

## COULD EVERYTHING BE TRUE?

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### I. The Problem: Trivialism

Is everything true? The answer, presumably, is no—and there is not likely to be much disagreement about that. But how do you know? To put the issue into focus, suppose that you met someone who took everything to be true. I will call such a person a *trivialist*. How could you justify your position *vis a vis* theirs?<sup>1</sup>

The question may seem a rather arcane one, but it is a significant one. For a start, it is significant if you are a dialetheist, that is, if you believe that *some* contradictions are true. The trivialist believes that *all* contradictions are true. (Indeed, assuming that one believes a conjunction iff one believes both conjuncts, this is an alternative characterisation of the trivialist.) It is often said by way of objection to dialetheism that if one is a dialetheist, one might just as well be a trivialist. This is a silly objection, as are most slides from ‘some’ to ‘all’. (Compare: you believe some things to be true; why don’t you believe all things to be true?) None the less, even though this is not a good objection, the question of why one should not accept everything is one that an honest dialetheist will ask himself.

The problem is not simply one for a dialetheist, however. It arises just as much for someone who subscribes to orthodox, classical, logic, as it does for someone who subscribes to a paraconsistent logic. For the trivialist *is a classical logician*. Every principle of inference that a classical logician subscribes to, such as that a contradiction entails everything, the trivialist subscribes to too (indeed, this might be why they became a trivialist in the first place). Every semantic principle that the classical logician subscribes to, such as that nothing is both true and false, the trivialist subscribes to too. One cannot, therefore, simply appeal to classical logic when faced with the trivialist.

There is, in fact, a strong similarity between trivialism and scepticism. The trivialist will subscribe to everything; the sceptic will subscribe to nothing. In this respect, they are dual figures. And both take such extreme positions that it is difficult for those who wish to hold the middle ground to know where to start the debate. It might be thought that, at least historically, scepticism and trivialism are not on a par. For there have certainly been sceptics, such as Sextus Empiricus; but there have been no trivialists. This is less than clear, though. In *Metaphysics* Γ,<sup>2</sup> Aristotle takes Heraclitus and Protagoras to be trivialists, though whether this is fair to them may be a moot point.

<sup>1</sup> I have been mulling over this question for some time, and have learned that little in the area is as simple as it may seem. It may well be that what follows is wrong. Still, it is the best I can do at the moment, and I think that the problem is significant enough that it is time it were thrown out to the general philosophical community.

<sup>2</sup> See, especially, chapter 5.

Perhaps more importantly, it is not at all clear that there have *really* been any sceptics. Sextus certainly claimed to be, but the fact that he navigated his way around his world may suggest that he did really believe some things to be true rather than others. At this point, we have already engaged in substantive philosophical issues; ones we will, in fact, return to later.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, whether there have really been any sceptics or trivialists is unimportant. It is the positions themselves that are important. Both of them are extreme and incredible, but it is exactly by taking such extreme views as foils that we come to understand better our own views, as the generations of debate related to scepticism have demonstrated in epistemology.

So how does one justify one's view *vis a vis* the trivialist's? Before we can engage with the issue, there is a problem even about how to conceptualise it. It is easy enough to show that trivialism is not true—indeed, necessarily so. For it is either true or it is not. But if it is true, it follows that it is not true (everything follows). Hence, in either case, it is not true. Does this settle the issue? Not at all: for the trivialist accepts that everything is not true! Quite generally, one cannot simply enter into debate with the trivialist as to whether or not everything is true. In fact, there is no point in engaging in debate with the trivialist about *anything*. We know that they are going to agree in advance! There is, as far as I can see, no way of getting the trivialist to change their position at all. Just because everything one says is something that they already believe, there is nothing one can say that will have the slightest purchase.

It makes more sense to ask how one would justify one's view to some independent third party, an arbitrator. The third party may be supposed to be neutral on the issue, at least initially. The job for each of the first two parties is to persuade them. The arbitrator will listen to arguments from each side, and, if convinced by either party, will judge in their favour.<sup>4</sup>

Convincing the arbitrator is still not as easy as it might at first appear, though. In particular, one must still not beg the question, or the arbitrator will rule 'foul'. For example, an obvious argument to use is that the trivialist's position is inconsistent, and so ought not to be believed. (Naturally, a dialetheist is not going to make this objection; but a classical logician might.) It is clear that this argument fails, though, since it begs the question. The trivialist affirms everything, including all contradictions. Simply to claim that these cannot be true is to take for granted part of what is at issue.

