — for it has no way to retreat if nothing is empty. Nor can it contract into itself. For in that case it would be both rarer and denser than itself, and that is impossible. For what is rare cannot be as full as what is dense; rather, what is rare is thereby emptier than what is

dense – but what is empty does not exist. One should judge whether what exists is full or not by seeing whether or not it accommodates anything else: if it does not accommodate anything, it is full; if it does accommodate, it is not full. Now if it is not empty it is necessarily full; and if so, then it cannot move – not because it is not possible to move through what is full, as we say in the case of bodies, but because the whole of what exists can move neither into the existent (for there exists nothing apart from it) nor into the non-existent (for the non-existent does not exist).

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 103.13–104.15)

*The paraphrase largely fixes the order in which the fragments should be set out.*

Melissus showed the ungenerability of what exists, using the common axiom [that nothing comes into being from nothing]. He writes as follows:

**Whatever existed always existed and always will exist. For if it came into being, then necessarily before coming into being it was nothing. Now if it was nothing it will in no way have come to be anything from being nothing.** [30 B 1]

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 162.23–26)

Melissus puts the point as follows:

**Now since it did not come into being but exists, it always existed and always will exist, and it has no beginning and no end but is limitless. For if it came into being it will have a beginning (for it will at some time have begun coming into being) and an end (for it will at some time have ceased coming into being). And if it neither began nor ended and always existed and always will exist, then it has no beginning and no end. For what does not exist wholly cannot exist always.** [B 2]

... Just as he asserts that what has at some time come into being is limited in its being, so he says that what always exists is limitless in its being. He makes this clear when he says:

**But just as it exists always, so in magnitude too it must always be limitless.** [B 3]

By magnitude he does not mean extension; for he himself shows that what exists is indivisible:

**If what exists has been divided, he says, it is moving; but if it is moving it will not exist.** [B 10]

Rather, by magnitude he means degree of reality. For he shows that he means what exists to be incorporeal when he says:

**Now if it exists, it must be one; but being one it must fail to possess a body.** [Cf. B 9]

And he co-ordinates limitlessness with eternity, in respect of being, when he says:

**Nothing which has a beginning and an end is either eternal or limitless** [B 4], so that what does not have them is limitless.

From limitlessness he inferred that it is one, by way of the proposition that if it were not one it would be limited against something else [B 5]. Eudemus criticizes this on the grounds that it is unspecified.

He writes:

If you were to concede that what exists is limitless, why will it be one? Not because a plurality of things will be limited against one another; for time past is thought to be limitless even though it is limited against time present. Perhaps a plurality of things will not be limitless in all directions; but it will be evident that they can be so in one direction. So it must be specified in which way a plurality will not be limitless. [Eudemus, *Physics* fragment 41. Wehrli]

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 109.19–110.11)

And if Melissus entitled his work *On Nature or on What Exists*, it is clear that he thought nature to be what exists, and natural objects, i.e. perceptible objects, to be the things which exist. Perhaps that is why Aristotle said that, in declaring what exists to be one, he supposed that there was nothing else apart from perceptible substances. For given that what is perceptible seems plainly to exist, then if what exists is one there will not exist anything else apart from this. Melissus says: **For if it is <limitless> it will be one. For if there are two, they**

cannot be limitless, but will have limits against one another. [B 6]  
(Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 557.10-17)

Since Melissus wrote in an archaic style but not unclearly, let us set down his archaic words themselves so that those who read them may judge more accurately which are the more appropriate interpretations. So, drawing the conclusions I have already mentioned and introducing his treatment of change, Melissus says:

In this way, then, it is eternal and limitless and one and altogether similar to itself. And it will neither perish nor become larger nor change its arrangement nor suffer pain nor suffer anguish. For if it undergoes any of these things it will no longer be one.

For if it alters, necessarily what exists will not be similar; rather, what previously existed will perish and what did not exist will come into being. Now if it becomes altered by a single hair in ten thousand years, it will perish wholly in the whole of time.

Nor can it change its arrangement. For the arrangement which previously existed is not destroyed nor will one which did not exist come into being. And since nothing is added or perishes or alters, how could anything which exists change its arrangement? For if it alters in any way it will thereby also change its arrangement.

Nor does it suffer pain. For if it is in pain it will not wholly exist; for a thing in pain cannot exist always, nor does it have equal power with what is healthy. Nor will it be similar if it suffers pain; for it will suffer pain by the loss or the addition of something, and it will no longer be similar. Nor could what is healthy suffer pain; for the health which existed would perish and what did not exist would come into being.

