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# ARE THERE REALLY PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHICAL DISPUTES?

Principles taken upon trust, consequences lamely deduced from them, want of coherence in the parts, and of evidence in the whole, these are everywhere to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seems to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself... (E) ven the rabble without doors may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous moments we are not able to give any certain decisions (Hume, 1960, pp. xvii-xviii).

The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him (Proverbs, 18:17).

If Hume's description of the state of cognitive discord of the discipline of philosophy is correct, then the question should be immediately asked: 'is the Western tradition in philosophy a degenerating research programme (or research tradition) (Laudan, 1977)?' Alternatively: 'in the face of the problem of perennial philosophical disputes (PPPD), how can philosophy as cognitive enterprise be considered to be both progressive and rational?' This is a major problem for anyone who understands philosophy as that discipline which attempts to formulate and justify Weltanschauungs, that is, world views (Kekes, 1980), (Smith,

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1984). Such Weltanschauungs attempt to give an account of the furniture of the universe, a view of human nature and an outline of the place of human beings in the scheme of the world. Philosophy, unlike most literature and poetry, must support its conclusions by reasoned argument It is not enough merely to describe the world; the description must be justified and shown to be more satisfactory and preferable to other competing descriptions, with respect to various cognitive standards such as truth, consistency, comprehensibility and simplicity, among others (Rescher, 1979). If philosophy is a rational enterprise, it should give us knowledge. If philosophy is a cognitively progressive enterprise, it should give us increasingly more knowledge over time. Yet, the existence of perennial philosophical disputes seems to indicate that in its 2500 year history, philosophy has produced no knowledge and not a single philosophical problem has been satisfactorily resolved. Not only does the history of philosophy seem to be little more than the successive refutation of previous philosophical Weltanschauungs, but in more recent times when the bulk of published basic research in philosophy has appeared in specialised journals, it is not uncommon to find criticisms of an author who has published a paper in a particular journal. criticised in the very issue in which the target paper appeared. From an anthropological perspective, philosophy may be seen as a discipline torn by unending disputes, agonised by pluralism and unachieved consensus, and humiliated by the success of the natural sciences. The disagreements and failures of the past and present, should weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the present generation of philosophers (Smith, 1988).

In this paper I consider two objections to the problem of perennial philosophical disagreements which derive from postempiricist philosophy of science. These objections attempt dissolve our central problem by showing that there are no perennial philosophical disputes. These objections will now be outlined, and after doing this I shall try to show that both replies are unsatisfactory on historical grounds.

The first objection *loosely* derives from the work of Kuhn (1970) although some may wish to call this criticism the Hegelian response. According to this view problems and standards are historically variable, hence philosophical solutions and their adequacy are also historically variable. As a result, perennial philosophical disputes do not really occur. Philosophers living in different contexts may use the same worlds, but they mean quite different things by them. Stated more formally this argument is as follows:

(K<sub>1</sub>) Philosophical problems and standards of adequacy change over time.

Therefore,

(K<sub>2</sub>) Solutions to philosophical problems and standards of adequacy change over time.

Therefore,

(K<sub>3</sub>) Perennial philosophical disputes do not occur.

A second objection, which is a variant of the above argument, has been given by Ruth Barcan Marcus (1985). Marcus argues that on historical grounds we can see that most past philosophers are displaced, so there must be substantial agreement about which philosophical theories are rejected. Philosophical theories do not endure (*ibid*, p. 325):

"There are more than 700 Western philosophers judged worthy of notice in Paul Edwards' Encyctopedia of Philosophy. Many of them had a period of substantial recognition. Most have ceased to be studied or read except for occasional recondite scholarship. Very few will even fleetingly be

a continuing part of any philosophical canon. Far from never having suffered rejection, most wane and are largely ignored. They fare no better than abortive or rejected scientific theories. Nor is the eclipse due to their failure to achieve the fullness and richness of holistic speculative systems as is sometimes claimed. A perusal of the literature falsifies the suggestion. I am reminded that my first awareness of speculative philosophical systems was through happening upon some imposing volumes by John Elof Boodin with titles like *The Realistic Universe*, *Time and Reality*. In the early years of this century Boodin was seriously studied. His post-humous papers were published as late as 1957 by the University of California Press. Where is he now?"

