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Parmenides' Refutation of Change

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Palmer, John. *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Hoy, Ronald. "Parmenides' Complete Rejection of Time." *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 573–98.

Parmenides was a Greek scholar living in the Italian colony of Elea in the fifth century BCE. The Eleatic school that he championed was known for its claim that reality is a timeless unity. Change, along with the passage of time, is just an illusion or projection of the mind. Only fragments of Parmenides' work survive; they include his refutation of change, which may constitute the earliest surviving example of extended philosophical argumentation.

The main fragment contains a series of connected points intended to show the impossibility of change. According to Parmenides, any change involves destruction or creation, in that it either involves an item going from being to not being (or vice versa) or a property going from being (instantiated) to not being (uninstantiated) (or vice versa). So any change involves something that both is and is not, which is an apparent contradiction. He anticipates the obvious proposed resolution to this claim: there is no contradiction in an item or property both being and not being, since it can, say, "be" in the present while "not be" in the future or past. He replies that this just relocates the contradiction inherent in change to the level of change

over time. Taking change seriously requires us to think in terms of past and future times as real; but the past and future are distinguished from the present in that the present “is” while the past and future “are not.” The only way to think of the past and future as real (Parmenides would claim) is to think of them as real now, which would make them present. So thinking about change requires us to think about the past and future as both present and not present, real and not real.

Parmenides’ resolution of the contradiction is to deny the reality both of change and of the passage of time. (Note this line of reasoning is a very close precursor to J. M. E. McTaggart’s (#15) early-twentieth-century argument to the same conclusion. Sense-perception is characterized by change, so sensation is fundamentally deceptive. The only way to know the truth about the world is by disregarding sensation and using reason and logic alone.

Note that Parmenides does not consider rejecting P2 or P4 instead of P1; he does not, in other words, consider any definition of change that would be consistent with a static theory of time. The static theory denies dynamic nonrelational temporal properties (such as past/present/future) but allows static relational temporal properties (such as earlier/simultaneous/later). This is the same omission later made by McTaggart. This omission does not affect the validity of this argument when considered as an attack specifically on the dynamic theory of time.

As yet a single tale of a way
 remains, that it is; and along this path markers are there
 very many, that *What Is* is ungenerated and deathless,
 whole and uniform, and still and perfect;
 but not ever was it, nor yet will it be, since it is now together entire,
 single, continuous; for what birth will you seek of it?
 How, whence increased? From not being I shall not allow
 you to say or to think: for not to be said and not to be thought
 is it that it is not. And indeed what need could have aroused it
 later rather than before, beginning from nothing, to grow?
 Thus it must either be altogether or not at all.
 Nor ever from not being will the force of conviction allow
 something to come to be beyond it: on account of this neither to be born
 nor to die has Justice allowed it, having loosed its bonds,
 but she holds it fast. And the decision about these matters lies in this:
 it is or it is not; but it has in fact been decided, just as is necessary,
 to leave the one unthought and nameless (for no true
 way is it), and [it has been decided] that the one that it is indeed is genuine.
 And how could *What Is* be hereafter? And how might it have been?
 For if it was, it is not, nor if ever it is going to be:
 thus generation is extinguished and destruction unheard of.

(Parmenides, qtd. in Palmer, 143)

- P1. Change is real (assumption for *reductio*).
- P2. If change is real, then it involves either (a) an object's coming into existence or beginning to have some property or (b) an object's becoming nonexistent or ceasing to have some property.
- P3. If (P2), then there are different times, that is, past/present/future.
 - C1. There are different times, that is, past/present/future (hypothetical syllogism, P1,P2, P3).
- P4. There are not different times – only the present exists.
 - C2. There are different times and there are not different times (conjunction C1, P4).
 - C3. Change is not real (*reductio*, P1–C2).

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The Existence of Forms: Plato's Argument from the Possibility of Knowledge

Jurgis (George) Brakas

Plato. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. New York: Bollington Foundation, 1963.

Cornford, F. M. *The Republic of Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Ross, William David. *Plato's Theory of Ideas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951.

The existence of Forms is at the heart of Plato's philosophy. Take them away, and no philosophy that could reasonably be called Plato's would remain. To the layman (not to mention many philosophers), they are strange creatures indeed. This demands that any discussion of them attempt not only to make clear what these Forms are supposed to be like but also why we should believe they exist at all. Plato gives us several arguments for their existence, but the most important one is arguably what may be called his "argument from the possibility of knowledge." Its premises can be found in several of his dialogues. The argument, naturally enough, is the product of his own passionate convictions and the influence of his predecessors upon his thinking.