With regard to suffering anguish, the same argument holds as for being in pain.

Nor is it empty in any respect. For what is empty is nothings; and hence, being nothing, it will not exist.

Nor does it move. For it has no way to retreat but is full. For if it were empty it would retreat into the empty part, but since nothing is empty it has no way to retreat. And it will not be dense and rare. For what is rare cannot be as full as what is dense; rather, what is

rare is thereby emptier than what is dense. You should judge what is full and what is not full in this way: if it yields at all or accommodates, it is not full; if it neither yields nor accommodates, it is full. Now necessarily it is full if it is not empty. So if it is full it does not move. [B 7]

That is what Melissus says.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 111.15-112.15)

Their existent One, being indivisible, will not be limited or limitless in the way bodies are. For Parmenides places bodies among the objects of opinion, and Melissus says:

Being one, it must fail to possess a body. But if it has bulk it will have parts and will no longer be one. [Cf. B 9]

(Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 87.4-7)

The final fragment shows that Melissus' book contained a critical as well as a constructive section.

Melissus, inasmuch as he wrote in prose, gave a clearer account [than Parmenides] of his views on [perceptible objects] throughout his work - and especially in the following passage. Having said about what exists that it is one and ungenerated and motionless and interrupted by no emptiness but wholly full of itself, he continues:

Now this argument is the greatest sign that there exists just one thing; but there are also the following signs. If there exist more things than one, they will have to be such as I say the one thing is. For if there exist earth and water and air and iron and gold and living things and dead and black and white and the other things which men say are true - if these things exist and we see and hear correctly, then each of them must be such as it seemed to us at first: they cannot change or become altered, but each must always be just what it is. Now we are saying that we see and hear and understand correctly. But what is hot seems to us to become cold, and what is cold hot, and what is hard soft, and what is soft hard, and living things seem to die and to come into being from what is not alive, and all these things seem to alter, and what was and what

is now do not seem to be similar; rather, iron, which is hard, is rubbed away by contact with the fingers, and so are gold and stones and everything else which seems to be strong; and earth and stones seem to come into being from water. [[So that it results that we neither see nor know the things that exist.]]\*

Now these things do not agree with one another. For we said that there are many things with forms and strength, but they all seem to us to alter and to change from what they were each time they were seen. So it is clear that we do not see correctly, and that those many things do not correctly seem to exist. For they would not change if they were true; rather, each would be as it seemed to be; for nothing is stronger than what is true. And if they change, what exists will have perished and what does not exist will have come into being. In this way, then, if there exist many things, they must be such as the one thing is. [B 8]

Melissus thus clearly explains why they [*i.e. Parmenides and Melissus*] say that perceptible objects do not exist but seem to exist.

(Simplicius, *Commentary on On the Heavens* 558.17–559.13)

\*The sentence enclosed in double brackets is clearly out of place: it should probably be deleted.

## Zeno

*Zeno, like Parmenides, came from Elea. Virtually nothing is known about his life. Plato tells of an encounter between Zeno and Socrates: the story, though a fiction, is worth repeating since what it says about the nature and the scope of Zeno's work may well be true.*

According to Antiphon, Pythodorus said that Zeno and Parmenides once came [to Athens] for the festival of the Great Panathenaea. Parmenides was already a very old man, white-haired but of distinguished appearance – he was about sixty-five. Zeno was then nearly forty, tall and pleasant to look at – he was said to have been Parmenides' lover. They were staying with Pythodorus, outside the city wall in the Ceramicus. Socrates had gone there, and many others with him, eager to hear Zeno's writings – for this was the first time they had brought them to Athens. Socrates was then very young.

Zeno himself read to them while Parmenides happened to be out. There was only very little of the argument still left to be read, Pythodorus said, when he himself came in and with him Parmenides and Aristotle (who became one of the thirty tyrants); so they heard just a little of the writings – although Pythodorus himself had actually heard Zeno before.

When Socrates had heard him out, he asked Zeno to read again the first hypothesis of the first argument. When it had been read he said: 'Zeno, what do you mean? Are you saying that if more things than one exist, then they must be both similar and dissimilar, which is impossible – for dissimilar things cannot be similar or similar things dissimilar? Is that it?'

'Yes,' said Zeno.