

A **RE**-introduction to Philosophy

Why Post-Fregean Methods Have Not Reduced Philosophic Disagreement and Paradox

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To all first-year graduate students in philosophy,
present, past, and future.

Introduction

Some amount of disagreement and paradox will always characterize every field of human intellectual endeavor, but no other field comes close to having the amount philosophy does. Other disciplines have been able to do what philosophy has not: produce a consensus that is widespread, long lasting and cumulative (the consensus of later generations builds on agreement with their predecessors' results more than on criticism of them) among those trained in the field. And no other discipline generates paradox with anything like the frequency philosophy does. Elsewhere, I have called this condition "philosophy's predicament," unaware that the phrase had been used in another sense by Stanley Cavell. Now it has been used in at least one more sense, by Zhang Yuni. Accidental multiple *entendre* like that is, of course, a contributor to philosophic disagreement and paradox, though not the main contributor. Since I have not found a better term, however, I will continue to use "philosophy's predicament" in my sense.

While it is still early in the new century, it is time to face an overlooked question about the philosophy of the last: Why has our use of post-Fregean methods not reduced the amount of philosophic disagreement and paradox? Frege's computational methods brought unprecedented clarity, precision and rigor to verification in logic, not to mention the extension of verifiability to infinitely more formulas. Whether or not Frege thought the power of his methods could be extended to the solution, or dissolution, of traditional philosophical problems, others certainly did. Think of such ideologically driven projections of Fregean models onto metaphysics and epistemology as the *Tractatus* and *Aufbau*, respectively. But under "post-Fregean" methods I am also including reactions against such strict Fregean observances, like ordinary language and ideal language programs.

And what about later achievements in logic built on Frege's, like Tarski's treatment of truth, Craig's theorem, Kripke's semantics of possible worlds, or even Russell's theory of descriptions? There is no problem with the technical value of such achievements considered just as logical analyses; they are perfectly good, in fact excellent, in themselves. That is a

given. But problems of disagreement and paradox have always followed our attempts to draw philosophic consequences from logical advances like that. Russell's theory, for example, is perfectly successful as a technical logical device, but a century later we still disagree on whether we can use it to answer the philosophic questions Russell thought we could answer with it, or any other philosophic questions. Why have such logical advances not helped us reduce the amount of disagreement and paradox in philosophy?

As just indicated, one answer can be rejected out of hand. The reason cannot be that there is anything wrong with computational methods of logical verification in themselves; there is nothing wrong with them on their own terms. So our failure to reduce philosophic disagreement and paradox by means of them, despite the unparalleled clarity, precision and rigor they brought to logic, must have its sources elsewhere. It must come from other assumptions that we consciously or unconsciously bring to the table. This book concerns some of those other assumptions.

I will begin with a refutation of one of those assumptions: our acceptance of Hume's argument that a thing's need for an efficient cause can be known neither "intuitively" or "demonstrably," or to use more contemporary terms, that the need for an efficient cause cannot be epistemically necessary. This might seem an odd place to start a discussion of philosophic disagreement and paradox. Hasn't our agreement with Hume's argument been very widespread, long lasting and cumulative? Haven't the treatments of causality by subsequent generations built on it, despite some criticisms of other causal positions in Hume? So even if my refutation of Hume is correct, our almost universal acceptance of it seems to be an exception to the prevalence of philosophy's predicament. How can I cite that acceptance as a source of disagreement and paradox, other than in some discussions specifically about causality?

But the fact this assumption may not appear relevant to other prominent areas of philosophic disagreement and paradox is important to my point. Our acceptance of Hume's argument is so embedded in our thinking that we are no longer conscious of how much the

way we approach philosophy depends on it. To cite just one example—and not the most significant one—were it not for accepting Hume we would not think twice about looking for the *causes* of philosophy's predicament. (Here "A *causes* B" does not mean that an A is always followed by a B. Rather, the universality of the A/B sequence would itself be an *effect* of what-B-is deriving from what-A-is.) So in addition to refuting Hume, I will explain the ramifications that our acceptance of Hume has had on the way we handle philosophic issues not directly related to causality. In the course of explaining those ramifications, this book will discuss other incorrect extra-Fregean assumptions that are so deeply embedded that we don't bother to critically examine them.

