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Corporeality and Thickness: Back on Melissus' Fragment B9

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Abstract: Melissus' fragment B9, where he claims that being has no body and no thickness, raises the question of how being can be extended and full and at the same time incorporeal. Most recent interpretations tried to avoid lending to “body” the meaning of “physical body”. My aim in this paper is to reconstruct Melissus' notion of body, by examining its connection to “thickness”. I show that Melissus meant by “thick” something that has distinct parts and

therefore supports in B9 the indivisibility of being. I then indicate that he relied on the contrast between soul and body for his conception of corporeality, by highlighting that by Presocratic thinkers, the soul was considered as “thin” and regarded as something that could be exempt of the division into parts. I conclude that even though Melissus’ notion of incorporeality is very different from the one Plato will develop, he made a huge step toward its conceptualization.

Keywords: Melissus, incorporeality, division, body, soul.

The nature of Eleatic being, and in particular its connection to the physical world, has been much discussed since Antiquity. The title *On Nature* (περὶ φύσεως) was attributed to both works of Parmenides and Melissus,¹ but its authenticity is generally contested.² Aristotle claims that Parmenides “grasps unity according to definition” (κατὰ τὸν λόγον) and Melissus “according to matter” (κατὰ τὴν ὕλην) (*Metaphysics* A.5 986b18–21), which would imply that Melissus’ being is material. However, this interpretation is only based on their claims concerning being’s spatial extension: since Parmenides’ being is limited, it should, according to Aristotle, be assimilated to form, while infinity has to do with matter. This reading obviously rests on his own conception of the connection between spatiality and matter and form.³

On the opposite, Neoplatonists, and in particular Simplicius, regard Melissus’ being as intelligible. This reading could be disregarded as untrustworthy, since Neoplatonists systematically interpret Presocratic thinkers as announcing Plato’s theory of ideas. But Simplicius can rely for this interpretation on fragment B9. I provide here the edition by Diels-Kranz:

¹ See Simp. *In Cael.* 556.25–26.

² See the seminal study of Schmalzriedt (1970), especially p. 71–72 on Melissus’ treatise.

³ Cf. Brémond, 2017, 29–30.

Εἰ μὲν οὖν εἶη,⁴ δεῖ αὐτὸ ἕν εἶναι· ἕν δ' ἐὸν δεῖ αὐτὸ
σῶμα μὴ ἔχειν. εἰ δὲ ἔχοι πάχος, ἔχοι ἄν μέρη, καὶ
οὐκέτι ἕν εἶη.

Then if it is, it must be one. And being one, it must not
have a body. If it had thickness, it would have parts
and no longer be one.

This fragment is surprising. For first, it is the only explicit instance in Presocratic texts of the idea of incorporeality, whose invention is usually attributed to Plato. Second, Melissus' depiction of being is otherwise characteristically more physical than Parmenides'.⁵ Finally, and more importantly, the incorporeality of being is at odds with two other theses: that being is spatially extended (B3) and that it is full (B7). How can something that is both extended and full be at the same time bodiless?

Interpreters have proposed various solutions to this issue, which I will review in more details in the next section, but none is completely satisfying, as I will show. One key to understanding Melissus' claim in fragment B9 is to grasp what he refers to with the concept he connects with corporeality, i.e. thickness (section 2). I will argue that Melissus' attack against corporeality is actually an attack against the divisibility of being into parts (section 3),⁶ and that the opposition between body and soul helps him conceive of something that is so thin, as opposed to thick, that it has no parts at all (section 4).

⁴ Some manuscripts have εἰ μὲν ὄν εἶη. I follow here Diels-Kranz (1952a), while Diels (1882) and Laks-Most (2016) opt for the second version. This has little impact on the meaning.

⁵ Cf. Rapp, 2013, p. 580. In particular, Melissus' being is instantiated in time: while Parmenides claims that being is in an eternal present and neither was nor will be (B8.5), according to Melissus, it was, is and will be (B2).

⁶ Owen (1960, p. 100–101) briefly developed a similar reading.

1. The Debate

Various strategies have been developed to solve the apparent conflict between the incorporeality and the spatiality and fullness of Melissus' being:⁷

1. A first solution is to accept that being is incorporeal but deny that it is extended. This supposes to reinterpret fragment B3: “but just as it always is, it must always be *unlimited in magnitude* (τὸ μέγεθος ἄπειρον)”. Vlastos (1953, p. 34–35) supports this option by arguing that since in fragment B2, Melissus deduces that being is ἄπειρον from the fact that it has no beginning nor end in time, ἄπειρον must mean “unlimited in time”. It is difficult, however, to understand how μέγεθος in fragment B3 could refer to temporal extension. Confronted with the same difficulty, Simplicius proposes to read it as meaning “elevation of reality” (δίαιμμα τῆς ὑποστάσεως)⁸ and Loenen (1959, p. 149, n. 41) as referring to some abstract greatness. However, Melissus argues in fragments B4–5 that if being is unlimited, it must be one because two things would limit each other: this argument can hardly make sense if the infinity in question concerns time or some metaphorical greatness. For there is nothing contradictory about two things being unlimited in time or perfect.

