V. MEGARIAN PARADOXES AS ELEATIC ARGUMENTS

SAMUEL C. WHEELER III

I. HISTORICAL REMARKS

I am interested in some paradoxes attributed to Eubulides, a Megarian philosopher. The Megarian Philosophers, a "Minor Socratic School,"¹¹ are widely dismissed as producers of "barren Eristic ... [and] ... clever but worthless arguments,"¹² as "catches"¹³ without serious purposes beyond befuddling opponents. Euclid, the founder, admittedly, is held to be a decent and well-meaning person, in view of his devotion to Socrates and aid to Plato. Furthermore, he is said to hold that the One is the Good, showing that he is properly concerned with value. But "among the followers of Euclid we need only mention Stilpo, a late contemporary of Aristotle's."¹⁴ He needs mention only in virtue of having Zeno, the founder of the Stoic School, as pupil. The vast majority of historians of philosophy treat the Megarians thus lightly.⁵

Some other authors are respectful but baffled by the historical aims of the Megarians. William and Martha Kneale, after a cursory discussion of the four paradoxes attributed to Eubulides, remark that, "All [the paradoxes] are interesting, and it is incredible that Eubulides produced them in an entirely pointless way, as the tradition suggests. He must surely have been trying to illustrate some theses of Megarian philosophy, though it may be impossible for us to reconstruct the debates in which he introduced them."¹⁶ Theodor Gomperz discusses the Megarians sympathetically and at length, but seems to miss the Eleatic points of the arguments. He does note about the heap that "in the eyes of its author the theorem without doubt possessed the highest significance, and ranked as a new proof of the contradictory nature of empirical concepts ...."¹⁷ This is pretty close, I think, but we would like some explanation of how the paradox might show this generally. Gomperz also does not indicate, in his discussions of the other paradoxes, how they might connect at all with Eleatic views. The only recent writing specifically about the historical Eubulides is an article by Jon Moline⁸ which treats of possible polemical purposes of the Sorites, which would be compatible with what I take to be their fundamental metaphysical intent.

Non-historical solutions of all of Eubulides' paradoxes abound in recent literature. Few of these solutions, perhaps needless to say, take the Eleatic perspective. I argue that the Megarians are worthy of serious attention in their own terms. There is good reason to think that Euclid and Eubulides held Parmenidean views and that the paradoxes attributed to Eubulides are, like Zeno's paradoxes of motion and plurality, designed to show that concepts whose applicability contradicts Parmenides views are incoherent. Furthermore, the conclusions the Megarians drew from the paradoxes are defensible. That is, the Megarians' choices of what to give up when confronted with a set of inconsistent but plausible beliefs are no less rational than "modern" choices, in the sense that they violate intuitions no stronger than the intuitions violated by "modern" solutions to the paradoxes.

The main result reached in the paper is that the Megarians were serious and brilliant philosophers, who in the course of defending views of Parmenides, raised powerful objections via the paradoxes attributed to Eubulides to standard views of the world. In the case of at least two paradoxes, the Electra and the Sorites, I think the Megarian solutions can teach us a lot. I will briefly defend the Megarian's solution to the Electra and will refer the reader to recent papers by Peter Unger⁹ and the author¹⁰ for a defense of the
Megarian solution to the Sorites.

As an historical aside, I will speculate on why the Megarians have been so unjustly treated by historians of philosophy. For one thing Diogenes Laertius, the main source of information on the paradoxes, is a singularly poor person for transmitting the import of philosophical paradoxes. If Russell had been similarly preserved for us, we might know only that he thought the present king of France was not bald, that no barbers shaved themselves if they shaved only everybody else and that George IV didn't know who the author of Waverly was but did know that Scott was Scott. Diogenes seems to have been interested in more “relevant” philosophical views and in words of wisdom rather than in arguments. (See his discussion of Plato, for instance.) This less-than-optimal source partially excuses historians such as Copleston, B.A.G. Fuller and “the tradition.”

II. The Eleaticism of the Megarians

Euclid of Megara is said by Diogenes to have “... studied the writings of Parmenides .... He held that the supreme good is really one, though it has many names, wisdom, God, Mind, and so forth. He rejected all that is contradictory of the good, holding it to be non-existent.”

