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# Gorgias' Antilogical Arguments and the Reception of the Eleatics

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I show that the Aristotelian reception often attributes to the Eleatics, as a group or individuals, arguments that I call “antilogies”, i.e. a *reductio ad absurdum* based on a dichotomy. I trace back this structure of reasoning to Gorgias, who in his treatise *On Not-being* was the first to reformulate the Eleatic arguments as antilogies. Not only did some authors, like Aristotle, borrow arguments from Gorgias to attribute them to the Eleatics, it also led to a widespread tendency to reformulate the Eleatic arguments as antilogies, even independently of Gorgias' treatise. This reveals a deep and so far unnoticed influence of Gorgias on the way the Eleatics were interpreted.

**Keywords:** Gorgias, Eleatics, Reception, Aristotle, Antilogies

In the past decades, the interest in the history of the reception of the Presocratics has flourished, leading to many new editions of the testimonies and new studies. Concerning Parmenides, critics have mostly examined either the early reception, in Plato<sup>1</sup> and Aristotle,<sup>2</sup> or the Neoplatonic reinterpretation,<sup>3</sup> but they usually focus on his reception as an individual thinker. However, Parmenides was often interpreted in connection with his so-called disciples, i.e. Melissus and Zeno, and more broadly with what we may call the “Eleatic school” (which can also include Xenophanes). Whether it is historically pertinent to talk about such a school or not, it appears that already in the earliest reception, the thinking of Parmenides, Melissus and Zeno has often been regarded as a coherent whole, with common theses and arguments—we shall see some examples of this phenomenon in what follows.<sup>4</sup> Even though those thinkers share some common points (to what extent they do is a matter of discussion), in order to talk about one coherent Eleatic doctrine and reasoning, some work of adaptation and reformulation was required.

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<sup>1</sup> The main study being Palmer 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Clarke 2019; McKirahan 2023.

<sup>3</sup> See Perry 1983; Guérard 1987; Stevens 1990; Licciardi 2016.

<sup>4</sup> See my remarks in Brémond 2017, 37–48 on Aristotle's reconstitution of a common doctrine and approach attributed to the Eleatics (more precisely Parmenides and Melissus). While Palmer correctly points out passages where the thought of those two philosophers is clearly distinguished (see Palmer 2009, 36–38), he wrongly downplays all the other texts where they are completely assimilated. This grouping of philosophers based on common opinion most probably originates from sophistic catalogues: on this topic, see Mansfeld 1986a.

In this paper, I will focus on one aspect of this reconstruction, which has, as far as I know, barely been noticed so far,<sup>5</sup> i.e. the attribution to all the Eleatics of what I will call “antilogies”, and Gorgias’ responsibility in this phenomenon. Antilogies consist in a *reductio ad absurdum* based on a dichotomy:

1. For  $\varphi$  to be true, either  $\psi$  or not- $\psi$  must be true.
2.  $\Psi$  is impossible.
3. Not- $\psi$  is also impossible.
4. Hence,  $\varphi$  is false.

As we shall see, although the Eleatics never develop any reasoning that has this structure, the reception, especially the Aristotelian one, often reformulates their arguments in this form. I shall demonstrate that this tendency is inherited from Gorgias’ treatise *On Nature or On Not-being* (which I will call from now on simply *On Not-Being*). There have already been many studies on the relationship between Gorgias and the Eleatics, which mainly focussed on the sophist’s criticism of their thought. In this paper, I will rather highlight Gorgias’ impact on the reconstruction of Eleatic thought, in particular on this attribution of antilogical arguments to Parmenides and his followers. This impact has been mostly neglected so far for what appears as a good reason: Gorgias is referred to as a professor of rhetoric in most of antiquity, in particular by Plato and Aristotle. Neither of them seems to take the treatise *On Not-Being* into consideration, and it looks as if they had no knowledge whatsoever of this work. In later antiquity, Gorgias’ treatise is almost never mentioned.<sup>6</sup> We shall see, however, that Gorgias played a major role in the way in which Eleatic arguments were presented, in particular in the Aristotelian tradition.<sup>7</sup> I will first examine two arguments in Aristotle’s work, the first one in *Physics* I.8 (section 1) and the second one in *On Generation and Corruption (GC)* I.8 (section 2), to show that he attributes to the Eleatics antilogical arguments that he borrowed from Gorgias. I will then show in my third section how this led to a general tendency in the later reception to reformulate Eleatic arguments as antilogies.

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<sup>5</sup> We find some remarks that point in this direction in Palmer 2004, 37 and Harriman 2019, 50, n. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Beside Pseudo-Aristotle’s and Sextus’ summaries of the treatise, the only traces of Gorgias in later antiquity are references to the title *On Nature*, in Galen *In Hipp. Element.* 1.9.27 and Olympiodorus *In Gorgiam* 9.

<sup>7</sup> I have also shown in other studies that he inspired the kind of arguments that Plato puts into Parmenides’ mouth in the second part of Plato’s *Parmenides*: see Brémond 2019, 2022. I shall come back to this point in my conclusion.