Deeply influenced by Socrates, he took from him the love of wisdom, the love of genuine knowledge, with its corresponding withering contempt

for pretensions to it – including the relativism and subjectivism of many of his contemporary thinkers, the Sophists. He also realized that he had to come to grips with the views of two other major thinkers, Heraclitus and Parmenides – Heraclitus claiming that nothing is, only becoming, Parmenides (#14) claiming that change does not exist, only what does not change (a certain One). If – as Plato believed with Heraclitus – everything in this world is constantly changing in every way, constantly “morphing,” never, ever remaining what it is, how could it ever be possible for us to “grasp” anything, to know what any thing is? By the time you think you have grasped it, it has already slipped out of your hands.

To know something must therefore be to know something that does not change, something that always remains what it is (something Parmenidean). Only such a thing can be known, and only such a thing – Plato agrees with Parmenides – is really real. Since such things do not exist in this world, they must exist in, and constitute, a nonspatial, nontemporal dimension. These are what Plato calls “Forms.” (Note that the structure of Plato’s argument is not that Forms exist because knowledge exists; it is, rather, that knowledge exists because Forms exist. Knowledge is not the source of the existence of Forms; the reverse is true: the existence of Forms makes the existence of knowledge possible. Plato’s argument, therefore, is not epistemic; it is ontological.) They are also perfect, eternal, the source of the existence of this world, and many other things as well, but Plato gives other reasons for their possession of these attributes.

[Socrates asks Cratylus] Tell me whether there is or is not any absolute beauty or good, or any other absolute existence? Certainly, Socrates, I think there is. Then let us seek the true beauty, not asking whether a face is fair, or anything of that sort, for all such things appear to be in flux, but let us ask whether the true beauty is not always beautiful. Certainly [. . .]. Then how can that be a real thing which is never in the same state? [. . .]. They cannot. Nor yet, can they be known by anyone; for at the moment that the observer approaches, then they become other and of another nature, so that you can no longer know their nature or state. [. . .]. Nor can we reasonably say [. . .] that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge too cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and to exist. But if the very nature of knowledge changes, at the time when the change occurs there will be no knowledge, and if the transition is always going on, there will always be no knowledge. (*Cratylus*, qtd. in Ross, 439C–440C; Ross’s trans., slightly modified using Jowett’s in *The Collected Dialogues*)

In the *Republic*, Plato gives us the same argument in more explicit form – or, if you like, a different version of the same argument in more explicit form.

[Addressing Glaucon, Socrates asks] [If] a man believes in the existence of beautiful things, but not of Beauty itself [. . .], is he not living in a dream? [. . .]. Contrast him with the man who holds that there is such a thing a Beauty itself and can discern that essence as well as the things that partake of its character, without ever confusing the one with the other – is he a dreamer or living in a waking state? He is very much awake. So we may say that he knows, while the other has only a belief in appearances; and might we call their states of mind knowledge and belief? Certainly. [. . .] When a man knows, must there not be something that he knows? [. . .] [T]here must. Something real or unreal? Something real. How could a thing that is unreal ever be known? [. . .]. So if the real is the object of knowledge, the object of belief must be something other than the real. Yes. Can it be the unreal? Or is that an impossible object even for belief? Consider: if a man has a belief, there must be something before his mind; he cannot be believing nothing, can he? No. [. . .]. So what he is believing cannot be real nor yet unreal. True. [. . .]. It seems, then, that what remains to be discovered is that object which can be said both to be and not to be and cannot properly be called either real or purely unreal. If that can be found, we may justly call it the object of belief [. . .]. (Plato *Republic*, 476C–479A; Cornford's trans.)

Socrates then goes on to identify that object as the world in which we live, a world which he earlier implicitly referred to as a world of appearances. Although one of the basic operating premises here is not that all things in this world are in constant flux, but rather that they are neither fully real nor fully unreal, it is not a far stretch to argue that they are neither fully real nor fully unreal because they are in constant flux. If so, then the argument is fundamentally the same as the one given in the *Cratylus*; if not, then it is another version of it. In the latter case, premise 4 would have to be modified accordingly as well as the wording in all the lines relying on it.

- P1. Knowledge is possible.
- P2. Knowledge is knowledge of some object. That is, if a (putative) piece of knowledge does not have an object, then that (putative) piece of knowledge does not exist.
- P3. All knowledge (unlike opinion) is stable. That is, all pieces of knowledge are stable: they do not change, being one thing at one time, another at another.
- P4. If the object of knowledge could change (for example, if beauty, the object I know, could become something other than beauty), then the knowledge of that object would not be stable (my knowledge of beauty would not be stable).
- P5. All things in this world, as Heraclitus says, are in constant flux. That is, all things in this world are things that are always changing in every way, or, all things in this world are not things that are stable.

