NOTES ON THE PRESOCRATICS

BY

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VII. MELISSUS FRAG. 2

Melissus frag. 2 runs as follows: ὅτε τοίνυν οὖν ἐγένετο, ἦστι τε καὶ ἀεὶ ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἦσται καὶ ἄρχην οὖν ἔχει οὐδὲ τελευτήν, ἀλλ' ἀπειρών ἦστιν. εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἐγένετο, ἄρχην ἄν ἔχειν (ἥξιοτο γάρ ἂν ποτε γινόμενον) καὶ τελευτήν (ἐτελεύτησε γὰρ ἂν ποτε γινόμενον). ὅτε δὲ μὴτε ἥξιοτο μήτε ἐτελεύτησεν ἀεὶ τε ἦν καὶ ἀεὶ ἦσται, οὖν ἔχει ἄρχην οὐδὲ τελευτήν· οὐ γὰρ ἀεὶ εἶναι ἀνυστόν, ὅτι μή πάν ἦστι.

Much controversy has arisen about Aristotle’s criticism of this passage. However, a certain agreement seems to have been reached 1), so that we may pass over this problem. Yet something remains to be said about the form of the argument. H. Cherniss, who rightly rejects the interpretations of Burnet and Diels-Kranz, gives the following translation 2):

'Since, then, it (i.e. Being) was not the result of a process 3),

1) It is and always was and always will be 4),

2) And has no beginning or end but is infinite,


3) As has been proved in frag. 1.

4) G. Calogero, La logica del secondo clesismo, Atene e Roma 38 (1936), 157, is certainly wrong in joining ἦστι τε καὶ ἀεὶ ἦν to the protasis and translating καὶ ἄρχην οὖν ἔχει by 'neppure ha principio'.
For, had it been the result of a process, it would have a beginning (because it would at some time have been at the commencement of the process) and an end (for it would at some time have been at the end of the process).

But since it neither began nor stopped and always was and always will be, it has no beginning or end.

For it is impossible for that to be always which is not everything.

Cherniss supposes 1 to be proved by a and 2 by b. But 1 has already been proved in frag. 1, and so in the present argument it is not meant to be a conclusion, but a premiss. Accordingly, the following syllogism suggests itself:

(A) Being is eternal,
(B) What is eternal has no beginning or end,
(C) Consequently, Being has no beginning or end.

A is proved by frag. 1 and B (= b) is the conversion of a. Confusion is caused by the fact that Melissus in his first sentence simply enumerates the stages of his argument; he proceeds to state the argument for his second premiss; then follows the second premiss, but it is stated in a form which implicitly contains the conclusion.

The last sentence is paraphrased by Cherniss as follows: 'The eternally existent must comprise within itself the sum of existence at any time', and for this interpretation he rightly refers to frag. 3: ὃσπερ ἐστιν ἄει, οἷον καὶ τὸ μέγεθος ἀπειρον ἄει γρη δεῖναι. So πᾶν only seems to be another expression for ἀπειρον. But what is the function of the last sentence in the whole of the argument? Cherniss says: 'a and b are connected by c'. However,

5) The reading γενόμενον instead of γενόμενον is also accepted by Ross, loc. cit., Calogero, Studi sull' Eleatismo (Rome 1932), 64 n. 1, and Albertelli, op. cit., 230.
6) Kranz puts a comma after ἐτελεύτησεν and inserts καί before οὖν.
7) Diels-Kranz translate: 'was nicht ganz und gar ist'.
8) Albertelli's doubts to the authenticity of the fragment (op. cit., 233) seem to be unwarranted.