THE EPISTEMIC CONSEQUENCES OF PARADOX

Bryan Frances

*Department of Cognitive Sciences*

*College of Humanities and Social Sciences*

*United Arab Emirates University*

*PO Box 15551*

*Al Ain, UAE*

**Abstract**

By pooling together exhaustive analyses of certain philosophical paradoxes, we can prove a series of fascinating results regarding philosophical progress (yes, of a peculiar sort), agreement on substantive philosophical claims (yes, of a sort), knockdown arguments in philosophy (there are some, given here), the wisdom of philosophical belief (quite rare, because the knockdown arguments show that we philosophers have been wildly wrong about language, logic, truth, or ordinary empirical matters), the epistemic status of metaphysics (it’s not bullshit, and in one respect superior to many other philosophical fields), and the power of philosophy to refute common sense (yes, of a sort). As examples, I examine the Sorites Paradox, the Liar Paradox, and the Problem of the Many—although many other paradoxes can do the trick too.

## INTRODUCTION

Most philosophers agree that outside of the formal parts of philosophy, we cannot offer rigorous *knockdown* *proofs* of philosophically substantive theses. We might be able to prove things in formal logic, mathematics, and decision theory, and those results can be philosophically important. But knockdown proofs of philosophically substantive theses in regular, non-formal philosophy? Ha ha, . . . nope. Most of us without hubris abandon the goal of giving knockdown (informal) proofs of philosophically substantive conclusions.

As a result, many of us retreat to offering reasonable, “interesting”, yet hardly fool proof arguments for theses of the form ‘This solution to the problem is true/false’. If one has struggled for a number of years with such projects, then one will, unless wildly confident in one’s abilities, have moments of despair about even this more modest goal. After all, you will, if you are sufficiently reflective and honest with yourself, eventually see that there always are good (yet inconclusive) objections to your arguments that you cannot block. So, we often *retreat once again*, watering down our conclusions to ‘This view has such-and-such going for it’ or ‘This criticism of such-and-such view is no good—unless, of course, the criticism gets changed radically in order to maneuver around the problems I’ve detailed here’.

Another disappointment is that most philosophers now admit that philosophy, by itself, is not nearly as strong as science when it comes to showing how common sense is mistaken. In the olden days, philosophers advanced bold arguments purporting to prove that many of the average idiot’s beliefs were laughably false, to put the point boldly and unkindly. Now we hang our heads and mumble that although science is up to the task, our profession is too weak to deliver the goods. Some of us even feel intellectually tough in admitting this loudly, without the mumbling. It’s akin to standing up and saying, “Yes, I am a sinner! I am! I admit it!”

So, conventional wisdom says ‘No knockdown arguments in normal philosophy’ and ‘No refutations of common sense from philosophy’. What would be really crazy would be philosophical arguments that are *both* knockdown *and* refutations of common sense. That would refute both parts of conventional wisdom with one blow.

That’s the way things seemed to me—until recently. Now I suspect, but certainly do not believe, that we can give knockdown proofs of highly counterintuitive theses, refuting both parts of conventional wisdom with one blow. However, we have to do it in a new way, starting from *exhaustive analyses* *of philosophical problems*. Bizarrely enough, we may be able to prove philosophically substantive theses without taking any stand on the solutions to any of those problems we are analyzing.

To get an idea how this might work, pretend that each of the following three claims regarding some intellectual problem is highly intuitive: C1, C2, ~(C1 & C2). It’s child’s play to derive a contradiction from them. Your first reaction to such a situation is to conclude that at least one of the three claims is false. That may seem a safe inference to make. However, if you decide to be more cautious, to look for proofs instead of merely persuasive arguments, you will realize that such a conclusion is hasty. For one thing, maybe some contradictions are true. For another thing, maybe there is some subtle equivocation in the trio of claims that blocks the application of the derivation of the contradiction (so they don’t really have the logical forms they appear to have). For yet a third thing, maybe elementary logic is flawed in some deep fashion, so the obvious derivation applies to the three claims but the inferences aren’t truth-preserving.

