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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 question­
able, 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 absurd­
ity, 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 argu­
ment 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.
likes cannot be likes, and likes cannot be unlikes. Is this not the thrust of your argument?

_It is._

_Zeno_

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?

_YES._

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

Suppose that _A, B, C, 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._

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