

Melissus of Samos and Plato on the Generation of the World*

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The role of Melissus of Samos in the development of pre-Socratic thought has been widely misrepresented in the past. It is well known that Plato passed a better and more reverential judgement on Parmenides than on Melissus himself. Let us quote from the *Theaetetus* (183e): "as regards Melissus and the others, who affirm that the whole is one and immobile, although I feel uneasy with considering this problem in a rough way, yet I feel less uneasy than in front of Parmenides alone. Parmenides seems to me to be, in Homer's words, at once 'venerable and dreadful'." As we can see, Plato's opinion of Melissus is, in any case, not a derogatory one, and is only slightly inferior to the high esteem in which he held Parmenides. I should be tempted to say that this disparity in Plato's views is mainly due to the fact that Parmenides' standpoint is squarely metaphysical, indeed in a sense theological, and is made δεινός by that character of religious revelation it acquires from its being uttered by the Goddess herself; while Melissus is totally devoid of any mystical reference and plays more the part of the logician, we might say of the accountant — a part seemingly destitute of any creative gift and definitely not very appealing. Yet it must be said that logical arrangement has great importance in the shaping of any product of thought so I would like to consider Melissus' systematic account more as an improvement on Parmenides himself than as a deterioration — and more so because, as a matter of fact, it modifies Parmenides' doctrine on some substantial points in a way which subsequent philosophers, including Aristotle, considered representative of the whole Eleatic school.

The main source of Melissus' bad repute has been the harsh and ungenerous judgement — or rather, condemnation — passed on him by Aristotle himself.¹ Everybody knows how great the authority of Aristotle has been through the centuries — even as

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1. See especially *Physics* A 3, 186 a 6-10, and *Metaphysics* A 5, 986 b 25, but also *Sophistici Elenchi* 5, 167 b 13; 6, 168 b 35; 28, 181 a 27.

an historian of antecedent philosophy. Modern criticism² has brought new light on this subject, balancing Aristotle's testimonies with others, especially by Simplicius (who apparently had in his hands and quoted directly the works of Melissus), and an anonymous author, possibly an Aristotelian with some leaning towards Megarism, who wrote a treatise entitled *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia*.

According to Simplicius, the writing of Melissus began with a restatement of the great principle of Parmenides relative to being. I quote from his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*: "Availing himself of the principles worked out by the naturalist, Melissus begins his work thus: 'If nothing is, what could be said about it, as if it were something?'"³ One can easily see the likeness of these words to those famous lines by Parmenides: "You could not in fact know what non-being is — that is impossible, indeed! — neither could you say it in words"⁴ But, if non-being is inexpressible, it is so because its own existence is contradictory, and therefore impossible. That is why Melissus proceeds to say: "What was, has always been, and ever will be. If it had been born, it would have been necessary that, before being born, it were nothing; but if it, before, was nothing, nothing could in no way have been born out of nothing"⁵

The argument is apparently simple: before coming to be, no thing or entity can be thought of as already existing; if it already was in existence, it need not have come to be; if it came to be, this is a proof that it did not exist before; but if it did not exist before existing, how was it able to come into existence, since from nothing, nothing can come? This last sentence gives us the key to understanding the reasoning of Melissus. The logico-metaphysical

2. For instance, from O. APELT, *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia*, Leipzig, 1888; A. PABST, *De Melissi Samii fragmentis*, Bonn, 1889, to A. CHIAPPELLI, *Sui frammenti e sulle dottrine di Melisso di Samo*, in "Atti della R. Accademia dei Lincei", VI, IV, I, 1889, pp. 377-413; A. COVOTTI, in *I Presocratici*, Naples, 1934; J. E. RAVEN, *Pythagoreans and Eleatics*, London, 1948, repr. Amsterdam, 1966; J. ZAFIROPULO, *L'Ecole éléate*, Paris, 1950, and J. H. M. LOENEN, *Parmenides, Melissus, Gorgias. A Reinterpretation of Eleatic Philosophy*, Assen, 1959; editions of the fragments have been given by H. DIELS, successively joined by W. FRANK, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin, 1903, 1960¹⁰; P. ALBERTELLI, *Gli Eleati, Testimonianze e frammenti*, Bari, 1939, now in *I Presocratici, Testimonianze e frammenti*, Bari, 1969, 1975², and especially G. REALE, *Melisso, Testimonianze e frammenti*, Florence, 1970.

