

FISHBYTES

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Drinking Zeno's coffee

by Daniel Pauly

This is to comment on institutional coffee, such as that provided by the Coffee Club at the Fisheries Centre. We all know of Zeno, an ancient Greek philosopher who argued, as only philosophers can, that an arrow would never reach its intended target, given that it has to cover half of the distance to the target, then half of the rest, and so on

(during which, presumably, the target has time to hide behind his shield, etc.). I thought that the issue was settled, in practice, every time somebody is pierced by an arrow (in theory it was resolved by Leibnitz and Newton, who both invented differential calculus, and who then fought for the rest of their lives about who was first). I was reminded of this recently because I read in the Internet (where such things can be stated with abandon) that "Zeno was right after all" (but I couldn't see why: the link was broken).

What does all this have to do with coffee? The point is that many of us, as the amount of remaining coffee in the pot diminishes, take a diminishing amount of coffee, so that there will be some left and they will not have to steep up a new pot. The next drinker then takes half of the rest, and so on to the bitter end. In the process, the residual bit of coffee becomes utterly revolting. So, my first conclusion from this is that Zeno's coffee is inherently bitter.

I don't have any practical recommendation to offer about what you do when it is really, really bitter, because at this point I tend to avoid the vicinity of the coffee pot. However, a few days ago, I noticed the transmutation of Zeno's coffee into what might be called 'Zeno's quintessence', which is a black solid gunk that forms at the bottom of the pot. I guess if this scraped off and ground up, it may yield instant Zeno's coffee, whose slogan could be: "the taste without the wait...".

Anyway, these were my thoughts about Zeno's coffee. I know that some people will say that it would never happen if I (and the others) were to set up new pots more often. But then, there would be no deep thinking about Zeno's relevance to our daily lives.

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