So what arguments can be used? There are a number of possible answers to this question, and I shall not attempt an exhaustive discussion here. In the rest of this paper, I

<sup>3</sup> Trivialism would seem to have a dual position: that everything is false. Oddly, though, these two positions are one and the same. For if everything is true, 'everything is false' is true, so everything is false. And if everything is false, 'something is not true' is false, and so everything is true. Now, there certainly have been philosophers who held that everything is false. For example, Bradley held that this was, strictly speaking, the case.

<sup>4</sup> One might object here as follows. Since the arbitrator must agree with neither party initially, there must be something that they do not believe, viz. that any one of the parties is right. Hence, they cannot be a trivialist, and so are not neutral. But the fact that the arbitrator *does not* believe trivialism, does not entail that they *do* believe that trivialism is untrue. Hence, this does not threaten their impartiality.

will consider three answers that I find to be interesting. The first two are less than completely successful, as I will argue; the third, I hope, is.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Argument One: Evidence

The first argument is as follows. The trivialist believes many strange things. They believe, for example, that you are a scrambled egg. This is objectionable since there is just no evidence to justify it. The rational person should not believe anything for which there is no reason. The arbitrator must agree. And if the trivialist argues that there is a reason, namely that it follows from trivialism, then it is they who now beg the question.

Unfortunately, the trivialist is not out yet. There *is* evidence independent of trivialism that you are a scrambled egg. Consider a sequence of objects obtained, at each step, by replacing a micron of you with a micron of scrambled egg. I start with an object that is you, and if I have an object that is you, and replace a micron with a micron of scrambled egg, it is still you. Hence, the final stage of the sequence is still you. And the final stage is a scrambled egg. Hence, you are a scrambled egg. This argument depends in no way at all on trivialism.

Naturally, we will take it that there is something wrong with the argument. If it were patently invalid, say it proceeded by asserting the consequent, it would be easy enough to justify this. But the only form of inference that the argument uses (albeit  $10^6$  times) is *modus ponens*, and this is valid, at least *prima facie*. Moreover, its only premises (that you are you, and that something that is you is still you if a micron is exchanged) are also *prima facie* true. Hence the argument does appear to be sound. The trivialist has shifted the onus of proof.

If the argument were produced by a non-trivialist, we could say that since the conclusion is absurd, there must be *something* wrong with it. But against the trivialist, this move is of no avail, for it clearly begs the question. One might try a stronger argument. Let  $a$  be any physical object, and let  $F$  be any property, tolerant in its applicability with respect to small changes, possessed by some possible physical object,  $b$ . Then if soritical reasoning were sound, we could construct (at least in thought) a sequence of objects, each barely different from its predecessor, running between  $a$  and  $b$ , and hence establish that  $Fa$ .<sup>6</sup> In other words, if soritical reasoning were legitimate, we could show that every physical object has every tolerant physically possible property. Hence, soritical reasoning cannot be legitimate. Against an ordinary opponent, this argument is conclusive. But against the trivialist, the argument begs the question just as before. The trivialist holds that every physical object *does* have all such properties.

Let us take stock. Sorites reasoning of the kind we have been looking at does not establish trivialism in general. There is no way (as far as I can see) to use such reasoning

<sup>5</sup> There is another way that one may interpret the question with which this essay starts, 'How do you know that not everything is true?' One might take this, not as a request for a justification, but as a request for an explanation. That is, granted that one does know, how does one do this? This is a quite different matter; for example, begging the question is no longer an issue. This way of interpreting the question is addressed in [3].

<sup>6</sup> Most of the objects in question are, of course, hypothetical, rather than actual; but such is the case in most sorites arguments.

to show that physical objects have all *sharp* properties (or to show anything much at all about non-physical objects—if there are any). It is not, therefore, a complete reply to objection number one. But such reasoning does appear to show that every physical object has every tolerant physically possible property. Since this encompasses virtually every object and property we commonly deal with, this is as near trivialism as makes no difference for practical purposes. Let us call a person who takes all physical objects to have all such properties a *near-trivialist*. The sorites argument does provide a defence of near-trivialism against objection number one.<sup>7</sup>

### III. Argument Two: Meaning

For the next argument we turn towards Aristotle. The issue of trivialism is not, in fact, a new one. In *Metaphysics* Γ 4, Aristotle gives a number of arguments in support of the Law of Non-Triviality, LNT (not everything is true)—which Aristotle tends to confuse with the Law of Non-Contradiction, LNC. Aristotle's major argument (1006<sup>a</sup>24–7<sup>b</sup>18) is often interpreted as trying to show that violations of the LNC or LNT would render language meaningless. I do not think that this interpretation is correct. Nor do I think that other arguments that commentators have claimed to find in the text, to the effect that violation of the LNT renders language meaningless, succeed in establishing this either.<sup>8</sup> But here is another argument for this conclusion.