3. In *Phys.*, 103,13, ed. Diels (C.A.G., IX) = fr. B O, Reale.

4. Fr. B 2, 13-14 Untersteiner = fr. II, 7-8 Tarán.

5. Fr. B 1 Reale, again from Simplicius' commentary on the *Physics*, 162, 24: ἀεὶ ἦν ὁ τι ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἔσται · εἰ γὰρ ἐγένετο, ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστι πρὶν γενέσθαι εἶναι μηδὲν · εἰ τοίνυν μηδὲν ἦν, οὐδαμὰ ἂν γένοιτο οὐδὲν ἐκ μηδενός.

principle upon which it rests is, οὐδὲν ἐκ μηδενός, nothing is from nothing.⁶

Once he has stated that being cannot derive or issue from non-being, Melissus proceeds to affirm that, equally, it cannot derive from being itself. The reason for this second — and perhaps more confusing — assertion is given by Simplicius. “It cannot be”, he says, “that something derives from non-being (neither what is non-being nor, *a fortiori*, what is being in an absolute sense); but neither can it be that it may derive from being. Indeed, if it came out from being, it would simply be, and could not have a birth”.⁷ Here again, Melissus seems to take from Parmenides this development⁸ that closes the circle and shapes the essential feature of the typical Eleatic theory of being: its fixedness. To give it a final touch, we may say with Simplicius⁹ that the same holds for the reverse of what has been said, that is, for the destruction of being: being cannot vanish into non-being (because non-being does not exist) nor into being (because it would be turned then into itself, without losing its own nature, that is without undergoing any change).

If we want to see what the anonymous author of the treatise *Περὶ Μελίσσου* has to tell us on this same point, here are his words that furnish some additional explanation: “Melissus says that, if something exists, it is eternal, since nothing can come out of nothing. In fact, both that all things have had birth, and that not all have had birth, is impossible; because the things, coming to be, should come from nothing. If they all had had birth, nothing would exist before them; if some things always existed, and others joined them, being would become greater and bigger; but that by which being would become bigger and greater, this would come from nothing.”¹⁰

The testimonies of Simplicius and the Anonymous are confirmed by passages drawn from the commentary on the *Sophistici Elenchi* of the Pseudo Alexander;¹¹ from an anonymous commentary on

6. Once again, Melissus echoes a Parmenidian Principle, this time from the fr. B 8, 5-10 Untersteiner = 8, 5-10 Tarān: “Neither was being once, nor will it be, because it is now, a homogeneous whole, one, continuous: what origin would you ever find for it? How might it have been born, and whence? I will not allow you to say, neither to think, that it came out of non-being; in fact there is no way to say neither to think that it is not. And what necessity, then, should have brought it to have birth, after or before, if it comes from nothing?” (our translation follows Untersteiner’s text in some points).

7. In *Phys.* 103, 15 = fr. B 1, Reale.

8. See PARMENIDES, fr. 8, line 12 Tarān, reading ἐκ τοῦ ἐόντος instead of μὴ ἐόντος: see L. TARÁN, *Parmenides. A text with Translation, Commentary and Critical Essays*, Princeton, 1965, pp. 95-102.

9. In a passage immediately following the one quoted at n. 7.

10. 974 a Bekker, 1-8 = A 5, Reale.

11. 49, 20 ff., ed. Wallies (C.A.G., II, 3).

the same work;¹² and from Philoponus' commentary on the *Physics* of Aristotle;¹³ although the best confirmation comes from a passage in the Aristotelian *Physics*,¹⁴ which is generally understood as referring to Parmenides, while in reality it sets forth the same concepts, and in the same order, as are expressed by Melissus.

Aristotle's own criticism is given in the last phrase of this passage, as generically aimed at "those first philosophers who searched after the truth and the nature of things": "they affirm that there are not the many, but that there is exclusively being as such".¹⁵ Much more detailed is Aristotle's criticism of Melissus' so-called 'paralogism', the error he fell into, according to Aristotle, while deducing the infinity of being. He insists strongly on this particular point. At least three passages in the *Sophistici Elenchi* and one in the *Physics* stress the same point, in nearly the same words. Here is the most complete one from the *Sophistici Elenchi*: "So for instance", says Aristotle, "the argument of Melissus that the whole is infinite is a paralogism of the same kind; the argument starts from the premiss that the whole is unborn (because from non-being nothing can come), and that what is generated derives from a principle; therefore, if it is not generated, the whole has no principle, and consequently is infinite. Such a consequence has no character of necessity; in fact, for all that is generated to have a principle is not the same as to say that if something has a principle it has been generated."¹⁶

If we want to translate Aristotle's thought into a more accessible wording, we can say that, while it is correct to deduce the consequence from its condition, it is not correct *vice versa*, to deduce the condition from the consequence. For example: all those who have a temperature are hot; but we cannot say the contrary, that all those who are hot have got a temperature, because they might be hot for any other reason; for instance, because they went jogging.

