

Are these the paradoxes being referred to?

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Abstract. I make some proposals regarding which paradoxes Dr. Johnson was referring to in a preface.

In a preface, Dr. Johnson tells us about “those who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox”. Which disappointing paradoxes does he have in mind? I do not know. Probably they are long forgotten paradoxes. I have conceived three candidates, which I present below.

The lyre paradox. If you give Orpheus a lyre, his nature is such that it cannot but enslave him. Often even if he judges that it would be better to do something else, he plays his lyre and plays it as well as possible. But let us imagine that Orpheus is walking in a dark and spooky forest. Some branches are in his way. You would have to crouch to avoid them, but Orpheus just plays his lyre and, charmed by it, they move. Orpheus might also use his lyre against people intent on physical attack. To give him a lyre is to enslave him, but also to reduce the restrictions upon him, to liberate him. But how can that be?

“I am a Machiavellian.” Let us suppose that someone says to you, “I am a Machiavellian.” But are they really a Machiavellian? It is a puzzling statement to assess. If you believe that this statement is true, then you have evidence that the statement is false. A Machiavellian uses manipulative strategies to pursue the end of gaining and maintaining power, but your belief in the truth of the statement puts you on your guard, impairing their ability to manipulate you. It does not seem very Machiavellian to make a statement which has this effect. But if you believe that the

statement is false, then you have evidence that the statement is true, for your belief leads you to have more trust in the person, better enabling them to manipulate you. So what should you believe?

The paradox of the perfect goal. If God is the most perfect being then God is necessarily perfect. But how then can God score the perfect goal? For the perfect goal requires first evading a number of skilled defenders and there must be a genuine risk of failure. It must not be the case that an appropriately knowledgeable observer can assume beforehand that the evasions will occur.

Appendix

A solution to the lyre paradox is to say that as long as no one is physically preventing you from doing something, then you are free to do that thing; it does not matter whether you cannot summon the will to or not to do something, such as stop playing the lyre. They might also add, given my presentation of it, that obstacles from non-sentient beings do not count, only obstacles from people. But suppose that a fat man is beaten up and falls down, preventing me from being able to walk in a straight line to my destination. Is he restricting my freedom? Though sentient, there does not seem to be a significant difference between him and a natural obstacle. So am I only free to do something if no one is freely preventing me from doing something (including by ordering others to)? But that is a circular definition. I was thinking to include this above but perhaps it is not a paradox.

Reference

Johnson, S. 1765. Preface to Shakespeare. In V.B. Leitch (ed.), 2001, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.