Eubulides, in the same biography, is said to belong to Euclid's school and to have been “... the author of many dialectical arguments in a question and answer form, namely, The Liar, The Disguised, The Electa, The Veiled Figure, The Sorites, The Horned One, and The Bald Head.”

Following the Kneales and Bochenski, I treat these paradoxes as really four in number: (1) The Liar; (2) The Horned One; (3) The Electa; (4) The Sorites.

There is no conclusive evidence that these are all Eubulides’ work. Apollonius Cronus, for instance, is said to be credited by some with the Veiled Figure and the Horned One. Alexinus of Elis, Stilpo, Diodorus Cronus, or Euclid himself, among other Megarians, might well have invented one or more of these. As far as I can tell, only Diogenes' attribution supports the claim that Eubulides alone invented all four arguments, but this is not a central concern of this paper. I will often speak of Eubulides as the author, but I do this as a convenience.

That even Euclid, let alone Eubulides, was an advocate of Parmenides' ideas at all is not conclusively supported by Diogenes' claim that he read Parmenides' works. Ancient sources besides Diogenes do regard the Megarians as successors of the Eleatics, but are divided as to what Parmenidean doctrines they might be committed to. The main argument I have is that the paradoxes are designed to support Parmenidean conclusions is that such a hypothesis gives them a coherent focus and makes them into serious problems with metaphysical consequences. If the ascription of Parmenidean views to the Megarians turns what the tradition treats as a melange of verbal tricks into a unified and serious program, that is strong evidence in favor of the ascription.

III. Parmenides' Views

Mourelatos, in The Route of Parmenides, presents an interpretation of the logic of the Parmenidean argument which I find quite persuasive. In this section I will just sketch in outline form some of the premises and conclusions which Mourelatos takes to be crucial to the argument, as Parmenides intended it. I argue below that Megarian arguments are designed to support these premises and the conclusions drawn from them.

(1) There can only be determinate, definite entities. Being, how things are, is not vague or fuzzy.

(2) Negative sentences are indeterminate and indefinite and so can't state how things are. “Joe is not a frog” does not say what Joe is, since “not a frog” doesn't picture any definite condition. Thus “Joe is not a frog,” doesn't state how things are, being. The positive state of Joe (e.g., that Joe is a toad) is the only one that really exists in the situation. There can be no essentially negative states of affairs, i.e., things which cannot be expressed without negation.
The Elatic point of view here can be made plausible by considering putative negative properties, where properties are thought of as parts of beings. A negative property is the complement of a positive property. But if properties are real beings, it would be quite remarkable that two properties should exhaust the world without ever coinciding. If there were such a complementary property, it could be formally considered a "negative property," but it would really just be another positive property ontologically. "Negative properties" are no more real, if properties are parts of the being of things, than negative persons. ("Who came in?" "Well, it was not John." Just as not-John isn't an individual, so not-red isn't a property.) Negative expressions, then, necessarily lack reference. No part of Being is pictured by any negative expression.

(3) Putative expressions that cannot state how things are cannot be meaningful, since they have no truth-conditions. By their very nature, they can't say "how it is." In particular, ascriptions of "negative properties" cannot picture being, since there can be no negative properties.

(4) Since thought is only of what is, there cannot be thoughts of putative phenomena that require negation for their analysis either.

(5) Distinctness, plurality, change and motion are all putative phenomena whose expression requires negation. So the world cannot have these phenomena. The world consists of one, motionless being. There cannot be falsehood (what is not true), pluralities, or physical objects with distinct parts (parts which are not one another).

As Parmenides notes, it is immaterial which propositions are taken to be premises and which conclusions. The nonsensicality of the premises and conclusions themselves which is a consequence of the argument can be tolerated by means of Wittgenstein's tractarian ladder. (Problems of self-application may explain the "question and answer" style of Eubulides, since this avoids commitments on the part of the interrogator to any truth-value for his utterances.) It is worth noting in passing that Plato's response to Parmenides in the _Sophist_ fits Mourelatos' interpretation, since Plato there analyzes negation by the positive feature represented by the form Difference.