This and the other slightly different, but parallel, Aristotelian demonstrations of Melissus' 'error' in reality do not hit their target. It frequently happens that while we criticize errors made by others, we ourselves fall into some blunder, perhaps worse. It will be easily noticed that, in formulating Melissus' argument, Aristotle shifts from speaking of 'the whole' (τὸ ἅπαν) in the beginning of his argument, to 'all that is generated' (τὸ γενόμενον ἅπαν) at the end

12. 15, 26, ed. Hayduck (C.A.G., XXIII, 4).

13. 51, 20 ff., ed. Vitelli (C.A.G., XVI).

14. A 8, 191 a 24 ff. = A 8 a, Reale, and the relative discussion at p. 42 there.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Sophistici Elenchi*, 5, 167 b 13 = A 10, Reale.

of it. There will not be any need of an elaborate logical demonstration in order to see the point in question.¹⁷ The basis of Melissus' argument, both with regard to the eternity of being — which we have just considered — and its infinity, unity, unchangeableness and identity with itself, is to be found exclusively in the concept of τὸ πᾶν (or ἅπαν). Let us only quote the end of the second great fragment, on the infinity of being: "It is impossible for what is not the whole to be for ever".¹⁸ In Melissus' own terms, the totality of beings is clearly incompatible with either 'all that is generated' or, 'has a principle', or whatever else one might add to the pure πᾶν — which are formulas relative to *particular* kinds of beings, not to *the whole* of them.

Of course to state that Melissus refers to the whole, is only the beginning of the road. The question immediately arises as to what this whole is. Some scholars have considered it a spiritual conception — something very extraneous to any kind of materiality, others have taken the opposite view as more probable, while some have deemed it easier to deny altogether the authenticity of the testimony of Melissus. The whole discussion may find its historical support, aside from Melissus' own text, in a passage drawn from Simplicius' commentary on the *Physics*. Says Simplicius: "Indeed he (Melissus) conceives his being as incorporeal (ἄσώματον εἶναι βούλεται τὸ ὄν), and shows that by saying: 'if it is, it must be one; and, being one, it must not have a body' (ἐν δ' ὄν δεῖ αὐτὸ σῶμα μὴ ἔχειν)".¹⁹

17. For a more detailed analysis see Reale, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-77 and 86-91, who takes up a critical line already pursued by, among others, Apelt and Chiappelli.

18. SIMPLICIUS, *In Phys.*, 29, 22. 109, 20 = fr. B 2, Reale: οὐ γὰρ ἂν εἶναι ἀνυστόν, ὃ τι μὴ πᾶν ἔστι We follow here the interpretation given by G. Reale, who insists that "πᾶν means here the *totality*, the *fullness* of being, the *whole* in a strict sense", and adds: "clearly inadequate, then, are those translations that either understand πᾶν as if meaning πάντως or else do not give to πᾶν that fullness of meaning that it . . . must have") *op. cit.*, pp. 373-4, and cp. the whole chap. III of the *Introduction*). In fact, the only other sense in which the term could be understood, apart from "the whole in a strict sense", is the indeterminate and generic one: "a totality", or: "total, full *in* and *by* itself", so that the above sentence might be read as saying: "It is impossible for what is not *a* whole (or: is not fully and entirely) to be for ever", and hence as referring the quality of wholeness more to a particular condition of being than to the totality of beings. But here again one can legitimately ask what may be the subject of this alleged *specific* whole, and — even earlier — whether it is likely that there may be *several* wholes rather than only one. It seems justified to answer that a plurality of wholes is self-contradictory, if they all are to be considered as eternal (according to the precise statement of Melissus, which requires that what is eternal be also without a beginning and an end, *but infinite because non-generated*, cp. fr. B 2, p. 372, Reale).

19. *In Phys.*, 109, 34 = fr. B 9 [8], Reale.

Any chance of grasping the general meaning of what Simplicius intends to say clearly depends on a preliminary understanding of what not only he, but Melissus himself, whose words he is relating, meant by the words *σῶμα* and *ἄσώματον*. In an essay devoted to the history of the term *σῶμα* Heinrich Gomperz²⁰ had already drawn some important conclusions; following in his tracks, and in those of Mario Untersteiner,²¹ Giovanni Reale has lately stated²² the following points: in pre-Socratic literature *σῶμα* meant, at first, 'living body in general', then it was referred also to inanimate objects which have in common with bodies two properties: that, on the one hand, they can be touched and seen and on the other hand, that they are enclosed within fixed boundaries, more or less, rigid. Analogously, *ἄσώματον* came to mean: what could not be seen or touched, what is devoid of density and thickness, in a word, what has no fixed material shape or limits. It is here that *ἄσώματον* joins hands with the concept of infinity and what is boundless is said to be "devoid of body".