- P6. Some objects of knowledge exist among things in this world (assumption for *reductio*).
- C1. Some objects of knowledge change; they are not stable (syllogism, P5, P6).
 - C2. Some pieces of knowledge are not stable (*modus ponens*, P4, C1).
 - C3. All knowledge (unlike opinion) is stable and some pieces of knowledge are not stable (conjunction, P3, C2).
 - C4. No objects of knowledge exist among things in this world (*reductio*, P6–C3).
- P7. If objects of knowledge do not exist in this world and do not exist in another, then objects of knowledge do not exist.
- P8. Objects of knowledge do not exist in another world (assumption for indirect proof).
- C5. Objects of knowledge do not exist in this world, and objects of knowledge do not exist in another (conjunction, C4, P8).
 - C6. Objects of knowledge do not exist (*modus ponens*, P7, C5).
 - C7. Knowledge is not possible (*modus ponens*, P2, C6).
 - C8. Knowledge is possible, and knowledge is not possible (conjunction, P1, C7).
 - C9. Objects of knowledge – called “Forms” – do exist in another world (*reductio*, P6–C8).

Plato, Aristotle, and the Third Man Argument

Jurgis (George) Brakas

Aristotle. *Peri Ideon (On Ideas)*, in *Aristotle Fragmenta Selecta*, edited by William D. Ross. Oxford, 1963: 84.21–85.6.

Fine, Gail. “Owen, Aristotle and the Third Man.” *Phronesis* 27 (1982): 13–33.

Lewis, Frank A. “On Plato’s Third Man Argument and the ‘Platonism’ of Aristotle,” in *How Things Are*, edited by J. Bogen and J. McQuire, 133–74. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985.

Plato. *Plato: Parmenides*, translated by R. E. Allen. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

Strang, Colin. “Plato and the Third Man.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 1 (1963): 147–64.

Many scholars believe that the Third Man Argument (the TMA) is one of the most powerful arguments against the existence of Plato’s Forms, many going so far as to maintain that it is successful. It exists in two versions. One, preserved to us only in a commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* by Alexander of Aphrodisias, uses the Form Man as an example; the other – offered first, to his great credit, by Plato himself – uses the Form Large. The difference between the versions is significant, because the first uses Forms of entities or substances as examples whereas the second uses attributes or properties.

Both versions use just three major premises (in addition to five that most people would find uncontroversial) to generate a regress that is vicious. For any group of things to which the same “name” (word) may be truly applied, there exists a Form having the same “name” in virtue of which that “name” may be truly applied to them. (This may be called the “Existence Assumption” or “One-over-many Assumption.”) This Form is not a member of the group of things of which it is the Form. (This is usually called the “Non-identity Assumption.”) Finally, this Form may be predicated of itself. (This is usually called the “Self-predication Assumption.”) It should be pointed out that both the formulation of this premise and its name are misleading. It is not the very same Form that is predicated of itself but rather another Form having the same name as the first, with the same point applying as the regress proceeds.) Since an infinite regress is impossible (at least, so both Plato and Aristotle agree), one or more of the three major premises must be false, if we take the additional five to be uncontroversial. The problem is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to see how Plato could give up any of those premises and be left with anything that resembles his philosophy.

Controversy does surround both versions. Scholars interpret them differently, and, while some find one or both to be successful, others do not (see Strang, Fine, and Lewis).

The third man is proven also in the following way. If the thing predicated of some group of things also is another thing in addition to the things of which it is predicated, having been separated from them (for this [is what] those who posit the Forms think they prove; this is why, according to them, a certain man-itself exists – because the man being truly predicated of the many individual men also is other than the individual men) – if this is so, there will be a third man. For if the thing predicated is other than the things of which it is predicated, and exists on its own, and man is predicated both of the individual men and of the Form, there will be a third man in addition to both the individuals and the Form. In the same way, [there will be] also a fourth man, predicated of both this [man] – that is, the Form – and the individual [men], and in the same way also a fifth, and so on to infinity. (Aristotle, 84.21–85.6; author’s translation)

P1. If a group of things exists (individual men,¹ for example) to each member of which the same name (“man”) may be truly applied, then a Form (Man or man-himself) exists in virtue of which that name may be truly applied to them (existence or one-over-many assumption).

¹ “Men” and “man” are used in a gender-neutral sense.

