The Ultimate Paradox and Whether Pigs Have Wings

An Essay

by

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Introduction to the Electronic Version

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The ultimate philosophical paradox is absoluteness in an infinite universe. It doesn't take much brain power to see that all things would be possible in an infinite universe—they might never have taken place, but they are possible. Of course, if time stretches infinitely backwards, which it would in an infinite universe, one might consider that all things have already happened in the past. Similarly, they will all happen again (and again?) in the infinite future.

As for absoluteness, there are two types: physical absoluteness and conceptual absoluteness. To avoid getting bogged down in semantics and the various philosophies of perceptual reality, absoluteness of a physical nature is defined for my purposes here to be the existing universe as it is generally perceived by science (all except for a few fringe cults, whose constituents shouldn't be reading this anyway). Conceptual absoluteness is that state of being that is true or false all the time, regardless of the conditions under which it occurs, that has intrigued and eluded philosophers for as long as they have been around. That is, the concept of absoluteness necessarily transcends time and space. To be truly absolute this state of being must possess the same characteristics whether here or there; or whether now, then, or in the future.

On the other hand, the concept of infinitude has no physical manifestation. It is entirely conceptual. We cannot measure infinity, neither in smallness nor largeness. Not only that, the concept of infinity has no meaning except as it applies to its two extremes. To take a different perspective, everything between the two extremes is not infinite. This negative definition might be more revealing than the positive one, since this "in-between" definition appears to be the world in which we live.

With the definitions given above, physical absoluteness (existential reality) exists as what has happened in the past and the state of what is in existence now. Future physical absoluteness is not a rational concept in an infinite universe. There can only be projected possibilities of what will exist in the future when an infinite number of possibilities exist for altering reality as it is now.

However, the ideas of physical and conceptual absoluteness both carry the possibility of being proven no matter where or when they are found. After all, they are absolute. What could be more concrete and provable than that? A physical event or state of being might be proven if it has occurred in the past or if it is currently in existence. However, it could be proven as a not yet occurred future state of being only if the physical future were predetermined. If the possibilities of the physical future were open-ended, that is infinite, an infinite number of unexpected events could occur that could change the expected course of events.

Most scientist agree that the Grand Canyon is the product of several million years of scouring by the Colorado River (notwithstanding the current hierarchy of the National Park Service who seem hell-bent to convince everyone that the canyon is only 4,500 years old and was produced by Noah's flood). As a measure of science's belief that such scouring will continue into the foreseeable future, benchmarks have been placed to allow measurement of future scouring. However, it is entirely possible that an unexpected shift in plate tectonics or an

asteroid strike could occur at any time and submerge Arizona once again in an expanded Gulf of Mexico where the river would no longer flow and the canyon would begin to fill with sediment.

Similar to the physical absolute discussed above, could a concept that had proven to be absolutely true or false in the past, and absolutely true or false in the present be said to be absolutely true or false in the future? Again, this absoluteness could exist only if the future were predetermined, since unanticipated conditions might manifest themselves in a future with infinite possibilities. When something is proven to be absolutely true or false, it is done so under an existing set of conditions that are either stated or implied. If these conditions change, so might the absoluteness of the concept.

As an example, consider the concept of gravity. If we were to have a piece of gravel suspended motionless from a string attached to our finger anywhere on the earth and we were to cut that string with a pair of scissors, we would be inclined to state absolutely that the pebble would fall to the earth. Not only that, we could arrogantly predict the exact rate at which it would fall (forgetting the minute effect of air density). However, should science succeed in devising a way of counteracting the effect of gravity in the future (not an inconceivable possibility), this scenario would change from absolutely true to true some of the time.

For any observed state-of-being believed to be absolute, it is possible to conceive of a set of future conditions under which its cloak of absoluteness would dissolve. Therefore, the past, present, and future criteria for true absoluteness is impossible in an infinite universe, and this limits any proof of absoluteness to the metaphysical, making it physically unprovable by definition.

Both absoluteness and infinitude are states of being that are closed concepts. They are essentially one word tautologies, brooking no use of qualifiers. Phases like “almost absolute,” “partially absolute,” and “absolute except” are oxymoronic, as are similar phrases concerning infinitude. Any partial state of absoluteness or infinitude would also be a partial state of the other extreme. For example, the state of being almost absolute would also be a state of slightly infinite, or vice versa. This is obviously a logical contradiction of both the concepts of absoluteness and infinitude.