It is therefore improper — concluded Giovanni Reale — to speak either of spiritualism or materialism in the case of Melissus. On the contrary, we have to renounce that antithesis, and realize that here we cannot use categories of thought that are valid only from Plato onward. I cannot but agree with him on these general items. Nevertheless, I would like to dwell here on a closer analysis of the very peculiar nature of the conception of being Melissus shares with Parmenides.²³

We have just seen that Melissus held the terms 'totality' and 'the whole' (*πᾶν*, *ἅπαν*) to be synonymous with 'being' (*ὄν*, *ἔόν*).²⁴ This identification enables us to suggest that, for instance, the axiom: "being is and always has been and ever shall be, neither has it got a principle nor an end, but is infinite"²⁵ is tantamount to this one: "the whole is and always has been and ever shall be, neither

20. In "Hermes", LXVII, 1932, pp. 155-167.

21. See *Un aspetto dell'essere melissiano*, in "Rivista critica di storia della filosofia", VIII, 1953, pp. 597-606.

22. In the Introduction to his edition of *Melisso, Testimonianze e frammenti*, quoted above, chap. VII, pp. 193-225.

23. Beyond their divergencies about both the *finiteness* of being, which was held by Parmenides, denied by Melissus, as stated for instance by ARISTOTLE, *Metaph.* A 5, 986 b 18, and *Phys.* A 2, 185 a 32, and about *generation*, absolutely dismissed by Melissus, accepted by Parmenides only with reference to opinion: cp. SIMPLICIUS, *In De coelo*, 556, 12, ed. Heiberg (C.A.G., VII).

24. The theme of totality is present and central in Parmenides too, for instance, in his definition of the eternity of being, already quoted above at n. 6.

25. Fr. B 2, Reale, from SIMPLICIUS, in *Phys.*, 29, 22, 109.20.

has it got a beginning nor an end, but is infinite". That is indeed the positive reading of what the final clause of the second fragment says in the negative: "It is not possible for what is not the whole to be for ever", whence it follows that what is all (or: the whole) must ever be.

It is otherwise obvious that, according to Melissus, the whole should not be considered as much in relation to its constitutive elements as to its specific form. If we ask for the reason behind such an attempt to consider being (or 'the existent', as we may also translate the term *ὄν*) from the point of view of totality, we must answer: because this standpoint seems to allow us to bring back the manifold appearances which constitute the world of experience to a point of synthetic convergence, of unitary comprehension and, as such, true, (because only what is unitary is also true).

Everybody knows that the search for this goal is the *proprium* of the whole of Greek philosophy. Its fulfilment is given by the discovery of an aggregating key for the interpretation of sense data. The Naturalists saw this key in a material structure that seemed to provide for a total explanation of every other; the Pythagoreans in number, a point of view still quantitative, but no longer material, in which quantity is not considered in the concrete succession of parts, but in its abstract idea, the idea of quantity as such. The Eleatics, finally widened the horizon of thought, even more, scrutinizing the nature of being as totality — a totality which the mind's sight tries to embrace simultaneously in its full extension.

Such a profile is eminently formal, as I have already remarked — more than that, it is the most formal possible. The totality it defines is the totality of reason, not that of experience. The Eleatics are very outspoken in this regard; and it is in other ways also only too evident that of totality (as of being in itself) there can be no experience. The mind comes to it by means of a logico-deductive "leap". This state of things brings about some substantial distortions. The first lies in making believe one has already got to the plane of the absolute truth when, on the contrary, only a truth that is abstract and indeterminate, and consequently ambiguous, has been defined. It need not perhaps be added that such a truth is certainly valid if viewed in its conceptual coherence and not in its content. But someone could object to it: the whole really cannot be specified in any way because its content is everything and all things. That is true enough of the whole-in-itself; not of the whole as conceived by man, which is the idea of it that this or that thinker gives shape to in his mind.