Boodin is of course dead, but it does not follow that the issues which he dealt with, such as the problem of realism and the nature of time are dead. The sort of historical argument employed by Marcus is insufficient to show that there are either no, or very few, perennial philosophical disagreements. What must be shown is that all philosophical proplems, or all of the most important philosophical problems, change over time, along with the standards of adequacy. This qualification needs to be added to the argument cited above before it can be regarded as being valid. It is the soundness of this argument which I wish to question by questioning the truth of its premises.

First, I shall show that there is an example of a philosophical problem which has been discussed since the dawn of western philosophy in Greece – the problem of formulating a consistent view of change in the light of Zeno's paradoxes – which whilst changing in formulation over two thousand years remain with us still. As Wesley Salmon has put it in his introduction to a

volume of essays on Zeno's paradoxes (Salmon [ed.], 1970, pp, 43-40).

"It would, of course, be rash to conclude that we had actually arrived at a complete resolution of all problems that come out of Zeno's paradoxes. Each age, from Aristotle on down, seems to find in paradoxes difficulties that are roughly commensurate with the mathematical, logical and philosophical resources then available. When more powerful tools emerge, philosophers seem willing to acknowledge deeper difficulties that would have proved insurmountable for more primitive methods. We may have resolutions which are appropriate to our present level of understanding, but they may appear quite inadequate when we have advanced further."

According to this point of view even though Zeno's original formulation of his paradoxes makes these paradoxes seem like little more than sophisms, the paradoxes have been reformulated over time to escape previous solutions and revive the difficulties which Zeno first saw with the concept of change and plurality. This means that a problem may very well change over time, as might the standards of adequacy by which solutions to the problem are judged, and yet enough continuity exists between the original problem and its reformulations to say that we are considering either the same problem, or the same family of problems. This means that the mere fact that philosophical problems are reformulated, modified and rethought does not show that there are no perennial philosophical disagreements or disputes. This fact is consistent with philosophical problems becoming more difficult over time, as if we have opened one door and found a thousand before us. The problem of the nature of the self has been complicated by a century of neurophysiological discoveries; the semantical paradoxes such as the Liar paradox, which puzzled most great philosphers from the dawn of Western philosophy, have been supplemented by an array of powerful logical paradoxes discovered by modern formal logicians and arguments such as the ontological argument for the existence of God have been revived through the use of new formal systems of modal logic. It would require a discussion which would be more lengthy than necessary to fully document my case by considering all of these philosophical problems. Hence, I shall concentrate on the example of Zeno's paradoxes to make my point.

Zeno's paradoxes are a particularly good example to choose because they enable us to deal with this objection on its most favourable grounds: that philosophers in different contexts may use the same words, but they mean quite different things by them. Certainly concepts of space, time and motion have radically changed over the last two thousand years. But Zeno at no point attempted to define 'motion' or 'change.' He devised paradoxes which he thought, rightly or wrongly, would threaten any conceivable general metaphysical theory of motion or change. To see this I shall concentrate my discussion upon the best known of Zeno's paradoxes: Achilles and the Tortoise.

Aristotle in his *Physics* VI, 9, 2396 formulates Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise in the following fashion (paraphrased): Achilles can never beat the slow Tortoise in their race, for given the Tortoise's lead Achilles must first reach the place from which the Tortoise started. But by then the Tortoise has a further lead, so that the slow Tortoise must always be in advance, however small. If this is so, then there can be no occasion when a body can reach its destination, for after any distance there will always be another distance to cover. Hence, motion is impossible. This argument is based upon the premise that space

and time are *continuous* and thus is explicitly advanced by Zeno as an attack upon continuous theories of space and time.

