

THE SKEPTIC'S DILEMMA: A REPLY TO DAVIS

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The self-refutation argument has a long and controversial history beginning with Socrates' arguments against Protagoras in the *Thaetetus* down to the handful of similar efforts against today's forms of relativism, skepticism, and nihilism. Arrayed on the one side are those who hold the self-refutation to be a sound and distinctively philosophical argument¹; on the other are those who either see a logical-linguistic sleight of hand²—or at least see ways of reformulating the positions at stake to avoid self-refutation. Professor Davis's effort to defend Rorty-style skepticism³ from me seems to fall into this last group.

Davis seems to concede that if the skeptic is uttering genuine categorical propositions then his position is self-refuting. But need the skeptic utter propositions? As Davis puts it, the skeptic "has no burden of proof...if he chooses, [he] need only sit in a Buddha-like calm, observing the 'strife of systems'...(p.148). In other words, the skeptic need only let dogmatic philosophers contradict and refute one another. Thus his position need not be self-referentially incoherent.

Indeed the skeptic may take this stance—that much I concede. But note that he is no longer an *inquirer*; he no longer seeks truth.

Rather, the Buddha-like silent skeptic has opted out of the game, so to speak, by virtue of his conclusion that inquiry is futile. However, I as a systematic philosopher may simply elect to ignore him and go about my business as if he wasn't even there. The silent skeptic is therefore in a hopelessly awkward position: his "position" is entirely compatible with my ignoring him. To my decision to ignore him it seems he can have no response, for this would require him to break his silence and thus fall back into self-refutation. This, of course, is very strange: to my mind, giving up speech to avoid self-refutation is not the best of all possible trade-offs.

But according to Davis, a skeptic need not be entirely silent. Rorty, after all, has not been silent. (Indeed, he is among the most widely published and anthologized philosophers of our time.) As Davis describes him, the Rortian skeptic "invites us to survey the history of philosophy and open our eyes to the evident chaos" (*ibid.*), speaking the language of both analytic and continental philosophers and thus "presupposing some considerable mass of shared meanings and standards with his audience" (p.149). Thus his assertions will all be conditional. "The skeptic...must speak as if reason enjoys some competence..." (*ibid.*).

I must submit the following, though: (1) This does not accurately characterize Rorty's position, and (2) even if it did, he would not be significantly better off than the silent skeptic. Let me take these one at a time. (1) One can hardly read Rorty's main tracts without getting the impression that a substantive position is being offered about past and present philosophical discourse⁴—a position which, moreover, Rorty wishes us to accept as *true*.⁵ Specific prescriptions follow; these are intended to cure us of the "disease" of wanting to do systematic philosophy. (2) But let us suppose for the sake of argument that Rorty really *is* only making conditional assertions, using the systematic philosopher's tools to undercut those very tools. There are two ways we may read this. A conditional is an if-then statement, and so asserts nothing categorically. If this is read as not really asserting *anything* the audience can take as true, then it is likely that Rorty's position is that of the silent skeptic, and my earlier criticisms apply. But a conditional *does* assert a logical relationship between two propositions which can be given truth conditions. In this case there *are* factual claims being made, even if only about discourse, position (2) collapses into (1), and those arguments apply. The skeptic still faces a basic dilemma—remaining silent and allowing inquirers to ignore him, or speaking up and falling into self-refutation.

However, does the nonskeptic have related difficulties? Davis

ends his paper by turning the argument the other way, observing that if the skeptic has self-referential problems, then so does the rationalist. As he explains,

If knowledge is supposed to exist, there must be some standard or standards by which candidates for such alleged knowledge are judged. Whatever these standards are supposed to be, they must be measured for their validity. But then we should be in the position of judging the truth of our standards by themselves. This is self-referential in a question-begging mode... (p.151)

