

Radical Flux and Contradictory Characterizations
A Reconstruction of *Theaetetus* 182c-183b

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Guus Eelink

(Tübingen, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker Zentrum)

1. Text (*Theaetetus* 182c9-183b6) and translation (McDowell, slightly modified)

Part A (182c9-d7):

SOC: Well now, if things were only locomoting, and not undergoing alteration, we would be able to say, surely, with which quality the locomoting things are flowing.¹ Isn't that right?

THE: Yes. SOC: Whereas since not even this stays constant, that the flowing thing is flowing white, but it is changing, so that there's a flow of this thing also, of the whiteness, and change to another colour, in order not to be convicted of staying constant in that respect – since that's so, is it ever possible to indicate any colour in such a way as to be indicating it correctly? THE: How could it be, Socrates? Indeed, how could it be possible to do so with any other thing of that kind, if it's always slipping away from the one who is speaking; as it must be, given that it's flowing?

ΣΩ. Εἰ μὲν τοίνυν ἐφέρετο μόνον, ἡλλοιοῦτο δὲ μή, εἶχομεν ἄν που εἰπεῖν οἷα ἄττα ῥεῖ τὰ φερόμενα· ἢ πῶς λέγομεν; ΘΕΟ. Οὕτως. ΣΩ. Ἐπειδὴ δὲ οὐδὲ τοῦτο μένει, τὸ λευκὸν ῥεῖν τὸ ῥέον, ἀλλὰ μεταβάλλει, ὥστε καὶ αὐτοῦ τούτου εἶναι ῥοήν, τῆς λευκότητος, καὶ μεταβολὴν εἰς ἄλλην χροῖαν, ἵνα μὴ ἀλῶ ταύτη μένον, ἄρα ποτε οἶόν τέ τι προσεῖπεῖν χροῖμα, ὥστε καὶ ὀρθῶς προσαγορεύειν; ΘΕΟ. Καὶ τίς μηχανή, ὦ Σώκρατες; ἢ ἄλλο γέ τι τῶν τοιούτων, εἴπερ ἀεὶ λέγοντος ὑπεξέρχεται ἅτε δὴ ῥέον;

Part B (182d8-183a9):

SOC: And what shall we say about a perception of any given kind, for instance that of seeing or hearing? Shall we say it ever lasts within seeing or hearing itself? THE: No, we mustn't, if everything is changing. SOC: So we shouldn't speak of anything as seeing more than [or: rather than (*mallon ē*)] as not seeing, or any other perceiving more than as not that perceiving; at any rate, we shouldn't do so if everything is changing in every way. SOC: But Theaetetus and I were saying that knowledge is perception. THE: Yes. SOC: So when we were asked what knowledge is, we gave as our answer something which is no more knowledge than not knowledge. THE: Apparently. THE: No. SOC: Well, our attempt at perfecting our answer seems to have turned out admirably! We were eager to show that all things change, so that it might become clear that that answer was correct. But what has in fact become clear is, apparently, that if all things are changing, then every answer, whatever one is answering about, is equally correct: both to assert that it is so and to assert that it is not so, or if you like, [both to assert that it] is becoming [so and to assert that it is becoming not so], in order that we do not bring those people to a standstill by what we say. THE: You speak correctly.

ΣΩ. Τί δὲ περὶ αἰσθήσεως ἐροῦμεν ὅποιασοῦν, οἷον τῆς τοῦ ὄραν ἢ ἀκούειν; μένειν ποτὲ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ ὄραν ἢ ἀκούειν; ΘΕΟ. Οὐκ οὐκ δεῖ γε, εἴπερ πάντα κινεῖται.

ΣΩ. Οὔτε ἄρα ὄραν προσρητέον τι μᾶλλον ἢ μὴ ὄραν, οὐδέ τιν' ἄλλην αἴσθησιν μᾶλλον ἢ μὴ, πάντων γε πάντως κινουμένων. ΘΕΟ. Οὐ γὰρ οὐκ. ΣΩ. Καὶ μὴν αἴσθησις γε ἐπιστήμη, ὡς

¹ I have adopted a variant of Thaler's helpful translation of the indirect question at 182c10: 'with what quality the moving things flow.' See Thaler 2013, 28.

ἔφραμεν ἐγὼ τε καὶ Θεαίτητος. ΘΕΟ. Ἦν ταῦτα. ΣΩ. Οὐδὲν ἄρα ἐπιστήμην μᾶλλον ἢ μὴ ἐπιστήμην ἀπεκρινάμεθα ἐρωτώμενοι ὅτι ἐστὶν ἐπιστήμη. ΘΕΟ. Ἐοίκατε. καλὸν ἂν ἡμῖν συμβαίνοι τὸ ἐπανόρθωμα τῆς ἀποκρίσεως, προθυμηθεῖσιν ἀποδείξαι ὅτι πάντᾳ κινεῖται, ἵνα δὴ ἐκείνη ἢ ἀπόκρισις ὀρθὴ φανῆ. τὸ δ', ὡς εἴκειν, ἐφάνη, εἰ πάντα κινεῖται, πᾶσα ἀπόκρισις, περὶ οὗτου ἂν τις ἀποκρίνηται, ὁμοίως ὀρθὴ εἶναι, οὕτω τ' ἔχειν φάναι καὶ μὴ οὕτω, εἰ δὲ βούλει, γίγνεσθαι, ἵνα μὴ στήσωμεν αὐτοὺς τῷ λόγῳ. ΘΕΟ. ὀρθῶς λέγεις.

