

Chapter 1 Questions of Philosophy

Section 4 Skepticism — The Riddles of Knowledge and Language

12 The Riddle of Knowledge

* The four main doctrinal antinomies resulting from philosophical thought: monism and dualism (pluralism) as primordial principles (elements); Being and Becoming as ontological principles; realism and idealism as epistemological principles; sensationalism and super-sensationalism and universalism and relativism. It should be noted that, in ancient Greek philosophy, these antinomies were explored in the form of pure logical oppositions; this directly led Greek philosophers to pursue the “riddle of knowledge”, or the question of what could guarantee the legitimacy of knowledge.

* I would like to point out in advance that these disputes, which are so deeply rooted in the philosophical mind, have never been substantially settled in the long history of philosophy. For example, A. J. Ayer, one of those major logical positivists, discussed this subject as a long-standing fundamental problem of metaphysical philosophy in his work *Language, Truth and Logic*. He put special emphasis on the three divisions, realism vs. conceptualism, rationalism vs. empiricism, and monism vs. pluralism. and attempted to “eliminate” the problem from the viewpoint that any conflict arising from traditional metaphysical approaches is already *logically* resolvable.

Accordingly, we who are interested in the condition of philosophy can no longer acquiesce in the existence of party divisions among philosophers. For we know that if the questions about which the parties contend are logical in character, they can be definitively answered. And, if they are not logical, they must either be dismissed as metaphysical, or made the subject of an empirical inquiry. (Ayer 1952 pp.133,134)

* I am now certain that these fundamental controversies in philosophical theories can only be resolved by *elucidating the nature of knowledge*, but the latter can never be explained in principle by logical approaches. It is no more explainable than the paradoxes of time are mathematically or logically solvable.

We will further examine the nature of this intractable conflict in philosophy in the following sections, but for now it is worth noting that this problem should necessarily give rise to the “riddle of language.” It is Zeno of Elea, another ancient Greek philosopher, who was a symbol of the “riddle of language” introduced in Greek philosophy.

13 Zeno and Paradoxes

* Zeno was a student of Parmenides and is considered the first Greek philosopher to write his thoughts in prose. His own statement on the paradoxes of language survives today. Plato in his dialogue *Parmenides* credited Zeno with being a proponent of his master's theory of “One Being.” However, looking at Zeno's surviving works and his claims, which are referred to by many ancient writers, it seems very unlikely that the central significance of Zeno's philosophy was to advocate the teachings of Parmenides.

* While the well-known paradoxes of Achilles and the tortoise as well as the paradox of an arrow in flight were not necessarily invented by Zeno, the surviving writings of Zeno himself refer only to two logical paradoxes, those of one and many, and of motion.

(1) If Things are Many, they are in finite in number. For there are always other things between those that are, and again others between those. And thus things are infinite (*in number*). (2) That

which moves, moves neither in the place in which it is, nor in that in which it is not. (Freeman 1948 p.47)

The proof for (1): Assuming that things are many, they should be numerically finite. But there are always other things between many things, and there are still other things between those that are. Thus, things are infinite. Many things are finite and infinite at the same time, but this is absurd. Therefore, things are not many and just one exists.

The proof for (2): Suppose there is something that moves, it does not remain in the place where it is at any given moment, and nor does it move where it is not. So, there is no motion at all. Instead, there is only one.

* The Achilles and the tortoise paradox is a variant of these two paradoxes. The point in their logic is that something that moves *cannot pass through an infinite number of points in a finite amount of time*. Suppose a thing moves from one particular point to another, then there must be an infinite number of points between the two particular points. This means that the thing must pass through an infinite number of intermediate points in a finite amount of time, but this is impossible ...

* These paradoxes are often held to be *neither mathematically nor logically solvable*, but here is already a critical misconception. For these paradoxes were invented solely to make themselves unsolvable mathematically and logically. More specifically, they were created by transforming actual motions into *mathematical or logical statements*, or by *expressing* the motions in the manner of mathematics or logic. To solve this problem, an essential insight into the temporal nature of motion is needed instead of mathematical or logical thinking. Mathematical or logical expression is made possible here only by “objectifying” the nature of temporality and by *burying this objectification in oblivion*. Hence, this kind of statement can never reveal the nature of temporality in knowledge.

* Contemporary logicians have devised a method of *determining whether a statement is true or false* by reducing the matter in general to a logical form, such as propositional or predicate logic. Yet it is by no means possible to properly address such questions as the nature of time and values, using formal logic. This is precisely the reason why linguistic paradoxes were bound to arise. While we will further discuss this problem further later, let us first see how Zeno was credited with presenting the “riddle of language.”