2. Another option consists in doubting the authenticity of all or part of fragment B9. Among others, Albertelli (1939, p. 242) presents several arguments to reject the whole fragment, in particular that Simplicius is not trustworthy and that the rejection of corporeality is not mentioned in his own paraphrase of Melissus' work nor in the other summary we find in the Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias* (MXG 1 974a2–b8). He concludes that forging such a fragment was a way for Simplicius to defend Melissus against Aristotle's attacks. But neither the author of the *MXG* nor Simplicius pretends to summarize the whole of

⁷ See a similar presentation of the interpretative options in Palmer (2003, p. 1–6), Rapp (2013, p. 588–90) and Harriman (2019, p. 117–18).

⁸ *In Phys.* 109.34. This conception is obviously tainted of Neoplatonism: cf. Brémond, 2017, p. 118–19.

Melissus' reasoning. Indeed, neither of them evokes the indivisibility of being (B10), nor does Simplicius mention the content of fragment B8. Simplicius is also usually quite reliable concerning the quotations of Presocratics, and most critics assume that he possessed either the whole or part of Melissus' work.⁹ Moreover, he clearly attributes the fragment to Melissus and even quotes it twice. As a consequence, it is difficult to reject the whole fragment.

Some, however, relied on the differences between Simplicius' two quotations to propose an emendation of the fragment. For in *In Phys.* 110.1–2, he only quotes the first part: “εἰ μὲν οὖν εἴη,¹⁰ δεῖ αὐτὸ ἐν εἶναι· ἐν δὲ ὄν δεῖ αὐτὸ σῶμα μὴ ἔχειν.” while in 87.67, he deletes the beginning but adds a second sentence: ἐν ἑόν, φησί, δεῖ αὐτὸ σῶμα μὴ ἔχειν. εἰ δὲ ἔχοι πάχος, ἔχοι ἄν μόρια καὶ οὐκέτι ἐν εἴη.

Some considered this second sentence as suspicious: in particular, Palmer (2003) argues that it has a Zenonian look¹¹ and would nicely supply a missing argument in Zeno's dichotomy against plurality (7–9). Therefore, he proposes to regard it as a Zenonian justification Simplicius would have provided for Melissus' claim.¹² Deleting this second part of the fragment allows to get rid of the association between σῶμα and πάχος and to argue that Melissus was not denying corporeality but rather that being has an organic body of the kind human beings have. The fragment would then be a criticism of anthropomorphism.

I will come back to this interpretation later. But concerning the authenticity of the second part, there is no indication that the quotation ends after the first sentence.¹³ For Simplicius usually marks quite well the end of quotations.¹⁴ Moreover, he often provides

⁹ Cf. Brémond, 2017, 134–35.

¹⁰ Diels (1882) edits εἰ μὲν ὄν εἴη; cf. n. 4.

¹¹ See fragment B1, quoted below, in which Zeno uses the term πάχος.

¹² The sentence is also deleted in the edition of Laks and Most (2016).

¹³ See also Harriman, 2019, p. 125.

¹⁴ Cf. Brémond, 2017, p. 135–37, where I indicate the various ways in which Simplicius concludes his quotations.

several versions of a fragment with various lengths and some variations in the details:¹⁵ the differences between the two versions of B9 are then not particularly meaningful. Finally, as Harriman (2019, p. 125) underlines, the second sentence has a distinctive Melissan structure. As a consequence, there is no philological reason to reject the second part of the sentence.

3. Another way to avoid the conflict between fragment B9 and other claims of Melissus consists in claiming that they do not deal with the same subject, but B9 would be polemical: Melissus would attack adversaries, maybe the Pythagoreans, who would claim that the universe is composed of multiple unities. This solution found supporters in many early critics (for example, Zeller/Nestle (1919)), but also more recently, though grudgingly, in Barnes (1982, p. 178–79). There is no indication, however, that the subject of B9 is not Melissus' one being, especially since the fragment particularly insists on the unity of its object. Moreover, Melissus could hardly have failed to notice that the same argument could apply to his own being.¹⁶

4. Most recent critics tried to reinterpret fragment B9 so that it would deny corporeality without rejecting at the same time its spatiality and fullness. It usually meant negating that $\sigma\tilde{\omega}\mu\alpha$ means “body” in a physical sense. Two main options have been recently developed: to understand it as referring to the anatomical body and claim that Melissus rejects anthropomorphism, or to read it as meaning “geometrical body” and indicating that being does not have a specific figure.

Palmer (2003), as we have seen, argued for the first option. This rejection would be reminiscent of Xenophanes' claim that the gods cannot have the shape ($\delta\acute{\epsilon}\mu\alpha\varsigma$) of a man or an animal (B14–B16 and

¹⁵ For example, he quotes four times our fragment B2 (*In Phys.* 29.22–26, 41.13–14, 41.31–42.1 and 109.20–25), but only once does he provide its last sentence (at 109.20–25).