Since the two concepts are mutually exclusive, classic logic determines they cannot exist simultaneously. With classic logic, we are left with two possible answers to the paradox, either the universe is infinite and some arguments have the *appearance* of being absolute in the finite definition of the universe in which we conduct daily affairs, or the universe is finite as it frequently appears to be for practical applications and only *appears* to be infinite because we have not yet discovered its limits.

The paradox takes on new dimensions when we consider that a logical proof of the infinite nature of the universe is as equally impossible as is that for its absolute nature. Since there is by definition no way to define limits of the infinite, we cannot prove it doesn’t have any. Therefore, proof of an infinite universe appears to lie equally in the sphere of metaphysics as does the proof for an absolute universe—bedfellows not particularly well suited to each other.

Then again, why has the philosophical community spent such an enormous amount of energy on this issue when it looks like science has had the answer for a very long time? For instance, the ever popular Big-Bang theory has the universe beginning from a single point (a unity?;an absoluteness?), which doesn't fit the infinity position at all. However, if it is expanding endlessly, is this the same as approaching infinity? Even the theory that the universe will ultimately stop expanding and shrink back to its original unity has appeal as a solution if we throw in the pulsating theory. This situation would have the universe cycling from the unity (absoluteness) toward infinity but ultimately failing, then collapsing back into absoluteness and continuing the cycle forever (infinity). This of course ignores the problem of infinite sets of universes (thank you Mr. Russell for really complicating the problem).

Being even more direct, we can find the same example in a set of pragmatic rules that have been around for a very long time without being proven less than absolute—the three laws of thermodynamics (thank you primarily, Lord Kelvin, for providing one of the (or probably just the) most useful laws of science and technology). The first law states that matter and energy are conserved. You can change the nature and form of matter and energy but it doesn't go away. The containment of all matter and energy in the universe in a single point was in the unity (absoluteness).

The second law states that disorder always increases, which prevents a return to previous states of entropy. This sounds a lot like once the bubble (the unity) popped, it was going to keep on going out from its original nexus (the continuously expanding universe approaching infinity).

The third law puts a point on it all by stating that absolute zero is unobtainable. That is to say that the energy and matter released in the big bang will grow ever more tenuous as the universe expands. With the volume of space increasing as the cube of the distance to its edge moves outward from the point of the big bang, the amount of energy in a given volume of space will continue to diminish, even with the primitive matter released during the big bang continuing to convert itself to more complex forms (stars) and in the process producing more energy. Eventually, these energy/matter dynamics will slow to a stop, whether the expansion of the universe itself does or not, and the amount of energy per cubic whatever will be so low as to approximate but not quite get to zero.

So to sum it all up, science seems to tell us that the universe might have had absoluteness at one time, but whether it did or not is a moot point, since the answer has no value other than a metaphysical one. It also tells us that whether or not the universe is infinite or not is an equally moot point, since the universe comes so close to being infinite (or should it be *will come so close*?) that the difference is not worth arguing about. Finally, science tells us that absoluteness can exist only at the point of unity for all matter and energy in the universe, which has either happened only at the beginning of the universe, will happen again at the end of the universe, or happens at the end/beginning of each pulse of the universe.

All classical logic can tell us about the nature of the universe is that it can't be both absolute and infinite at the same time, but that's okay, since it doesn't

rule out its being neither and doesn't conflict with science. Classic logic and science combined provide us with the answers we need to pursue truth, that is that it can only exist in its absolute form at the point at which the universe (as we define it) ceases to exist and becomes a unity. Simply put, that means that absolute truth is of little value outside the world of metaphysics, even if it does exist. Consequently, any meaningful pursuit of the nature of the universe, and more importantly, any understanding of our meaning in this universe must come through employing fuzzy logic (fortunately for the reader, another topic), where our pursuits can shift from absolute to relative truth (we just can't seem to shake you, Mr. Einstein, and your efforts beyond $E=MC^2$).

But we cannot leave this paradox without piling on another. The very concept of infinity should be seen as a paradox in itself, because to be infinite is to be absolutely without end. This is not a hiccup of semantics; it is merely a look at infinity from a different perspective. The infinitely mechanistic universe seems to imply no higher level of consciousness at the helm, but the absoluteness of infinity seems to imply metaphysical truth. All of which can make your brain tired if you think about it too much. Take a break.