To say with Melissus that total being is eternal, infinite, one, identical with itself (and so on in the deduction of its other

attributes), is true if referred to being as such, or in-itself; it is not so if we mean — implicitly or explicitly — that the being in question is the sum total of those entities that constitute our own world. Let us try to read the formula of Melissus in this light: “Total being [such as we know it — and therefore the being of our world] is eternal, infinite, one”, and so on. Viewed in this light the logical error that has already been remarked — the identification of our world with totality as such — will easily be seen; on the other hand there is its evident discordance with all experience. Between reason and experience a radical rift is brought about and an extreme tension, a tension that certainly has something baffling in itself, because human knowledge cannot but begin in experience, and follow its own course in close accordance, not in disagreement, with experience. The progress of knowledge cannot renounce its origins, in which its own justification is to be found. Anybody dismissing the validity of the testimony of experience invalidates, by the same stroke, the most abstract deductions of reason — the last steps of a continuous stairway resting on the foundation of experience, which when removed, causes all the rest to collapse.

At this point it should be noted that the Eleatics are not responsible for such an erroneous philosophical approach. They do not say, in any way, that being as such is identical (if its substance is in question) with the world-for-us. On the contrary, they state on many occasions, with Parmenides, that the world of appearance, namely of coming to be and perishing, is wholly different from the world of true being which is without a beginning and eternal²⁶ and, with Melissus, that the world of appearance does not exist because, if it existed, and consequently “were the many, these should be such, as is the one”.²⁷

Such a neat contraposition between appearance and reality, however, makes us suspect that the Eleatic being is not authentically absolute — i.e. free from any reference or tie to our world, but rather that it is, in reality, beyond the terms actually used, the being that constitutes our present world. What reason do we offer for such a suspicion? Substantially, that being as such, if it is the true and authentic totality, must also hold in itself, in some way, the world of appearances. If the reality of becoming and change is radically negated, as in the case of Melissus, or debased to mere opinion, as in the case of Parmenides, the totality of being loses an element that can perhaps be considered secondary but is *at any rate* essential if totality is to be really conceived as such. A halved or diminished totality cannot be truly ultimate, final and absolute.

26. Cp. PARMENIDES, fr. VIII Taran, pp. 85-6.

27. Fr. 8, Reale, last sentence, echoing the very beginning of the fragment.

Through an apparently paradoxical reversal, the Eleatic dismissal of the world of appearance is, to my mind, the best proof that their conception of being is nothing other — from the point of view of its content — than the raising to an absolute power of this world, whose *species* had first been refused as erroneous.

The possibility and plausibility of Eleatic thought being interpreted in such a way is also shown by Melissus' opinion about movement. After a whole series of negative attributions ("being cannot lose something, or become greater, neither can it change its shape and it does not suffer pain or sorrow"),²⁸ Melissus goes on to give some others, this time positive, and as such, extremely interesting. Vacuum, for instance, does not exist, because it is nothing; being cannot move because insofar as it could move, it could do so only in vacuum; it follows that being is full.²⁹ Moreover, being cannot be thick or thin, because what is thin cannot be full in the same way as what is thick, but what is thin is without doubt emptier than what is thick.³⁰ In conclusion: it is necessary that being should, "be full, if vacuum is not. And if then it is full, it does not move".³¹

Now, we might suppose here that Melissus speaks of what is full and empty in a metaphoric or, in the last resort, an analogic sense, and that his reasoning is to be understood in this sense: "As on the physical plane bodies are distinguished by intermediate vacuums, so multiplicity is formed by 'vacuums' or gaps in the ontological continuity of being", and again: "As, on the physical plane, what is full is unitary and not manifold (because of what has just been said), so on the ontological one the being that is identical with itself may be said to be full". If so, the usage of a physical terminology would simply be instrumental to the expression of the logical and rational characteristics of being. In point of fact, however, the examination of the context and internal signification of the texts does not permit such a refined reading. Melissus speaks and intends to speak of corporeality, even if in its most universal aspect. The statement that being, "as it ever is, so too must ever be infinite in largeness"³² points to the same conclusion.

We conclude thus, confirming our initial supposition. In the Eleatics — and particularly in Melissus, who developed his theses

28. Fr. 7 1-6, Reale.

29. *Ibid.*, 7.

30. *Ibid.*, 8.

31. *Ibid.*, 10.