# 1. The Argument against Generation

## 1.1 In the Aristotelian Tradition

In *Physics* I.8, Aristotle presents an argument that rejects the possibility of generation:

The first people to philosophise about the nature and truth of things got so to speak side-tracked or driven off course by inexperience, and said that nothing comes to be or passes away, because *whatever comes to be must do so either out of being, or out of not-being, and neither is possible*. Being cannot come to be, since it is already, and nothing can come to be out of not-being, since there must be something underlying. And thus inflating the consequences of this, they deny the plurality of things, and say that there is nothing but “what is itself”. (Aristotle *Physics* I.8 191a24-31; transl. Charlton 1970 modified).

Aristotle attributes this argument to the large group of “the first people to philosophise about the nature and truth of things”, which might refer to all those we call “Presocratics”. And indeed, in *Metaphysics* A.3 984a31-33 and *Physics* I.4 187a26-9, Aristotle claims that they all denied the possibility of generation. However, at the end of the argument, he blames those thinkers for “inflating the consequences” of their arguments and denying plurality (*oud' einai polla*). This indicates that although he thinks that most Presocratics would support this argument, he mainly targets the Eleatics.<sup>8</sup>

The argument displays the antilogical structure that I previously described:

1. if being came to be, it would be either from being or from not-being;
2. generation from being is impossible;
3. generation from not-being is also impossible;
4. hence, there is no generation.

In the later Aristotelian reception, this precise argument is explicitly attributed to the Eleatics. This is not only the case in commentaries to this specific text, but also, more generally, whenever the commentators present the thought of the Eleatics, whether separately or jointly.

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<sup>8</sup> Another reason to believe that the Eleatics are the main target lies in the image of the road (*exetrapēsan hoion hodon tina allēn apōsthenetes*, which could be translated more literally with “they have gone astray, being so to speak pushed back onto another road”), which cannot but remind us of Parmenides’ fragment B2 with its depiction of the two ways of inquiry; cf. Clarke 2015, 130–131; Quarantotto 2016. Against this identification of the Eleatics as the main target, see Palmer 2009, 130–133, who argues that the last sentence does not defend monism but claims that only a certain kind of entity *is* in the strong sense of the term. This conception would, according to him, be common to all Presocratics.

Hence, in his summary of Melissus' thought (commenting on *Physics* I.3 186a4), Philoponus develops his denial of generation in the following terms:

[Melissus] shows that being did not come to be as follows: *if being came to be, it came either from being or from not-being*. If it came from being, being will be there before it comes to be. For some being comes from some being, but being *tout court* could not come from being; it would be coming to be from itself, so that it was before it came to be, which is absurd. If it came to be from not-being, it must be from what is not in any manner or form; for if being *tout court* comes to be, it would come to be from not-being *tout court*. But there is a common consensus among all the natural philosophers that nothing comes to be from what in no way and in no sense is. (...) *So therefore if it is necessary that if being comes to be it must come either from being or from not-being, but absurdity follows in either case, clearly then, being did not come to be.* (In *Physics* 51.20-52.6; transl. Osborne 2006 modified)

We may find a very similar presentation of Melissus' argument in Simplicius *In Physics* 103.16-23, within his paraphrase of the beginning of Melissus' treatise. As Palmer remarks, in Simplicius' paraphrase, this tendency to attribute to Melissus dilemmatic structures goes beyond the argument against generation: it applies for example to the argument against motion (*In Physics* 104.12-15), which I shall examine in section 3.2.<sup>9</sup>

Again, when Simplicius compares Parmenides' thought with Anaxagoras' in his commentary on I.4, he claims the following:

And indeed Parmenides showed that what really is is ungenerated by arguing that *it comes to be neither from being (for there was nothing in being prior to it) nor from not-being*; for it must come to be from something, but not-being is nothing. (In *Physics* 162.11-14; transl. Menn 2022 modified)

We find a similar presentation in *In Physics* 78.24-29.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Palmer 2004, 36: "It seems that the paraphrast, for whatever reason, had a penchant for dilemmatic argumentation and allowed this to influence his 'clarification' of Melissus' own argument to such an extent that he introduced the arguments required by the structure he sought to impose upon Melissus' somewhat unruly treatise."

<sup>10</sup> See also in the Pseudo-Alexandrian *In Sophist. Elench.* 49.22-29 and the Anonymous commentary on the same treatise (*In Sophist. Elench.* 30.11-13), where the antilogical structure, however, is less noticeable.

## 1.2 In Parmenides and his followers

If one examines the texts of the Eleatics, however, we do not find this dichotomy. Both Parmenides and Melissus argue against generation, but they only seem to take into consideration the possibility of generation from not-being. This appears first in Parmenides' fragment B8:

For what origin of it will you look for? How and whence grown? I shall not let you say or conceive, "from not-being", for it cannot be said or conceived that anything is not; and then what necessity in fact could have urged it to begin and spring up later or before from nothing? Thus it must either be entirely or not be at all. (B8.6-11, transl. Coxon 2009 modified)

Some critics, however, claim that Parmenides also examined the possibility of generation from being in the next two verses:

Nor will the strength of conviction ever impel anything to come to be beside it (*par' auto*) from (not-)being (*ek mē eontos* or *ek tou eontos*). (B8.12-13)