To start with, let us consider the family of colour words. Let us suppose that the LNT failed for these. Thus, every (visible) object is green, and blue, and red, and all other colours. If such were the case, colour words would have no public meaning. For the public meanings of words have to be learned; and they are learned by contrasting situations where they do apply with situations where they do not. The lack of such a distinction would therefore undercut the possibility of public, transmissible, meaning. One might be tempted to reply that the meanings of such words could still be grasped since things at least *appear* different colours. But of course, if trivialism were true, everything would appear red, and appear blue, and appear green, and so on, too.

The argument generalises. To convey the sense of any predicate,<sup>9</sup> one depends on situations where it applies, and situations where it does not. If there are no such situations, public, communicable, sense is impossible. Hence, trivialism entails the meaninglessness of public language. The arbitrator, as long as they are to be an arbitrator, clearly cannot accept this conclusion. Hence, they must find against the trivialist.

One might take issue with this argument. For example, it depends on a contrastive account of the communicability of meaning, which one might contest. But there are quite general reasons why this, or any, argument to the effect that violation of the LNT entails the meaninglessness of language must fail to do what is required in the present context.

<sup>7</sup> It might be thought that standard solutions to the sorites paradoxes would be of some help here, but they are not. There are many proffered solutions, but each of them has some strongly unintuitive feature. Indeed, necessarily so. For the soritical reasoning is both simple and intuitively correct. This does not show that, as solutions to the sorites paradox, they are wrong. But it does show that they cannot shift the relevant onus of proof. In other words, in the present context, they are of no help.

<sup>8</sup> For justification of both of these claims, see [2].

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps with the exception of 'to be'; but being is always an odd thing.

For the trivialist may simply take to heart the thought that public language is meaningless, and so cease to assert anything.<sup>10</sup>

It might be thought that this would take the trivialist out of the debate altogether. Since they say nothing, we are free to ignore them. Aristotle certainly thought this. This is too fast, however. They may not be able to assent to anything, but that does not stop them uttering things. *They* may take themselves to be just ‘babbling’—to use a helpful phrase of Peter Unger. But *we* don’t; and we still have to take into account the force of what they say, or at least, of what we take to be that force. The situation here is a very familiar one in the context of scepticism.<sup>11</sup> The sceptic claims that there is no ground for believing anything, as opposed to anything else. This means that they can assent to nothing. But they can still utter things; and we, who do assent to some of the things uttered, cannot ignore their consequences. The sceptic, in a word, utters *ad hominem*. The trivialist does the same. If the trivialist is prepared to go in this direction, then any argument from meaninglessness fails.

#### IV. Argument Three: the Phenomenology of Choice

In *Metaphysics* Γ 4, Aristotle gives a number of other arguments against failure of the LNT. Many of these are pretty hopeless. For example, between 1007<sup>b</sup>18 and 1008<sup>a</sup>7 Aristotle points out a number of apparently absurd consequences of everything being true. Such arguments simply beg the question against the trivialist, as I have already observed.<sup>12</sup>

Aristotle’s most interesting argument comes at 1008<sup>b</sup>12–31, where he points out that if someone really believed everything to be true they would have no reason to act in any way, as opposed to any other. When they felt hungry they would have no reason to eat bread rather than broken glass, or for that matter, eat nothing at all, since they believe that each of these actions will satisfy their hunger. Such a person will, then, act erratically—and not for very long. Conversely, if we do see someone acting in a systematic and apparently purposeful fashion, we can infer that they do not really believe everything, whatever they say.

