Why There’s Nothing You Can Say to Change My Mind:
The Principle of Non-Contradiction in Aristotle’s Metaphysics

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Abstract

The Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC), as presented by Aristotle, states that something cannot both be and not be in the same respect at the same time. The PNC is at the foundation of Aristotle’s metaphysics as well as our basic understanding of the world. As a principle, the PNC cannot actually be demonstrated to be true. However, it can be shown that choosing to reject the PNC leads to absurd consequences. Any argument against the PNC actually results in the arguer affirming it as true. Phenomenalism and Relativism are philosophies which reject the PNC and are examined as such.
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In the *Metaphysics*, primarily Book IV, chapters three through six\(^1\), Aristotle conducts a thorough discussion of the principle of non-contradiction (PNC), its implications, and the implications of not accepting it as true. For Aristotle, this principle has a great deal of importance in his philosophical system as it protects the very idea of independent things and thinghood. Since accepting the PNC is so important to the rest of his philosophy, Aristotle finds it necessary to attempt to show the reader why the PNC must be accepted as both a principle of logic and a principle of being. In opposition to Aristotle and his philosophy are other philosophies that stem from and relate to a rejection of the PNC. Two of these philosophies are phenomenalism and relativism. Each of these philosophies shows what the philosophical and practical consequences of rejecting the PNC turn out to be when someone has to reconcile their life and experiences with rejecting the PNC.

The PNC, as Aristotle presents it, can be defined as stating that something cannot both be and not be in the same respect at the same time (Sachs, 1005b 20). At first glance, the principle may seem simple enough and intuitive, but important distinctions can be discovered upon further investigation. The qualifications in the definition are of particular interest as they serve to clarify exactly what the PNC is and what it is not. The qualifications make it clear that things cannot both be and not be, but that this directive only applies when the being and not being refer to the thing in the same respect and refer to it at the same time. While both parts of the qualification in the definition are interdependent and must be used together, we can examine the parts individually to gain a better understanding of exactly what each part implies. For instance, the

\(^1\) Sachs, Joe, 2002. *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*. Santa Fe: Green Lion Press. In text citations may take the form of (Sachs, pp.)
first part of the qualification, referring to the thing in the same respect, can be demonstrated with a simple example. The statement “This book is both hard and not red” does not violate this part of the PNC. Hardness and redness do not refer to the book in the same respect; one refers to the solidity of the book and the other refers to the color. Since in the statement the part of the book that is being and the part that is not being are not referring to the same aspect of the book, the statement does not violate the first qualification of the PNC. A statement that does violate this part of the qualification would be “This book is both hard and soft.” When a statement violates this first part of the qualification and refers to the same aspect, we must then consider the second part of the qualification to determine if the statement does indeed violate the PNC. The second part of the qualification in the PNC states that things may not both be and not be at the same time. If we use color as an example and say “This book is both red and not red at this time,” we violate the second part of the qualification in the definition of the PNC. A thing cannot completely be and not be a color at the same time. This does not mean, however that something cannot completely be different colors at different times. When we return to the full definition of the PNC and reassemble it with all the qualifications present, we can understand what Aristotle means by something being and not being in the same respect at the same time. After breaking down the PNC into its constituent parts, we can now take the PNC as a whole and see just what is being said and what statements violate it. To determine if a statement violates the PNC, we first determine if what is being said about being and not being refers to the thing in the same respect. If it does not refer to the same aspect of the thing, it does not violate the PNC. If what is being said of the thing does refer to the thing in the same respect, we must then determine if what is being said is being said of the object at the same time. If the being and not being refer to both the same respect of the thing and the same time, then the statement violates the PNC. Aristotle
believes that any statement that violates the PNC would be nonsensical and have no meaning. This notion will be discussed in greater detail as it relates to Aristotle’s rebuttal of the ideas of phenomenalism and relativism.

As much as Aristotle would like to simply prove the PNC, he finds that the nature of the PNC itself prevents any sort of demonstration or proof in the normal sense (Sachs, 1006a). For Aristotle, the PNC is the most evident statement that can be made. The problem that arises from the PNC being the most evident statement is that this means that there is no way to explain or show it through a deductive argument. Deductive arguments rely on starting with premises that seem clearly evident and then demonstrating what follows, with complete certainty, from those premises if the premises are true. In the case of the PNC, there is nothing more evident that could be used to derive the PNC from; it must simply be accepted. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be done to show support for the PNC. While Aristotle is unable to directly prove or demonstrate the PNC, he is able to show the absurdity in rejecting it.