¹⁶ Cf. Raven, 1948, p. 88–89.

B23),¹⁷ but also of Melissus' own refutation of the possibility of pain in B7. Fragment B9 would then be part of a global attack against the personification of being. A strong advantage of this reading is that it is consistent with the main use of *σῶμα* in Melissus' time, since the term mostly referred to human and animal bodies.¹⁸

However, this reading raises the obvious issue that the second sentence of the fragment, which associates *σῶμα* with *πάχος*, does not validate it, which is why Palmer makes the questionable move of rejecting its authenticity. Harriman (2019, p. 126–30) tried to defend this reading while accepting the authenticity of the whole fragment: he claims that *πάχος* refers to the measurement of a specific extension, and makes a connection with the anatomical conception of body by emphasizing that in ancient Greece, body parts were usually used as units of measure. This ingenious reconstruction struggles, however, to build a coherent interpretation of the fragment, as Harriman himself admits (p. 131): why would Melissus rely on the idea that body is used for measurement to dismiss anthropomorphism?

One might more generally wonder why Melissus would reject an anthropomorphic conception of being. For while it is sensible for Xenophanes to attack the traditional representation of gods by denying that they could have a human or animal form, no one would be tempted to conceive being as having a form of this kind. Moreover, since fragment B9 relies on the unity of being, it must come after B5–6 and thus after the demonstration that being is unlimited (B2–4). Therefore, since Melissus already ruled out that being has limits, it seems unnecessary to specify that it does not have an organic body.

A better proposal, in my view, is to understand *σῶμα* as meaning “geometrical body” or “figure”, as Mansfeld (2016, p. 98–103)

¹⁷ Cf. Harriman, 2019, p. 121–23. Xenophanes even uses the term *σῶμα* in B15 to refer to the shape of animals.

¹⁸ See the study of Renehan (1980).

does.¹⁹ On this interpretation, πάχος would refer to a specific depth, as opposed to an indefinite one. Melissus would then claim that being does not have a specific shape, probably in reaction to Parmenides' depiction of being as a well-rounded sphere in B8.42–44. This is perfectly compatible with its spatial extension and fullness.

However, I see two difficulties for this interpretation. First, it supposes that according to Melissus, (1) something with a specific figure would necessarily have parts, while (2) something that has no figure would not. The first part of this claim is not obvious: the atomists, for example, posited bodies with specific shapes but no parts. The second part is even more problematic: there is no indication that Melissus thought that an unlimited being could not as unlimited be divided in parts. The connection between having a shape and having parts is then far from evident.

The second difficulty is that the fragment is then reduced to the claim that being has no limits, which was already proven in fragment B2, where Melissus shows that it has no beginning nor end and is therefore unlimited. For since Melissus' being is unlimited, it appears as superfluous to demonstrate that it has no specific shape. As a consequence, I do not think that the term σῶμα can just be used to refer to something limited, with a specific figure: even though it might be part of its meaning (in whatever sense we take σῶμα, it usually refers to something limited), Melissus should be making another point here than just repeating in other terms that being has no limits.

Therefore, we should reconsider the meaning we give to σῶμα. Most of the previous interpretations suppose that we should avoid claiming that Melissus' being is incorporeal because a body is necessarily extended and full, while incorporeal beings, by contrast, could have none of these properties. In particular, since the main characteristic of bodies is usually regarded, from a Cartesian perspective, as spatial extension, the incorporeality of being is considered as incompatible

¹⁹ McKirahan (2010, p. 301) and Laks-Most (2016, p. 245, n. 1) support a similar position. For a history of this reading, see Mansfeld (2016, p. 100, n. 24.)

with its infinity in magnitude.²⁰ But it is wholly possible for Melissus to have a different conception of body and to draw the line differently between what has a body and what does not. Moreover, he does not have to support a dualism in which none of the characteristics of body can belong to something that has no body. This does not necessarily mean that he had a primitive or naïve concept of corporeality, as some critics claimed,²¹ but just that it does not exactly correspond to the notion Plato will develop.²²

The main defender of this kind of approach is Gomperz (1932) (especially p. 157-159 on Melissus' fragment). His interpretation was weakened, however, by two aspects: first he endeavored to prove that the word ἄσώματος was already used in the fifth century, by relying on dubious testimonies—this approach was rightly refuted by Renehan (1980, p. 119–25). Second, he was unclear about what this other conception of corporeality would be. He understands Melissus' fragment as indicating “grobe Stofflichkeit”, “coarse materiality” (158–59), which he then interprets as referring to two specific properties: perceptibility and limitation (164).²³ I already indicated that Melissus should do more in fragment B9 than reassess the limitation of being in new terms. Would he then mean that being is imperceptible? He criticizes indeed in fragment B8 our sense-perception as untrustworthy. But contrarily to Parmenides, he never characterizes in his fragments being in the way it is known.