A similar argument can be urged against the sceptic who claims not to believe anything, as opposed to anything else. Indeed, Sextus considers just such an objection, and replies to it that, though the sceptic behaves systematically, they do not, in fact, behave on the basis of possessing reasons. They do what they do, simply because they are well trained. When they are hungry they reach for bread, not because they believe that it, rather than glass, will nourish them, but simply because they are conditioned to do so.<sup>13</sup> The same reply is available to the trivialist. They, too, may claim that when they reach for

<sup>10</sup> Note that one cannot run the same arguments against the meaningfulness of a private language—assuming such a thing to make sense—for the preceding argument depends on communicability.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., [1], 3.4.

<sup>12</sup> A variant of this strategy is also employed at 1008<sup>a</sup>30, where Aristotle points out that the trivialist is ‘in error by his own admission’. This argument begs the question against the trivialist in the same way. For the trivialist holds that one ought to believe anything that is an error! All of Aristotle’s arguments are discussed further in [2].

<sup>13</sup> *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I, 11, 23–4.

bread, it is not because they do not believe that glass would be just as good. It is simply because they have been trained to do so.

This does not get to the heart of the matter, though. Given some purpose, the trivialist can have no reason for behaving in one way rather than another to bring it about. But the situation is worse. The trivialist—at least whilst they remember that they are a trivialist—can have no purpose at all. One cannot intend to act in such a way as to bring about some state of affairs, *s*, if one believes *s* already to hold. Conversely, if one acts with the purpose of bringing *s* about, one cannot believe that *s* already obtains. Hence, if one believes that everything is true, one cannot act purposefully. It might be retorted that if one believes that everything is the case, one believes that *s* is *not* the case, and so one *can* intend to bring it about. Normally, it is true, someone who believes  $\neg s$  does not believe that *s*; and so believing  $\neg s$  allows one to have the intention of bringing *s* about. But for the trivialist,  $\neg s$  does not rule out *s*; hence these considerations do not apply. The trivialist cannot aim to bring about *s*, because it is simply *part* of a situation that (they think) already obtains, viz.,  $s \wedge \neg s$ .

But now: as long as a person is conscious, they make choices. They decide what to do, and what not to do. Even if they decide to ‘do nothing’ they have still chosen a course of action. And the person who is running on Sextus’ ‘autopilot’ chooses to go along with it, and not over-ride it. This observation that people must make choices may sound like an endorsement of free will. I do not intend it to be so. It may be that, at some level, our actions are determined by things that are quite beyond our consciousness, and so are unfree. I intend the observation purely as a phenomenological report of our consciousness. Having to choose is something phenomenologically unavoidable. The point was stressed, famously, by Sartre.<sup>14</sup>

But to choose how to act is to have a purpose: to (try to) bring about *this* rather than *that*. Not even to act on the toss of a coin is a counter-example to this. For to act on the toss of a coin is simply to let one’s next purpose be determined by the result—and one has that purpose in tossing the coin, to boot. Choosing is an irredeemably goal-directed activity. And as we have seen, such action is incompatible with believing everything.<sup>15</sup> It follows that I cannot but reject trivialism. Phenomenologically, it is not an option for me. This does not show that trivialism is untrue. As far as the above considerations go, it is quite possible that everything is the case; but not for me—or for any other person.

Notice that the argument is not vulnerable to the Ungerian trivialist of argument two. The meaning which they deny is a public phenomenon; I cannot guarantee that words are meaningful in this way simply by inspecting my own consciousness. But that I am (subjectively) a chooser, and cannot be otherwise, is something that is phenomenologically guaranteed. Notice, also, that this argument works just as much against the near-trivialist of argument one as it does against the trivialist. For one of the things about which we must choose is how to act in the physical world (at least, the phenomenological physical world). We cannot, therefore believe everything to be the case about this world.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., in *Being and Nothingness*, though the point often comes out more forcibly in his stories.

<sup>15</sup> This can be seen in another way. One cannot choose between *this* and *that* if one believes that this and that are the same thing, which the trivialist does. Of course, the trivialist believes that this and that are distinct, too. But, as before, for the trivialist, two things being distinct does not rule out their being identical.

As is clear, argument number three depends on an analysis of consciousness. Perhaps the best way to think of this is in Kantian terms. In the Transcendental Deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant tries to establish the applicability of the Categories from the nature of (the unity of) consciousness. Similarly, the argument I have deployed provides a transcendental deduction from certain features of consciousness to the impossibility of being a trivialist. In the context, this is the best kind of argument one can give. The arbitrator must rule in our favour if we can give them a transcendental proof that our opponent does not exist.<sup>16</sup>

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