The corrections to those assumptions will not, however, be sufficient for reducing philosophic disagreement and paradox. Instead, they will provide sufficient reasons for future philosophers to be very skeptical about the possibility of reducing them, despite using styles of philosophizing based on methods that have enabled other fields to do what philosophy has not: produce consensus among those trained in the field that is widespread, long lasting and cumulative. There are characteristics that are *de facto* unique, at least when taken *in toto*, to philosophic questions and due to which we cannot expect anything like the kind of consensus and relative lack of paradox in philosophy that the methods of other fields produce. And using methods that are inappropriate to the unique characteristics of philosophic questions can make the situation even worse. What I will offer, in other words, is an explanation of why the history of philosophy, including contemporary history as much as any other period, *is what it actually is*. I do not claim to have identified all the causes of philosophy's predicament, but the causes I identify are sufficient to make it very unlikely that the future amount of disagreement and paradox in philosophy can be any different from the past (except by being even greater).

You may find this result depressing. I hope you will find it radically liberating. By liberating, I don't mean that it frees us from the need to be scrupulously rigorous. On the contrary, it requires us to strive to be even more rigorous. If we cannot expect to achieve

more long lasting and cumulative consensus, it is still possible to achieve more disagreement and paradox. Knowing this, we are even more obligated to strive for clarity, precision and rigor. For unlike many other explanations of philosophy's predicament, my analysis does not imply that philosophic questions contain some sort of inherent defect that is the cause of the condition. That kind of explanation of philosophy's predicament goes at least as far back as Sextus Empiricus and continues through Hume and Kant to Wittgenstein, the logical positivists and deconstructionists. But even if criticism of that kind was valid, making it has never generated less disagreement and paradox among its proponents and their subsequent disciples than among the philosophers being criticized.

And of course, to arrive at a claim that there is something intrinsically wrong with what others have called "philosophy," one must philosophize at least in the sense of doing something other than ordinary logic, mathematics, physics, psychology, linguistics, or whatever. For that claim does not appear to be the kind we are able to justify in fields whose methods do generate so much less confusion. The problem I am raising with the "inherently defective" explanation of philosophy's condition is often a problem of self-referential inconsistency (for example, that "Empirical science is the only legitimate knowledge"—as opposed to "Only empirical science has produced long term and cumulative consensus"—is not itself an agreed on piece of empirical knowledge.) But the problem is not just self-referential inconsistency. Inconsistent or not, the anti-philosophic claim has to be justified in some way. And no one has found a way that generates less disagreement and paradox than the claim is meant to help us avoid.

I will offer an explanation of philosophy's predicament that neither (a) offers a way out of the predicament nor (b) makes philosophy an intrinsically invalid endeavor. It isn't that arguments known to be sound cannot occur in philosophy. But the conditions under which human beings must pursue philosophic truth make that soundness, once known by some philosopher, much less communicable to other philosophers than is the evidence in other fields. Philosophic evidence is objective and so communicable, but the kind of

objectivity that characterizes philosophy's evidence makes the communication of evidence from one philosopher to another more difficult than in other fields by far.

The result is that the relatively small subset of philosophers who share genuine knowledge that argument A (for example, one of the many arguments for or against the existence of God) is sound will only partially intersect with the small subset sharing knowledge that B (one of the many arguments for or against free will) is sound, and B's subset will only partially intersect with the subset sharing knowledge that C (one of the many arguments about the problem of induction) is sound, etc. So with genuine knowledge, you and I may agree about the soundness of A, but you may disagree with me about the soundness of B with knowledge, while someone else may disagree with both you and me about the soundness of C with knowledge, etc. Think of any relatively large philosophy department you have ever been familiar with. Assuming that each of the members have achieved some genuine knowledge of the soundness of some philosophic arguments, is it even *logically* possible, given all the disagreements among those members, that such knowledge is distributed in any other way than as illustrated by the subsets for A, B and C?