Part C (183a10-b6):

SOC: Yes, Theodorus, except that I said 'so' and 'not so'. One oughtn't even to use this 'so', because 'so' wouldn't any longer be changing; and, again, one oughtn't to use 'not so', because that isn't a change either. No, those who state that theory must establish some other mode of expression, because as things are they haven't got expressions for their doctrine: unless, perhaps, 'not so either', said infinitely many times, might suit them best. THE: Yes, that would certainly be a most appropriate idiom for them.

ΣΩ. Πλήν γε, ὦ Θεόδωρε, ὅτι “οὕτω” τε εἶπον καὶ “οὐχ οὕτω.” δεῖ δὲ οὐδὲ τοῦτο “οὕτω” λέγειν—οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν ἔτι κινεῖτο “οὕτω”—οὐδ' αὖ “μὴ οὕτω”—οὐδὲ γὰρ τοῦτο κίνησις—ἀλλὰ τιν' ἄλλην φωνὴν θετέον τοῖς τὸν λόγον τοῦτον λέγουσιν, ὡς νῦν γε πρὸς τὴν αὐτῶν ὑπόθεσιν οὐκ ἔχουσι ῥήματα, εἰ μὴ ἄρα τὸ “οὐδ' οὕτως” μάλιστα οὐδ' ἂν αὐτοῖς ἀρμόττοι, ἄπειρον λεγόμενον. ΘΕΟ. Οἰκειοτάτη γοῦν διάλεκτος αὕτη αὐτοῖς.²

2. Steps of the argument

Part A:

Conclusion 1: $\forall X \forall F$: 'X is F' is not (simply) correct.

Part B:

Conclusion 2: $\forall X \forall F$: 'X is F' and 'X is not F' are equally correct
(and neither is simply correct).

Part C:

Conclusion 3: $\forall X \forall F$: 'X is F' and 'X is not F' are both (simply) incorrect.

² I read οὐδ' οὕτως at 183b4 with W and the schol. βT have οὐδ' ὅπως. I follow Denyer 1991, 104 (in particular n. 4), in translating 'ἄπειρον' as 'infinitely'. McDowell 1973, 64, translates 'indefinite'.

3. Some existing interpretations

Epistemic interpretations (Sedley and Boter): things change too fast to make correct predications about them.

....due to the fleeting nature of X, we cannot correctly predicate F of X.

Broad scope interpretations (Silverman, Hestir): properties (and/or their instances) themselves change.

....X itself changes into G (not-F).

Semantic interpretations, such as Thaler (p. 35) on 182d8-a6:

‘The names of species of perception, such as ‘seeing’ or ‘hearing’, have no determinate sense, so that it will never be more proper to designate anything in particular by the name ‘seeing’ rather than ‘not seeing’, and the same goes for all other species of perception.’ (182 D 8- E 6)

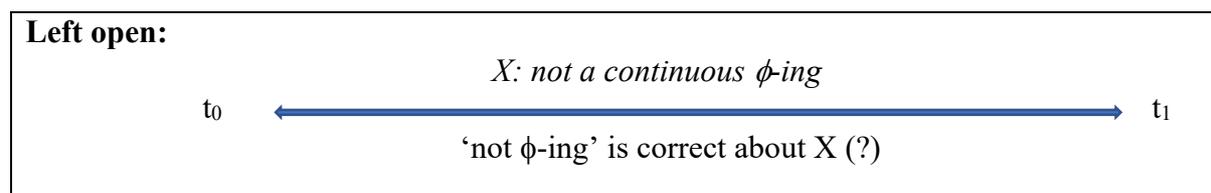
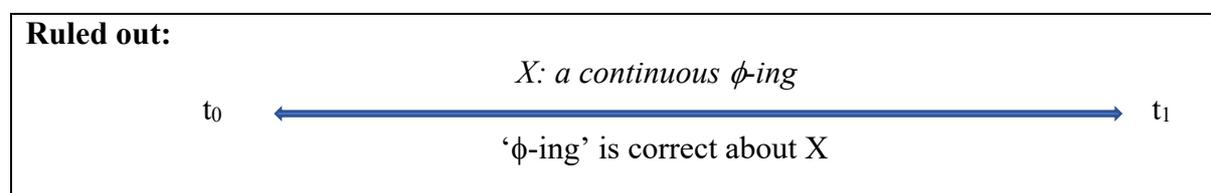
... ‘F’ and ‘not F’ have no determinate meaning.