The issue depends on the textual edition: while the manuscripts of Simplicius' *In Physics*, from which the quotation originates,<sup>11</sup> all have *ek mē ontos* (which Diels corrects into *ek mē eontos*), "from not-being", some critics, from Karsten onwards,<sup>12</sup> proposed to read *ek tou eontos*, "from being". If one accepts the correction, Parmenides would have examined the possibility of generation from being. Two arguments were advanced in favour of this emendation.<sup>13</sup> First, that if one keeps the lesson of the manuscripts, *auto* should refer to not-being, in which case Parmenides would be saying that something would come to be "alongside not-being", and thereby that not-being exists. Second, that the argument would be quite redundant with the previous one. None of these arguments, however, justifies the textual emendation: there is no real difficulty in reading *auto* as referring not to not-being, but to being, which is the subject of the previous sentence. Moreover, even with the lesson of the manuscripts, Parmenides appears to be making a new point here, i.e. that being not only cannot be generated, but it also cannot grow (this is how I understand the claim that nothing "comes to be beside it"), because what

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<sup>11</sup> *In Physics* 78.21-22 and 145.12-13.

<sup>12</sup> Karsten 1835, 34.

<sup>13</sup> See especially the discussion in Tarán 1965, 95–102.

increases it would necessarily stem from not-being. Therefore, if one keeps the lesson of the manuscripts, Parmenides only examines the possibility of generation from not-being.<sup>14</sup>

This reading is confirmed by the way in which other Presocratic philosophers present the argument. Melissus also focusses on generation from not-being:

What was always was and always will be. For if it came to be, there would necessarily be nothing before it came to be. Hence, if there was nothing, nothing could ever come to be from nothing. (B1, my translation)

Admittedly, the quotation, which comes from Simplicius' *In Physics* (162.24-26), stops here, and there is no certainty that Melissus did not go further by taking the impossibility of generation from being into consideration. Reale indeed claims that Aristotle's and Simplicius' testimonies prove that Melissus' fragment was dilemmatic.<sup>15</sup> But first, it is unlikely that Simplicius would have failed to report a second part of the argument which would confirm his antilogical presentation (especially since he just attributed the antilogical argument to Parmenides in 162.11-14), at least if one assumes, as critics usually do, that he possessed the whole of Melissus' treatise.<sup>16</sup> More importantly, Melissus analyses change as necessarily implying a transition from being to not-being and vice versa:

For, if it is altered, necessarily being is not identical, but the former being perishes and not-being comes to be. (B7, my translation)

If Melissus does not consider that change can take place from a being to another being but only imagines that a being can become a not-being and vice versa, *a fortiori* he did not conceive that generation could take place from some other being. Similarly, in his fragment B12, Empedocles rejects the possibility of generation only from not-being. Therefore, it appears that Parmenides and his successors only regard generation as taking place from not-being,<sup>17</sup> and none of them proposed the dilemma that we find in Aristotle's *Physics* and in the Aristotelian tradition.

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<sup>14</sup> See, however, Barbara Sattler's contribution in this volume for a different reading.

<sup>15</sup> Reale 1970, 39–45. He regards the many versions of the antilogical argument against generation in the commentators as a proof of its authenticity, without, unfortunately, worrying that since they all have the same source, i.e. Aristotle, their value is extremely weak. Cf. Palmer 2004, 36, n. 34 and Harriman 2019, 43–49 for similar criticisms.

<sup>16</sup> See Baltussen 2008, 65–66; Brémond 2017, 134–135.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Coxon 2009, 319–320.

### 1.3 The Gorgian Source

Why does Aristotle, then, present the Eleatic argument as an antilogy? I shall argue that he inherited this argument from Gorgias' treatise *On Not-being*. We only know the content of this treatise through two summaries, one in the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias (MXG)* and the other in Sextus Empiricus *Adversus Mathematicos (AM)* VII.65-87. They both attribute to Gorgias an antilogical argument against generation:

But [being] is also not generated. At least, *nothing could come to be whether from being or from not-being*. For if being changed, it would not be a being anymore, just as if not-being came to be, it would not be a not-being anymore. But it cannot come to be from not-being either. For if not-being is not, nothing could come to be from nothing. But if not-being is, for the reason why it cannot come from being, it cannot come from not-being either. (*MXG* 6, 979b26-31, my translation)

But being cannot come to be either. *For if it came to be, it would come either from being or from not-being*. But it did not come from being, since if it is a being, it did not come to be but already is. Neither does it come from not-being. For not-being cannot generate something, since what generates must necessarily partake in some kind of existence. Hence, being is not generated either. (*AM* VII.71-72, my translation)

The argument is very similar to Aristotle's. In Sextus' version, the resemblances are particularly striking: Gorgias would claim first that being cannot come to be from being because in this case, "it did not come to be but already is" (compare with Aristotle's "what is cannot come to be, since it is already"), and then that it cannot come from not-being either since "what generates must necessarily partake in some kind of existence" (in Aristotle's version, "since there must be something underlying"). In Pseudo-Aristotle's version, which is usually regarded as more trustworthy, there are more variations in respect to Aristotle's argument. The main difference appears in the study of generation from not-being, where Gorgias would subdivide the argument in two, introducing thereby a new antilogy within the first one:

1. either the not-being where generation comes from is not, in which case there can be no generation from it, since nothing comes from not-being,



2. or this not-being is, which would bring the same issues as in the case of generation from a being.

Despite those differences, the antilogical structure is the same as the one we find in Aristotle.

