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**The Papers Presented at the World
Congress on Mulla Sadra
(May, 1999, Tehran)**

Volume 9

**Mulla Sadra
Religion and Gnosis**

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Do the Fundamentals of Rationality in Different Philosophical Traditions Correspond?

Andrey Smirnov

A comparative study of Zeno's paradoxes and teachings of early *kalām*. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that it is impossible to formulate Zeno's paradoxes concerning motion proceeding from the set of premises that were considered rationally consistent by the Mu'tazila. It is demonstrated, furthermore, that these premises, agreed upon among the Mu'tazila, permit to formulate theses that parallel the topic of Zeno's paradoxes and contrast their conclusions. The paper argues that the only possible explanation of this contrast is disagreement of the principles of rationality that guide philosophical discourse in the two cases. Accordingly, these principles, that define what is considered 'evidently impossible/correct', are formulated and compared. The paper shows that the law of the excluded middle was accepted by the Mu'tazila in a form evidently different from Aristotle's. Furthermore, the notion of sense-formation procedure is introduced, and it is demonstrated that differences in content of concepts and theories can be reduced to differences in sense-formation procedures, but not vice versa.

I

Let us begin by comparing two statements.

1. Simplicius Comm. on Physics, 1011,19 (ad 239b5): Zeno's argument that when anything is in a space equal to itself, it is either in motion or at rest, and that nothing is moved in the present moment, and that the moving body is always in a space equal to itself at each present moment, may, I think, be put in a syllogism as follows: The arrow which is moving forward is at every present moment in a space equal to itself, accordingly it is in a space equal to itself in all time; but that which is in a space equal to itself in the present moment is not in motion. Accordingly it is in a state of rest, since it is not moved in the present moment, and that which is not moving is at rest, since everything is either in motion or at rest. So the arrow which is moving forward is at rest while it is moving forward, in every moment of its motion.¹

2. Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf said that motion and rest are something different from being and contiguity. Motion in a body from one location to another occurs when it is at its new location, in the state² of its being in it, and it is its transition from the first location and its leaving the first location. The body is at rest in the second location if it stays there two instants of time. Therefore, for transition from one location to another to take place, two locations and two instants of time are required, and for rest — one location and two instants of time [are required].³

In the first case, as one will easily guess, the text in question is the famous Zeno's "Arrow" paradox. The second argument belongs to Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf, one of the prominent representatives of early *kalām*, the first trend of medieval Islamic philosophy. I would like to bring the two arguments into confrontation to highlight the principles that underlie them.

This is the question which we put to these texts: do the two ways to consider the motion which we find in them correspond? Can they be placed in one and the same perspective or are they parallel in such a way that there is no common point of departure for them, even on the deepest possible level of our inquiry? The question can also be worded differently: is it possible to formulate Zeno's paradoxes in the system of ideas that form the reference frame for considering the motion in *kalām*, and vice versa?

II

Refuting the paradoxes based on sophisms Aristotle formulates a principle according to which a thing must be spoken about in one and the same respect within one and the same statement. Differentiating between actual and potential states can be considered as the particular case of such univocal usage of words. It is also important for resolving paradoxes based on paralogisms, one of which is the above mentioned "Arrow" paradox.

Aristotle (*Physics*, Z 9,239 b 5): Zeno's reasoning, however, is fallacious, when he says that if everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in motion is always occupying such a space at any moment, the flying arrow is therefore motionless. This is false, for time is not composed of indivisible instances any more than any other quantity is composed of atoms.⁴

According to Aristotle, time is potentially divisible ad infinitum, therefore an atomic instant of temporal quantity is absent. If such a non-lasting instant of time existed, being added to the instants of the same type it, obviously, would not be able to give a temporal duration due to its null duration.