- P2. If a Form (Man) exists in virtue of which the same name may be truly applied to a group of things (individual men), then the Form in virtue of which the same name may be truly applied to that group is not included in it (nonidentity assumption).
- P3. If the same name (“man”) may be truly applied to each member of a group of things (individual men), then the name that may be truly applied to each member of that group may also be truly applied to the Form in virtue of which that name may be applied to each member of that group (self-predication assumption).
- P4. A group of things (e.g., men) exists to each member of which the name “man” may be truly applied.
- C1. A Form, Man, exists (in virtue of which “man” may be truly applied to each member of the group of individual men) (*modus ponens*, P1, P4).
- C2. The Form Man is not included in the group of individual men (*modus ponens*, P2, C1).
- C3. The name “man” may be truly applied to the Form Man. That is, the Form Man is [a]² man (*modus ponens*, P3, P4).
- P5. The Form (Man) in virtue of which the same name (“man”) may be applied to a group of things (individual men) is added to that group.
- P6. If the Form (Man) in virtue of which the same name (“man”) may be applied to a group of things (individual men) is added to that group, then the Form and that group constitute a new, different group.
- C4. Man and the group of individual men constitute a new, different group (*modus ponens*, P6, P5).
- C5. The name “man” may be truly applied to Man and each of the individual men. In other words, a group of things exist (Man and the individual men) to each member of which the same name (“man”) may be truly applied (conjunction, C3, P4).
- C6. Another Man (The Third Man³) exists (in virtue of which “man” may be truly applied to each member of this new group) (*modus ponens*, P1, C5).
- P7. If a third Man exists, then also a fourth Man exists (by the same reasoning that the third Man exists: P1–C6).
- C7. A fourth Man exists (*modus ponens*, P7, C6).
- P8. If a fourth Man exists, then an infinite number of such Forms exist.
- C8. An infinite number of such Forms exist (*modus ponens*, P8, C7).

² Brackets are placed around “a” because the indefinite article does not exist in ancient Greek. Depending on the context, the Greek would therefore allow the same set of words to be translated as “Man is a man” or “Man is man.” Clearly, the argument will not go through if “self-predication” is understood along the lines of “Man is man.”

³ Although this Form is not the third Form Man to appear, it is the third man to appear if we take any one of the individual men to be the first man – as Aristotle does.

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Ockham's Razor

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William of Ockham. *Theory of Terms: Part I of the Summa Logicae*, translated by Michael J. Loux. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974.

———. *Scriptum in librum primum Sententiarum (Ordinatio)*, Distinctiones XIX–XLVIII, in *Opera Theologica*, vol. IV, edited by Girard Etzkorn and Francis Kelly. St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1979.

“Ockham’s Razor” is frequently cited as an argument and attributed to William of Ockham. It is typically rendered as “Entities are not to be multiplied without necessity.” It is sometimes understood to mean that when given a choice between two theories, one should choose the one that employs fewer entities (or, sometimes, fewer different types of entities). At other times, it is understood to state that if a given entity is not necessary to explain anything, then we should deny its existence. This common conception, however, is a misunderstanding in several ways.

First, Ockham never said those words – the name “Ockham’s Razor” was invented in 1852, and the words attributed to Ockham do not appear in any of his known works. (The two statements above represent Ockham’s actual position.) Second, the idea that we shouldn’t believe in things without a good reason is by no means original to Ockham or distinctive of him. Third, the Razor is not really an argument but rather a premise or principle used to create arguments of a certain form. Finally, Ockham himself did not actually use the argument to deny the existence of any possible entities, only to doubt them. Ockham allowed for three sources of knowledge

(self-evidence, empirical evidence, and biblical revelation), and held that if we cannot know that something exists through one of these three sources, we should not believe that the thing exists (which does not necessarily mean that we believe that it doesn't exist – without positive evidence that the thing is not there, we should simply remain neutral).

Plurality should not be postulated without necessity. (*Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Part I, dist. 1, q. 1 and 2)

For nothing ought to be posited without a reason given, unless it is known through itself or known by experience or proven by the authority of Sacred Scripture. (*Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Part I, dist. 30, q. 1)

“Ockham’s Razor” as it is commonly employed:

- P1. Two theories, T1 and T2, explain the observed facts equally well (and better than all rival theories), and T1 requires us to postulate the existence of more entities (or more types of entities) than T2.
- P2. “Ockham’s Razor”: If two theories explain the observed facts equally well (and better than all rival theories), believe the theory that postulates fewer entities than a rival theory with no loss in explanatory force.
- C1. We ought to believe T2 and disbelieve T1 (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).

Or

- P1. We do not need to postulate the existence of object X in order to explain any of the phenomena we are attempting to explain.
- P2. “Ockham’s Razor”: If we do not need to postulate the existence of any particular object in order to explain any of the phenomena we are attempting to explain, we should disbelieve the existence of any putative object not needed to explain phenomena.
- C1. Disbelieve the existence of X (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).

