The Resurrection of the Dead: An Exercise in Critical Analysis

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The material in this note was developed for a first course in logic to illustrate a standard use of logic in analysis. The object was to present a not entirely trivial or artificial confusion that was amenable to resolution using only the tools of quite elementary logic—no modalities, no restrictions to extensional contexts.[1] Copies of The Problem were distributed. Then, on another day, A Solution.

The Problem:

> Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life we who are in Christ have only hope, we are of all men most to be pitied. (*Corinthians* I:15, verses 12-19.)

Paul argues explicitly here against the thesis that there is no resurrection of the dead. Perhaps he argues implicitly, though fallaciously, for the positive thesis that there *is* resurrection of the dead, *all* the dead. There is some reason to think that he *believes* that the dead will be raised: consider "the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised." (*Corinthians* I:15, verse 52.) But possibly he does not think that *all* the dead will be raised and does not mean to argue for this unrestricted generalization in this passage or even for a generalization restricted for ex-ample to the faithful. Even so, there is a temptation to read into the passage the following argument (whether or not Paul intended something like it to be at work):

> 1. To be proved: There is resurrection of the dead.
>
> 2. Assumption for indirect proof: It is not the case that there is resurrection of the dead.
>
> 3. Premise: Christ has been raised from the dead.

But it is an obvious and trivial truth, indeed it is a necessary truth, that

> 4. If it is not the case that there is resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised from the dead.

It follows from (2) and (4) by *modus ponens* that

> 5. Christ has not been raised from the dead.

But (5) contradicts (3) and so completes the indirect derivation of the unrestricted generalization that there is resurrection of the dead from the single contingent premise that Christ has been raised. It is however clear that this generalization does not follow from the sole premise that someone, namely Christ, has been raised from the dead. Observe that in the argument special use is *not* made of the fact that its contingent premise is about Christ. It could as well have been about Henry Kissinger. It would not in that case be so widely believed, but that of course is irrelevant to its sufficiency for this argument.

What has gone wrong? Where is the mistake? How does it slip by?

A Solution:

> The mistake comes no later than at (4).

Re-phrasing to avoid ambiguities, for the time only, since what is to be proved is

1a. All the dead are raised.

the correct assumption for indirect proof is

2a. Not all the dead are raised.

But then

4a. If not all the dead are raised, then Christ has not been raised from the dead.

is not a necessary truth, or in any way an obvious or trivial truth. Indeed its truth is after all what is at issue, namely, whether or not, given that Christ has been raised from the dead it follows that all the dead are raised. Perhaps this does follow given suitable augmentation of the premise or analysis of its unobvious content since it is about Christ, but that it follows is not established and certainly cannot be assumed in the argument (1)-(5). The best that can be said about this argument is that it would beg the question.

The reason that the defects of argument (1)-(5) are not immediately plain is that its lines as first formulated are ambiguous. Thus (2) is capable of two quite different interpretations:[2]

2a. Not all the dead are raised.

2b. None of the dead are raised.

In standard notation,

2a. $\sim (x)(Dx \supset Rx)$
2b. $(x)(Dx \supset \sim Rx)$

Similarly, (4) has two readings:

4a. If not all the dead are raised, then Christ has not been raised from the dead.

4b. If none of the dead are raised, then Christ has not been raised from the dead.

In standard notation,

4a. $\sim (x)(Dx \supset Rx) \supset \sim (Rc \cdot Dc)$
4b. $(x)(Dx \supset \sim Rx) \supset \sim (Rc \cdot Dc)$

The correct assumption for indirect proof is of course (2a). And the reading for (4) under which it does not beg the question and is necessarily true is (4b). (5) does not follow from (2a) and (4b) by *modus ponens*, but it does follow from (2a) and (4a), and it follows from (2b) and (4b). The argument trades on the ambiguities of (2) and (4), on the completely natural and generous temptation to read them one way when they are introduced, the way they must be read to be accepted, and another way when they are put jointly to use in the inference to (5), as they must be read for this inference to be a case of *modus ponens*.

Notes

[1]Another illustration would take as its subject a reconstruction of Descartes' ontological argument, a putative indirect proof of,

A supremely perfect being has the perfection of existence.

The displayed sentence is ambiguous. It has, in standard notation, these interpretations:

$(x)(Px \supset Ex)$
$(\exists x)(Px \cdot Ex)$

The first is, given the intended interpretations of letters, necessarily true but not existential. The second is existential, but it and its denial cannot be assumed to be necessarily true and false respectively without begging the question at issue in the argument.

[2]Statement (2) illustrates the somewhat uncommon fact that in English the sentence "It is not the case that ϕ" does not invariably express unambiguously the negation of what ϕ expresses.

Contrast (2) with the following:

The dead are not raised.

There is no resurrection of the dead.

These forms which actually occur in *Corinthians* I:15 are less ambiguous than (2). Perhaps they are not ambiguous at all. Probably, therefore, (2) serves the fallacious argument better than they would, though in such matters judgments may differ.