Another of Zeno's paradoxes, the so-called Stadium, attacks the notion of discontinuous or atomistic space and time. Given that space and time are either continuous or discontinuous, Zeno concludes that reality is unchanging. Zeno is certainly not unaware that it appears to our senses that change occurs and that Achilles passes the Tortoise. He has taken the criterion of logical argument to override the evidence of the senses. This then is the first response which can be made to Zeno's paradox: accept the conclusion and deny the possibility of motion and change. This view has only been opted for by a handful of Western philosophers: F. H. Bradley's Appearance and Reality (1930), whilst making no explicit textual reference to Zeno, uses Eleatic arguments to establish that space, time and motion are contradictory appearances.

Another solution which a few philosophers have taken is to accept that Zeno's arguments are sound, and also that motion is possible, so that reality is seen to have inherent contradictions. This position was taken by Hegel in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy (1829, pp. 261-278) when he rejected the universal validity of the law of non-contradiction. This position has also been taken by modern dialectical logicians such as Graham Priest (1985). The dispute between Priest and Zeno could only be resolved by examining the question of the validity of the law of non-contradiction: differences in viewing the validity of this law account for the radically different metaphysical positions of these philosophers, even though both groups accept Zeno's arguments as being valid, and in fact sound.

Other philosophers attempted to use Zeno's paradoxes to prove particular speculative metaphysical theses. Henri Bergson, ... 7

in Creative Evolution (1911), for example, accepts that change or becoming is continuous, but denies that either methematical analysis or logical reasoning are capable of enabling us to understand motion and change. This style of solution, if it can be called that at all, is certainly not the most common solution to Zeno's paradox. Many philosophers have felt that Zeno's paradoxes, especially Achilles and the Tortoise rest on simple mathematical errors. Russell (1929, pp. 182-198) and Whitehead (1929, p. 107) were both critical of various paradoxes of Zeno on mathematical grounds. It is worthwhile considering their respective views on the problem with Achilles and the Tortoise.

Russell reformulates the Achilles paradox methematically and attempts to show a mathematical flaw in the argument. If Achilles overtakes the Tortoise it must be after an infinite number of instants have elapsed since the beginning of the race. Russell accepts that this is true. He then argues that Zeno's view that an infinite number of instants must make up an infinitely long time is not true, and so Zeno's conclusion is refuted. Russell at no point shows that this proposal - that an infinite number of instants add up to an infinitely long time - is either accepted by Zeno or is essential to his argument. It is hardly likely that Zeno accepted Russell's proposal, since in Zeno's paradox of plurality he considers what he might describe today as the difficulty of constructing the extended linear continuum out of unextended elements. Nor is Russell's reconstruction of Zeno's argument satisfactory in so far as it makes the source of the difficulty of the Achilles plain. We shall see the real source of this difficulty after examining Whitehead's response.

Whitehead argues that the Achilles should be analysed in the light of the modern mathematical theory of convergent series. By use of these series we can show, given the appropriate distances and times, when and where Achilles overtakes the

Tortoise. According to Peirce, "... this silly little catch presents no difficulty at all to a mind adequately trained in mathematics and in logic" (Peirce, 1935, p. 177). Not all philosophical minds trained in mathematics and logic have agreed with Peirce. Max Black (1950-1951) has argued that the notion of a limit shows that these distances and intervals of time may approach zero but that they do not become zero as Zeno's original paradox seemed to require. The mathematical solution is fundamentally irrelevant.

Max Black's paper is very interesting for its attempt to show that the expression "infinite series of (performable) acts" is self-contradictory by means of the notion of an infinity machine. It may be thought that there in no logical impossibility, but only a medical impossibility in performing an infinite number of tasks and in fact motion consists in the performance of an infinite number of tasks. There is never a time at which we are ending our motion, but there is a time at which we would have already reached our destination. The infinity machine is used to show that this proposed solution to Zeno's Achilles paradox cannot succeed. The following example comes from James Thomson (1970, pp. 94-95):

"There are certain reading lamps that have a button in the base. If the lamp is off and you press the button the lamp goes on, and if the lamp is on and you press the button the lamp goes off. So if the lamp was originally off, and you pressed the button an odd number of times, the lamp is on, and if you pressed the button an even number of times the lamp is off, Suppose now that the lamp is off, and I succeed in pressing the button an infinite number of times, perhaps making one jab in one minute, another jab in the next half minute, and so on, according to Russell's recipe. After I have completed the whole infinite sequence

of jabs, i. e. at the end of the two minutes, is the lamp on or off? It seems impossible to answer this question. It cannot be on, because I did not ever turn it on without at once turning it off. It cannot be off, because I did in the first place turn it on, and thereafter I never turned it off without at once turning it on. But the lamp must be either on or off. This is a contradiction."