Remember that assent to a truth is *not* what constitutes good philosophy. A philosopher has a fifty-fifty chance of being right about any statement. So the subsets of philosophers that share *beliefs* may intersect much more than the subsets that agree on the arguments for those beliefs. But good philosophy consists of assent to truth due to grasping that an argument is sound. The widespread, long lasting and cumulative agreement on the soundness of Hume's *argument* against epistemic necessity for causality, as opposed to simple agreement on the truth of its conclusion, is indeed one of the exceptions to philosophy's predicament, but it is an exception that admirably proves the rule, since the exception comes at the price of agreement with a fallacy.

The particular kind of difficulty in communicability that is greater in philosophy than other fields does *not* mean that philosophic knowledge requires more intelligence than, say, physics and mathematics do. Einstein and Gödel's successes, for example, were more

difficult than philosophy's in deep and important ways. But the achievement of long standing and cumulative agreement has proven much more difficult in philosophy than in any other field. That is not a theory; it is an historical fact. Since it is a fact, we should have a theory of what philosophic evidence is that accounts for that fact without implying that it, the theory, is immune from the difficulties it is accounting for. The reason my theory should be radically liberating is that, unlike all other explanations of the facts about philosophy's predicament, it does not claim to transcend them.

But what kind of hope for success does this analysis offer philosophers, especially young philosophers? I am saying that in the future philosophers will have the exact same kind of success we have now and have had at almost every period in the history of philosophy. Every generation of philosophers has taken its current state of relative consensus about its criticism of its predecessors as evidence of philosophic progress. Also, in almost every generation, groups of philosophers have had a degree of consensus about the superiority of their current style of philosophizing sufficient for them to imagine that they are at last on the verge of permanently rescuing philosophy from its predicament. And every generation of philosophers has been wrong about that, as ours has been.

Whatever the future of philosophy may bring, however, only group-think could lead the present generation of philosophers to believe that our accomplishments are superior to those of past generations with respect to reducing disagreement and paradox. It may be replied "At least our disagreement and paradox spring from better foundations than those of the past." But why are our foundations better? "Because those of the past produced all that disagreement and paradox." Then why do we have at least as much disagreement and paradox? We may think, for example, that we have successfully by-passed the traditional problem of universals by replacing it with the question of quantifying over sets. The traditional problem is still there, however; it comes back to bite us in Wittgenstein's problem about "the same" in carrying on a series. But now its bite is worse since our reformulations prevent us from recognizing it when we meet it. We have used our more sophisticated

foundations to outsmart ourselves, as philosophers have always done. (So we actually have more disagreement and paradox than before, but let's not argue about that.)

Could there be more in our foundations than we have noticed, like a fallacious argument that prevents us from seeking the true *causes* of philosophy's predicament? Another thing history shows is that we philosophers are better at critically examining everyone else's presuppositions than our own. No matter how rigorous we consider ourselves to be, the fact is that in philosophy we don't push back hard enough against our own assumptions.

I rest this introduction to my case with four statements illustrating my point about post-Fregean philosophy, the first three from post-Fregean philosophers of distinction:

"(Quine and Anscombe were) united in their attachment to a conviction that philosophy had been transformed by the work of Gottlob Frege."

John Haldane (2001, 47)

"One of the most important (of Frege's conceptions) is the profound comparison between a predicate and the expression of an arithmetical function, e.g., $(x)^2$. The notion of what is termed a 'propositional function', e.g., 'x is bald', is directly based on this comparison: here we get a proposition if we replace 'x' by a (real) proper name, just as from $(x)^2$ we get an expression of a definite value by replacing the 'x' by a definite number. This comparison is fundamental to all modern logic."

Elizabeth Anscombe (1971, 14)

"The term 'open sentence' has been used by Carnap and others. The older term for the purpose is 'propositional function', but this can be misleading, since a function in the mathematical sense is best seen as a certain type of relation rather than as a notation."

W. V. Quine, (1982, 147)

"The more things are transformed, the more they remain the same."

(French proverb)