32. Fr. 3, Reale, pp. 375-6: τὸ μέγεθος which, underlines Simplicius, is not the same thing as the material extension but, on the contrary, as being is indivisible, is no other thing than "the raising [to a superior level] of substance" — τὸ δίαρμα αὐτὸ . . . τῆς ὑποστάσεως.

more systematically and 'technically' than Parmenides — the distinction between two modes of understanding reality is clear. On the one hand is the logico-formal reading³³ according to which being is defined in its absolute purity and its internal attributes are deduced; on the other hand there is a question of content and substance and here being assumes an ambiguous nature, marked by the attribution of an absolute valency to cosmic reality. To quote Aristotle, it is true that "Melissus, Parmenides and their followers", showing that there are "non-generated and absolutely immobile beings", worked out a line of research different and earlier than the physical one, namely, a metaphysical line. "Nevertheless, since they did not acknowledge the existence of any other being besides sensible substances, and since, on the other hand, they first held that no knowledge or intelligence could do without those unchangeable entities, it followed that they transferred the considerations relative to those entities to sensible things."³⁴

What happens, then, in the typically Eleatic way of thinking? Reason, scrutinizing nature and qualities of total being, links them spontaneously to the only kind of being it is acquainted with through direct experience, namely contingent being — which comes to be seen at once as contingent (from the standpoint of experience) and absolute (from the standpoint of reason). All this is contradictory, of course, and this seems indeed to be the inner *crux* of the Eleatic standpoint and one which is only overcome when the characteristics of totality and absoluteness are conferred to what really in itself is such — to total totality, so to speak, and absolute absoluteness. To this end the relative must be distinguished from the absolute, but not separated from it — on the contrary, it must be inserted into and comprehended in its fullness.

As for its historical development, the progressive unfolding of this royal road passed through many successive stages from Plato and Aristotle to the Middle and Neo-Platonists. These last, in particular, acknowledged the fact that the absolute is beyond the antitheses that hold good for this world of ours. Indeed, the absolute cannot be put in contradiction with what is relative and contingent but is substantiated by a logic of its own that transcends the logic of opposition and disowns as much, "the resemblance as the dissimilarity, the diversity as the identity".³⁵

Such is the final pattern of the long-range dialectic that

33. In this connection ARISTOTLE speaks of "those who go beyond sensation and despise it, convinced that only reasoning must be followed, *De gen. et corr.*, A 8, 325 a 2.

34. ARISTOTLE, *De coelo*, I 1, 298 b 14.

35. PORPHYRY, *In Parmenidem*, III, 33-34, ed. Hadot, in *Porphyre et Victorinus*, vol. II, Paris, 1968, p. 74.

distinguished the development of Greek philosophy to the conclusion of its course. The Eleatic standpoint represents, in this light, the moment of the first beginning. It must be said that the Eleatics had the great merit of perceiving, in all its strength, the inner necessity that impels thought to pass from sensible things reached through an unsure and contradictory experience, to the rock-like certitude of the auto-affirmation of pure being. Its deduction is exact — like that of its most universal attributes — and forms the very basis of philosophical thinking. Although the Eleatics did not realize, and therefore were not able to solve, the basic riddle in their thought pertaining to the metaphysical concept of being as such, this negative side does not lessen in any way the perennial validity of their intuition of logico-rational necessity inherent in pure being.

Unlike any other quality of reality, being seems fit to lead us towards the first origin of all things, which is also their necessary end. Being is what is left when we strip the world in which we live of its surface attributes, so to go deeper and deeper into its hidden mystery. That is why, appearing to our inner eye as the last shore we find in our journey to the roots of reality, being opens our sight to the perspective of what is beyond reality itself: its meaning, its self-sufficient cause, its metaphysical principle. The deepest layer of our present world, being, is also the bridge that enables us to transcend its most remote horizon. In other words, being is here and there, in our dimension and in another, by our side and most removed from us.

When man first became aware of this nature of being, his mind was dazzled by its new object, so brightly and strongly it shone, so clear was its light. It seemed to allow for no doubt whatever, since its evidence was absolute. Human mind is limited by nature, so it is quite natural for us to gaze on what strikes our attention as new and true without noticing, at first, the conditions and restrictions that accompany its truth. This neophyte enthusiasm is what makes remarkable and admirable Parmenides' poem — not to mention Melissus and Zeno and their logical theorems — but at the same time it makes their thought fragile and vulnerable. Their enthusiasm is justified, if ever in the history of human thought, but it exceeds its mark and lends itself to some weighty charges.

In his *Seven Lectures on Being*,³⁶ Jacques Maritain describes the metaphysical ascent to truth (or, to put it in other words, the ascent to metaphysical truth) as a kind of "natural revelation" not allowed to everyone, but only to those who have metaphysical insight —

36. 3rd lecture, 3, p. 52 of the Mentor Omega Books ed., New York, 1962.

it is indeed by experiencing such a transcending vision that the true metaphysician is formed. While I quite agree with Maritain on this last point, I am not so sure that he is right in reserving the capacity for metaphysical insight only to a happy few. As a matter of fact surely only few men reach that highest peak; but in principle I maintain that anyone of us can attain to it, provided we put ourselves in the right attitude towards it and do what is required to follow the road to its end. In other words I think that experiencing this particular evidence of truth is within the reach of anyone applying himself to it and doing what is necessary to get to it.