Mourelatos has defended this interpretation at length and well. In any case, most interpretations of Parmenides' poem take him to have at least concluded that negation, plurality, falsehood, and physical existents with parts cannot be real phenomena, and these claims are what I take the Megarians to be defending.

IV. THE PARADOXES, THEIR INTERPRETATION, AND THE DEFENSE OF THE MEGARIAN SOLUTIONS

I will present Eubulides' paradoxes as sets of propositions \( \{A_1, \ldots, A_n\} \) such that each proposition \( A_i \) is intuitively plausible while the set \( \{A_1, \ldots, A_n\} \) is inconsistent. A solution to a paradox is a rejection of one or more of the propositions, say \( A_i \). A solution then says that, although \( A_i \) is very intuitive, \( \neg A_i \) is the case. The theory supported by the paradox is an explanation of why \( A_i \) is false. Depending on a theorist's other commitments, various \( A_i \)'s can be given up. That is, in general, there is a choice of solutions to a paradox which is rationally determined by how strong antecedent grounds for belief in members of \( \{A_1, \ldots, A_n\} \) are. I will argue that there is much to be said for Megarian choices of which \( A_i \) to abandon. At worst, they are defensible as serious proposals, at best they seem to me absolutely right.

As the reader will notice, the explications I present of the arguments are considerably more elaborate than the recorded statements of the arguments. The recorded statements take the form of puzzles with no explicitly-drawn conclusions. The hypothesis that these are arguments for Parmenidean conclusions supplies a rationale and explanation for their gnomic character.

Suppose that you wish to argue that there is only one entity and that concepts which employ negation are inapplicable to reality. If these conclusions are presented as the conclusions of explicitly presented arguments with a plurality of premises using negations, a kind of self-refutation
seems to occur. You would seem to be reaching the conclusions by nonsense rather than reasons, if your theory is correct. Your situation would be somewhat like that of the Zen master who must teach his students that all dualities are illusory without using (and thereby endorsing) dualities. A Megarian puzzle, I think, is designed to get a person to see that some concepts are self-contradictory without putting the arguer in the awkward position of overtly using what must be nonsense. Thus if the puzzles have Eleatic objectives, their form has a point.

(A) The Liar

The four groups of versions of the Liar presented by Bochenski,18 citing Rustow,19 agree in presenting the liar as “I am lying,” plus a judgement or question about its truth-value. Familiar presentations20 show how various idiosyncracies of this particular version of the paradox can be eliminated, such as self-reference, token reflexives, and so forth, while the paradox remains.

The principles and particular claims below are all intuitively plausible:

1. Either “true” or “false,” but not both, apply to any statement. A statement is false if and only if it is not true.

2. “I am saying something false” is a meaningful statement, since “Jones is saying something false” is meaningful and I could be Jones. “Jones is saying something false” is meaningful, if and only if it could say how things are.

3. Any language can name any being. So self-reference is not itself pernicious. More generally, sentences needn’t have a determinate metalinguistic level to be true, so no such requirement can be put on meaningfulness. For instance, the pair of sentences below are both true.

The sentence below has six words altogether.

The sentence above contains seven words.

4. Some statements are false. That is, the negative property, “not being true” constitutes part of some state of affairs that B is not true, for some B.

Kripke21 and others reject (1), Tarski22 rejects (3), and Eubulides rejects (4) and so (2). Just as Zeno takes his paradoxes to show that motion is impossible, so Eubulides takes this paradox to show that falsehood (as well as “lying” which includes falsehood in its analysis) is an incoherent concept. That is, Eubulides takes (1)-(3) to be analytic to the ordinary concepts of falsehood and truth. As Tarski observes, though:23

“If these observations are correct [i.e., the discussion of the “universality” of ordinary language], then the very possibility of a consistent use of the expression “true sentence” which is in harmony with the laws of logic and the spirit of everyday language seems to be very questionable ....” Tarski is right only if “not true” is allowed to be true of sentences.

Eubulides would argue that falsehood cannot be real because, if it were, a self-contradiction would be the case. Eubulides, on my view, is arguing along the lines of Zeno’s proof24 that plurality is impossible. If a given concept (of a many, of falsehood) leads to a contradiction, that concept must be inapplicable to reality. No proposition is expressed by apparent falsehood claims. Eubulides can rationally give up the intuitively apparent existence of falsehood because he is convinced already that there are no “negative properties” and that non-being isn’t. In fact, I claim, the Liar paradox is advanced in order to show that non-being cannot be coherently spoken of, that we cannot sensibly say what is not.