The extensive literature dealing with infinity machines (Salmon [ed], 1970) shows that Zeno's Achilles paradox is far from being trivial, and far from being satisfactorily solved if space, time and motion are accepted as being continuous. I have now supplied an example of a philosophical problem which is perennial-being discussed by many great philosophers since the dawn of Western philosophy—and which through recent reformulations, has become even more difficult. So a philosophical problem can change over time, yet still be perennial. What is important is the sort of change. I have considered internal changes in a problem's formulation in my attempt to refute this objection. I now wish to consider the view that perennial philosophical disagreements do not exist because entire problems are abandoned.

It is true historically that many philosophical problems were the product of the interest and acceptance of certain philosophical systems, and once they were abandoned, the problems went with them. A good example of this is the problem of the nature of the Absolute; when absolute idealist philosophical systems were abandoned at the turn of this century this problem ceased to be of central interest to philosophers. But the problem of the Absolute is not a "grand" philosophical problem arising from speculation about the basic fabric of reality and the fundamental concepts involved in understanding, such as the problem of universals, the nature and justification of knowledge, the nature of causation and the freewill problem. In what follows I shall

give one example of a philosophical problem which has not changed in its formulation since the dawn of Western philosophy, and where contemporary philosophers usually begin their discussion of this problem by citing and relying upon the ancient formulation of this problem.

Sextus Empiricus in Outlines of Pyrrhonism, II, chap. IV gave a precise outline of the diallelus problems of justifying a standard of truth, justification or knowledge (Sextus Empiricus 1933, pp. 163-165):

"...in order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them (the Dogmatic philosophers) to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress ad infinitum."

This argument attempts to establish that an adequately justified standard of knowledge is impossible. Given that there can be no particular knowledge claims without some general standard used to justify or show that what is claimed to be knowledge is in fact knowledge, it follows that there is no knowledge at all unless the diallelus can be escaped.

Richard Popkin (1664, p.xi) points out that the Pyrrhonic form of scepticism was unknown in the west until the rediscovery of the manuscripts of Sextus Empiricus in the sixteenth century. Popkin's book The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes is a detailed historical treatment of the impact of Sextus

Empiricus' arguments upon theology and philosophy during the period, 1500-1650, which we can draw on here to develop a critical historical argument against Marcus' objection.

Popkin points out that the full impact of Sextus Enpiricus' diallelus argument was first felt in the dispute over the proper standard of religious knowledge. The problem of finding a criterion of truth, reinforced by Sextus' argument, was later raised regarding natural knowledge provided by the new natural sciences of the day. This led to what Popkin describes as the crise pyrrhonienne of the early seventeenth century (ibid, p.1).