²⁰ This is especially clear in the article of Curd (2013), who claims that the early Greek thinkers conceived of incorporeality, which would necessarily mean, in her view, that they imagined something that has no spatial extension: she makes no distinction between materiality, corporeality and extension.

²¹ See Raven (1948, p. 90–92), Loenen (1959, p. 175), Guthrie (1965, p. 110–13) and Renehan (1980, p. 117–19). Guthrie argues that Aristotle, when he discusses the Presocratics, often uses the comparative and superlative forms of ἄσώματος, thereby indicating that they did not have a full concept of corporeality.

²² Cf. Holmes (2014, p. 102–3).

²³ He is followed by Guthrie (1965, p. 111) and Reale (1970, p. 215–25). Untersteiner (1953, p. 597–606) and Reale add the property of heterogeneity to the characteristics of a body. Heterogeneity is not easily connected with thickness, though.

Moreover, it is not evident, again, why perceptibility would be connected to having parts and not being one.²⁴

To understand this other conception of corporeality, my approach will consist in better grasping the connection between having no σῶμα and having no πάχος and μόρια. For most interpretations first attribute a meaning to σῶμα and then try to make it cohere with a certain understanding of πάχος. But they often end up with two separate arguments, one that shows that being has no body and one that shows that it has no parts nor thickness. I think a better approach is to start from the second sentence and the meaning of πάχος, to help understand what Melissus meant with σῶμα.

2. Πάχος: Having Parts

Πάχος mostly has two meanings: “depth” and “thickness”. If Melissus were using it in the first sense, one would have to support some version of interpretation 4: being would not have any depth in the sense that it would not have a specific size or shape.²⁵ But πάχος also means “thickness”: in particular, it is used in medical works to describe the aspect of bodily fluids. In fact, most of the occurrences of the expression πάχος ἔχειν in the 5th century appear in the Hippocratic treatise *Epidemics* I and III to describe the aspect of urine.²⁶ In both meanings, πάχος is opposed to λέπτος, thin.

What does it specifically mean for something to be *thick*? The issue particularly arises because Melissus claims in B7 that being is full: what meaning can πάχος have so that not having thickness is

²⁴ See similar criticisms in Palmer (2003, p. 4–5).

²⁵ One could also understand “depth” in contrast to length and width (as for example in the early Hippocratic treatise *On fractures* 13.38), which would imply that Melissus’ being is two-dimensional. This is hardly compatible, however, with the fact that it is full and that its infinity prevents it from being many: if being were an infinite surface, there could be another being parallel to it.

²⁶ The only other occurrences of this expression beside Melissus’ fragment and the Hippocratic corpus are in Zeno’s B1, which I quote just below, and Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* VI.1.54.6, to describe this time a particular size.

compatible with being full? To understand better what πάχος means, we should turn to the main parallel text, i.e. Zeno's fragment B1:

If it is, necessarily each thing has some magnitude and thickness and part of it is separate from another part (ἀνάγκη ἕκαστον μέγεθος τι ἔχειν καὶ πάχος καὶ ἀπέχειν αὐτοῦ τὸ ἕτερον ἀπὸ τοῦ ἑτέρου). And the same argument applies to the front part. For it will have magnitude too and some part of it will be in front. And it is the same thing to say it once and over again: for no part of it will ever be the last one and have no part in front of another. Therefore, if there are many things, necessarily they are small and large, so small that they have no magnitude and so large that they are unlimited.

Zeno aims to show in this text that the many beings are infinitely large because they can be infinitely divided into parts of a certain magnitude. At first sight, this sentence seems to contradict our fragment B9, since it seems to assimilate μέγεθος and πάχος. But if both terms are synonyms, Melissus' being cannot have magnitude but no thickness. I would like to suggest, however, that Zeno does not present the two terms as synonyms. For if it were the case, his reasoning would not apply only to the many beings he mentions at the end of the fragment. Indeed, just before this passage, according to Simplicius, Zeno claimed that in order to be, something must have magnitude. This point is demonstrated in his fragment B2: if something has no magnitude, it amounts to nothing and therefore it is not.²⁷ Indeed, both Parmenides and Melissus lend magnitude to their being. But why does Zeno's reasoning in B1 only apply to the many beings, if he indeed considers that everything that has magnitude can be infinitely divided?²⁸

²⁷ Gorgias also attributes to Zeno the claim that if something is nowhere, it is not: see *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias* 6 979b25.

²⁸ On the special connection Zeno establishes between plurality and divisibility, see Rapp (2006, p. 175). The testimony of Philoponus *In Phys.* 80.23–81.3 (= Lee 3), if it is trustworthy, confirms that according to Zeno, either being is one and indivisible, or it is many and divisible.

I think that a solution might be that πάχος is not a mere synonym of μέγεθος but provides another piece of information concerning the many beings: they do not have only magnitude, but also thickness, and this is why they can be infinitely divided.²⁹ Indeed, the introduction of thickness is immediately followed by the claim that the many beings have distinct parts. The parallel with Melissus' claim is striking: obviously, for Zeno and Melissus, having a πάχος, thickness, implies having parts.

