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ZENO'S STRicture AND PREDICATION
IN PLATO, ARISTOTLE, AND PLOTINUS

Much philosophical insight (to say nothing of scientific insight) has been the result of taking very literally and even simple-mindedly the things which we say and think. Having so taken them, one may, with minimum risk of verbal bewitchment, hold them up to critical scrutiny. What seemed obvious in its standard rhetorical garb may then suddenly appear trivial, highly questionable, or even impossible. Socrates' practice in the early and middle Platonic dialogues is, of course, a standard example of this common philosophical procedure. Sometimes the insight garnered from this procedure comes only after it has been used aporetically or even to promote apparent absurdity. I think, for example, that a number of arguments for philosophical scepticism are of this latter sort. Though an argument designed to enforce or clarify a distinction between knowledge and opinion does not as such promote absurdity, surely one designed to show that knowledge as such is impossible does. I readily acknowledge, however, that the promotion of apparent absurdity has actually led to insight, as the responses of, for example, Augustine, Descartes, or Berkeley to apparently absurd scepticism show. But my concern in his paper is not with scepticism or any responses to it.

It is rather with an argument which Plato attributes to Zeno and which promotes quite a different absurdity. What I wish to do is, first, to state the argument and, second, to look rather carefully at what I take to the responses of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus to it.

Zeno's argument, as Plato states it, is designed to show that what we ordinarily take to be predication is impossible. This is, I submit, an apparent, if not a real, absurdity. I hope to show, however, that the argument imposes a provocative constraint on the efforts of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus to show how predication is possible. That constraint I shall be calling 'Zeno's Stricture'.

The philosophical content of Plato's Parmenides commences with Socrates' summing up Zeno's treatise (which, as the dialogue opens, Zeno has just finished reading) as follows:

Socrates  Zeno, how does your argument go? If the beings are many, then they must be likes and unlikes. But this is impossible, for un-

James Bogen and James E. McGuire (eds.), How Things Are, 21–58.

J. Bogen et al. (eds.), How Things Are
likes cannot be likes, and likes cannot be unlikes. Is this not the thrust of your argument?

Zeno
It is.

Socrates
And so, if it is impossible for unlikes to be likes and for likes to be unlikes, it is also impossible for many to be. For, if the beings were many, they would be impossibly characterized. And so, is the burden of your arguments nothing other than to contend — against everything commonly said — that the beings are not many?

Zeno
Yes.\(^1\)

The purport, in context, of this rather obscure argument is, I believe, as follows:

Suppose that \(A, B, C, \text{ etc.}\) are "beings". Their being many is simply a matter of their being more than one. If ‘\(A\)', ‘\(B\)', ‘\(C\)', etc., are not simply to be names for the same thing, the beings must be different from one another and, as different, unlike each other. Suppose further that we allow predication among these beings, i.e., that one or more of them can truly be said to be one of the others. Thus, e.g., \(A\) may truly be said to be \(B\). And so \(A\) is \(B\). But, if \(A\) really is \(B\), it would seem to have to be the same as \(B\) and, as same, like it. And so, if we allow it to be said that \(A\) is \(B\), we shall have to say that \(A\) is both like (as being \(B\)) \(B\) and unlike (since ‘\(A\)' and ‘\(B\)' are names for differents) \(B\). \(A\) and \(B\) would then be both "likes" and "unlikes". But this is impossible, so it cannot be the case that \(A\) is \(B\).\(^2\)

Plato makes it quite clear in context that the argument is used to defend there being no many and thus to support Parmenides' insistence upon One. Even so, the argument does imply the principle that, if \(A\) is \(B\), then \(A\) and \(B\) cannot be different. And it is this principle which I call 'Zeno's Stricture'.

Several comments are in order.

First, every Greek, like the rest of us, spoke the language and simply took a variety of forms of predication for granted. Their language, like ours, obviously "worked" for a large number of purposes. With it one could tell what is happening or has happened, describe people and things, explain changes and procedures, give instructions, praise, blame, issue orders, lay plans, express joy, regret, and sorrow. And many other things. In doing most of these commonplace things predication of some sort is necessary. For