The conflict between Martin Luther's views and his quarrel with Erasmus illustrates the difficulties raised by the diallelus in a theological context. In writings such as The Appeal to the German Nobility and The Babylonish Captivity of the Church, Luther denied that the Church is the criterion of religious knowledge and at the Diet of Worms, pleased that the correct criterion of religious knowledge is conscience conditioned by a reading of the Scriptures. In outlining a new criterion of religious knowledge, Luther directly challenged the authority of the Church. This challenge was met by Catholic theologians, particularly Erasmus of Rotterdam, by a sceptical defense of the faith. Erasmus in De Libero Arbitrio argued that Scripture is not as clear and uncontroversial as Luther had supposed: theologians have argued about the meaning of certain Scriptural passages and the correct solution of certain theological problems for centuries without any sight of solution. Now Luther claims that he has within his grasp the true meaning of Scripture: but how do we know this? This whole debate is too difficult to resolve, Erasmus maintained, so it is best to accept in good faith the traditional teachings of the Church. Luther replied to Erasmus in De Libero Arbitrio arguing that scepticism was inconsistent with Christianity as the Scriptures are not composed of uniustified hopes, but of God-given truths. Some of these truths may be difficult to know, but there are basic truths which are clear and evident. These truths serve to illuminate the meaning of "darker" passages (ibid. pp. 5-7). Nevertheless Luther left it unclear as to why that which our religious conscience convicts us in believing as true, when reading the Scriptures, is in fact true rather than false. Calvin attempted to answer this problem by maintaining that our inner persuasion (if we are a Christian!) about what is true and false in religious matters is given to us by the Holy Spirit, an all-knowing and all-powerful entity who would not deceive us. Nevertheless, the Catholics argued in reply that Calvin did not escape the diallelus as the criterion of religious knowledge is inner persuasion, and this is authentic because it is caused by the Holy Spirit, and we know this because of inner persuasion (ibid, p. 9)

The rediscovery of the manuscripts of Sextus Empiricus extended the diallelus problem from theology to philosophy. Gian Francesco Pico della Mirandola in Exam Vanitatis Doctrine Gentium first made use of Sextus' arguments to destroy the foundations of rational philosophy which he saw supplying philosophical justification for various pagan world views. He hoped to lead the sceptically-devastated pagans to rest with the Christion revelation. This course of action was also recommended by Francisco Sanchez in Quad nihil scitur and by the better known Michel de Montaigne in his Apologie de Raimond Sebond. Montaigne gave a restatement of the diallelus problem which has been a particularly influential statement of this problem. Here for example, is a paraphrase of Montaigne's French given by Roderick Chisholm (1973, p. 3):

"To know whether things really are as they seem to be, we must have a *procedure* for distinguishing appearances that are true from appearances that are false. But to know

whether our procedure is a good procedure, we have to know whether it really succeeds in distinguishing appearances that are true from appearances that are false. And we cannot know whether it does really succeed unless we already know which appearances are true and which ones are false. And so we are caught in a circle."

Montaigne's version of the diallelus was accepted by P. Coffey in Epistemology or the Theory of Knowledge (1958), part I, a work first published in 1917. Montaigne's essay is thus a crucial link between the seventeenth century considerations of the diallelus problem and twentieth century considerations. It is hardly possible here to discuss the diallelus problem in the work of all major philosophers from the seventeenth century onwards, and nor is this necessary to rebut Morcus' this objection and historically illustrate the perenniality of a major philosophical problem. Rather all that we need to show is that the diallelus problem was discussed in both the seventeenth century and the twentieth century. Even if it was not given the same intensive discussion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it does not follow that the diallelus problem is not a perennial philosophical problem. All that this shows is that at certain times philosophers do not discuss certain problem: it does not show that the problems have been either rationally resolved or rationally abandoned.

Coffey felt that the diallelus argument was based upon an equivocation, although he by no means felt that this problem was a trivial one. The argument assumed that the criterion of truth must always be extrinsic to the judgement the truth of which it is the test, but (ibid, p. 144):

"... since we have the power of reflecting on our judgements, what if we find that some judgements contain in themselves and inseparable from themselves, a characteristic which is the test, or criterion, of their own truth: so that by one and the same intuition we see the truth of the judge-ment, and simultaneously, - not antecedently, or subsequently or by a distinct judicial act, - the validity of the criterion?"

Another philosopher, Leonard Nelson, writing a few years before the publication of Coffey's book, was not confident that the diallelus argument could be solved in this fashion. Arguing before the Fourth International Congress for Philosophy at Bologna in 1911, Nelson maintained that it was impossible to give reason to believe that our knowledge is objective. He gave the following version of the diallelus to show this (Nelson, 1973, p. 6):

"In order to solve this problem, we should have to have a criterion by the application of which we could decide whether or not a cognition is true: I shall call it briefly the "validity criterion". This criterion would itself either be nor not be a cognition. If it be a cognition, it would fall within the area of what is problematic, the validity of which is first to be solved with the aid of our criterion. Accordingly, it cannot itself be a cognition. But if the criterion be not a cognition, it would nevertheless, in order to be applicable, have to be known, i.e., we should have to know that it is a criterion of the truth. But in order to gain this knowledge of the criterion, we should already have had to apply it. In both cases, therefore, we encounter a contradiction. A "validity criterion" is consequently impossible, and hence there can be no "theory of knowledge".