I even think that having a πάχος precisely means being composed of distinct parts and being divisible.³⁰ Indeed, even in modern languages, thickness is often defined relatively to components: something is thick if its parts are close together.³¹ It appears to have been the case in ancient Greek too. For when he describes the thought of material monists in *On Heavens* III.5 303b22–27, Aristotle assimilates indeed thickness, density and having big parts:

Moreover, there is no difference between generating other things through density and rarity (πυκνότητι καὶ μανότητι) and through thinness and thickness (λεπτότητι καὶ παχύτητι). For they mean by “thin” rare and by “thick” dense. And again, it is the same to rely on thinness and thickness and on greatness and smallness. *For what has small parts is thin and what has big parts is thick* (λεπτὸν μὲν γὰρ τὸ μικρομερές, παχὺ δὲ τὸ μεγαλομερές).³²

It appears, then, that according to Aristotle, early monists meant by “thick” something that is dense and has big parts. This connection is made explicit in the later (4th century) adjectives λεπτομερής and παχυμερής. The function of the suffix –μερής can be grasped through

²⁹ On the fact that πάχος specifically refers to a divisible extension in Zeno's fragment, see also Köhler (2015, p. 270, n. 662).

³⁰ Holmes (2014, p. 103) makes a similar point: “the adjective *pakhus* can describe not only thickness but also graininess or cloudiness, qualities that suggest heterogeneity within a stuff.”

³¹ See for example the Merriam-Webster definition 3 of “thick” as “close-packed with units or individuals”.

³² On the equivalence between λεπτός and μικρομερής, see also *GC* II.2 330a1–3.

the parallel terms ὁμοιομερής and ἕτερομερής: for ὅμοιος can mean “homogenous”, i.e. “whose parts are alike”, and the suffix just emphasizes this aspect. This understanding of πάχος explains the connection Melissus and Zeno made between having parts and having thickness.

One might wonder what the difference is for Melissus between πύκνος and πάχος: since he demonstrated in B7 that being is not πύκνος, what would the demonstration in B9 add? Let us look at the passage:

And it could not be dense nor rare. For the rare cannot be as full as the dense, but it becomes then emptier than the dense. And one must decide between the full and the not full in this way: if it gives way to something and receives it, it is not full; but if it neither gives way nor receives, it is full.

Melissus sets a scale with the full on one side and the empty on the other, between which he places the dense and the rare. The dense is presented as emptier than the full and the rare is even emptier, and since the empty or void is a not-being, being cannot be dense nor rare. It should be noted, however, that Melissus does define the dense and the rare through the nature or number of their parts, in the sense that the dense would have a proportion of void than is higher than the full and lower than the rare. He might even be referring to degrees of being: the dense and the rare would be closer to not-being not because they contain parts of being and parts of not-being (this would suppose that there are many beings separated by void), but because they are less being. In any case, his focus is rather on the criterium of penetrability: something full cannot be penetrated, the void is completely penetrable, and the dense and the rare are probably partly penetrable. Hence, his analysis of density does not rely on the fact that it supposes that being has parts—whether he considered that variations of density had nothing to do with having parts or just neglected this particular aspect of density. On the opposite, according to my interpretation, when he focusses on the possibility for being to have parts, he rather talks about “thickness”.

If being has no thickness, does it mean that it is thin? It cannot be the case if by “thin”, one means something that has small parts, since Melissus’ being has no parts at all: something thin would even have more parts than something thick. To avoid this issue, one could say that Melissus does not claim that being is not thick but that it has no thickness. For just as Zeno says that something has no magnitude (μέγεθος) not meaning that it is not big (μέγα), but that it is not extended at all, Melissus could say through “not having πάχος” not that it is thin, but that being is neither thin nor thick since it is not composed of parts.

It appears, however, that thinness could have another meaning at Melissus’ time: it could refer not to something that has very small parts but to something that has no parts at all. I defined πάχος as the fact of having distinct parts: indeed, the parts of what is thick are big and therefore clearly distinct. On the opposite, what is thin has very small parts, which one does not see. There is an easy transfer of meaning from “having parts one does not see” to “having no parts at all”: something would then be “thin” in the sense that it consists of a single piece. We will see some applications of the adjective λέπτως to the soul in the last section, for now I wish to provide one testimony in this sense, i.e. Anaxagoras’ fragment B12. For in this fragment dedicated to the state of the Intellect before the setting in movement of the cosmos, Anaxagoras describes the Intellect as λεπτότατον τε πάντων χρημάτων καί καθαρώτατον, “the thinnest of all things and the purest”.

