CHAPTER EIGHT

DOES ARISTOTLE REFUTE ELEATICISM?

One of the principal functions we have seen Aristotle assign to the now in Book IV of Physics is that of temporal terminus (peras) or extremity (akron or eschaton). Previously, Aristotle had argued, against the possibility of the now’s remaining always one and the same, that nothing continuous and determinately extended can have just one terminus. Aristotle’s more recent discussion of the now confirmed this viewpoint. The time which passed while his heroes of Sardinia slept needed to be terminated by two nows—one related to their falling asleep and another relating to their awakening—or else no time will have passed while they slept. Later, Aristotle integrated this requirement with the notion that a temporal extent also requires a before and an after, and characterized our cognition of time’s passing as involving our soul postulating a before-extremity-now and an after-extremity-now, thereby delineating a certain extent of time.

Subsequently, though, as time’s (ongoing, anewing, dynamic) continuousness overshadowed its extension in Aristotle’s discussion, the now emerged also as a different sort of terminus—as a terminus which is both “two” insofar as it terminates past-time and also future-time, and yet is “one” insofar as it does so just by continuously demarcating them, conjointly culminating past-time and commencing future-time.

I have proposed that these differing notions of the now as terminus need not be incompatible insofar as the now may be thought to demarcate a particular extent of time as it proceeds dynamically in its demarcation function from the start of that extent to its end.

In Book VI of Physics—especially in the context of Aristotle’s attempts there to reply to Zeno of Elea’s attacks on the reality of motion—the previous notion of time as always existing as a certain determinate extent and doing so by having its existence terminated by two extremities or delimiters once again dominates. Indeed, scholars and commentators have understandably tended not to discern a genuinely dynamic notion of time operating in the text of Book VI. As Sherover says regarding the dominant image of time conveyed in Aristotle’s account of motion: ‘Aristotle’s working concept of time is strangely
static; it lacks the dynamic aspect of time … which his preoccupation with motion might have urged” [Sherover, 27].

Christensen, recall from Chapter 2, characterizes static-time as also space-like time, inasmuch as “[o]bjects do not move successively from one time to another but are spread across time” [Christensen, 145]. Koriscon’s stroll from the gymnasium, on this portrayal, is not ultimately to be explicated in terms of a three-dimensional object (Koriscon) whose continuous strolling motion leaves the gymnasium farther and farther behind (temporally as well as spatially) even while it also brings him nearer and nearer to the market-place. Rather, his stroll is to be explicated as a feature of a four-dimensional object (for example, Koriscon-strolling-from-the-gymnasium-to-the-market-place) which extends from the gymnasium to the market-place.

On the space-like time conception, our common notion that Koriscon, or his strolling motion, leaves the one behind and approaches the other is akin to the manner in which the Bay Bridge leaves San Francisco behind and approaches Oakland. Strictly speaking, the Bay Bridge simply extends from San Francisco to Oakland. It spans the spatial distance between the two. Space-like time thinks of time as a fourth-dimension which in a like manner spans purported temporal distances between purported temporal locations.

This image of time as space-like comports well with how Aristotle seems in Book VI to portray time as it relates to motion, especially in his responses to Zeno. Still, the notion that Aristotle harbors a more fundamental image of time as genuinely dynamic is not entirely indiscernible in his discussion there of the reality and nature of motion. At the very least, his discussion of motion in Book VI does not seem incompatible with his discussion of time in Book IV, where we have seen strong reason to claim that he propounds an authentically dynamic conception of time.

Aristotle’s extremely brief discussion of time in his Categories may also be read as an attempt to portray time dynamically. There, Aristotle again characterizes time as continuous by virtue of its being “joined together by the now with a view towards (pros) the past and the future” [Cat. 5a7f]. Moreover, while we have seen that in Physics Aristotle introduces temporal before-and-after as dependent on or at least derivative from spatial before-and-after, in Categories Aristotle seems more concerned to emphasize the difference between spatial relationships and temporal ones.

Space and time both fall within the category of quantity, wherein they