The above statement of the diallelus argument is virtually a paraphrase of Sextus Empiricus' ancient formulation, although Nelson nowhere acknowledges this. The only difference is

Nelson's use of the term 'cognition', which means 'true judgement' or 'true proposition'.

In the writings of Chisholm (1973) and Rescher (1973 (b); 1979, 1980) the formulation of the diallelus also follows the classical source of Sextus Empiricus and Montaigne. Both authors, who have considered the diallelus problem in more detail than any other modern philosophers, also add refinements to the classical argument to make the argument clearer. This, as we shall now see, does not materially change the problem, but rather makes the difficulties posed by the diallelus argument more evident.

Rescher in *The Coherence Theory of Truth* (1973 (b)) gives the following analysis of the *diallelus* argument after citing Sextus' formulation. This clearly indicates that Rescher believes that he is dealing with the *same* problem that Sextus dealt with. A criterion of truth (or knowledge) (Rescher, 1980) is of the form: whenever a proposition p meets the requirment R, then p is true:

(C) 
$$(\forall p)$$
  $(R(p) \rightarrow T(p))$ .

Now to establish the truth of p is to give a deductively sound argument:  $C \& R (p) \to T (p)$ . Now if this argument is sound, then it must be both formally valid, and have true premises. Consequently if C & R (p) is to be established as true we must establish T (C). To give a deductively sound argument for T (C) by taking C to be self-applicable, is to give an argument of the form  $C \& R (C) \to T (C)$ . To establish T (C), it is necessary that the truth of C is established, i. e. T (C), and we thereby fall into vicious circularity. If C is not self-applicable, then T (C) is established by use of another criterion  $C_1 \& R_1 (C) \to T (C)$ . For this argument to be accepted, it must be established to be deductively sound. To do this, we must establish

that  $T(C_1)$ . To appeal to another criterion  $C_2$  leads us into an infinite regress.

Roderick Chisholm (1973) also begins his discussion of the diallelus by citing a classical source, this time Montaigne. He then adds the following analysis of the problem. We may distinguish between two fundamental epistemological questions: (A) What is the extent of our knowledge? What do we know? and (B) What are the criteria of our knowledge? How are we to decide whether in fact we do know? Methodists claim to be able to answer question (B) and on the basis of this provide an answer to question (A). Particularists claim to be able to answer question (A), and on the basis of this answer question (B). Sceptics on the other hand argue that (1) it is necessary to first solve the question of the extent of our knowledge in order to solve the question of the criteria of our knowledge and (2) it is also necessary to first solve the question of the criteria of our knowledge before we can solve the question of the extent of our knowledge. This, however, is a vicious circle. Consequently, the sceptic concludes, knowledge is impossible.

Chisholm and Rescher both supply elaborate responses so the sceptic's diallelus argument. It is much of a tangent to consider their solutions here, just as it is an unacceptable tangent to detail the importance of the criterion problem for other leading philosophers in this century such as Russell and Popper. My aim has been to outline one alleged perennial philosophical dispute and show that this problem has been discussed since the dawn of Western philosophy in much the same form as it was originally stated. Whilst I do not pretend to have written a treatise on this issue, the reader should be able to see a broad historical link between figures such as Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne and Rescher and Chisholm. This places the burden of proof upon the critic to show that despite the use of common formula-

tions of a problem which they believe is the same, these thinkers are really dealing with different problems. Therefore I conclude on the basis of these historical examples of "deep" philosophical problems, that the "Hegelian" or "Kuhnian" argument, for the non-existence of pernnial philosophical disputes, fails.

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