What does λέπτως mean here? Obviously not that the Intellect has no depth. For according to the same fragment, it is unlimited. It cannot mean “rare” either, neither in the sense that it would not be full nor in the sense that it would be extremely penetrable.³³ For the first characteristic is incompatible with the description of the Intellect’s purity and the second one is not pertinent in this context: penetrability would indicate that the Intellect can be in everything, while on the opposite, Anaxagoras underlines in this fragment that it is all by

³³ According to Curd (2010), it means that “it is the most rarified of all things”.

itself, μόνον ἑόντα ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ, and unmixed with anything else. Also, one does not see why Anaxagoras would intend to claim that the Intellect is composed of very small parts. But since his main point in this fragment is that the Intellect is entirely by itself and its own master, the meaning of “thin” that I presented, i.e. as “not divided in parts”, makes better sense. More particularly, Anaxagoras explains that the Intellect is a perfect separate unity, as opposed to spread over several entities: it does not have parts in the sense that it is not divided among many different beings.³⁴

On this reconstruction of the meaning of λέπτος, Melissus would mean by “having no thickness” that being is thin in the sense that it does not have distinct parts. This conception of thinness will be capital to understand his conception of incorporeality (see section 4).

3. Divisibility of Being

On my interpretation, negating that being has thickness amounts to claiming that it is indivisible. It then escapes Zeno’s criticism in fragment B1: if being had thickness, it could be divided *ad infinitum* and it would be infinitely many; but since it has no thickness, it remains perfectly one.

A consequence of this reading is that for Melissus, something is not divisible in parts because it is spatially extended, but because it possesses a further property, i.e. “thickness”. This idea something can be spatially extended without being divided into parts is also shared by the atomists who, according to Aristotle, they posited indivisible magnitudes.³⁵ Hence, magnitude in itself is not divisible, but only a magnitude with a certain bodily thickness can be divided in parts. It

³⁴ See the enlightening parallel with *On Diet*, IV.86, 218.4–9, quoted below, for the opposition between being by itself and being spread over several parts.

³⁵ See for example *GC* I.2 315b15–16 and *DC* III.4 303a5–24. In this second passage, Aristotle criticizes the indivisibility of atoms as being incoherent with mathematics.

is then perfectly acceptable for something to have a certain magnitude and to be full without possessing such a thickness.³⁶

However, the reasoning might appear redundant with fragment B10, where Melissus explicitly argues that being is not divided: “for if being is divided, it moves; but if it moved, it would not be.” The connection between movement and division in this fragment has seemed surprising: for something unmoved, like a geometrical body, is still divisible. Harriman (2019, p. 133–36) tries to get around the problem by claiming that Melissus also proceeds on the premise of homogeneity in this reasoning: if being is homogenous, it has no distinct parts and cannot be divided in any other way than by separation.³⁷ The fragment does not mention homogeneity, however, and I argued elsewhere that Melissus’ being is only homogenous in time.³⁸ Indeed, since Melissus shows in B9 that being has no parts, he has no reason to claim that it is homogenous, since homogeneity implies that all *parts* of a thing are identical.

But “divisible” can have two meanings:

being physically divisible, i.e. that the parts can be separated from one another.

having parts. This second and stronger meaning of “divisible” is, of course, a necessary condition for the first one.

In fragment B10, I think that Melissus only argues against the first kind of divisibility.³⁹ This explains why he considers movement as the only necessary premise to reject divisibility: if the parts of being are physically separated, they have to move away from one another.

³⁶ Thickness is probably also for the atomists a secondary property of composed bodies: see Theophrastus *De Sensibus* 50, 59.

³⁷ Parmenides also claims in B8.22–24 that being is indivisible (οὐδὲ διαίρετόν ἐστιν), which he connects with its homogeneity. But his argument is obviously quite different from Melissus’ in its conception of homogeneity (cf. Brémond, 2019, p. 29) and divisibility.

³⁸ See Brémond, 2019.

³⁹ Cf. Barnes, 1982, p. 173, who notes that the fragment does not argue that being is indivisible but that it is not “split up into bits”.

But Melissus' argument against divisibility in the second sense can be found in fragment B9.⁴⁰ The two fragments are then complementary rather than redundant.

4. Body and Soul

Finally, I wish to examine why this divisibility into parts would, according to Melissus, specifically concern bodies.⁴¹ In order to answer this question, one should wonder what according to Melissus is *not* a body. In the fifth century literature, σῶμα specifically refers to the body of living beings, human or animal.⁴² The term is usually contrasted with two other kinds of entities:⁴³ inanimate⁴⁴ things and mental entities or activities.⁴⁵ Melissus cannot draw a contrast with inanimate things, since they possess both πάχος and μῦρια. I suggest that his model for thinking being is rather the soul or intellect. I do not mean that Melissus considers being as a soul, with whatever specific activities one lends to a soul, but that the opposition between soul and body allows him to think the characteristics of being.

It has been long noted that in Homer, the σῶμα is the dead body as opposed to the soul, which is detached from it after death. The

⁴⁰ Harriman (2019, p. 138–40) strangely comes to a similar conclusion, even though he wants to find the second kind of divisibility also in B10 and he understands πάχος in a very different way than I did.