Having such a cautious attitude doesn’t preclude one from confidently drawing conclusions, however. We can be *extremely confident* in concluding that the truth lies in one of the following four possibilities:

* one or more of the three claims C1, C2, and ~(C1 & C2) isn’t true
* the trio of claims is true but there is some subtle equivocation or other linguistic difficulty present in them that makes the derivation of the contradiction not apply, so no contradiction results from the trio
* the trio is true and there is no such linguistic difficulty (so the derivation does apply just as we expected) but one of the elementary sentential inference rules in the derivation isn’t truth-preserving, so no contradiction results
* the three claims are true, the derivation goes through as expected, the inference rules are truth-preserving, and thus a contradiction is true too

If we realize that the claim ‘An equivocation or similar linguistic complication was present that ruined the obvious application of the derivation’ is philosophically counterintuitive in the rough sense that its truth would require a huge change in our beliefs, then we can safely conclude that *whatever the truth is about the intellectual problem in question*, it’s philosophically counterintuitive, since as we just saw there are exactly four options and each has that quality. Therefore, our analysis of the problem itself, without taking any stand on its solution, has yielded two interesting results: one, the disjunction of the four claims is true; and two, a philosophical argument proves that there exists a philosophically counterintuitive truth (viz. one of the disjuncts, although we don’t know which one).

In this book I show that something akin to this scenario applies to many (not all) philosophical problems. As we will see, its consequences are philosophically significant.

I have long had the gut feeling that many philosophical paradoxes are amazing in the sense that they *force* one to adopt a view that is firmly, even wildly, against common sense. I don’t think I’ll ever have a decent reason to think that such-and-such detailed response to a given paradox is correct. For instance, by my lights the presently existing public considerations regarding the Sorites paradox are in favor of epistemicism. But why on earth would I think that those considerations—the ones we have *today*, located in the *public* sphere—are good enough to point us in the right direction? I can’t think of any good reason to think that; in fact, there are excellent reasons (not given here) to think that that’s just plain false. In any case, I wondered whether I could justify my gut feeling that certain philosophical paradoxes refute portions of common sense—no matter what the correct solution was to those paradoxes. So, I tried to find that justification, with reference to several philosophical paradoxes. Like many philosophers familiar with paradoxes, I used to think of paradoxes as seemingly valid arguments from commonsensical premises to highly counterintuitive conclusions. So, I figured that the mere existence of the paradoxes proved that either a commonsensical premise is false, a seemingly valid argument is invalid, or a highly counterintuitive conclusion is true. As hinted at with the {C1, C2, ~(C1 & C2)} scenario discussed above, now I see that that diagnosis misses some possibilities.

What the paradoxes have in common is that an exhaustive analysis of each of them reveals that any of its proposed solutions is philosophically counterintuitive, in a sense to be defined below. That’s a nice thesis, but things get much more interesting when we pool these analyses together. When we do so, we find interesting metaphilosophical and epistemological insights on six topics:

* philosophical progress
* agreement in philosophy
* knockdown arguments in philosophy
* the wisdom of philosophical belief
* the epistemic status of metaphysics
* the power of philosophy to refute common sense

In the next section, I briefly elaborate on those six topics. But if you are impatient to hear the *central* take-home lesson, which lies in the intersection of epistemology and metaphilosophy, here it is:

Like I pointed out above, many philosophers think that philosophy never refutes common sense; many philosophers also think there are no knockdown arguments in non-formal philosophy. What would be extraordinary would be philosophical arguments that did both! However, that’s what I argue for here: there are many arguments that (a) clearly belong to non-formal philosophy, (b) are knockdown, and (c) that conclude that some violently counterintuitive claims are true; furthermore, once the typical philosopher is aware of the truth of that thesis, she should, in order to be wise, withhold judgment on a colossal number of claims, even highly commonsensical ones. Hence, a lesson of philosophy’s success is that once the wise philosopher becomes aware of these facts, she will suspend judgment much more often than she once did. In that sense we fall doxastic victim to our own argumentative success.

## OUR SIX TOPICS

Philosophers have been complaining about metaphysics for a long time, claiming that it is bullshit when compared to most other areas of philosophy (e.g. Ladyman and Ross 2007). Even today, almost all of us encounter jabs at it, in conversation and social media if not in print. Up until now, the metaphysician’s best response has been this: “Oh yeah? Let’s see your response to such-and-such metaphysical problem, if you think metaphysics is bullshit”. The critics and defenders are rarely impressed with the ensuing discussion, should there be any at all.

Philosophers have been complaining about the lack of philosophical progress for a long time (e.g. some of the papers in Blackford and Broderick 2020). Even today, almost all of us encounter jabs at it, in conversation and social media if not in print. Most complainers are willing to admit that there are some forms of philosophical progress: new distinctions are discovered that are philosophically key, new problems are discovered, new theories are formulated, new arguments are constructed, new thought experiments are conceived, new fields are generated, etc. These new things help us see deeper into certain topics, in ways that are hard to articulate non-metaphorically. But even if we grant all of those forms of progress, philosophical progress is anemic compared to scientific progress when it comes to getting substantive, positive truths that are answers to burning questions. It’s not like we have solved many really big problems. If we had, then why the hell we would still be reading Aristotle and Kant for solutions instead of as historians only?