Those similarities could be read not as implying that Gorgias is the father of this argument, but either that Aristotle and he had a common source, or (which is even more likely) that the two summaries were influenced by Aristotle's *Physics*. In this regard, the almost identical formulations between Sextus' summary and Aristotle make it probable that the sceptic borrowed some of them from the *Physics*. Despite this possible contamination by Aristotle's version, I will argue that Gorgias is indeed the author of the argument.

For this antilogical structure is typical of his way of thinking, in particular in this part of the treatise, where Gorgias wants to show that there is no being at all. He intends to prove this by claiming that if being is, it should be *either eternal or generated* and *either one or many*. But he shows that each of these hypotheses leads to impossible claims. Therefore, if being has none of these characteristics, it cannot be. His whole reasoning, then, is structured as an antilogy. And similarly, within the argument against generation, he claims that if being came to be, it would be either from being or from not-being, but since both options lead to absurdities, generation is impossible. Since this structure is typical of Gorgias' way of reasoning, it is very likely that he is the father of this antilogical argument against generation.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, this kind of *reductio ad absurdum* is partly inherited from the Eleatics. For Zeno demonstrates in his fragments B1 and B3 that if beings are many, they are both  $x$  and not- $x$ , while according to Gorgias, if being is, it is neither  $x$  and not- $x$ .<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the radical opposition between being and not-being on which the argument against generation rests was founded and developed by Parmenides and his followers<sup>20</sup>. This reliance on Eleatic premises and methods forms the basis of Gorgias' treatise, most likely because he was imitating the Eleatic style and arguments in order to attack their philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, the antilogical structure appears as an innovation of Gorgias: we find no trace of this kind of reasoning in our fragments of the Eleatics. This original approach probably stems from rhetoric. Indeed, antilogy appears as structural in Gorgias' epideictic treatises, in

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<sup>18</sup> One may add that the pseudo-Aristotelian version of the argument is more developed than Aristotle's, in particular with the second antilogy embedded within the demonstration that being cannot come from not-being.

<sup>19</sup> On the Eleatic legacy on Gorgias' way of arguing, see my previous analyses (Brémond 2019, 85–86, 2022, 104–107).

<sup>20</sup> On this topic, see Barbara Sattler's contribution in this volume.

<sup>21</sup> Even though the precise aim of Gorgias' treatise is very debated (was it just a joke, or a serious piece of philosophy?), most critics agree that the Eleatics were both his main target and a source of inspiration for his methods and arguments.

particular the *Palamedes*. For example, Gorgias demonstrates that Palamedes would have acted either alone or with accomplices, and if it was with accomplices, either with equals or with slaves, but since all those options lead to impossibilities, Palamedes cannot have betrayed his companions (B11a.11). Again, when Gorgias wonders whether Palamedes could have been motivated by the search for tyrannical power, he examines and rejects various alternatives: the tyranny would be imposed either on the Greeks or on the barbarians, and in the second hypothesis, he would reach power either through persuasion or through force (B11a.13–14). These parallels indicate how much Gorgias relied on antilogies. Therefore, the sophist is most probably responsible for giving this form to the Eleatic argument against generation, and Aristotle then drew the argument that he exposes in *Physics* I.8 from Gorgias' treatise, whether directly or through some other source. I shall discuss in the conclusion the reasons why he may have done it.

## 2. The Argument against Multiplicity

Another Aristotelian argument has similar characteristics:

For some of the older philosophers thought that being must necessarily be one and immovable. (...) And they hold that the view that the universe is not continuous but consists of separate things in contact is no different from the view that they are many (and not one) and a void. For if it is divisible through and through, there is no one, and no many either, but the whole is void; while to maintain that it is divisible at some points, but not at others, looks like an arbitrary fiction. For up to what limit is it divisible? And for what reason is part of the whole indivisible, i.e. a plenum, and part divided? (*On Generation and Corruption* I.8 325a3-12, transl. Joachim 1922 modified).

In this passage, Aristotle presents an argument against the possibility of multiplicity that shows that if beings are many, even if they are in contact, they would be reduced to void because of their divisibility. A first common point with my text from the *Physics* is that this argument is attributed to a whole group, "some of the older philosophers", instead of a specific thinker, and in this case too, this group may be identified as the Eleatics, since they are those who claim that

being is “one and immovable”.<sup>22</sup> Second, the argument is not paralleled in the fragments of the Eleatics. The mention of the void reminds of Melissus, since he is the only Eleatic thinker, to our knowledge, who uses this notion. However, he does so to deny the existence of movement (B7), not multiplicity. The issue of divisibility is tackled by all three Eleatic thinkers, but the idea that something could be divided everywhere only appears in Zeno’s paradoxes, in particular those against movement, which suppose that space is infinitely divisible. But none of those philosophers implies that division supposes or entails that being is void.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, most critics consider that Aristotle forged this argument based on considerations found in Melissus and Zeno.<sup>24</sup>

There is, however, a clear parallel between this text and Gorgias’ treatise *On Not-Being*. A first similarity lies in the antilogical structure: although it is less remarkable than in the passage of the *Physics*, Aristotle examines two possibilities for the division: either being is divisible everywhere, or it is divisible “at some points, but not at others”. Since both options result in impossibilities, there can be no division. But we also find a parallel with a passage from the summary of Gorgias’ *On Not-being* in the *MXG*, which has no equivalent in Sextus’ version:

Moreover, if it is moved in the sense of transported, being is not continuous but it is divided, and it is not where it is divided. Hence, if it is moved everywhere, it is divided everywhere, and in this case, it is not everywhere. For where it is divided, it lacks being. (*MXG* 6 980a3-6, my translation)

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<sup>22</sup> They are characterised in this way in *Physics* I.2 184b15-18 and *Metaphysics* A.5 986b10-17. Hussey 2004, 249 talks about a “thorough assimilation of Parmenides to Melissus”.