⁴¹ It is interesting to note that according to Simplicius, Themistius would have said that Zeno talked about the “infinite divisibility of bodies” (διὰ τὴν ἐπ’ ἄπειρον τομὴν τῶν σωμάτων, *In Phys.* 139.21–22 = Lee 1). If the term σῶμα were really used by Zeno, it would indicate that he also thought that bodies specifically are subject to division. This testimony is too indirect, however, to have the force of evidence.

⁴² See Renehan, 1980.

⁴³ Cf. Lorenz, 2009.

⁴⁴ For example, in military contexts, Thucydides often presents as the two necessary components of an army the bodies (= soldiers) and money (see for example *History* I.121.3 or VIII.65.3); he also often opposes saving one's body (= life) and saving one's property (see for example I.143.5).

⁴⁵ Beside the standard opposition between σῶμα as the dead body and ψυχή as the immortal soul, see the opposition of σῶμα with θυμός in Herodotus *History* VII.39.7–8 or with γνῶμη in Thucydides *History* I.70.6.

opposition between body and soul is then fundamental to the construction of the two concepts. This body/soul opposition does not, however, imply the opposition between corporeality and incorporeality in the Platonic sense. Whether the soul is connected with a particular elemental body or not, it is always before Plato corporeal in the sense that it is extended in space and time. As a consequence, the opposition between those two items must lie somewhere else.

What characterizes then the soul in relation to the body? One answer could be its activity, i.e. the psychological activities. But this is far from enlightening in our case for two reasons. First, it is far from established in Melissus' time what the "activity" of the soul could be: many of the activities we attribute to the soul are explained by Presocratic thinkers through elemental interactions without reference to any specific mental entity.⁴⁶ Second, Melissus' being does not seem to have any kind of activity at all, since all changes were refuted in B7. It is interesting to note, however, that he takes some time to refute the possibility for being to undergo pain and grief (ἀλγεῖ and ἀνιᾶται): this indicates that he regarded as a possibility to attribute mental states to his being. In particular, interpreters usually think that ἀνιᾶται refers to mental suffering as opposed to physical one.⁴⁷ Since the two states Melissus rejects are negative ones, one might even wonder if being could have positive, unchanging mental states like pleasure. But there is no indication that being would exercise any kind of activities.

What most anciently characterizes soul is, however, that it survives after death, and according to some, even has the capacity to go from one body to another—whether one takes into consideration the ψυχή of the Pythagoreans⁴⁸ or the Empedoclean δαίμων. As a

⁴⁶ Cf. Laks, 1999, p. 250–52.

⁴⁷ Cf. Harriman, 2019, p. 175.

⁴⁸ Huffman (2009) argues that ψυχή is the subject of the Pythagorean metempsychosis.

consequence, it is considered as a certain unity, bearer of a certain identity, which is eternal and can be independent of the σῶμα, body.

This opposition between the unity and eternity of the soul and the multiplicity and perishability of the body is already developed before Plato, for example in the Hippocratic treatise *On Diet*:⁴⁹

The soul is identical for all ensouled beings, while the body is different for each. Therefore, the soul is always similar, both in the bigger and the smaller, since it is not changed by nature nor by necessity. But the body is never similar to any other by nature nor by necessity, since it dissolves into everything and mixes with everything (I. 28 144.16–20 ed. Joly-Byl (2003)).

The characteristics of the soul that are described here are reminiscent of its description by Anaxagoras in B12,⁵⁰ where he also claims that what has a soul can be bigger or smaller (ὅσα γε ψυχὴν ἔχει καὶ τὰ μείζω καὶ τὰ ἐλάσσω), but also of the Eleatic characterization of being as eternal, similar to itself (ὁμοίος) and unchanged.

Moreover, in this text, the body is characterized by its division, which I associated with its thickness. Another passage of the same treatise explains why the soul can be associated with the absence of parts:

For the soul is at the service of the body when it is awake, and while it is distributed over many parts (ἐπὶ πολλὰ μεριζομένη), it does not belong to itself, but it dedicates some part (τι μέρος) to each faculty of the body: hearing, sight, touching, walking, activities of the whole body. But its thought does not belong to itself. But when the body rests, the soul moves and wakes up to occupy its own house, and it accomplishes by itself all the activities of the body (IV.86 218.4–9).

The author opposes here the body, which is characterized by division into parts, and the soul. When the body is awake, the soul is divided

⁴⁹ The treatise is dated by Joly-Byl (2003, p. 44–49) at the end of the fifth century or very beginning of the fourth.

⁵⁰ On the influence of Anaxagoras on the treatise, see Joly-Byl, 2003, p. 30–32.

into its different parts and is not by itself. But when the body is asleep, the soul is not divided anymore but only occupies one place, in perfect unity. I think that this is precisely the kind of representation of the soul that is at stake in Melissus' fragment B9: Melissus rejects this idea that being could have a body in the same way as the soul, according to the Hippocratic treatise, has one. On the opposite, being, like the soul of a sleeping body, is all by itself, immune to division.

