AJL COMMENT

One Philosopher is Correct (Maybe)

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Abstract: It is argued that there may be a philosopher who is correct.

Philosophers are an argumentative bunch. As I often point out to students, arguing is part of a philosopher's job description, if not the most important part. It's in our nature to disagree with one another. Each of us can find disagreement with another philosopher on some proposition or a range of propositions. This comes out in a practical fashion in talks and papers, where we regularly find fault with one another's positions. The bottom line is that, no matter who the philosopher, he or she will disagree, at some point, with another philosopher.

To state the obvious then, I will put this claim in the form of a proposition: Every philosopher disagrees with every other philosopher. But this simple proposition brings out a peculiarity of our profession, in the form of a conclusion that we can draw from the proposition. And that is the following. If every philosopher disagrees with every other philosopher, then—at most—one philosopher is correct.

We can formalize the argument. To say that two philosophers disagree is to say that there is (at least) a proposition p they disagree about: one philosopher holds p, and the other philosopher holds $\neg p$[1]. That is, for any two non-identical philosophers, there is a proposition p such that one philosopher holds p and the other philosopher holds $\neg p$. We can write this formally as a premise:

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§EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of what may become a regular feature in the *AJL*: an unrefereed comment of a more lighthearted nature. We hope you enjoy it!

[1]Of course, a philosopher holding p does not guarantee p's truth.

PREMISE 1

$$\forall x \forall y \big[\big(P(x) \land P(y) \land (x \neq y) \big) \to \exists p \big(Prop(p) \land H(x,p) \land H(y, \neg p) \big) \big] \quad (1)$$

To show how the argument goes through, we should add another premise, which states that it would be a contradiction for any proposition and its opposite to be simultaneously true. This blocks any claim that two philosophers, one of whom holds p and the other of whom holds $\neg p$, can both be correct about p's truth.

PREMISE 2

$$\forall p \big(T(p) \land T(\neg p) \to \bot \big) \quad (2)$$

Let's stipulate that for a philosopher to be correct, all the propositions that she holds need to be true. This can be captured by saying (for this philosopher x) that:

$$\forall p \big(H(x,p) \to T(p) \big). \quad (3)$$

That means she doesn't need to hold every true philosophical proposition to be true; rather, it means that the propositions she actually holds are all true.

We can now formalize the conclusion: At most, one philosopher is correct. That is, given any two philosophers x and y, then if x and y agree on all the propositions p they hold, and all these propositions p are true, then x and y are one and the same philosopher. We can write this formally as:

CONCLUSION

$$\forall x \forall y \big[\big(P(x) \land P(y) \land \forall p \big(H(x,p) \to T(p) \land H(y,p) \to T(p) \big) \big) \to x = y \big] \quad (4)$$

To prove this, let's suppose the negation of the conclusion. That is, we suppose that there are two distinct philosophers, and both are always correct.

$$\exists x \exists y \big[\big(P(x) \land P(y) \land \forall p \big(H(x,p) \to T(p) \land H(y,p) \to T(p) \big) \big) \land x \neq y \big] \quad (5)$$

We know from Premise 1 that there is a proposition p such that philosopher x holds p to be true, while philosopher y holds $\neg p$ to be true. Since both of our philosophers are assumed to be correct, then in particular, both philosophers are correct about proposition p. Since both philosophers are correct about p, and since philosopher x holds p to be true, while philosopher y holds $\neg p$ to be true, then we have

$$T(p) \land T(\neg p) \quad (6)$$

By Premise 2, this is a contradiction. The conclusion therefore, holds: At most, one philosopher is correct.

Several tantalizing philosophical, practical, and psychological questions can be raised about our profession as a result of this conclusion. But I will not pursue those here. Instead, I will focus on two positives. First, on the flipside, imagine if there were actually two philosophers who never disagreed. How dull! And second, I find it professionally fulfilling to be able to commend my students on their good fortune in learning philosophy from the one philosopher who happens to be correct.

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