<sup>23</sup> In *GC* I.2 316a14-b16, Aristotle expands on the issue of infinite divisibility and wonders what would remain if a body was completely divided, one of the possibilities being that it would be nothing at all (316b27-29). This difficulty would have led the atomists to posit indivisible bodies. The question of the origin of this argument is debated (see Rashed 2005, 103–104), but even though the inspiration is clearly Zenonian, Aristotle himself does not attribute those considerations on division to anyone specific. Simplicius, in his *Commentary to Physics* I.4 16-22, claims that according to Zeno, the many beings would be infinitely extended because of the “slicing to infinity” (“*tèn ep’apeiron tomèn*”), an expression he draws, as he says himself, from Themistius’ commentary. It is unclear whether this is a reconstitution of Zeno’s argument or a trustworthy testimony, but in any case, the infinite divisibility of being is not taken to imply its complete destruction: while Simplicius seems to use this claim to establish that the many beings would be unlimited in size, according to Themistius, this argument would rather prove that those beings cannot be one.

<sup>24</sup> See Barnes 1982, 201; Brémond 2017, 43–44.

In this text, Gorgias attacks the possibility of movement as follows:<sup>25</sup> if being is moved, it is not “continuous” (*suneches*) but divided, and where it is divided, it is not.<sup>26</sup> Hence, if being is divided everywhere (*pantē diērētai*), it will be nothing at all. Similarly, Aristotle opposes the divisibility of being and its continuity (“the universe is not continuous – *suneches* – but consists of separate – *diērēmenon* – things in contact”) and claims that if it is divided everywhere (*pantē diaireton*), it will be nothing but void. Those similarities are even more striking if one considers that according to Aristotle, continuity is not opposed to divisibility nor contact: for he thinks that what is continuous *is* divisible and in contact.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, he is using here the adjective *suneches* not in his own sense, but in Gorgias’, who clearly means by it a property that would prevent things from being divided.<sup>28</sup>

Despite all those similarities, Aristotle’s argument is still quite different from Gorgias’. First, he uses the impossibility of division to refute the multiplicity of beings, while Gorgias targets their movement. And in our summary of the *MXG*, the argument does not have an antilogical structure: Gorgias takes into consideration only the possibility of complete division, and not the one of partial division that we find in the *GC*. It is, of course, very possible that the text of the *MXG* is corrupt, especially since this passage raises many difficulties both in its edition and in its interpretation.<sup>29</sup> But it appears, in any case, that Aristotle did not simply borrow Gorgias’ argument without any modifications, since he used the problems that the sophist raised against motion to reject the possibility of multiplicity. This parallel indicates that Aristotle was again inspired by Gorgias for the argument and that, just as it was the case in *Physics* I.8, he relied on the sophist’s treatise to reconstruct an antilogical argument that is attributed to the Eleatics as a whole.

Whether we think that Gorgias himself formulated this argument antilogically or not, we may understand Aristotle’s intervention differently: either he just borrowed from Gorgias an antilogical argument and attributed it to the Eleatics as a group, as we saw in the case of

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<sup>25</sup> The role of this argument is far from clear: while in this section, Gorgias rejects the existence of being by showing that it is neither eternal nor generated and neither one nor many, he adds at the end one argument against motion. Some critics think that he wanted to demonstrate that being is neither moved nor unmoved but that the part in favour of motion is missing from our manuscripts, others that this argument serves to argue against multiplicity; in any case, there is no reason to doubt its authenticity.

<sup>26</sup> The reason why movement would necessarily entail division is not made explicit. Melissus, in his fragment B10, also connects divisibility and movement, but the other way around: according to him, if being is divided, it is moved, while for Gorgias, if being is moved, it is divided.

<sup>27</sup> In *Physics* V.3 227a14-15, Aristotle defines what is continuous as that which constitutes a unity by contact with something else, in VI.2 232b24-25 as that which is divisible into parts that are always further divisible. On the relationship between those two definitions, see Sattler 2020, 295–296.

<sup>28</sup> One may find a similar conception in Parmenides, who deduces in B8 the continuity of being (v. 30) from its indivisibility (v. 27-29).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. n. 25. The preceding lines are highly corrupt in the manuscripts.

*Physics* I.8, or, despite some Gorgian original content, Aristotle is responsible for rephrasing the Eleatic arguments as antilogies, even though Gorgias himself did not do it. We shall see in the next section that this second phenomenon is quite widespread. This leads me to claim that Gorgias' model became what I would call "productive": the antilogical structure, because of his treatise, became so tightly associated with Eleatic thought that our testimonies tended to systematically reformulate Eleatic arguments as antilogies. The next section should provide some case studies to exemplify this tendency.

### 3. Productivity of the Antilogical Model

#### 3.1 Further Arguments against Generation

First, I shall examine some other versions of the Eleatic argument against generation that can be found in various testimonies. Although they differ from the one we find both in Aristotle's *Physics* and in Gorgias' treatise, we shall see that they maintain the antilogical structure.