Ockham’s Razor as Ockham himself would employ it:

- P1. The existence of object X is not self-evident, nor do we have empirical evidence for its existence, nor is it required by the Bible.
- P2. Ockham’s Razor: If the existence of object X is not self-evident, nor do we have empirical evidence for its existence, nor is it required by the Bible, then we should not believe in the existence of object X.
- C1. Do not believe in the existence of object X (though it is still possible that X does exist) (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).

- P9. If an infinite number of Forms exist, then an infinite regress is possible.
C9. An infinite regress is possible (*modus ponens*, P9, C8).
- P10. An infinite regress is not possible.
C10. An infinite regress is possible and an infinite regress is not possible (conjunction, C9, P10).
- C11. One or more of P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, or P10 are false (*reductio*, P1–C10).

Plato presents what may be called the “self-characterization” version of the TMA in the *Parmenides*. Parmenides is questioning Socrates:

“[W]hen some plurality of things seem to you to be large, there perhaps seems to be some one characteristic that is the same when you look over them all, whence you believe that the large is one.”

“True,” he said.

“What about the large itself and the other larges? If with your mind you should look over them all in like manner, will not some large one again appear, by which they all appear to be large?”

“It seems so.”

“Therefore, another character of largeness will have made its appearance alongside largeness itself and the things that have a share of it; and over and above all those, again, a different one, by which they will all be large. And each of the characters will no longer be one for you, but unlimited in multitude.” (Plato, 132a–b; Allen’s translation)

In reconstructing this argument, I have used beautiful things and their corresponding Forms instead of the “larges” and their Forms. This should make Plato’s argument more “down to earth,” without distorting it in any way.

- P1. If a group of things exists (individual beautiful things, for example) to each member of which the same name (“beautiful”) may be truly applied, then a Form (the beautiful itself or Beauty) exists in virtue of which that name may be truly applied to them (existence or one-over-many assumption).
- P2. If a Form (Beauty) exists in virtue of which the same name may be truly applied to a group of things (individual beautiful things), then the Form in virtue of which the same name may be truly applied to that group is not included in it (non-identity assumption).
- P3. If the same name (“beautiful”) may be truly applied to each member of a group of things (individual beautiful things), then the name that may be truly applied to each member of that group may also be truly

- applied to the Form in virtue of which that name may be applied to each member of that group (“self-predication” assumption).
- P4. A group of things (individual beautiful things, for example) exists to each member of which the name (“beautiful”) may be truly applied.
- C1. A Form, Beauty, exists (in virtue of which “beautiful” may be truly applied to each member of the group of individual beautiful things) (*modus ponens*, 1, 4).
- C2. The Form Beauty is not included in the group of individual beautiful things (*modus ponens*, P2, C1).
- C3. The name “beautiful” may be truly applied to the Form Beauty. That is, the Form Beauty is beautiful (*modus ponens*, P3, P4).
- P5. The Form (Beauty) in virtue of which the same name (“beautiful”) may be applied to a group of things (individual beautiful things) is added to that group.
- P6. If the Form (Beauty) in virtue of which the same name (“beautiful”) may be applied to a group of things (individual beautiful things) is added to that group, then the Form and that group constitute a new, different group.
- C4. Beauty and the group of individual beautiful things constitute a new, different group (*modus ponens*, P6, P5).
- C5. The name “beautiful” may be truly applied to Beauty and each of the individual beautiful things. In other words, a group of things exist (Beauty and the individual beautiful things) to each member of which the same name (“beautiful”) may be truly applied (conjunction, C3, P4).
- C6. Another Beauty (The Third Beauty) exists (in virtue of which “beautiful” may be truly applied to each member of this new group) (*modus ponens*, P1, C5).
- P7. If a third Beauty exists, then also a fourth Beauty exists (by the same reasoning that the third Beauty exists: P1–C6).
- C7. A fourth Beauty exists (*modus ponens*, P7, C6).
- P8. If a fourth Beauty exists, then an infinite number of such Forms exist.
- C8. An infinite number of such Forms exist (*modus ponens*, P8, C7).
- P9. If an infinite number of Forms exist, then an infinite regress is possible.
- C9. An infinite regress is possible (*modus ponens*, C8, P7).
- P10. An infinite regress is not possible.
- C10. An infinite regress is possible and an infinite regress is not possible (conjunction, C9, P10).
- C11. One or more of P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, or P10 are false (*reductio*, P1–C10).

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Aristotle and the Argument to End All Arguments

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Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, translated by W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908.

Friedman, Milton. *Essays in Positive Economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.

Mill, John Stuart. *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vols. VII and VIII, edited by J. Robson. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1973.

Parsons, Charles. "Reason and Intuition," *Synthese* 125 (2000): 299–315.