Those who reject the PNC deny that a thing cannot both be and not be in the same respect at the same time. In other words, they assert that a thing can both be and not be in the same respect at the same time. If this is the case then those who reject the PNC succeed in destroying meaning in things (Sachs, 1006a 20-30). There cannot be any meaning in a statement if what is being said can have the meaning of something completely different. Aristotle uses a variety of examples to show how someone who denies the PNC is either not worth talking to, or is someone who, in actuality, implicitly asserts that the PNC is true. While Aristotle believes that those people who say something can be refuted, he begins by addressing those who refuse to speak. These people would have no argument, which he says makes them no better than a plant (Sachs, 1006a 10). Aristotle addressed those who do speak by raising the point that if they intend
to mean anything by speaking, they have already refuted their own denial of the PNC. By intending meaning, one implicitly assumes that the PNC is true, thereby allowing the possibility for someone to mean something by what they say. Another example Aristotle uses in support of the PNC is that people simply act as if they viewed the PNC to be true (Sachs, 1008b 10). People do not think jumping off a cliff and not jumping off a cliff are the same thing, otherwise there would be no tendency for people to avoid jumping off of cliffs. Insofar as people act as if certain things are good or bad, they are admitting to a practical belief in the PNC.

If one chooses to reject the PNC, that person is still in the position of having to make sense of the world if they want to go about their lives. We have seen how rejecting the PNC destroys any sort of meaning, in the normal sense, so the person who rejects the PNC must find some alternative to the typical understanding of a meaningful reality. Two philosophies that attempt to explain a world without normal meaning are phenomenalism and relativism. Each philosophy asserts that contradicting ideas can both be correct, which defies the PNC. In explaining this idea, Aristotle clarifies that the possibility of contradicting ideas being correct isn’t simply ambiguity between things. For instance, he uses the example of a robe and a cloak. Both of these things can refer to the same thing although they use different names. The contradicting ideas of phenomenalism and relativism are much stronger. For instance, one could assert that a duck is both a duck and not a duck at the same time in the same respect and still be correct. Relativism rejects the PNC more strongly and completely than phenomenalism, so we will discuss its implications first.

The philosophy of relativism asserts that there is no objective meaning and that any meaning is only relative. Since relativism rejects the PNC, a thing can both be and not be in the same respect at the same time. As we have seen, this results in an infinite number of beings and
not beings for any given thing, destroying any meaning in the thing itself. Any meaning in the philosophy of relativism is not meant in the same sense as normal, objective meaning. Under relativism, any sort of meaning is merely derived by a thing’s relation to you. For example, if you used a table as a chair by sitting on it, the table would have the meaning of a chair to you. If someone else uses the table as a table, then it would have the meaning of a table to them. The meaning of anything is found only in how you use it, so there is not any sense of objectivity or permanence for any meaning in relativism.

Phenomenalism is a slightly less severe form of relativism in that it does leave open the possibility that things do have objective reality and meaning. However, phenomenalism makes a distinction between what we perceive and reality, believing that we can only know what we experience through perception and that our perceptions do not necessarily reflect reality accurately. Since everyone is forced to rely on their perceptions which may not reveal the true reality of a thing, there is no objective way to determine if a person’s perceptions are correct or incorrect with regard to reality. With this in mind, phenomenalism can be defined as asserting that anything that appears a certain way to someone and anything that someone believes to be so is in fact so to that person (Sachs, 1009b).

In discussing his presentation of phenomenalism, Aristotle distinguishes a few aspects that serve to further distinguish it from relativism. Firstly, he notes that while truth is derived from sense perception, it is not determined by simple majority rule (Sachs, 1009b). He proposes a case where the majority of the people are ill or insane which would render their sense perceptions inaccurate. Secondly, he makes note of the way in which people acquire these sense perceptions. For Aristotle, people sense things by being altered by the thing, which in a sense puts them in a sort of relation with the reality of the thing (Sachs, 1009b 10). But since we can
have different perceptions of the same thing and are not actually experiencing the real thing but are rather experiencing perceptions, phenomenalists conclude that either nothing is true or that our ability to grasp the real thing is hindered. Thirdly, Aristotle notes that we do seem to value certain perceptions to be truer than others (Sachs, 1009b). He uses the example of a doctor being a more reliable authority on who will get well than a layperson. Finally, he discusses how phenomenalism ignores the thinghood of a thing even though it seems that things can persist while our perceptions of them change. Aristotle describes a situation in which a wine is perceived as being sweet at one time and yet not sweet at another. While either the wine or the person could have changed, resulting in a different perception, the actual quality of sweetness does not change (Sachs, 1010b 20). If the quality of sweetness is present, this means the thing is necessarily sweet. If something is the case by necessity, Aristotle argues, it cannot both be so and not be so (Sachs, 1010b 30). This argument provides support for the PNC, as well as critiques the principles of phenomenalism. These distinctions and arguments show how, while phenomenalism may be a form of relativism, it is less severe and has more subtleties to consider.

In conclusion, this paper has presented Aristotle’s views on the PNC, its implications, and the implications of attempting to reject or ignore it. The PNC is found to be the most evident principle, and therefore a principle unable to be demonstrated. Aristotle counters this by showing how rejecting the PNC either leads to absurdity or the person actually asserts the PNC as soon as they intend to mean anything. Finally, the philosophies of relativism and phenomenalism which stem from a rejection of the PNC were investigated and their implications described. As the PNC is such a fundamental part of Aristotle’s metaphysics, it is important to understand exactly what the principle entails and what the reasons are for accepting it as true even when the principle cannot be demonstrated.