* Zeno was the first Greek philosopher who discovered and was aware of the distinctive nature of logical disputations. Zeno's idea of a paradox was based on his insight into the contradictory nature of some philosophical concepts such as “infinite” and “finite”. He recognized that these concepts evoked a sense of absurdity as they related to time. However, he never knew that the paradoxes he invented could be solved by elucidating the nature of time. This is quite common among philosophers who use the logic of relativism just because they are aware of the contradictory nature of concepts. Regarding the paradoxical nature of “finite” and “infinite,” a number of philosophers, including Descartes for his proof of the existence of God and Kant for his antinomies, have used this notion or its variants to support their theories. Zeno's “reductio ad absurdum” is even today a fundamental method of argument for contemporary postmodern thinkers and analytic philosophers, whose main weapon is philosophical relativism.

* The main points of Zeno's doctrine can be summarized as follows: Language, in general, is capable of *referring to* existing things, but is incapable of *expressing* or representing the Being itself, or the movement or becoming itself of the things. As suggested by Wittgenstein, logic is capable of *designating* a matter or object, but cannot *express* its meaning.

* Zeno's argument of logical paradoxes imposes another important limitation on general philosophical thinking. Philosophers use concepts logically instead of telling stories. In this way, philosophers try to avoid arbitrary beginnings in their language games and to ensure the universality of their philosophical discourses. Zeno's paradoxes, however, tend to indicate a crucial flaw, an inevitable dubiousness and fallibility in this very method proper to philosophy, that of universally proving the existent through the logical use of concepts, leading to an incompleteness of the logical use of concepts. In fact, many people seem to believe that *any kind of conclusion can be derived* from the modes of inference in such a language game as the analysis of a proposition by means of logical forms. The sophists are now ready to enter the scene.

14 Gorgias's Theses

* Distinct paradoxes in language and logic, or the “riddle of language,” discovered by Zeno reached their climax with another ancient philosopher, Gorgias considered a master of rhetoric.

* Gorgias is credited with “proving” three theses about the possibility of knowledge in philosophical thought, in his work *On Nature*, which is no longer extant.

First, nothing exists; or there is nothing that could be associated with the predicate 'exist'.

Secondly, any kind of cognition is impossible. Even if something exists, it is inapprehensible to man.

Thirdly, even if something exists and it is apprehensible, it still cannot be expressed or explained to man.

The first thesis refers to the riddle of being, the second to the riddle of knowledge and the third to the riddle of language. The theories of the existence of the world in Greek philosophy thus closed the first round by presenting the riddles inherent to philosophy. The second round would be opened by Socrates.

* Gorgias' arguments about being and knowledge were related by a later philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, as follows:

Thesis 1. Nothing exists;

If anything exists, either the existent exists or the nonexistent, but neither is the case. First of all, the nonexistence does not exist, for if the nonexistent exists, it will both exist and not exist at the same time, but this would be entirely absurd.

The existent does not exist either. For if the existent exists, it is either eternal or generated. If the existent is eternal, it does not have any beginning, and not having a beginning it is without limit. And if it is without limit it is nowhere. Moreover, neither can the existent be generated, for the nonexistent cannot generate anything. “Being cannot be both everlasting and created, since they are opposite. Therefore, Being does not exist.” (Freeman 1948 p.128)

And to use another argument, it is either one or many. But it is neither one nor many. For if it is one, it is an existent or a continuum or a magnitude or a body. But whatever of these it is, it is not one, since whatever has extent will be divided, and what is a continuum will be cut. And moreover, it is not many. For if it is not one, it is not many either, since the many is a composite of separate entities and thus, when the possibility that it is one was refuted, the possibility that it is many was refuted as well.

Thesis 2. Even if anything exists, it is unknowable and incomprehensible to man.

“For if things considered in the mind are not existent, the existent is not considered.” (ibid. p.129)

“If things considered are existent as they are, all things considered exist. But fantasy is just fantasy. Therefore, that all things considered are existent is absurd. In addition, if things considered in the mind are existent, nonexistent things will not be considered.” (ibid. p.129)

To paraphrase these quotations, *the nature of thinking does not coincide with the nature of being*. Hence, there can be no exact correspondence between thinking and being. Being itself cannot be considered.

Thesis 3. Even if something is comprehensible, man cannot put it into words.

Existents are visible and audible. But these perceived things cannot be replaced by *logos* or words. The perceived is revealed through language, but the perceived can never be the same as language. Language is therefore incapable of communicating existents themselves.

“... since the objects of sight cannot be presented to any other organ but sight, and the different sense-organs cannot give their information to one another, similarly speech cannot give any information about perceptible.” (ibid. p.129)

* Gorgias thus denied existence, then the knowledge or apprehension of existence and finally the possibility of conveying apprehension by means of language. Three points deserve special attention: (1) Gorgias' argument is to “prove” the impossibility of being and knowledge. He accomplished this by using two forms of *reductio ad absurdum*, one based on Parmenides' statements that the existent is one and that the existent neither comes into being nor is perishable, and the other based on Zeno's paradox of the continuum and infinity.