Philosophers have been complaining about the power of philosophy to refute common sense for a long time (e.g. Moore 1925, Lewis 1973, Fine 2001, Gupta 2006, Lycan 2001, Lycan 2019, Schaffer 2009, and Kelly 2008). Even today, almost all of us encounter jabs at it, in conversation and social media if not in print. They admit that science is up to the task, and some admit that formal philosophy can do it as well. The more modest ones are willing to admit that maybe, just maybe, philosophy can be transformed in some surprising way such that non-formal philosophy refutes common sense in the future. But up until now? No way. They think that even if Moore’s response to the argument for skepticism was flawed, the *Moorean Move* is reasonable when one is confronted with a philosophical attempt to refute common sense:

One starts out believing P, where one is fully aware that P is utterly commonsensical. One next encounters what one recognizes to be a non-formal philosophical argument A against P. In response, one forms the belief B that *P is significantly more warranted than at least one of the premises of A*. One then retains P with little or no change in confidence even if one admits that one has not (yet) found any flaw in A. This retaining of P is done on the basis of B.

Philosophers have been complaining about the lack of agreement in philosophy regarding philosophically substantive claims for a long time (e.g. van Inwagen 2006; cf. Frances 2017). Even today, almost all of us encounter jabs at it, in conversation and social media if not in print. All one has to do is scan the results of the PhilPapers surveys to witness how we fail to reach agreement on just about anything philosophically substantive. This is utterly different from what we find in the sciences.

Philosophers have been complaining about the lack of knockdown (and non-formal) philosophical arguments for philosophically substantive claims for a long time (e.g. van Inwagen 2009, Lewis 1983; cf. Ballantyne 2014, Keller 2015, McGrath & Kelly 2017). Even today, almost all of us encounter jabs at it, in conversation and social media if not in print. For one thing, if such arguments existed, there certainly wouldn’t be so much disagreement on philosophically substantive claims. But, again, just look at the results of the PhilPapers surveys.

But as much as philosophers like to complain about the comparative inadequacies of metaphysics, the failure of non-formal philosophy to refute common sense, the anemic nature of philosophical progress compared to that of science, the lack of agreement on substantive philosophical matters, and the failure to produce knockdown non-formal philosophical arguments for philosophically substantive claims, if my experience is at all representative, then what philosophers *really* *hate* is the idea that the typical wise philosopher should, epistemically if not professionally, suspend judgment on philosophical claims. Think about it: you work for years and years defending your niche position, defending it in multiple publications, and you’re not epistemically allowed to even believe it? Are you serious?

What this means is that my theses in this book will be resisted. Franklin Roosevelt’s address announcing the Second New Deal on October 31, 1936: “Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred.” I’m joking.

Earlier I asserted that we can prove philosophically counterintuitive results from analyses of philosophical problems—without taking any stand on the solutions to any of those problems. In order to do this, we start by giving a logically exhaustive analysis of several traditional philosophical paradoxes. The analysis allows us to prove disjunctions that have a small number of disjuncts and have the following features:

* The arguments for the disjunctions are “knockdown” arguments, pretty much however one wants to precisify that notion in a reasonable manner.
* We philosophers are strongly disposed, after seeing the proofs, to agree that the disjunctions are true.
* Each disjunct is *philosophically counterintuitive*: if it is true, then a great many of our ordinary commonsensical beliefs and/or a significant portion of our most confidently held ordinary beliefs or belief-dispositions are false, or key philosophical ideas held by a large portion of philosophers are false. (More on this characterization below.)
* Once we philosophers are aware of the truth of the disjunctions, we realize that we have been *wildly* wrong about language, logic, truth, or ordinary empirical matters.
* Awareness of the truth of the disjunctions makes the typical wise philosopher suspect that she should not trust her judgment, in a profound manner.
* Once one is aware of the truth of the disjunctions, the typical philosopher must, in order to be wise, suspend judgment on an enormous number of claims, even many of the most certain ones.

As a bonus, the materials used to prove the disjunctions cast light on whether metaphysics is bullshit (it’s not; in fact, in one key respect it is superior to some other areas of philosophy), what kinds of substantive philosophical progress there is on particular philosophical claims (it exists, although in an unexpected form), and whether (non-formal) philosophy—instead of science—can refute common sense (yes).