To recast the argument from Eubulides’ perspective: The concept of falsehood essentially involves (1)-(4), but (1)-(4) form an inconsistent set of principles. No concept which is internally inconsistent can have application to the real world. Since no paradox is generable if we allow no meaningful sentences (i.e., sentences which say how things are) to contain references to non-being (via negation or concepts such as falsehood), the sensible alternative is to give up (4), the claim that there are negative facts about which to speak (i.e., the claim that what is not is).

(B) The Horned One

This paradox has much the same conclusion and motivation as the Liar. In modern terms, this is the problem of accounting for intuitions about
presupposition in a two-valued logic. Historically, this paradox is reported as the sequence (addressed to a normal person):

“What you have not lost, you still have.
But you have not lost your horns.
So you still have your horns.”

Also, and perhaps more perspicuously:

“Have you stopped beating your father? Answer yes or no.”

What is paradoxical about these sentences can be set out in the following plausible propositions:

(1) If \( A \) is a meaningful term and \( F \) is a predicate, \( F(A) \) is a meaningful statement.

(2) Every meaningful statement \( S \) is either true or not true. When presented as the question, “Is it the case that \( S' \)?”, every meaningful statement \( S \) has a “yes” or “no” answer.

(3) “Your horns” is a meaningful term, as is “Santa Claus,” “What is not,” and “Your past beating of your father.” Generally, meaningfulness is self-evident. One can tell when one is saying something.

(4) “Have you stopped beating your father?”,” “Have you lost your horns?” and “Are all of John’s children blonde?” (when he has none) have no “yes” or “no” answers.

Many logicians deny (4), Strawson and others deny (2), and Eubulides denies (3). Eubulides is committed to denying (3) in any case in virtue of accepting Parmenides’ dictum which might be translated as “Thought and being are the same.”\(^{27}\) (However this is translated, Parmenides is at least committed to the view that there are no thoughts of what isn’t. So apparent thoughts, such that, if they are thoughts, are thoughts of what is not, are non-thoughts.) Eubulides, that is, produced these problem sentences as devices to convince us that indeed there cannot be meaningful representation of, i.e., thoughts about, what is not.

Eubulides, following Parmenides and like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, identifies having a sense (for singular terms) with having a reference. If Parmenides is right, and non-being can be neither thought nor said, then many apparent thoughts are not thoughts at all, but rather nonsense. That we are thinking or speaking sense is not self-evident, at least directly.

(C) *The Electra*

“You say Electra knew her brother. But the man at the altar was her brother and she didn’t know him.” This argument was familiar to Plato and in fact forms one of the central problems of the *Theatetus*. I believe that Plato draws a conclusion from the argument similar to ones that Megarians draw. I am inclined to ascribe this argument, therefore, to Euclid of Megara, since he is a contemporary of Plato’s.

This argument requires more steps and explication than the previous two. In effect, the first five premises establish that knowledge, if real, is a relation. The next three propositions draw conclusions from this lemma.

(1) The fundamental kind of knowledge is knowledge of particulars, that is, cases in which “knows” takes a direct object, cases in which the state of knowing is directed at an entity. These are cases of knowing *what individual* a thing is.

This premise could be supported by any number of arguments which proceed from the premise that generalities must be “grounded” on particular facts, so that knowledge must do likewise.

(2) What a piece of knowledge is knowledge of must be a function of the knower’s state. A knowledge of a particular must be knowledge of nothing else, and this must be a feature of the state itself.

(3) A knowledge of one truth about an object (or one description under which an object falls) does not in general suffice for knowledge of that object. The reader, for instance, does not know my maternal grandfather although he knows that he fits the description “the author’s grandfather.”

(4) Knowledge of *every* truth about an object (every description under which an object falls) would suffice to have knowledge of that object.