This argument, which comes down from Aristotle, is one of the most fundamental in the history of thought. It is also one of the most abbreviated, however, which makes it easy to overlook. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle merely says:

It is impossible that there should be demonstration of absolutely everything; [for then] there would be an infinite regress, so that there would still be no demonstration. (1006a, 8–10)

Here is an abridged version of Aristotle's implicit *reductio ad infinitum* argument:

- P1. For any p , if p is a proposition, then reasons can be given for/against p .
- P2. p is a proposition.
C1. Reasons can be given for/against P (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).
- P3. q and r are reasons for/against p .
- P4. If q and r are propositions, then reasons can be given for/against q and r .
- P5. q is a proposition.
C2. Reasons can be given for/against q (*modus ponens*, P1, P5).
- P6. s and t are reasons for/against q .
- P7. If s and t are propositions, then reasons can be given for/against s and t .
- P8. s is a proposition.
C3. Reasons can be given for/against s (*modus ponens* P1, P8).
- P9. u and v are reasons for/against s .
- P10. If u and v are propositions, then reasons can be given for/against u and v .
- P11. u is a proposition.
C4. Reasons can be given for/against u (*modus ponens*, P1, 11).

And so on, *ad infinitum* (omitting r , t , and v for the sake of brevity).

If we demand reasons for/against every proposition, in other words, we will be stuck in an endless process of justification, unable to assert anything at all. As the philosopher of logic and mathematics Charles Parsons put it, “The buck has to stop somewhere.”

This argument does not, of course, prevent us from giving reasons for many, indeed most, propositions. And even where we cannot give reasons for a proposition, it does not follow that we are therefore unjustified in believing it. Some propositions may be self-evident – known intuitively, as “evident without proof or reasoning,” to quote *Webster’s Ninth*. That is how Aristotle viewed the logical law of noncontradiction and how others have treated moral rules like promise keeping. The American Declaration of Independence famously begins: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”

Then, too, while the buck has to stop somewhere, it need not always stop in the same place. We can assume the truth of a proposition merely conditionally, for the sake of argument. We can even assume that p is true for one argument and false for another. As the economic theorist Milton Friedman notes in his *Essays in Positive Economics*, “there is no inconsistency in regarding the same firm as if it were a perfect competitor for one problem, and a monopolist for another, just as there is none in regarding the same chalk mark as a Euclidean line for one problem, a Euclidean surface for a second, and a Euclidean solid for a third” (36).

It is important, though, to know what proposition(s) one is taking as given. People are often unaware of their underlying premises or think them too obvious to mention. But marriages, friendships, and political alliances can come to a bad end simply because of unarticulated disagreements about where the buck stops.

We hold some truths to be more self-evident than others, not only for the sake of argument, but without qualification. Scientists operate on the assumption that whatever laws hold for the universe today will continue to hold tomorrow. And that the buck has to stop somewhere is even more foundational than this principle of induction. Philosophers have traditionally supposed there are some necessary truths; that is, propositions that could not, in any possible world, be false. If so, the Aristotelian argument we are considering is one of these.

On the other hand, in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” the philosopher W. V. Quine put forward the idea that so-called necessary truths are merely those propositions we would be most reluctant to give up (#44). For many, the existence and benevolence of God is a belief to keep when all else fails. For Quine, though, no statement, not even a law of logic, is “immune to revision.”

The argument we are considering is important because it shows that there are limitations to what reasoning can accomplish, which goes against our cherished belief that the exercise of reason can, in principle, settle all disputes. If the buck has to stop somewhere, then even in logic the ultimate appeal is not to reason, deductive or inductive, but to something closer to intuition. Aristotle had no trouble accepting this; nor, for that matter, did Einstein. But John Stuart Mill and others have made ‘intuition’ a term of ill repute – notwithstanding Mill’s assertion in *A System of Logic* that “truths known by intuition are the original premises from which all others are inferred” (§4).

The trouble with intuition is that people are often loath to brook any challenge, however well taken, to their entrenched intuitive beliefs, making further discussion pointless, if not impossible; and this can lead to toxic forms of fanaticism. That one bases a belief on intuition does nothing to guarantee its truth. But fallible, and even dangerous, as intuitive beliefs can be, it does not follow that intuition should simply be discredited. As George Bealer notes in his entry on “Intuition” in the Supplement to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, perception too is fallible (even dangerous at times), but no one thinks we should therefore discount it. On the contrary, it is a truism that “seeing is believing.”

Valid logical inference is safe, while the appeal to intuition carries some risk. But what Aristotle’s argument shows is that valid logical inference itself rests on propositions (axioms) whose truth we accept intuitively; that is perforce where the buck stops.