We find my first testimony in the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise, this time in the part dedicated to Melissus. The author presents the following argument against generation:

*For whether all things (apanta) came to be or not all things, in both cases they are eternal.*<sup>30</sup> For they would come to be from nothing in their generation. For nothing pre-exists if everything comes to be. And if while some things existed others kept being added, being would become more numerous and bigger, and that which makes it more numerous and bigger would come to be from nothing. For the more numerous is not in the lesser, nor the bigger in the smaller. (*MXG* 1 974a3-9, my translation)

According to this argument, generation would concern either all things or some of them; Melissus would show that in either case, something would come to be from nothing; therefore, generation is impossible. This dichotomy may remind us of Parmenides' fragment B8.6-13, where he first rejects the possibility of generation of being as a whole, and then the addition of a new being (cf. section 1.2). There are, however, some differences, the most important being

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<sup>30</sup> The formulation is quite awkward: Pseudo-Aristotle implies that if some things came to be, they would still be eternal, while he means that since a partial generation is impossible, all things must be eternal. Some editors change the text to avoid the difficulty.

that Parmenides does not oppose a generation of everything and a generation that would only concern some things: he only takes into consideration the generation of one thing, i.e. being, not of “all things” or “some of them”. Nor is there any indication that Melissus developed this argument: even though he mentions, in his fragment B7, the impossibility for being to become bigger, we find no dichotomy in the argument against generation (B1). Just as it is the case for Parmenides, the opposition between all things and some of them appears to be foreign to Melissus’ thought: he does not assimilate his being with “all things”, since it is one and indivisible. It is then very likely that Pseudo-Aristotle himself developed the argument in this antilogical form.<sup>31</sup>

Let me turn to a second testimony, which concerns this time Xenophanes. Both Pseudo-Aristotle and Simplicius attribute to him the following argument to demonstrate that his god, which they tend to assimilate to being in general, is eternal:

He says that it is impossible, if anything is, that it has come to be—he applies this to the god. For necessarily, *what has come to be came either from the like or from the unlike. And neither is possible.* For it does not befit the like to have been begotten by the like rather than to have begotten it (for equal things, indeed, have all the same properties, and they are in a like relation to one another). Nor would the unlike have come to be from the unlike. For if the stronger came to be from the weaker, or the greater from the minor, or the better from the worse, or on the contrary the worse things from the better ones, being would come to be from not-being, which is impossible. Then the god is, for these reasons, eternal. (*MXG 977a14-23*, my translation)

And [Xenophanes] showed that he did not come to be from the fact that *what comes to be has to come to be either from the like or the unlike.* But the like is unaffected by the like. For it does not fit the like at all to engender rather than to be engendered by the like. And if it came to be from the unlike, being would come to be from not-being. That is how he showed that he did not come to be and is eternal. (Simplicius *In Physics 22.33-23.4*, my translation)

Here again, we have an antilogical reasoning: if the god came to be, it would come to be either from something like it or from something that is unlike it, both of which are impossible; therefore, the god is eternal. The similarities with Eleatic reasoning are very striking, especially

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<sup>31</sup> For further discussion of the authenticity of this text, see Brémond 2017, 72–76.

in the use of the opposition between being and not-being (if the god came to be from what is unlike, “being would come to be from not-being”<sup>32</sup>); and Xenophanes was indeed often associated with the Eleatic school as Parmenides’ master.<sup>33</sup> But it is extremely unlikely that he is the author of the argument: even though he did consider that his god did not come to be, as attested by his fragment B14, he could not have developed this kind of reasoning based on the opposition between being and not-being before Parmenides. Aristotle, in *Rhetoric* II.23 1399b6-9, attributes to him the claim that it is impious to say that the gods are born, because it would mean that there was a time when there were no gods at all. This seems a much more trustworthy testimony than the one we find in the *MXG*.<sup>34</sup> There again, Xenophanes’ argument was reformulated, and this rewrite included an antilogical structure.

In both cases, then, an antilogical argument is attributed to individual thinkers associated with Parmenides, i.e. Melissus and Xenophanes: generation would take place either from what is like or from what is unlike (for Xenophanes), or it would concern either all things or only some of them (for Melissus). Then both branches of the dichotomy are shown to be absurd, usually because they would suppose in some way or another a generation from not-being, and this would prove that generation is impossible. Despite the similarities in structure, the two arguments differ from the one we found both in Aristotle’s *Physics* and in Gorgias’ *On Not-Being*. This raises the question of their origin. Even though they keep the typical Gorgian structure, we do not find a parallel in our summaries of his treatise, and it is most unlikely that Gorgias himself developed all these variations on the argument against generation.

We should note that in both cases, the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise plays a central role, since both arguments appear in the *MXG*. The only other testimony comes from Simplicius, but I tried to demonstrate in another paper that Simplicius’ source in this passage is the *MXG* itself (or some text that was very similar to it), which he probably mistook for a work by Theophrastus.<sup>35</sup> This tendency to reformulate Eleatic arguments as Gorgian antilogies is justified by Pseudo-Aristotle’s approach. For even though the general aim of the *MXG* is far from clear, it appears at least that the anonymous author tries to establish a strong connection

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<sup>32</sup> The manuscripts of the *MXG* actually transmit the reversed claim, i.e. that “not-being would come to be from being”. Most editors change the text on the basis of Simplicius’ testimony.