The first condition is that we should maintain a continuous sobriety of mind — that we don't suddenly let ourselves go blind by fixing on such a blazing light too intensely — but that we keep always in mind the way through which we have reached it. We can start from no other experience than from the experience of contingent, finite and limited being and, if it is true that we can rise to cast a fleeting glance into the realm of being as such, the infinite, perfect and self-sufficient being, it is still true that we must immediately come back to this world of ours, to our limit and imperfection.

Returning now to Melissus, we have explored two possible ways of explaining his idea of being — either as a consequence of an alleged pre-Socratic incapacity for conceiving the distinction between what is sensible and what is intelligible or, as the result of an intellectual short-circuit, so to speak, through which the mind extends the absolute character of being it has just discovered to every kind of being forgetting itself. Whatever may be the reason of Melissus' error, the result in both cases is not so different: we are faced with a world in which — as Aristotle rightly remarked — the many no longer have any place, becoming is ruled out and the sight of the mind gazes upon the infinite, eternal, unitary, unchangeable nature of being, moving around a closed circle of self-implying statements. In such a world (as will be evident to everyone) there is no longer place for distinctions such as those between sensible and intelligible, material and spiritual, primary and secondary, because there is no prerequisite distinction between the data furnished by experience and their ultimate explication in a self-supporting and self-explaining Cause. We can therefore say that, in Melissus' own view, the world has not had a generation, because nothing is generated and everything exists everlastingly. Such a standpoint is truly an extreme one, a point of no return. Human thought could remain in it only at the price of never

moving from it — and it is an unbearable price, because it means death for the mind.

Thus the conception brought forward by Parmenides and Melissus, (not to speak of Zeno), represented for Greek and Western thought a formidable challenge — it showed both the existence of insurmountable barriers if one were to proceed along certain lines of thought and the absolute necessity of going beyond them if thought had still a chance of survival.

Everybody knows how Greek thinkers reacted from the Pluralists and the Physicists, to the Sophists, to Socrates and Plato; nor is it my intention here to dwell upon Plato's own theory of being as it is expressed with reference to the genera of being in the *Sophistes*, for instance, or to the One in *Parmenides*. I will rather consider the developments the problem had in Plato from the cosmological point of view. The cosmological aspect is usually considered a side-effect of the natural sciences, or else as a border problem between these and philosophy. On the contrary, I think it has a particular importance of its own because it supplied the metaphysical debate on being, at times extremely sophisticated and therefore not always conclusive, with the effective external support of a clear distinction between what is in itself non-generated, and what has been generated. This distinction, starting as it did on the cosmological plane, relative to the world and its maker, shifted later to an ampler meaning, namely, to imply the distinction between non-generated and generated being.

Let us then direct our attention to the first part of the discourse of *Timaeus*, or rather the monologue of *Timaeus*, that contains the principles of those choral developments which run through the whole dialogue. In these principles lies an authentic answer to the question raised by Parmenides and Melissus — an answer that takes into due account the data provided for by experience, and by distinguishing between what is corporeal and what is spiritual, assigns to what is corporeal the quality of being generated.

This is in fact the real meaning of the distinction first set out by *Timaeus*, between "what is always real and has no becoming, and what is always becoming and is never real".³⁷ True reality possesses an existence not subject to change; what is ever changing is, in a sense, not real — in the same sense in which what is real is not subject to change — but in another sense it is real because it exists in its own way, the way of this world. If we try to get to the very heart of what Plato wants to say, we can see that "what is not subject to change" is so because it possesses an everlasting existence, an existence which *is* without having come

37. *Timaeus*, 27 d.

to be in a past, or being liable to disappear in the future. Such an existence, or ἔόν, is exactly what Parmenides and Melissus meant, when they spoke of their absolute, One being, from a logical point of view. But, while they acknowledged that single being, and discarded even the possibility of thinking or speaking — in terms of truth — of other realms of being, Plato maintains the possibility of another kind of being, a secondary, dependent, imitative and reflected being — a being generated by that supreme Being-as-such. The balance is thus redressed, the world receives a metaphysical status, though totally dependent on the “Father of all things”,³⁸ and human thought resumes its march.