12

Nietzsche's Death of God

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Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

While Nietzsche resists easy logical formulation, the significance of his critique of the ideas of truth and morality in Western philosophy makes him one of the most important thinkers in modern times. Perhaps no other philosopher has been defined through his legacy as has been Nietzsche: the assault on the metaphysical nature of truth in this argument not only lays foundations for existentialism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, but it also provides moral philosophy with an emblematic figure of moral skepticism (in the work of MacIntyre or Williams, for example).

For Nietzsche, the contemporary age (Northern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century) was witnessing a radical undermining of its philosophical foundations. On the one hand, the traditional beliefs in God were rendered unbelievable by developments in science. But on the other hand, the gap this left in existence had merely been filled by a substitute, science itself, which for Nietzsche maintained the same illusory suppositions over the sacred nature of “truth.” On the one hand, the rise of the middle classes in the industrial age was undermining traditional structures of society, revealing the importance and malleability of power to the development of humanity. On the other hand, Nietzsche saw that this great shift had produced not radical change but only apathy. The real problem, Nietzsche argued, was not that God had ceased to be believable, but – given the way

in which science seamlessly slotted into the same foundational space – nobody had really noticed the significance of the event. Nietzsche is not a nihilist: for him, the death of God is the greatest event of recent times, enabling “Free Spirits” to throw off their metaphysical shackles and embrace a genuinely open future (although Nietzsche’s – necessary – ambiguity over the precise nature of this future has undeniably led to such diverse readings of his work).

Hence, despite its subject matter, Nietzsche does not argue for the Death of God itself in his work in a way that would engage traditionally with the philosophy of religion – it is, rather, a proclamation of an event which is witnessed or reported (for example, in *The Gay Science*, §125, §343, and in the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). He is more interested in how we, as humans, react to the event: whether we embrace its full significance or continue to place a similar “faith” in concepts that remain dependent upon the same metaphysical assumptions, such as science and/or morality. Central to these assumptions is the affirmation of “another world,” that of “truth,” which lies behind our immediate world of experience (for Christianity, this is “heaven”; for morality, the abstract “good”; for science, atomic structures; and so on). This “beyond” removes us from our own sensibilities and retains us in a quasi-religious state in reverence to the scientific and/or the moral. Given that such an ordering of the world infects both our language and practice, Nietzsche consequently views the importance of truth as metaphorical rather than rational: the sense we make of the world is always limited by our perspective (indeed, in his early work he argues that truth is itself a mixed metaphorical construction, a point much elaborated on by later poststructuralists), and as such images, figures, and motifs authorize this sense long before we construct a justificatory logic for it. Nietzsche’s style of arguing is at once rigorously philological, tracing the historical development of concepts with intense academic skill, and at the same time almost hopelessly generalizing, aiming broad shots across the bows of our expectations of what a philosophical argument should be. This style must be borne in mind when approaching the logic of Nietzsche’s argument: his argument over the Death of God is far more a polemic than it is an exercise in close reasoning, and at least one of its aims is to open our eyes to a world without fixed parameters of meaning and truth, and in its place, a raw flux of energy and power.

The greatest recent event – that “God is dead”; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe. [...] But in the main one might say: for many people’s power of comprehension, the event is itself far too great, distant, and out of the way even for its tidings to be thought of as having arrived yet. Even less may one suppose many to know at all what this even really means – and,

now that this faith has been undermined, how much must collapse because it was built on this faith, leaned on it, had grown on it – for example, our entire European morality. (§343)

Wouldn't the cultivation of the scientific spirit begin when one permitted oneself no more convictions? That is probably the case; only we need still ask: *in order that this cultivation begin*, must there not be some prior conviction – and indeed one so authoritative and unconditional that it sacrifices all other convictions to itself? We see that science, too, rests on a faith; there is simply no “presuppositionless” science. The question whether *truth* is necessary must get an answer in advance, the answer “yes”, and moreover this answer must be so firm that it takes the form of the statement, the belief, the conviction: “*Nothing is more* necessary than truth; and in relation to it, everything else has only secondary value.” [...] But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived? Note that the reasons for the former lie in a completely different area from those for the latter: one does not want to let oneself be deceived because one assumes it is harmful, dangerous, disastrous to be deceived; in this sense science would be a long-range prudence, caution, utility, and to this one could justifiably object: How so? Is it really less harmful, dangerous, disastrous not to want to let oneself be deceived? [...] Precisely this conviction could never have originated if truth *and* untruth had constantly made it clear that they were both useful, as they are. So, the faith in science, which after all undeniably exists, cannot owe its origin to such a calculus of utility; rather it must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of the “will to truth” or “truth at any price” is proved to it constantly. [...] Consequently, “will to truth” does not mean “I do not want to let myself be deceived” but – there is no alternative – “I will not deceive, not even myself”; *and with that we stand on moral ground.* (§344)

Thus the question “Why science?” leads back to the moral problem: *Why morality at all*, if life, nature, and history are “immoral”? No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes *thereby affirm another world* than that of life, nature, and history; [...] it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine [...] But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie – if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie? (§344)

The opening part of this reconstructed argument is not Nietzsche's but rather a standard motif of modernity, which Nietzsche takes to task:

P1. If we accept or commit to something as an organizing principle of our lives, then it should be rational, true, or believable.