<sup>33</sup> On the “Eleatisation” of Xenophanes, see Brémond 2020.

<sup>34</sup> It is not completely unlikely that Xenophanes claimed that the gods cannot come to be from nothing, since Epicharmus, who is known to have parodied Xenophanes (see Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1010a6-7), develops in his fragment B1 an argument where he claims that the gods are eternal “because there is nothing from which or into which [they] would have come to be first”. Barnes 1982, 66–67 reconstitutes Xenophanes’ argument based on Aristotle’s, Epicharmus’ and Pseudo-Aristotle’s testimonies, but he does not go as far as to attribute to Xenophanes the antilogical structure and he recognises that the *MXG*’s report was “contaminated by later Eleatic logic”.

<sup>35</sup> Brémond 2023, 195–198.

between the three authors he deals with, i.e. Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, he was particularly susceptible to be influenced by Gorgias' treatise in his presentation of Melissus and Xenophanes. We shall see in the next sections, however, that this antilogical rewriting of Eleatic arguments is quite widespread in the Aristotelian tradition.

### 3.2 Melissus' Argument Against Movement

Let us turn to another group of testimonies that concerns Melissus' argument against motion. In his fragment B7, Melissus claims the following:

Neither does it move. For it has nowhere to withdraw to, but it is full. For if there was a void, it would withdraw toward the void. But since there is no void, it has nowhere to withdraw to. (My translation)

Hence, Melissus considers that motion would only happen if there was a void, but since there is no void (because it is a not-being), motion is impossible. The Aristotelian tradition, however, systematically attributes to Melissus an antilogical argument: motion would take place if being went toward the void *or* the plenum, but neither is possible; hence there is no motion. Our two earliest testimonies come from Pseudo-Aristotle and Alexander:

It withdraws by going necessarily *either toward the full or toward the void*. But one of them cannot receive the full, the other is nothing but void. (Pseudo-Aristotle *MXG* 1 974a16-18, my translation)

Melissus (...) next shows also that it is motionless, as Alexander says, "from the fact that *what moves must move either through something full or through a void* (and in this way there would actually be something else [other than being]). But that it is not possible for something to move through what is full, and that a void cannot be among the things that exist (for the void is nothing, and if it existed being would still not be infinite; for if it were possible for it to change around in itself, it is clear that it would be larger than itself, but

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Cassin 1980, 28–31. In particular, the three summaries begin with the same premise, i.e. "if there is something" (*ei ti estin*), giving the impression that Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias had the same starting point (even though, in the case of Gorgias, the final aim was to reject this premise).



nothing is larger than the infinite...<sup>37</sup> (Alexander in Simplicius *In Physics* 110.13-19, translation by Huby and Taylor 2011)

We find similar antilogical presentations of the argument in Philoponus *In Physics* 608.21-28 and Simplicius *In Physics* 104.12-15 and 111.3-8, which are probably inspired by Alexander.<sup>38</sup> It is difficult to assess, however, the relationship between Alexander and Pseudo-Aristotle: despite the great uncertainties concerning the date of the *MXG* (hypotheses reach from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), it is quite unlikely that Pseudo-Aristotle had access to Alexander's commentary, and Alexander's version, since it is more detailed, can hardly derive from the *MXG*.

As for a common source, it appears that it cannot be Gorgias either. As we saw in section 2, Pseudo-Aristotle's summary attributes to him an argument against motion that we do not find in Sextus. This argument, however, does not rely on the concept of void, but rather claims that motion would imply division. Moreover, Pseudo-Aristotle makes this cryptic comment at the end of Gorgias' argument: "saying 'being divided' instead of 'the void'" (*anti tou kenou to diērēsthai legōn*, *MXG* 6 980a7). I understand this as meaning that Gorgias takes division, not the void, as the condition for motion, which would suggest that he did not propose an argument that relied on the impossibility of the void.

We may find a more likely source for this argument in Aristotle's *Physics* when he discusses the existence of the void:

They say, first, that there would be no motion in respect of place (that is, locomotion and increase), if there were no void. For what is a plenum cannot receive anything [into itself] (...) Melissus even uses this argument to show that the universe is unmovable: if it is to move, he says, there must be void, but void is not one of the beings. (*Physics* IV.6 213b4-14, transl. Hussey 2006 modified)

In this text, Aristotle first exposes the arguments of those who support the existence of the void: according to them, since the full cannot receive any new body, motion is only possible through the void. He then mentions that this reasoning led Melissus to reject motion, because he denied the existence of the void. This passage could easily be turned into an antilogical argument attributed to Melissus, where he would first show that there is no movement toward the full and

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<sup>37</sup> The quotation of Alexander's commentary is incomplete.

<sup>38</sup> Simplicius directly relied on Alexander's commentary, and Philoponus read Ammonius' commentary, which was in turn inspired by Alexander: see Golitsis 2008, 58–64.

then no movement toward the void. But Aristotle does not go so far. If this reformulation was made by a common source to Pseudo-Aristotle and Alexander, a likely candidate could be Theophrastus.<sup>39</sup> In any case, by Pseudo-Aristotle and Alexander we see a reformulation of Melissus' argument as an antilogy. While Melissus only considered one option, movement through the void, according to the whole post-Aristotelian tradition, he claimed that motion could take place either toward the plenum or toward the void.

