

The Twenty-First or “Lost” Sophism on Self-Reference of John Buridan

The discovery of the twenty-first or “lost” sophism of John Buridan on self-reference and the nature of wishes is recounted, and the sophism is translated.

Introduction

I worked with the late George Hughes when he was translating the *Sophismata* of John Buridan on self-reference.¹ Stimulated by his work and discussions with him I later devised a modern theory of truth based on Buridan’s ideas.²

I had heard that there was one more sophism on self-reference that concluded Chapter 8 of Buridan’s *Sophismata*. References to it in medieval literature were scant and unclear, suggesting only that there was a twenty-first, or what came to be called the “lost sophism,” which was said to be about self-reference and wishes.

In my peregrinations I worked at the University da Paraíba in João Pessoa, Brazil, and there I was surprised to find several medieval works on parchment. All were in a very bad state of conservation. I was able to make a hand copy of part of one that appeared to refer to John Buridan on self-reference. My competence in medieval Latin is very poor. However, in the last year I was able to work with someone to translate the text and now believe that it is indeed the lost sophism of John Buridan.

I present my translation here. The terminology and presentation are meant to follow that established by George Hughes.

The 21st or Lost Sophism of John Buridan on Self-Reference

Sophism 21

Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight.

The posited case is that Plato utters these words upon observing the first star of the evening, and this is all he says or thinks that evening before going to sleep. The question is whether Plato has made a wish.

21.1 Argument that Plato has wished:

Plato has wished. He has wished that he may have the wish he is now making, for he has wished that he might have the wish he has tonight, and he is now wishing. Thus he has wished.

21.1.1 Moreover, his wish is fulfilled. He has no other wishes so his only wish is to have his wish. Surely a wish is fulfilled if it is not unfulfilled, and the posited case and Plato's wish, which exists and we showed is a wish, together entail that it is impossible that Plato's wish be unfulfilled.

21.2 Argument that Plato has not wished:

Plato has not wished for anything. He has only wished that he have a wish fulfilled, but that wish is a wish for a wish. Since Plato has not wished for anything, he cannot have his wish fulfilled.

21.3 My own view is that Plato has not wished, and therefore that he cannot have his wish come true. That is because he has not wished for anything.

21.3.1 I understand "for anything" to mean that there is some condition which can fulfill the wish. That is, for an expression to be a wish there must be a proposition which, if true, would constitute fulfillment of the wish.

21.3.1.1 But then is a wish that a circle be a square a wish? By the definition above it is, since it is a wish that "A circle is a square" be true. That this is an impossibility means only that the wish is unfulfillable, not that it is not a wish. The conditions for its fulfillment are clear; it simply cannot be satisfied. A wish for an impossibility, which we call an impossible wish, is still a wish.

21.3.2 But Plato's utterance is not an impossible wish. Because it is self-referential it does not express a wish at all.

21.3.2.1 It seems to be a wish, but it can only be a wish that it be itself fulfilled, as Plato has made no other wish that evening. The conditions for its fulfillment appear to be expressed by the proposition "The wish is fulfilled" which leads us, *ad infinitum*, again and again to the wish itself.

21.3.2.2 You argue as above that this does not mean the wish has no conditions of fulfillment, only that its conditions for fulfillment are trivial. Anything will fulfill the condition, since nothing would constitute falsifying the proposition.

21.3.2.3 But I say that "a subject and predicate stand for the same" is an affirmative condition which in this case could not be shown to hold. The predicate has no supposition, even though it has signification.

21.4 You may, however, choose to make a distinction, saying a wish that is not an impossible wish but is merely unfulfillable due to self-reference is a wishy-washy wish. In that case I concede that Plato has made a wishy-washy wish but that he cannot have his wish fulfilled.

21.5 But then is Plato's wish necessarily a wishy-washy wish? No, for he might have said immediately after uttering it the sentence, "I wish I were Socrates." Then Plato would have made a wish, namely that the wish "I wish I were Socrates" be fulfilled. That is, that the proposition "Plato is Socrates" be true.

21.6 How then can Plato make a wish that expresses the same thought as the sophism yet is really a wish?

21.6.1 In the case of a possibly wishy-washy wish one can express the same wish while ensuring that it is not wishy-washy by simply wishing that the purported wish be indeed a wish.

21.6.2 Thus, what Plato should say to make a wish and not a wishy-washy wish is:

Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight.
And if this wish I make tonight
Is wishy-washy, make it right.

1. George Hughes, *John Buridan on Self-Reference*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.
2. "A Theory of Truth Based on a Medieval Solution to the Liar Paradox", *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 13, pp. 149-177, 1992, later revised as Chapter XXII of my *Classical Mathematical Logic*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

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1 message

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History and Philosophy of Logic

Dear Richard L. Epstein,

the paper cannot be accepted for the review procedure due to formal reasons: The source for Buridan's sophism is not given (manuscript, library). The Latin version is not given. The person helping to translate is not given. The style is too personal.

Thank you for considering History and Philosophy of Logic. I hope the outcome of this specific submission will not discourage you from the submission of future manuscripts.

Yours sincerely

Volker Peckhaus

Editor in Chief

History and Philosophy of Logic