PHILOSONNETS

Stephen Kearns

Ten philosophical sonnets.

Not a day goes by without someone asking if I could relay to them, please, a philosophical argument, idea, principle or thought experiment in the form of a sonnet. When I reply, 'I'm sorry, have we met?' the enquirer sighs and walks off. No doubt the same thing has happened to you. Fear not. Here are ten sonnets, any of which you can now recite the next time you are asked this common question.

The Consequence Argument[1]

We have no power over things foregone,
Nor o'er the rules that govern every speck,
Thus if our present futures rest upon
The ancient whims of microscopic dreck,
Like Martin Luther we can do no other
Than take the path the past and laws have laid,
For were just one of us to choose another,
What no one can defy is disobeyed.
Our freedom of the will, if such there is,
Precludes a universe deterministic.
But which prevails? For that please turn to quiz
A physicist, philosopher, or mystic.
For reasons *a priori* and empirical
A will both bound and free would need a miracle.

The Problem of Evil[2]

If there exists an entity divine
He can of course do anything at all,
Like walk on water, turn it into wine,
Or even change poor Saul into St Paul.
He is, what's more, impossible to fault –

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Essentially a Jolly Decent Fella –
When wrongs arise, He brings them to a halt,
Or, better yet, prevents them altogether.
And still, alas, iniquities abound,
While suffering's distressingly persistent.
From this it is most tempting to propound
No loving God almighty is existent.
Should anyone neglect her moral calling
Then she is either feeble or appalling.

The Ontological Argument[3]

The Fool says in his heart 'There is no God',
But still cannot conceive of something greater.
St Anselm found this outlook rather odd,
So went about his way to demonstrate a
Contradiction in such understanding –
For to exist is clearly a perfection,
And our idea of God is most demanding,
Thus (now we see how A. earned his election)
If the Fool agrees that God is great
But still maintains that He is merely fancy
The Fool conceives what would necessitate
That God is rather lesser than He can be.
Since God cannot be that, He must be real.
What Faith declares, our Reason does reveal.

The Liar Paradox[4]

The paradox: our sentence, S, runs thus –
S: 'S itself is false.' Now is S true?
If it is true, infer the obvious:
That S is false (disquoting from line 2).
If S is false, then it says what is not,
And thus it's not the case that S is false.
From which we may deduce that S has got
The value True (break out the smelling salts).
If S is true, it's false and vice versa,
Which logic tells us means that S is both.
Late Philitas dreamed of nothing worse: a
Faultless witness lying under oath.

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Caution those who try this crux to conquer –
What doesn't kill it only makes it stronger.

The Symmetry Argument[5]

Look back beyond when first we took a breath –
In this way Nature holds before our eyes
The mirror of our future after death.
In nought consists our reasons to despise
The state from which we came, to which return;
For just as we are tranquil in our view
Of times forgone, afore our own sojourn,
Our coming end should garner no ado.
We have no wish to fill the heretofore
With more of what we fleetingly enjoy.
Why, then, should ever-after give us more?
What Heaven can create it may destroy.
There is a beauty in such symmetry,
To wit: we weren't, we are, we will not be.

Berkeley's Master Argument[6]

Imagine, if you will, a tree unthought.
'Of course', you say, 'It is a simple deed
To picture elms that no mind could report,
Or beeches to which none of us pay heed.'
Aye, simple, 'tis, except it can't be done.
To illustrate, consider your lone beech –
What is this more than mentally to run
Ideas through one's mind? Pray, I beseech
You to examine well the stated claim
That you conceive a tree that's not conceived.
A manifest repugnancy – the same
As ne'er perceiving that by you perceived.
Things external can't be contemplated –
Honestly, I'd say they're overrated.

An Argument for the Necessity of Identity[7]

For every *x*, it's necessary that
x is identical to *x*, what's more
For any *x* and *y* (yes all the tat

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you can and can't abide or just ignore)
If *x* and *y* are really just the same
Then if *x* must be *x*, *x* must be *y*
(From laws to which G. Leibniz lent his name,
And with which all identicals comply).
Wherefore, therefore, whenever it is so
That Jeremiah is Jehoshaphat
It's quite impossible for old Jeho
And Jerry not to be exactly that.
Which is to say he cannot have two lives –
A fact he keeps well hidden from his wives.

The Harm Principle[8]

The only purpose for which power can,
To paraphrase the words of J. S. Mill,
Be rightly exercised o'er any man
Or any woman too, against their will,
Is to prevent (the very least allay)
Harm to other people. Self-protection
Is the single end for which we may
Interfere with liberty's direction.
His or her own good is no such reason –
Let him act against his own well-being;
Let her do whatever she may please – on
No such grounds should regimes overseeing
Human lives let freedom be suspended
(Apologies to all those I've offended).

The Trolley Problem[9]

You are the driver of a truant tram
That as we speak is hurtling down a track
Which leads to five men too absorbed to scram
And who will thus receive a mighty thwack,
Unless you switch to rail number two –
A path entirely clear; well, give or take;
A single person wanders into view
And rests a while (he's on his coffee break).
Decision-time! Now, should you save the five,
But in so doing kill another soul,

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Or must you keep a single man alive,
Allowing more to die (and friends condole)?
Whichever choice you make is melancholy;
It's quite enough to send you off your trolley.

Gödel's Second Incompleteness Theorem[10]

Arithmetic, assuming it's consistent,
Cannot with its own formal system prove
Itself to be (that's not to say it isn't) –
The course of true maths never did run smooth.
There exists a sentence of the theory
(Let's call these 'S' and 'T'), which runs like so:
'S cannot be proved by T.' Now clearly
If S is provable, then we can show
The truth as well of 'Zero equals one',
And, as it happens, if consistency
Turns out demonstrable, then, woebegone,
So too does S (and all within just T).
This consequence is somewhat bittersweet,
Re: maths is either bunk or incomplete.

Stephen Kearns is an associate professor of philosophy at Florida State University. He works on topics in many areas of philosophy, including metaethics, epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of action. In the early 1990s he came third in a limerick competition for Barclay's Bank, and won a stuffed Zummi Gummi. stephen.a.kearns@gmail.com

Notes

[1] The Consequence Argument was first formulated by Carl Ginet (1966), and found its most famous formulation (and its name) in the work of Peter van Inwagen (e.g. van Inwagen 1983).

[2] The Problem of Evil dates back at least as far as Epicurus, and finds a classic modern formulation in Mackie (1955).

[3] The Ontological Argument originated in Anselm's *Proslogion*. For contemporary discussion see Oppy (1995).

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[4] The Liar Paradox is often attributed to Epimenides of Crete. Seminal work on the paradox includes Tarski (1944) and Kripke (1975).

[5] The Symmetry Argument finds its first formulation in the work of Lucretius. Indeed, the second and third lines of this sonnet are taken directly from Latham's 1951 translation of *On the Nature of the Universe*, as quoted in Luper (2016).

[6] George Berkeley's Master Argument appears first his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, and subsequently in his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous.* It was given the name 'Master Argument' by Gallois (1974).

[7] An argument for the necessity of identity appears in Marcus (1947). The version in the sonnet resembles more closely that developed from Marcus's by Quine (1953). For more on its history, see Burgess (2014).

[8] The Harm Principle is first stated by J. S. Mill in *On Liberty*.

[9] The Trolley Problem was first presented in Foot (1967). For influential discussion of this and other cases, see Thomson (1976).

[10] As proved in Gödel (1931). For the theorem in words of one syllable, see Boolos (1994), from whom I stole the word 'bunk' and much besides.

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