4. My interpretation (extending Bolton’s interpretation)

Bolton (pp. 73-4) on part A: ‘For the Heracliteans every characteristic is a flow and a flow by definition must last for a time. So for an object to have a characteristic at all it must retain that characteristic, that flow, over time. But no object, on pain of becoming stable in some way, can retain *any* characteristic over time. So, on the Heraclitean view, no object can *have* any characteristic at all. And this view is absurd. There cannot be any object which does not have any characteristic.’

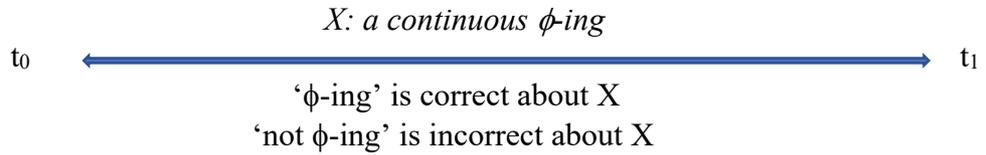
My proposal: Socrates reaches this conclusion in three steps.

Conclusion 1 (part A):

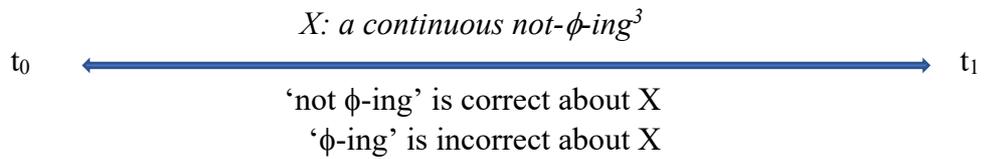


Conclusion 2 (part B):

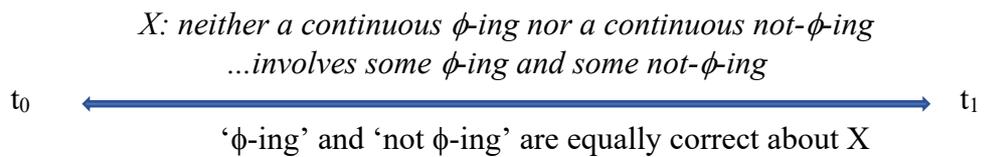
Ruled out:



Ruled out:



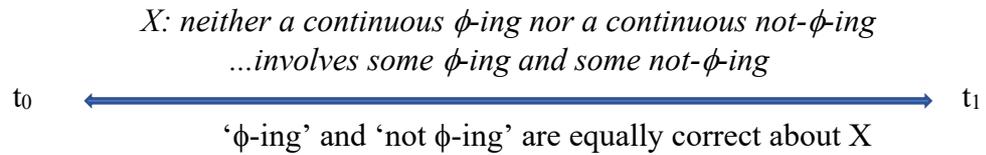
Left open:



³ Where not- ϕ -ing consists of only doing things other than ϕ -ing. For instance, not-flowing white might be flowing green or first flowing green and then flowing blue.

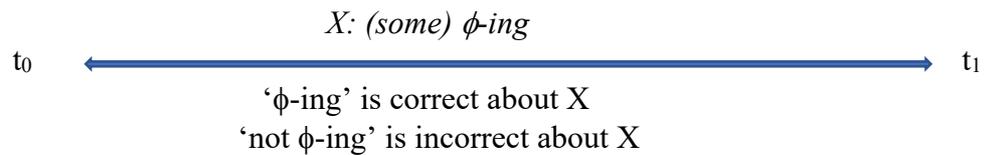
Conclusion 3 (part C):

Ruled out:

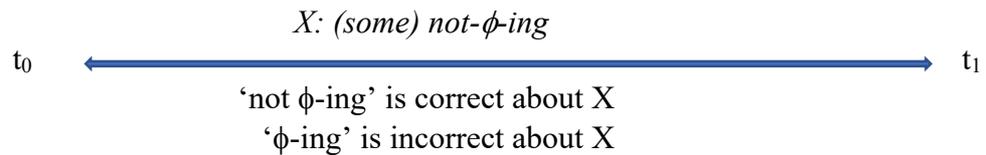


Because....

Ruled out:



Ruled out:



5. A formalization of the argument (regarding ϕ -ings)

- (i) There are no continuous ϕ -ings.
- (ii) If there are no continuous ϕ -ings, there are no ϕ -ings.
- (iii) There are no ϕ -ings. From (i) and (ii)

In support of (ii):

- (i)* If there are no continuous ϕ -ings, there are no ϕ -ings stretched out over time.
- (ii)* Each ϕ -ing is stretched out over time.
- (iii)* If there are no continuous ϕ -ings, there are no ϕ -ings. From (i)* and (ii)*

[An analogous argument rules out not- ϕ -ings.]

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