

Episode 244 - Cicero's OTNOTG 19 - Zeno's Paradoxes - Profundity Or Gaslighting?

Post by “Cassius” of August 29, 2024 at 2:01 PM

We can probably take this article as key material:

[Zeno's Paradoxes \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Zeno's Paradoxes

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Almost everything that we know about Zeno of Elea is to be found in the opening pages of Plato's *Parmenides*. There we learn that Zeno was nearly 40 years old when Socrates was a young man, say 20. Since Socrates was born in 469 BC we can estimate a birth date for Zeno around 490 BC. Beyond this, really all we know is that he was close to Parmenides (Plato reports the gossip that they had a sexual relationship when Zeno was young), and that he wrote a book of paradoxes defending Parmenides' philosophy. Sadly this book has not survived, and what we know of his arguments is second-hand, principally through Aristotle and his commentators (here we draw particularly on Simplicius, who, though writing a thousand years after Zeno, apparently possessed at least some of his book). There were apparently 40 'paradoxes of plurality', attempting to show that ontological pluralism—a belief in the existence of many things rather than only one—leads to absurd conclusions; of these paradoxes only two definitely survive, though a third argument can probably be attributed to Zeno. Aristotle speaks of a further four arguments against motion (and by extension change generally), all of which he gives and attempts to refute. In addition, Aristotle attributes two other paradoxes to Zeno. Sadly again, almost none of these paradoxes are quoted in Zeno's original words by their various commentators, but in paraphrase.

1.1 Ancient Background

Before we look at the paradoxes themselves it will be useful to sketch some of their historical and logical significance. First, Zeno sought to defend Parmenides by attacking his critics. Parmenides rejected pluralism and the reality of any kind of change: for him all was one indivisible, unchanging reality, and any appearances to the contrary were illusions, to be

dispelled by reason and revelation. Not surprisingly, this philosophy found many critics, who ridiculed the suggestion; after all it flies in the face of some of our most basic beliefs about the world. In response to this criticism Zeno did something that may sound obvious, but which had a profound impact on Greek philosophy that is felt to this day: he attempted to show that equal absurdities followed logically from the denial of Parmenides' views. You think that there are many things? Then you must conclude that everything is both infinitely small and infinitely big! You think that motion is infinitely divisible? Then it follows that nothing moves! (This is what a 'paradox' is: a demonstration that a contradiction or absurd consequence follows from apparently reasonable assumptions.)