Space limits unfortunately preclude full discussion of this problem.⁶ So I will simply suggest that a false dilemma is being posed here. Davis suggests that we have the choice between skepticism and a dogmatism forced to rest on intellectual foundations or standards which we cannot adjudicate without begging the question. I propose, on the other hand, that *some* propositions need no "adjudication" in this sense because they cannot be intelligibly doubted or denied⁷; as well, recognition of their truth is involved in their comprehension.⁸ Aristotle's principle of contradiction seems a likely candidate for an absolutely basic proposition of this sort, his having argued in the *Metaphysics* that the principle of contradiction is a presupposition for the intelligibility of discourse itself. If something like this rationalist view can be upheld, we easily pass through the horns of the dogmatist's dilemma.⁹

To sum up, Davis's effort to save skepticism does not succeed because (1) the silent skeptic's stance is entirely compatible with my deciding to ignore him; and (2) the stance of the skeptic who speaks in conditionals either reverts to silence or to self-refutation. Thus the skeptic's dilemma remains. Finally, the charge of dogmatism directed at the rationalist does not succeed if we can demonstrate the existence of absolutely basic propositions such as the principle of contradiction which are necessary for intelligible discourse.

One final remark seems in order. Davis's title, "In My Opinion, That's Your Opinion," seems to capture one aspect of the skeptic's stance—to wit, the view that philosophy has failed to move beyond opinion despite over 2,000 years of effort. I will refrain from stating that *this* opinion is self-refuting in order to wonder aloud: If philosophy cannot move beyond clashing opinions, the "strife of systems," then are philosophy's critics (who I suspect are more numerous than most of today's professional academic philosophers realize) on firm ground when they ask, what, then, is the use of philosophy?¹⁰

1. See the Fitch essay cited in n.10 of my "Rorty's Foundationalism" above; for a tremendous bibliography dealing with self-referential and reflexive phenomena of all kinds cf. *Self Reference: Reflections on Reflexivity*, eds. S.J. Bartlett and P. Suber (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp.259-364.

2. E.g., Jorgen Jorgensen, "Some Reflections on Reflexivity," *Mind* 62 (1953): 289-300; or Michael Stack, "Self-Refuting Arguments," *Metaphilosophy* 14 (1983):327-35.

3. For simplicity's sake I am following Davis's construal of Rorty's position as a kind of skepticism. For some discussion of the senses in which Rorty is and is not a skeptic see Richard Bernstein, "Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind," *Review of Metaphysics* 23 (1980), pp.761-63.

4. I would maintain in addition that Rorty is offering us a substantial *metaphysics* as well—a form of eliminative materialism—but *that* must wait for a fresh occasion.

5. Were he to offer them as anything less than *candidates* for truth in some sense of this term, he would be in violation of basic conversational implicature. Cf. H.P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *The Logic of Grammar*, eds. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harmon (Encino: California: Dickenson, 1975), p.67: "Try to make your contribution one that is true."

6. It is this problem that motivated Winfield's project (see n.6 and n.15 of "Rorty's Foundationalism"); cf. also Winfield's "Logic, Language, and the Autonomy of Reason," *Idealistic Studies* 17 (1987): 109-21; and "Dialectical and the Conception of Truth," *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 18 (1987): 133-48. Winfield attempts in these and other papers to use some of Hegel's ideas to develop a foundationless systematic philosophy which generates its own categories, content, and method from scratch, as it were; though I find it rather baffling how such a mode of inquiry can actually get off the ground, Winfield's work is valuable for its powerful criticisms of the standard analytic empiricism.

7. Cf. S.J. Bartlett, "Phenomenology, Self-Reference, and the Philosophy of Science," *Methodology and Science* 13 (1980), esp. pp.148-51, and the literature cited there. Cf. also the same author's "The Idea of a Metalogic of Reference," *Methodology and Science* 9 (1976): 85-92.

8. I am grateful to Tibor R. Machan for his suggestion of a version of this notion (private conversation).

9. Incidentally, this suggests that Davis's analogy between the skeptic and the "man lost at sea" also fails; if there are absolutely basic propositions, then it is simply not true that we are "lost," with none of our claims to knowledge "grounded."

10. I am grateful to Professors Machan and Davis for valuable discussion leading up to this paper. The results are, of course, my own responsibility.