It is easily noticeable that the ultimate fundamentals of rationality are represented here by the principle of the tertium non datur and the thesis that the addition of two zero values does not give any value.⁵ The difference between these principles and the propositions of Zeno's paradoxes disputed by Aristotle and his followers, is obvious. Every existent, considered under the same respect, is either one or many, and this principle of the excluded middle is unquestionably valid for Aristotle as well as for Zeno, who frequently repeats it in his reasoning (it is impossible to give all the relevant citations because it would take too much space); the main concern here is the univocal usage of the terms "oneness" and "plurality" regarding "one and the same" being. Similarly, an arrow is either at rest or in motion during each instant of time. And precisely because this thesis is unquestionably valid, the instant of time during which it can be said to be at rest, does not exist, consequently, the time is not divisible. This thesis perfectly agrees with the saying that the addition of two null values does not give any value.

Speaking about the principles of *tertium non datur* and that the addition of two null values does not give any value, I do not claim to have isolated all the theses that can be regarded as ultimate fundamentals of rationality in Greek thought. I would only like to highlight that the theses under consideration, no doubts, belong to them. It can not go unnoticed that the formulation of Zeno paradoxes is possible only if these theses are considered absolutely valid.

III

The problems *Mutakallimūn* faced, are similar to those that drew attention of Zeno and his opponents: how one and the same thing can be both one and many, the atomic theory of matter, time, and space, the description of motion. *Mutakallimūn* were only well aware of possible solutions of such problems brought forward in pre- and post-Socratic periods of ancient philosophical thought. For example, we come across the following mention of Aristotelian thesis:

Some philosophizing– scholars say that atom is divisible and this divisibility actually has its limit, but potentially the limit of divisibility does not exist.⁶

We remember that Zeno proceeds from the assumption that the addition of null values does not give any value. Showing his agreement with this assumption and, moreover, proceeding from it, Aristotle rejects the proposition that time is composed of atomic instances. Time according to him is a continual quantity, which is potentially divisible *ad infinitum* but does not contain any actual non-dimensional atom of time.

Let us compare the logic according to which these concepts are formed with the *Mutakallimūn* idea of time (we are taking into consideration only an early, Mu'tazila stage of the development of *kalām*).

As al-Ash'ari informs us, *Mutakallimūn* used to say: time is that what separates actions. This is the border between one action and the other. During each [instant of] time an action arises.⁷

It follows from al-Ash'ari's statement that most of *Mutakallimūn* supported this view. According to this definition, time appears to be the

function of two events. The key statement here is that time is “the border between one action and the other”.

If we want to understand it fully, we must take into consideration that “between” in Islamic thought does not imply a border which separates one thing from the other, in which case that which is between A and B would belong neither A or B. As a matter of fact “between” here turns out to be something which conjoins. But it conjoins the two not in the way they are contiguous in some point or along any border (this is the way to conjoin two things typical for the above mentioned border),⁸ but in such a way that they overlap in a given area. Therefore that which is found (between(A and B constitutes the area of their partial overlapping.

An instant of time defined as overlapping of one event with the other, separates by this very fact two events, simply because the overlapping area of two events, A and B, does not cover A and B completely, but leaves non-overlapping areas, that turn out to be separated one from the other by virtue of their overlapping.

We note that certain juxtaposition of two events (“actions”, in *Mutakallimūn*’s own wording) produces the “time”. The most precise term to determine this juxtaposition is, perhaps, (overlapping). In this overlapping (which always remains partial) of two senses, none of which implies time, arises a new sense — that of “time”.

If the “instant of time” as a sense arises in the juxtaposition of two events, it also means the opposite: any instant of time comprises two juxtaposed events.

