

Nicholas RESCHER

PARADOXES. Their Roots, Range and Resolution.

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Review by Mirela Saim

Eubulides of Miletus, a now forgotten dialectician cited by Diogenes Laertius, is credited with being responsible for the enunciation of some famous paradoxes, such as "the Liar"; ever since, the history of discursive disciplines such as rhetoric, logic and philosophy has registered a sort of cyclical movement new paradoxes being formulated and old ones - apparently - solved. As we all know, it is during the Scholastic age that paradoxes, under the name of "*insolubilia*", reached an exceptional development, occupying the finest academic minds, while the practice and theory of the controversial discourse did expand, mainly by exploiting the Aristotelian legacy of the "Sophistical Refutations".

Within the rhetorical tradition, however, paradoxes are situated differently; their place is unstable, and probably more complex, yet altogether significant. These enjoyable playthings of the intellectual tradition have rarely if ever been the focus of a thorough history, intellectual, cultural or otherwise. The classical survey by Prantl, published more than a century ago, has been out of date for a very long time. There are, nevertheless, some detailed discussions and monographic studies dedicated to some of the most important fallacies, as the series produced in the last decade by Douglas Walton and Anthony Blair. In their view, paradoxes are to be seen as part and parcel of a theory of argumentation that is of everlasting interest: discourses change, but fallacies and informal argumentation are forever here to stay and to be recognized as such. In Walton's approach, the chase for the hidden errors of argumentation, for the never-ending contradictory statement is ceaseless: their presence in the current public discourse reveals a lot about our culture and about our commitment to rationality and transparency in public life, as well as about our social and political awareness in general.¹

¹ In this respect, "Arguments from Ignorance" (1995), "Appeal to Expert Opinion"(1997) and "Appeal to popular Opinion" (1999) do indeed offer a very useful survey of the current state of argumentation

Quite recently, another approach to the discourse of paradoxes has been added to this field of study, strongly suggesting that Pragmatism has something distinctive to add to this field too. This review intends to discuss this contribution.

Nicholas Rescher's book about paradoxes is a handbook-like monograph, a compact and accessible systematization of the existing literature on paradoxes that surveys more than one hundred and thirty paradoxes; it also aims at bringing a new look, founded in a pragmatic view of communication and epistemology at the discussion of this issue.

From the very beginning, the author states that the aim of his study is mainly methodological, his aim being to "present a way of handling paradoxes in general". At least three of the innovative analytic tools listed by Rescher as methodological new approaches are of utmost interest to both orators and rhetoricians: "the standardization of paradox analysis through the machinery of general aporetics", "the exploration of the distinction between truth and plausibility as an instrument of paradox analysis", and "the utilization of epistemic prioritization in paradox resolution and the exploration of the role of plausibility rankings in this regard" (pp. XV-XVI).

This means that cognitive processes as well as communicative goals and values are brought together in an effort meant to offer a clue to the resolution of a big number of well known paradoxes. Paradoxes, regarded since Aristotle as fallacies, either aiming at unfairly confusing the unwary opponent by a "plausible" yet untruthful argument or being indeed mistaken arguments, are now included in a wider frame of reference and, in the best Ciceronian tradition, approached as facts of cultural semantics and pragmatics. For this reason, Rescher includes in the examination of the, parallogisms and sophisms in an extensive range of contradictory statements and discourse, implying a theory of the paradoxical discourse that is dominated by cultural understanding.

It is thus refreshing to note that some of the most interesting paradoxes are recovered in their original formulation, analyzed and discussed by following their historical semantics; for example a number of "philosophical theological" paradoxes are identified as such

in public discourse, of the slippery road from legitimate arguments to erroneous strategies and outright fallacies.

and dealt with accordingly.² Furthermore, Rescher is ready to acknowledge that some cultural fields and representative discourses, like religion, do strive on paradoxical foundations and formulations, so that a discursive resolution of the paradox involved usually displays an abandonment, or at least a weakening of either ethical or epistemic commitments. An interesting case in point is given by "Kierkegaard's God Paradox", linking religious discourses to rational understanding; as Rescher sees it, the paradox springs from a triadic argument concealing an inconsistency that can only be solved by rejecting one of its elements, which in turn leads to either a rejection of the requirement for rational comprehension (on theological or meta-philosophical grounds) or to an abandonment of the overall commitment to religious ideas. Another discussion of religious arguments within the aporetic frame concerns the famous topic of God's foreknowledge in relation to human freedom. Similar discussions are also developed around some classical philosophical apories, such as Plato's "Theory of Ideas" ("the third man paradox"), Aristotle's "Sea Battle Paradox" (determinism versus indeterminism), etc.

An interesting and original point is made by a discussion of the "Paradox of Explanation" deemed to be at the core of most hermeneutic claims for absolute comprehensiveness. According to this discussion, there is an unavoidable aporetic core to an epistemic stand that requires a tie between the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of non-circularity and the principle of comprehensiveness; in order to escape the circle of infinite regress or the wrongs of inconsistency, one simply has to recognize the dangers and to assign priority values to committing to all the three principles involved. In this case, at least, cautious relativism sustained by comparative awareness seems to show the way out of methodological predicament.

Further discussions, equally brief and stimulating are dedicated to more technical paradoxes, including mathematical paradoxes and paradoxes identified in mathematical terms by some modern philosophers: Russell, Cantor, Grelling, etc.

The book ends by an examination of a group of paradoxes that are called of choice and decision, or conflicting reasons for actions, of which "the prisoner's dilemma" has been made famous by David Mamet's productions. As can be seen, there is an increasing appeal to

² This indeed integrates to the general discussion some analyses already detailed by Rescher in his "Pascal's Wager" (1985).

practice and action as contexts, in order to even understand the paradoxes, let alone solve them. And it is this very need for a more comprehensive, communicative, social-pragmatic reason that leads Reischer to close his study by a return to Prantl's claim that paradoxes are indeed the province of the rhetorician, outlining once more his commitment to the values of rational practice and to the contexts of deliberation.

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