Timaeus goes on to say: “That which is apprehensible by thought with a rational account is the thing that is always unchangeably real; whereas that which is the object of belief together with unreasoning sensation is the thing that becomes and passes away, but never has real being”.³⁹ Once again, the terms used by Plato are those already present in Parmenides and Melissus; what is everlasting is perceived by reason only, the world of becoming by opinion. Plato takes up these terms, (not without assuming some of their negative side-effects), but changes altogether their signification. From now on absolute being will no longer be seen in its sublime loneliness only — which is true, but is not the whole truth; for absolute being is also the Cause of relative being. “All that becomes, says Plato, “must needs become by the agency of some cause; for without a cause nothing can come to be”.⁴⁰

We face here a linguistic ambiguity that has sometimes led to confusions in thought. ‘Γίγνεσθαι’ and ‘to become’ mean both ‘to be in the process of becoming’ and ‘to come to be’. One acceptation is continuous, the other absolute and extraneous to time. Some interpreters of Plato, for example F. M. Cornford, do not consider the second sense at all, sticking to the first as if it were the only possible one. “The ambiguity of the word ‘becoming’ (γένεσις, γίγνεσθαι)”, he says, “gave rise to a controversy on the question whether Plato really meant, as he appears to mean, that the world had a beginning in time”.⁴¹ But as a matter of fact Plato meant something different from the question whether the world had, or had not, a beginning *in time*. Much more radically, he is asking himself whether the world has a beginning *simpliciter*. Let us quote again from the *Timaeus*:

38. *Ibid.*,

39. *Ibid.*, 28 a.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Plato's Cosmology*, London, 1937, p. 24.

"So, concerning the whole heaven or world, we should ask the question which, it is agreed, must be asked at the outset of any inquiry: has it always been, without any source of becoming; or has it come to be, starting from some beginning? Of course it has come to be (*γέγονε*); for it can be seen and touched and it has body, and all such things are sensible; and, as we have seen, sensible things are things that become and can be generated".⁴²

On this point, I cannot but agree with A. E. Taylor who, in his old but always fascinating *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, says: "Therefore, since the world is a *γινόμενον*, it had a cause, it is the work of a maker or agent. This is the really important point. What Plato wishes to insist on is that the 'world' is not self-subsisting; it is something dependent and derivative, as contrasted with its uncaused and self-subsisting author, God. It is not necessary to the argument that the world should have had a beginning 'in time', in the sense that there was a time when the world was not there".⁴³

We can now identify the first Cause, the maker of the universe, with God himself. Let us bring to an end the quotation from Timaeus' speech: "But again, that which becomes, we say, must necessarily become by the agency of some cause. It is a hard task to find the maker of the universe, and having found him it would be impossible to declare him to all mankind".⁴⁴ But this final warning gives us the assurance that Plato thinks he has really discovered the maker of the universe. Of course this positive, though cautious, conclusion is to be read in the light of the polemic brought, in the tenth book of the *Laws*, against atheism and the denial of the moral government of the world by God. The joint trend of thought followed in these texts may be said to form the first attempt ever made at laying down natural theology as a rational science. I agree here with F. M. Cornford when he says that, while "earlier cosmogonies had been of the evolutionary type, suggesting a birth and growth of the world due to some spontaneous force of life in nature, or, as in Atomism, to the blind collision of lifeless atoms, such a story was, to Plato, very far from being like the truth. So he introduced, for the first time in Greek philosophy, the alternative scheme of creation by a divine artificer, according to which the world is like a work of art designed with a purpose".⁴⁵

The terms in contrast are at last clearly focused. On one side, the Eleatic thesis raises being to an absolute potency, but at the

42. *Timaeus*, 28 b-c.

43. London, 1928, pp. 66-7.

44. *Timaeus*, 28 c.

45. *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

same time reflects its attributions upon the present world conceived as a totality; on the other, Plato starts an opposite line of thought, which sets a definite distinction between the dimension of contingency and the first Cause of everything. As I have tried to illustrate, Plato intends to answer the challenge brought by the Eleatic tradition — that had already been fought and criticized from various quarters (especially by the Sophists) — but had not yet been overcome in its central problematic knot. According to Parmenides and Melissus, being, the whole of being, is not generated, and the axiom μηδὲν ἐκ μηδενός conveys the eternal immobility of a world allegedly exempt from becoming. But the condition that makes it possible for such a world to be conceived at all is that it should be separated from the present visible one. That condition is what is missing in the Eleatics but it is, on the contrary, present in Plato, along with the subsequent recognition of the causal agency of being as such towards becoming itself.

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