The possibility to contemplate an atomic instant of time in this way was used by the *Mutakallimūn* in an interesting speculation, which solves one of the most important questions of the cosmography: how can the earth hold in the center of the universe. The *Mutakallimūn* regarded that the Supreme God creates at each instant of time some body beneath the earth, then at the next instant destroys it and in the state (*ḥāl*) of its annihilation creates a new body. The earth stays on this very body. This body can not fall down in the state of its creation and does not need a place to be fixed on, since a thing can not be at motion or at rest in the state of its coming into being.⁹

The purely logical nature of this theory is evident. The earth at each present instant stays on some body. Each instant of time includes two events: destruction of such body (created at the previous instant of time) and its creation anew. It is clear though not stipulated expressly, that there is no duration “within” such an instant of time. It is emphasized by the introduced heretofore term “state” (*ḥāl*): the state is instantaneous, it manifests the thing in its invariability, and the instant of time (*waqt*) proves to be the conjunction of a pair of such states, in this case – the state of destruction of the body and the state of creating it anew. Thus, each instant of time is a juxtaposition of two non-lasting “states” or “events”. As the body that the earth stands upon and with reference to which its motion and rest can be determined at each instant of time, comes into being during each instant of time, and in the state of coming into being it is neither at motion nor at rest, so it comes out that during no instant of time the earth can be either in motion or at rest. If the earth is denied both “motion” (*ḥaraka*) and “rest” (*sukūn*), than its “staying upon” (*wuqūf*) is neither motion nor rest.

Note the obvious conflict of this theory with the law of the excluded middle. However, this is a kind of conflict that does not take the form of direct negation. The case is more complicated.

The law of the excluded middle in its classical form “A is either B or non-B” allows two readings that might be called “imperative” and “negative”. The first means that “A must be either B or non-B”, the second, that “A can not be both B and non-B at the same time”.

These two wordings seem to be equivalent; indeed, if the body may be predicated a motion, then only by virtue of this it should be either in motion or at rest (imperative reading) and can not be in motion and at rest at the same time (negative reading). However, the texts of classical Islamic tradition indicate that these two wordings were viewed as fundamentally different. In the case under consideration the law of excluded middle is broken in its first “imperative” wording (if “rest” is regarded as “non-motion”, what, according to the texts, corresponds to the intentions of *Mutakallimūn*). More cases when the law is broken in this very wording could be pointed out. In the mean time, the law of excluded middle in its “negative” wording was well-known in the Islamic philosophy at least since

kalām and, to the best of my knowledge, was strictly observed.¹⁰ The discussion of this question may offer a topic for a separate article; hereby I would like to fix the attention upon the fact of distinguishing the two wordings of the law, which are at all not equivalent from the point of view of the Islamic thought. I believe that this distinguishing finally goes back to the same ultimate fundamentals of rationality of semantic nature discussed in this article. But I can now just bring forward this proposition leaving its elaboration and demonstration till better occasion.

We have seen that instant of time, according to *Mutakallimūn*, includes two events. Does it mean that it “consists of” two events? If we regard these two events as separated from one another, i.e. as separate, the atom of time will “consist of” two joint, added to one another events, that naturally enough can also be separated and hence the atom of time will not be indivisible. At the same time it is clear that no coincidence of two events is meant here, because they involve one and the same body; at least it is not such a coincidence that makes one thing identical to the other. This dilemma takes us back to the concept of the border. How can two events be separated in the way that they at the same time stay inseparable from each other? How can an instant (consist of) something that is not adjoined to one another like cubes of a toy-constructor? Apparently this is achieved by means of such a juxtaposition which was called overlapping of two events.

Now we can spot the remarkable contrast of these speculations with the Peripatetic ideas of time. When Ibn Sinā says that time is that thanks to what there is such ‘before’ together with which its ‘after’ never occurs.¹¹ He introduces the Aristotelian comprehension of the border as dividing and excluding overlapping, what is expressed by the interdiction on “combination” of two subsequent events. But it is characteristic of *Mutakallimūn* to assert that two subsequent events are joined, i.e. overlap, and it is exactly this overlapping (prohibited by the Greek tradition) that proves to be the instant of time.

By “contrast” I do not mean a direct contradiction. I use this word for the reason that it reveals the sense of correlation where one element sets off the other without destroying it. Two things in contrast may coexist

without coming into direct confrontation just because they follow, so to say, parallel courses, and do not immediately come in touch with each other.