(2) With this assertion of the *impossibility* of being, knowledge and language, Gorgias most consciously established a unique theory of authentic relativism and skepticism in Greek philosophy. (3) From then on, this principle of the three “impossibilities” provided the basis for all skeptical and relativistic arguments about the possibility of being, knowledge and language in European philosophy.

* Gorgias claimed that being, knowledge and language are impossible. His argument was based on Parmenides' theory that *the existent is one*, as well as on Zeno's logic, which denied the possibility of becoming and motion. Gorgias states that no one can definitively prove or determine whether any things or matters are true or false, and instead that any argument of the type of formal logic is refutable.

While Parmenides' logical argumentation and Zeno's *dialectic* laid the groundwork for genuine philosophical thought in ancient Greek philosophy, their successor Gorgias took it to a new dimension by asserting the impossibility of being, knowledge and language. The liberal way of philosophical thinking with the logical use of concepts entered a new realm: the “riddle of knowledge”, or the search for an answer to the unprecedented question of why no one can definitively prove the certainty and validity of logical argumentation.

15 Denial of Noumenon

* In Indian philosophy, it was Nagarjuna who raised the question of why true knowledge and the language to express it were impossible in philosophy, a question also raised and somehow answered by Zeno and Gorgias. However, as mentioned above, the primary motive of Nagarjuna's unique dialectic was to relativize the proliferating rigmarole of Theravada Buddhism. In so doing, he sought to revive Buddha's original teachings through the “rejection of metaphysics” that Buddha himself had emphasized. Given the dominance of religious world views in Indian philosophy, neither Nagarjuna himself nor his successors were motivated to address the difficult question of authentic epistemology.

* Nevertheless, Nagarjuna's logic of paradox about motion generally overlaps with Zeno's argument.

Then there is no going in what has gone; there is no going also in what has not [yet] gone. Motion is unknowable apart from what has gone and not [yet] gone.

How can going be possible within motion? Because motion that is not going is impossible.

For whomever there is going within motion, for him it will follow that there [could be] no going within motion, because there is going within motion. (Nagarjuna Chapter 2)

Not only what is in motion, but also motion itself or *action* itself *can never be expressed* by language. What can be expressed by words is only the existent obtained by eliminating the element of time from motion and action. In other words, a thing itself or a movement itself can be referred to, but it can never be *expressed*.

* Milca Eliade has made pertinent remarks on the significance of Nagarjuna's arguments. With his assertion that all apparently existent things are empty and without real substance, Nagarjuna endows traditional Buddhist doctrines with the following new principles:

First, all the doctrines of early Buddhism and their systematic redefinition given by Abhidhamma interpreters are false. For example, the three stages of becoming of things – generation, continuation and cessation – which are generally accepted as an important part of the teaching, do not exist at all, and the notion of *pratītya-samutpāda* is also empty. The distinction between *samṣkṛta* (that which is constituted) and *asamṣkṛta* (that which is not constituted), which is traditionally a core idea of ancient Buddhism, is also rejected. Another important view of Nagarjuna is that the distinction between the one who is bound and the one who is liberated, and therefore the distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana*, should be denied.

* Moreover, Nagarjuna's final conclusion, which Eliade regards as “the basis for one of the most original ontological creations known in the history of thought,” is also quite fascinating from our own point of view. Eliade says:

Everything is 'empty', without any 'nature of its own'; yet it must not be inferred from this that there is no 'absolute essence' to which *sunyata* (or *nirvana*) refers. When it is said that 'emptiness', *sunyata*, is inexpressible, inconceivable, and indescribable, there is no implication that there is in existence a 'transcendent reality' characterized by these attributes. Ultimate truth does not unveil an 'absolute' of the *Vedanta* type; it is the mode of existence discovered by the adept when he obtains complete indifference toward 'things' and their cessation. (Eliade 1982 p.225)

Eliade's view of “emptiness” is reminiscent of the idea of “*dismantling the noumenon*” (i.e., *dismantling the speculation that there exists the world in itself and genuine knowledge of it*). However, it is not that Nagarjuna consciously focused on dismantling of *Noumenon* as his core theme, but he merely stated that the world as a substantial entity – the *Noumenon* – is what should be bracketed, what should be excluded from thinking in terms of authentic Buddhist teaching. Dismantling the noumenon should now be the most important and necessary task of the movement of philosophical thought. This can never be achieved by relativizing conventional metaphysics with the argument of *reductio ad absurdum* employed by Nagarjuna.

* The impact of Zeno and Gorgias on the ancient Greek philosophers made them realize that philosophical logic or language could express neither the motion and action of the existent nor the nature of their temporality, or in a word, *Becoming* itself. This set the stage for the emergence of the Sophists, who consciously used this dialectical logic of *reductio ad absurdum*. The activities of these Sophists, in turn, led to the emergence of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who introduced the new thought about the possibility of universal knowledge, though Socrates and Plato's philosophical approach to universal knowledge was entirely different from that of Aristotle's.