Finally, one can connect this aspect of soul with the fact that it is often presented as "thin" in Melissus' time.⁵¹ This point has not been noted by the interpreters of fragment B9, but it is quite enlightening to explain the connection Melissus establishes in B9 between having a body and having thickness. Indeed, Anaxagoras, as already mentioned, describes his Intellect as λεπτότερος. Diogenes of Apollonia, according to Aristotle (A20), would claim that the air in the soul is the thinnest. Aristophanes, when imitating Diogenes in the *Clouds* 229–230, also talks about "thin thought", τὴν φροντίδα λεπτήν.⁵² Moreover, Aristotle, when he mentions in *De Anima* I.2 405a4-13 the opinion of those who think that the soul is fire, justifies this idea by claiming that it is "the thinnest and most incorporeal of elements" (λεπτομερέστατόν τε καὶ μάλιστα τῶν στοιχείων ἄσώματον). This interestingly indicates that Aristotle too considers that thinness makes something close to incorporeal, but not in the sense that it is not extended (since it is a bodily element). Moreover, he attributes this opinion to Democritus who, according to fragment B11, also opposes sense-perception and "something thinner"; there is a lacuna in the text, but it would describe, according to Sextus Empiricus' interpretation of the quotation, the most legitimate kind of knowledge, hence probably reason or thought in general.

⁵¹ On the fact that λεπτός is regularly applied to mind, see also Guthrie (1965, p. 276–77). He uses this analysis to claim that Anaxagoras' mind is incorporeal in the sense of impalpable.

⁵² According to Theophrastus (A19), Diogenes also claimed that thought is accomplished through the purest air.

We can draw two consequences from these parallels:

Soul, when separated from the body (i.e. when it “has no body”, as Melissus says), is characterized by unity instead of dispersion into several body parts.

Soul is described by many of Melissus’ contemporaries as particularly “thin”. I would not say that “thin” always means by those thinkers that it is specifically devoid of parts, as for Melissus, but this explains the close association between body and thickness in fragment B9.

Many characteristics of the soul do not belong to Melissus’ being, though, which is why I would refrain from a full identification of being with a soul: among others, it is not the bearer of a certain personality, and it is not associated with any activity. The first issue could be eliminated if one assimilates Melissus’ being with a divine soul, like Anaxagoras’ Intellect, with which it shares many characteristics. Many interpreters have, for various reasons, proposed this identification.⁵³ However, there is no explicit indication that Melissus regarded his being as a god. On the opposite, according to Diogenes Laertius, he would have claimed that “one should not talk about the gods, for there is no knowledge of them” (IX, 24): if this testimony is correct, then Melissus could not have assimilated being and the divine, or his whole treatise would contradict his own ban.⁵⁴ In any case, Melissus does not need to identify being with an

⁵³ Guthrie (1965, p. 114), Long (1996, p. 141), Curd (2016, p.125–27) and Harriman (2019, p. 175–81) support this view. Harriman (2019, p. 170, n. 44) evokes the texts of Aetius and Olympiodorus at DK A13 to assert that some ancient testimonies assimilated Melissus’ being and the divine. But in the case of Aetius, the mention of the divine is an addition by Diels. Olympiodorus is also far from being an objective source on this topic, since his whole doxography deals with the divine (see Brémond, 2017, p. 454).

⁵⁴ Harriman (2019, p. 179–80) tries to avoid this conclusion by claiming that according to Diogenes, Melissus denied “direct knowledge” of the gods, but it would be possible to state something about them through “rational deduction”. Diogenes does not just deny knowledge of the gods, however, but he also rejects any discourse about them: it is then hardly compatible with the identification of being and the divine. The only way to support this assimilation would be to reject Diogenes’ testimony, for example as a confusion between Melissus and Protagoras.

individual soul or with a god to lend it some of the characteristics of these entities. I rather think that he used this opposition between body and soul to help him conceive how being could exist without having a body, i.e. as an eternal unity devoid of parts.

5. Conclusion

I tried to show that when Melissus denies that being has a body and thickness, he rejects the idea that it could have parts and be divisible. His model to think such an indivisible being appears to be the opposite of body, i.e. soul or intellect, which was indeed characterized by its thinness and its capacity to exist separate of a body and without occupying its limbs. Therefore, there is a certain concept of incorporeality in Melissus, which is characterized by indivisibility in parts. His distinction between body and soul is far from covering the opposition Plato will develop, though. Most importantly, Melissus does not reject spatiality with divisibility: according to him, what is extended does not necessarily have parts, but only thickness makes something divisible. His being is also subject to time and has many other physical characteristics. Melissus is then a long way from a dualism where only a body can have certain properties like spatial extension and fullness, but he might have been one of the first thinkers to apply the term $\sigma\tilde{\omega}\mu\alpha$ to something that is not a human being or animal, and to conceive it as the bearer of specific properties. To this extent, he made a tremendous step toward the concept of incorporeality.

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