### 3.3 The Argument for Monism

I will examine one last testimony, which concerns, this time, Parmenides only. My only source is Porphyry:

For if beings are not one but several, *either they will differ from one another in existence (tō einai), or in non-existence*; but neither would they differ in existence (for they are alike in actually existing, and like things, as like, are indistinguishable and are not different, and things that are not different are one), nor in non-existence; for things that differ must first exist, but things that do not exist differ in no way from one another; if, therefore, he [i.e. Parmenides] says that several postulated things are not able to differ and be different from one another, either by existing or by not existing, it is clear that all will be one and that it will be uncreated and imperishable. (Porphyry in Simplicius *In Physics* 116.11-18, translation by Huby and Taylor 2011 modified)

This constitutes, according to Simplicius, a rewriting of Parmenides' argument based partly on his poem, partly on Aristotle and partly on "what someone would say if he wanted to expose Parmenides' opinion convincingly" (116.6-8). Since this part of the reasoning finds no echo in the poem nor in Aristotle's text, it is most certainly a development of Porphyry or of one of his sources. There is no parallel in Gorgias' treatise *On Not-being* either. And again, the argument is antilogical: multiple beings would differ either in their existence or in their non-existence, neither is possible, hence being is one.

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<sup>39</sup> It is well known that Alexander used Theophrastus' works for his commentary. And I have argued in Brémond (2023), pp. 187–192, that Pseudo-Aristotle also relied on Theophrastus' doxographies.

#### 4. Conclusion

In all the texts I examined, we could see that an antilogical argument is attributed to the Eleatics, even though we find no such argument in their fragments. I traced back the antilogical structure to Gorgias' treatise *On Not-being* and showed that in some cases (the clearest one being the argument against generation in Aristotle's *Physics* I.8), his arguments are directly borrowed for a presentation of Eleatic thought. In others, the Eleatic arguments are reformulated as antilogies, but we cannot find the source in Gorgias' treatise. It cannot be a mere coincidence that the antilogical structure that Gorgias systematically used was applied to Eleatic arguments, even without a direct influence of the treatise *On Not-being*. In my opinion, the Gorgian way of reasoning became so connected with the Eleatics that when later thinkers reformulated the arguments of Parmenides and their followers, they tended to give them an antilogical structure.

One may then wonder in how far Gorgias' treatise directly influenced those testimonies. As we saw, since Aristotle borrowed the argument against generation and has one that is very similar to Gorgias' concerning division, it is likely that he took them directly from the *On Not-being* – even though one cannot exclude some intermediary source. In both cases, he uses Gorgias' argument to constitute a common Eleatic doctrine, without attributing it to a specific thinker. It is unclear why he relied on Gorgias for his reconstitution of the Eleatic school: the explanation may just be that he found Gorgias' arguments particularly convincing or convenient to defend common Eleatic claims. The pseudo-Aristotelian author of the *MXG* had a good knowledge of Gorgias' treatise and it certainly influenced the way in which he presents arguments by Melissus and Xenophanes. But as for the other authors of our testimonies, from Alexander to Simplicius, it is unlikely that they had any access, direct or indirect, to Gorgias' *On Not-Being*, since none of them ever makes any reference to this treatise.

Why did those authors, then, attribute antilogical arguments to the Eleatics? There are two main origins for this trend. The first one is Aristotle himself, since he is the main source for the other testimonies, which are mostly drawn from commentaries on his works. His use of antilogical arguments to reformulate Eleatic claims in the *Physics* and *GC* may have served as a model for further rewriting, which was then not attributed to the Eleatics as a group but to specific Eleatic thinkers, even by authors like Simplicius who had direct access to their works. But one should also take into consideration the important role of Plato's *Parmenides*. For in the second part of this treatise, Plato puts into the mouth of his eponymous character a series of reasoning concerning the one being, many of which consist in saying that it is neither x nor not-

x (neither moved nor unmoved, neither equal nor unequal, etc.). I have already shown in two papers that Plato was influenced by Gorgias in this regard.<sup>40</sup> It is also likely that the *Parmenides* contributed to the strong association between antilogical reasoning and the Eleatics. We should note, however, that none of the antilogies that I presented in this paper finds an equivalent in Plato's *Parmenides*.

The way in which Plato, Aristotle (and maybe Theophrastus) and Pseudo-Aristotle, under Gorgias' inspiration, formulated the Eleatic arguments as antilogies became, as I hope to have shown, productive: it served as a model for presenting the Eleatics even in times where Gorgias' treatise was almost forgotten. This reveals that Gorgias played a major and so far unnoticed role in the reception of Parmenides and his successors, and in a way that has, as far as I know, rarely been observed in the history of reception of the Presocratics: i.e. the systematic attribution of an argumentative structure to a group of thinkers, even though none of them used it, based on the rewriting of their thought by an opponent. This study will hopefully contribute to the understanding of the impact of the sophists in general in the reception of the Presocratics and will shed a new light on the way in which Parmenides and his followers were interpreted, not only individually, but as tenants of the "Eleatic school".

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<sup>40</sup> Brémond 2019, 2022. See also Mansfeld 1986b, 258–262; Palmer 2009, 108–117.

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