P2. God's existence is not rational, true, or believable ("The belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable," §343).

C1. We should not accept and commit to God as an organizing principle of our lives (*modus tollens*, P1, P2).

The majority of people are happy with this, Nietzsche thinks, because they substitute other, more believable principles – science, morality, and so on – in the place of 'God's existence'. P2 then becomes an affirmation rather than a negation – 'science is rational', for example – albeit creating a fallacy of affirming the consequent. It is these substitutions that Nietzsche sees as remnants of belief that are really challenged by the idea of the Death of God. Thus, Nietzsche is not interested in discussing the existence or nature of God (P2 or C1). His issue is rather with the claim made in P1: our desire to seek a "truth" in the world beyond our immediate sensations, or, as Nietzsche terms it, the Will to Truth, and why this conditions our lives in the way it does.

P3. If science, morality, or religion contains assumptions, then these will affect the outcome of its inquiry.

Again, here Nietzsche is using the principles of the Enlightenment (the "scientific spirit") that knowledge should be objective and without assumptions (or, in Nietzsche's words, "convictions"). "Wouldn't the cultivation of the scientific spirit begin when one permitted oneself no more convictions?" But Nietzsche probes this premise, "we need still ask: *in order that this cultivation begin*, must there not be some prior conviction – and indeed one so authoritative and unconditional that it sacrifices all other convictions to itself?" (§344).

P4. Science, morality, and religion contain the same assumption: the Will to Truth (the unspoken assumption of science, for example, is that truth is worth discovering: the "yes" in advance); "There is simply no 'presuppositionless' science."

C2. The Will to Truth affects the outcome of (moral, scientific, religious) inquiry (*modus ponens*, P3, P4).

Nietzsche is noting here that our understanding is conditioned by the need to discover a "truth" beyond our immediate perception, which he considers most moral, scientific, and religious understanding to do (he writes more on this in the section of *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled "On the prejudices of philosophers").

P5. If the Will to Truth is essential to our understanding (i.e., we can have no knowledge without it), then we will have a reason for following it.

P6. But we do not have a moral or utilitarian reason for following it.

When Nietzsche asks whether it is “really less harmful, dangerous, disastrous not to want to let oneself be deceived?” we can see that lying and deception can, in fact, be very useful (e.g., when raising children, absolute truth is unnecessary and sometimes unhelpful).

C3. The Will to Truth is not essential to our understanding (*modus tollens*, P5, P6).

As Nietzsche reflects, “you only have to ask yourself carefully, ‘Why do you not want to deceive?’ especially if it should seem – and it does seem! – as if [...] life on the largest scale has actually always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous *polytropoi*.” (201) “*Polytropoi*” means devious, cunning, deceptive. It comes from *The Odyssey*, where it is used to describe the hero who uses these traits to survive the wrath of the gods. In other words, Nietzsche is suggesting that “life” in general does not favor truth in the way that scientific or moral knowledge seems to.

The argument then makes two interrelated points surrounding the status of “truth” itself:

P7. If we do not have moral or utilitarian reasons for following the Will to Truth, our reasons must be other than these.

“Should both be necessary – a lot of trust as well as a lot of mistrust – then where might science get the unconditional belief or conviction one which it rests?” (200–1).

C4. Our reasons for following the Will to Truth are other than moral or utilitarian (*modus ponens*, P7, P6).

P8. If we do not have moral or utilitarian reasons for following the Will to Truth, then it cannot be rational, true, or believable

C5. The Will to Truth cannot be rational, true, or believable (*modus ponens*, P8, P6).

In the place of “rational” justification, which is but an aspect of the Will to Truth, Nietzsche suggests that “truth” is merely a guise for the expression of our power. It rests on a metaphysical faith which is no different, at heart, to the Christian belief in God. The Will to Truth is, thus, a means for limiting our expression of such power: this is symptomatic in the “slave morality” of Christianity. With this connection established between science, morality, and faith, Nietzsche returns to the first part of the argument. If God has become unbelievable, then our faith in the divinity of “truth” is also placed in question. The question that Nietzsche leaves us with suggests that this is what the death of God “really means.”