G&R Assignments

Melissus and Zeno.

*According to the introduction (p.18), the writings of Melissus offer some innovations:*

1. *“By arguing that the one thing cannot be rearranged, for example, he may have been criticising his Pluralist contemporaries.” Who are these Pluralist contemporaries? Where and how does Melissus argue against the possibility of rearrangement? Why might we interpret the argument against rearrangement as an argument against the Pluralists?*

The “Pluralist contemporaries” are thinkers who, in response to the teachings of Parmenides (Melissus’s preceptor), affirmed the multiplicity of substance. Melissus, as part of the Eleatic school, found the starting point for his metaphysical explanation of reality in Parmenidean monism, a theory according to which only one substance exists -- the ‘is’, Being or One, which, like his teacher, Melissus believed to be homogenous and *unchanging* (although the conclusions Melissus would draw from these premises are sometimes clashing with Parmenides’s). Rearrangement is necessarily impossible, as, if there is to be only “is”, there could never be “is not”, and because of the very nature of events such as change, division, alteration or, in one word, *rearrangement* of substance, one would either have to admit multiplicity (which is absurd) or the existence of Nothing, of “is not”, as a transitory state between one “being” and another. Fragments of Melissus are preserved in Simplicius and Aristotle, and his doctrine on being, in particular, is related to us by Aristotle in his metaphysics. Melissus’s conception of being is in clear contraposition to that of the pluralists, whose reality is centred on the possibility of substance to be divided, changed and rearranged.

1. *“Most importantly, however, Melissus contradicts Parmenides in two ways. Parmenides’ One was a spatially limited sphere existing in an eternal present. Melissus makes his One both spatially and temporally infinite.” Where and how does Melissus argue that the One is both spatially and temporally infinite?*

Through fragments preserved by Simplicius in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, we understand that Melissus did not simply produce an explanation of Parmenides’s philosophy, but rather expanded on it, often contradicting his own teacher. Such is the case, for example, for his views on the nature of the One, which he holds to be unbound and infinite both spatially and temporally. It is, Melissus believes, imperative that the One be considered as such, for if, *ab absurdum*, it were to be created, in the moment prior to its coming into existence, there must have either been another substance or nothing in existence. Since both options are absurd (for there can be only one substance, one “is”, and the existence of “nothing” is, by the very definition of existence, impossible, and even if we were to admit the possibility of its existence, we would have to concede that nothing could ever be created *from* it), it logically follows that the One must be timeless. Similarly, if the One were to be limited in spatial extension, it would also have to be immersed either in another substance or in empty space, or at least its extension would need to be limited by one of the two. But since neither of these cases can be true, it follows that the One must not possess any spatial boundaries either.

1. *Analyse the Achilles-argument against movement and discuss the question whether or not it is a valid argument.*

The Achilles argument is one of four arguments found in Aristotle’s *Physics,* presented by Zeno on the matter of motion. The argument states that ‘the slowest as it runs will never be caught by the quickest’. If, for example, we were to imagine a race between a tortoise, the slowest of land animals, and Achilles, presumably the fastest of men, and if the tortoise, through a cunning inspiration of compassion in the souls of the judges of this race, gained as a much as a hair of advantage, we would be shocked to learn that the tortoise would retain this advantage until the very end of the race. For every time Achilles reached the tortoise’s starting point, the tortoise would have moved some distance ahead, and so on *ad infinitum*. This argument, Aristotle remarks, is extremely similar (if not identical) to another of the arguments – that of the Dichotomy, which negates the possibility of movement on the grounds of its infinitely divisible nature. Both arguments attempt to prove the impossibility of movement through a sort of recursive, infinite-regress rationalist path, and the results are shocking because they do not corroborate our senses – as I assume most of us believe in the possibility of movement. If I were to attempt to judge the validity of this class of arguments, I would be forced to rule against them, insofar as they are essentially based on a great number of implicit premises (i.e. the teachings of Parmenides) that cannot blindly be accepted as true.

1. *Reconstruct Zeno’s [arrow] argument. What is wrong with it, according to Aristotle? Should we accept Aristotle’s criticism? Why (not)*

Zeno’s arrow argument, another one of the four afore mentioned arguments against the possibility of movement, and it stems from Zeno’s conception of time as a linear collection of photograms, of ‘*nows’*, in packets of discrete quantity. The thesis is that, if one were to observe each of these temporal quanta, the impossibility of motion would become readily self-evident. Since time can be subdivided into an infinite collection of single instants, and in each of these instants, the arrow is not moving (or “*it occupies a space equal to itself*”), it necessarily follows that our perception of movement is only illusory, as it is immediately disproven by the structure of time itself. Aristotle, in the *Physics*, defines time as “*a measure of change between before and after*”, and says, about Zeno’s argument, that *“[it] follows from assuming that time is composed of ‘nows.’ If this is not conceded, the deduction will not go through*”. We should accept this criticism as proof of the logical invalidity of Zeno’s argument which, just like the previously analysed ones, is missing a great number of crucial premises (some of which, Aristotle seems to point out, are highly contemptuous), and cannot alone be taken as sufficient proof of the impossibility of motion.