IV

The ideas of the *Mutakallimūn* regarding motion are not limited to the text we began our analysis with. We also detect other evidences. Thus al-Naṣṣām believed that if a body moves from one location to another, then motion arises in the first, and this motion is its intentions (*i'timādāt*) that imply its being in the second, while its coming into being in the second [location] is the motion of the body in the second [location], and another famous *Mutakallim*, Bishr al-Mu'tamir, said that motion arises neither in the first location, nor in the second, however, due to it the body moves from one location to another.¹²

However, irrespective to different standpoints of the *Mutakallimūn* about the essence of motion and rest (besides the quoted there are others as well) they have one typical feature in common: the senses of “motion” and “rest” may be determined only in juxtaposition of two instants of time and the state of the body in two locations accordingly. The “state” of the body taken in a single instant of time can not be related either to “motion” or to “rest”, to be precise, it may turn out to be both of them.

This evidently does not correspond to what Zeno assumes as unquestionable premise for constructing the sense of “motion”.

For him a body is either in motion or at rest during each instant of time including atomic one. Since it is absolutely true from the logical point of view, Aristotle interdicts indivisibility of time. But for the *Mutakallimūn*¹³ the body is neither in motion nor at rest in an atom of time. The state of the body during an instant of time proves to be the same both for the “rest” and for “motion”. “Motion” and “rest” as senses form in a different way¹⁴ the sense itself turns out to be different.

Zeno's paradox can not be formulated in the reference frame of basic concepts about the formation of the sense of motion shared by the *Mutakallimūn*. The point is not that it can not be formulated as a paradox; it can not be formulated even as a solved paradox, since all the senses

participating in its formation can not be generated in case we accept the principles shared by *Mutakallimūn*.

Thus in *Mutakallimūn*'s speculations the law of excluded middle¹⁵ does not manifest its fundamental power and does not make them formulate thesis on non-atomic nature of time, as we saw it do with Zeno and his opponents. For the Greeks the thesis about non-atomic nature of time is subordinate to what is unanimously regarded as unquestionable foundation of rationality.

For the *Mutakallimūn*, on contrary, the motion, as a sense, is only possible in the juxtaposition of two "instants", and they never overcome it. The juxtaposition of two "instants", two "states" does not turn out to be a content theory which is built up on some basis and may be discussed, but on the contrary it is the basis itself upon which the sense of "motion" is built up. It is this idea of the juxtaposition of two "instants" (two "states") that takes in *Kalām* the place which is taken by the thesis of excluded middle in the speculations of Zeno and his opponents. Even when the *Mutakallimūn* say that "the body is either in motion or at rest", they do not mean "during any instant of time"; meanwhile this very supplement is fundamental for the Greek tradition (for Zeno and his opponents), where the body during each instant of time might be predicated either motion or its contrary, and if the body exists, one of these two statements is indispensably true. Just because of indisputability of such sense-formation procedure Aristotle regards the supposition that time is a sum of non-lasting instants, as paralogism.

If the Western tradition proceeding from the fundamentals of rationality peculiar to it, can not formulate the propositions on time and motion acceptable to the *Mutakallimūn*, for the *Mutakallimūn* and the later tradition represented by Sufism, on the contrary, the sense-formation procedure, which ignores the law of the excluded middle in its "imperative" reading,¹⁶ proves to be fundamental.

I would like to point out that the procedure just examined is rather stable and relevant not only in case of determination of the senses of "motion", "rest" or "time". It also underlies the determination of the concept of "space", which, according to *Mutakallimūn*, arises in the juxtaposition of two atoms of substance devoid of space dimensions, what may remind us the

juxtaposition of two timeless events producing an atom of time. Thus the juxtaposition of two atoms devoid of any dimensions produces a mono-dimensional structure, the juxtaposition of two mono-dimensional produces duo-dimensional and the juxtaposition of two duo-dimensional produces a three-dimensional structure.¹⁷ The main point of this procedure may be expressed as follows: a new sense (whether it is “motion”, “rest”, “time instant” or “space dimension”) is produced in the juxtaposition of two elements none of which possesses this sense by itself.¹⁸ However, this juxtaposition is not a mere summing up, therefore such procedure does not contradict directly to the notion of impossibility to get anything by adding nothing.