(5) No intermediate between (3) and (4) seems to be generally formulable in a lawlike way. Certain special pieces of information can be found which, together with other conditions, lead us intuitively to say that a person in those conditions
with these pieces of information knows an entity of a given kind, but each kind of case seems different. (Boer and Lycan, for instance, spend close to fifty pages on "knowing who," which covers just persons.) A full set of general necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing what a particular is, even if possible, would be enormously complex. It could even be the case that no finite characterization of "knows what X is" is possible which allows extension to new kinds of case.

(6) Knowledge of particulars, if a real phenomenon, has a simple law-like account. This is really a point about the philosophy of science. If what exists is a cosmos, then all real phenomena fit together in one whole. A central phenomenon such as knowledge (in Plato's scheme) must have intelligible connections with other kinds of phenomena. The existence of such connecting laws is the mark of being a central part of a cosmos. If electromagnetic fields had no simpler laws than the account of knowledge which would fit the varying intuitions we have, it would be irrational to postulate their existence. The Greeks, or at least Plato and Euclid, saw no reason to treat knowledge, if a real phenomenon, any differently from other phenomena. If there is such a thing, it has a simple account. We should bear in mind that, for Plato, intentional/mental phenomena are built into the structure of the universe. A fundamental psychological concept must also be a fundamental natural concept.

(7) From (1)-(6) it is plausible that only what is totally known, in the sense that every description under which it falls is known, can be known at all. Thus knowledge is a relation of knower and known. So nothing is both known and not known.

(8) Thus in particular, the intuitive belief that Electra knew her brother (since she grew up with him) is shown to be inconsistent with the admitted fact that she did not know him at the altar. The "electra" was presented in this form in order to convince the interlocuter that his intuitive application of "knows" is inconsistent. What premises (1)-(6) do is to give reasons why this should be taken to be an inconsistency (a claim that a relation both holds and fails to hold) rather than a demonstration that knowledge isn't a relation at all.

(9) (a) Sense objects, about which there must be not-now-known truths, can be known. (This is a plausible version of what must be dropped as a result of the Theaetetus' similar argument.)

(b) More generally, objects which bear indefinite multiplicities of contingent relation to other objects can be known.

Euclid and Plato, I claim, give up (9). Thus, on my account, Euclid advanced the Electa to show that the Parmenidean One is the only possible object of knowledge. There are only a finite number of truths about the one, so that it can be totally known, and so known at all. According to Plato, the Forms constitute a determinate grasppable whole and do not have relations to contingent non-eternal entities.

Modern philosophers, of course, deny that knowledge is a relation by abandoning some of (1)-(6). For a scientific realist this is tantamount to denying that knowledge is a real phenomenon. For a scientific realist, all real phenomena are on a par. Thus knowledge, as an alleged natural kind of phenomenon, must meet the same kind of standards as any other. If intuitions about knowing who a person is, knowing what a thing is, and being acquainted with a thing cannot be captured by some systematization that makes it plausible that knowledge is a natural phenomenon, then those intuitions don't fit any natural phenomenon. There is then the choice between deciding that some other natural phenomenon is knowledge but that our intuitions have nothing to do with it, deciding that knowledge is a supernatural phenomenon, or deciding that knowledge is not a real psychological phenomenon but rather that the concept is a rather inept categorization of human states in relation to the world. Thus I think that Euclid's argument shows that if knowledge is a real phenomenon, it is a relation. So either scientific realism or the reality of ordinary empirical knowledge must go. Similar arguments, of course, apply to other psychological attitudes.
(D) *The Sorites*

This is the familiar argument that there cannot be such things as heaps because one fewer item won’t turn a heap into a non-heap, yet there are no one-item heaps.

I present the Eubulidean intent of this argument in five propositions.

1. It is analytic that every physical object has indefinite members of non-zero parts. That is, conceptually, even if not physically, every physical object is indefinitely divisible.

2. For every kind of physical object \( K \), it is analytic that there is a finite size of part \( S \) such that: (a) diminution of any \( K \)-object by one part of size \( S \) would leave a \( K \)-object in existence, (b) any \( K \)-object has only a finite number of \( S \)-sized parts and (c) a part of size \( S \) is not a \( K \). It is important to separate the claims made in premises (1) and (2). Premise (2) claims that every physical object has a *finite* number of parts of *a certain size*, appropriate to that kind. For instance a grain is an appropriate sized part for a heap; a star is an appropriate sized part for a galaxy, and a person is an appropriate sized part for a crowd. Premise (1), on the other hand, claims that no physical objects are reached to which premise (2) doesn’t apply. By premise (1) any part of size \( S \) which is appropriate to a kind \( K \) has itself an appropriate size part \( S' \) to which premise (2) applies, and so on indefinitely.