V

Having pointed out the difference of the sense-formation procedures in the both discussed cases, we can understand now why the contents differ (the contents of the concepts of “motion” and of theses connected to its discussion), and in what way they differ. The sense-formation procedures are formulated as ultimate fundamentals of rationality or, to be precise, the formulation of the later depends on sense-formation procedures assumed in this or that tradition.

The ultimate fundamentals of rationality determine a priori what can be and what can be not, what is absolutely true and what is undoubtedly absurd, what always takes place and what never happens. These ultimate fundamentals of rationality depend on the admitted sense-formation procedures. I highlight this dependence because it seems to have been ignored ever before. As for the sense-formation procedures, they are not the same in different cultures. Even if we all speak of one and the same Universe, the difference of our utterances is not only and not just difference in content, but first and foremost in procedures of sense formation. We do not just say different things, our utterances are generated in different ways. The very difference of utterance generation in different cultures is to become the subject of our attention, if we really wish to understand them.

Notes

1. Fairbanks A. (ed. and trans.) *The First Philosophers of Greece*. London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1898. I chose this text for its clarity; actually any other dealing with Zeno's Arrow would do for the purposes of the present article.
2. 'State' – *ḥāl*, in this context synonymous to *waqt* 'instant of time'. See below about the relation of the two terms.
3. Al-Ash'ari. *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn wa ikhtilāf al-muṣallīn* ((Sayings of the People of Islam and Controversies Among Those Who Pray. Wiesbaden, 1980, p. 355. The book lists the sayings belonging mainly to Mu'tazila, representatives of early *Kalām*.
4. Trans. by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye.
5. I remember, of course, that "null value" or "zero" concept is not adequate to its representation in the thought of ancient Greeks, however, the context of its usage here does not contradict their theories in the aspect under consideration.
6. I.e. *falāsifa*, Islamic Peripatetic philosophers. Ibn Sinā, for example, in his (*al-Isharāt wa 'l-tanbihāt*) (Instructions and Admonitions) expresses the same idea and rejects the opinion about reality of atoms.
7. Al-Ash'ari. *Ibid.*, p.318.
8. Al-Ash'ari. *Ibid.*, p.443.
9. I purposely speak about the concept of the border in this context, for in case "between" is understood differently, "the border" is understood differently either. For example, according to Simplicius, who comments on Aristotle's "*Physics*", the border is located "on the margin of a body" (Commentary to '*Physics*', (3.210b 22), but does not happen to be special and separate entity, the same way as (present) never turns out to be separate from "before" and "after" but is their common border, while in Islamic thinking "the border" is understood both as belonging to the things being separated and as a separate entity.
10. Al_Ash'ari. *Ibid.*, p.326.
11. Cf., e.g., al_Ash'ari, *ibid.*, p.323-324.
12. Ibn Sinā. '*Uyūn al-ḥikma* (ed. A.Badawi). Cairo, 1954, p.26.
13. Al-Ash'ari. *Ibid.*, p.353-355.
14. As well as for posterior Islamic tradition represented by Sufism, that has apprehended and developed the atomistic theory of time.
15. In its imperative reading; see above, page – page, ref 2 Readings _7_.

16. As well as impossibility to get something from nothing. However, this emerging of a new sense in a juxtaposition of the two initial ones neither of which possess it, is not an addition, but has a different nature (see also next paragraph). Thus Islamic classical thinking does not directly contradict the principles that underlie Western rationality, although it neither complies with them.
17. Al-Ash'ari. *Ibid.*, p.316-318.
18. Of course I do not mean that the application field of this procedure is restricted to the formation of these senses. It is undoubtedly wider. However, the senses of "motion", "rest", "time", and "space" obviously form an interrelated integrity; and it is not only justified but also necessary to consider them together.