3. It is analytic that for every physical object and for every kind, that physical object is either of that kind or not.

4. It is analytic that every physical object is of some kind or other.

5. There are physical objects.

In order to get a contradiction from these propositions we need to make explicit a principle connecting analytic contents of concepts to what the concept applies to. The principle is just that the extension of a concept must be such that all analytic contents of the concept are true of its elements. Thus a concept with inconsistent analytic contents could not apply to anything. This principle is used implicitly in the Liar as well, since the contradiction shown to be part of the content of “false” is taken to show that “false” can’t be true of any propositions.

I briefly show that, with this principle that analytic contents of a concept are true of what the concept is true of this set of propositions is indeed inconsistent: Suppose (5) that physical object \( a \) exists. By (4) there is a kind \( K \) to which \( a \) belongs. By (2), there is an appropriate-sized sorites part \( S \) of \( a \). By (2a) Object \( a \) remains a \( K \)-object (or, *some* \( K \)-object exists there) after an \( S \)-part subtraction. By (2b), there is a *last* such part. By (2c), the last \( S \)-part is not a \( K \), giving us the contradiction in supposing there to be any objects of kind \( K \).

Premise (1) makes the generality of the argument explicit by denying that there are minima of non-zero size which could not be evaporated by sorites arguments. In effect, Premise (2) has this consequence already, since there must be a part \( S \) which makes up an object of any kind \( K \) but which is not a \( K \). Thus, since the \( S \)-parts themselves would have to be physical objects and so by (4) would be kind \( K' \) of physical object and by (2) would have to have parts \( S' \) and so on, there are no physical objects, for any kind of physical object, unless some premise is mistaken.

Premise (3) is required to help keep premise (2) plausible. As soon as the unsettling consequences are realized, a standard device is to try to limit the successive application of (2a) by claiming that it breaks down along some foggy borderline. Premise (3) is really Parmenides’ dictum that a thing either is or isn’t, with no alleged middle ground.

Recently a variety of solutions have been proposed for this kind of paradox, most of which consist of efforts to develop a “logic of vagueness” which will avoid premise (3). There are modern versions of the acceptance of the Parmenidean conclusion that physical objects aren’t real in Wheeler and Unger.

Eubulides, following Zeno, Melissus and Parmenides, denies (5). His grounds for denying (5) rest on the view cited above that a concept whose analytic content is inconsistent cannot apply to anything. Thus the point of the sorites argument is to show that Being cannot be physical being since “physical being” is an incoherent notion.
The resemblance to Zeno's arguments are clearest in this state, and in fact his use of divisibility considerations may have inspired it.

I have applied a somewhat modified form of the sorites argument which drops the presumptions that inconsistent concepts cannot be true of entities. The "analytic content" of, say, an electron-concept may be such that small diminutions in charge leave an electron in existence even though this isn't true of electrons. Thus, for me if there are sharp breaks in the nature of things, a term can apply to things even though its concept doesn't "fit" them. Peter Unger, in several recent articles has argued a very pure Eubulidean line in which it is not only false that nature is partitioned into tall things and persons, but impossible.

V. CONCLUSION

If these interpretations are even roughly correct, the Megarians are a vastly under-rated group of philosophers. I have argued that the arguments attributed to Eubulides are not silly puzzles but rather powerful, serious, and plausible defenses of Parmenidean conclusions. Their strange conclusions detract from their interest no more than those of Zeno's arguments do.

University of Connecticut

Received March 5, 1982

NOTES


MEGARIAN PARADOXES AS ELEATIC ARGUMENTS

21. Saul Kripke, *ibid*.
27. This is John Mansley Robinson's translation. (*Op. cit.*, p. 110.)
30. Peter Unger, for instance, in “There Are No Ordinary Things”, *op. cit*. 