
AMEDEO GIOVANNI CONTE

Università degli Studi di Pavia

conte@unipv.it

PAOLO DI LUCIA

Università degli Studi di Milano

dilucia@fildir.unimi.it

ADÝNATON. FOUR DICHOTOMIES FOR A PHILOSOPHY OF IMPOSSIBILITY

abstract

The starting point of our paper is the distinction between a non-praxical impossibility from a praxical impossibility (i.e. an impossibility that does concern praxis, action). Our paper will focus on praxical impossibility. Within the domain of praxical impossibility, we will distinguish six different forms of praxical impossibility making use of three dichotomies: nomophoric vs. non-nomophoric, presence vs. absence, type vs. token. The eight forms of impossibility we introduce (non-praxical impossibility, praxical impossibility, nomophoric impossibility, non-nomophoric impossibility, presence-impossibility, absence-impossibility, type-impossibility, token-impossibility) are eight ideal types for a philosophy of impossibility.

keywords

Praxical impossibility, normative impossibility, constitutive rule, type/token

1. Eight Forms of Impossibility.

We shall explore the phenomenology of impossibility [in German: *Unmöglichkeit*; in French: *impossibilité*; in Italian: *impossibilità*] by applying the Platonic method called *dihaíresis* (in English: *division*). With this method we will be able to find or discover *four* distinct *dichotomies* which allow us to distinguish *eight* different *forms* of impossibility. These *eight forms of impossibility* are eight *ideal types*, eight *eidotypes* [in German: *Eidotypen*; in Italian: *eidótipi*] for a philosophy of impossibility.

2. Four Dichotomies for a Philosophy of Impossibility

2.1. First Dichotomy: Praxical Impossibility vs. Non-Praxical Impossibility

2.1.1. There is a kind of impossibility that doesn't concern *praxis*, *action*, a kind of impossibility which is not a *praxical* impossibility; in other words, there is a *non-praxical* impossibility.

An example of *non-praxical* impossibility [**Example 1.**] occurs in the philosopher Edmund Husserl [Proßnitz, 1859 – Freiburg im Breisgau, 1938] (Husserl 1900-1901, § 10, 255; English translation, 18):

Eine Farbe schließt eine andere aus, nämlich an demselben Flächenstück, das sie beide ganz überdecken sollen, aber es beide eben nicht können.

A colour excludes another colour, but only if both aim to cover an identical piece of surface, and both cannot do so completely (Husserl 1900-1901, § 10, 255; English translation, 18).

2.1.2. The main subject of our paper, however, is a kind of impossibility that concerns *praxis*: *praxical* impossibility.

This *praxical* impossibility is exemplified by the following nine sentences:

[**Example 2.**] _____ impossibility in a chess game of moving right off the chessboard¹;

[**Example 3.**] _____ impossibility of castling if the king is under check;

1 “Indeed this would not count as a 'move'” (Black 1958, 72).

- [**Example 4.**] impossibility to ordain a woman priest in the Roman Catholic Church;
- [**Example 5.**] impossibility for someone to forgive himself²;
- [**Example 6.**] impossibility of promising feelings³;
- [**Example 7.**] impossibility of castling in draughts/checkers⁴;
- [**Example 8.**] impossibility of electing the judges of the Constitutional Court according to the Polish Constitution of 1952⁵;
- [**Example 9.**] impossibility of revoking a deputy of the Polish Parliament according to the Polish Constitution of 1952⁶.

Thus we may draw a first dichotomy [*Dichotomy 1.*]:

[DICHOTOMY 1.]

praxical impossibility (impossibility that concerns action)

vs.

non-praxical impossibility (impossibility that does not concern action).

Second dichotomy: nomophoric impossibility vs. non-nomophoric impossibility.

2.2. Second Dichotomy: Nomophoric Impossibility vs. Non-Nomophoric Impossibility

2.2.1. To introduce the second dichotomy let's compare the following list of four examples.

- [**Example 3.**] impossibility of castling if the king is under check;
- [**Example 4.**] impossibility to ordain a woman priest in the Roman Catholic Church;
- [**Example 5.**] impossibility for someone to forgive himself;
- [**Example 6.**] impossibility of promising feelings.

² See (Reinach 1913).

³ "Was man versprechen kann. Man kann Handlungen versprechen, aber keine Empfindungen: denn diese sind unwillkürlich" (Nietzsche 1878-1879, § 58).

⁴ See (Wittgenstein 1967, § 134, 315).

⁵ See (Ziemiński 1966b).

⁶ See (Ziemiński 1968).

What is the difference between these two pairs of examples?

2.2.2. In the first pair of examples ([**Example 3.**], [**Example 4.**]), the impossibility is a matter of *rules* (in particular, the impossibility is due to the *constitutive rules* of chess and, respectively, to the rules of Canon Law), whereas in the second pair of examples ([**Example 5.**], [**Example 6.**]), the impossibility is *not* a matter of rules at all.

We shall call the *rule-related* impossibility “*nomophoric impossibility*”. Thus we may draw a second dichotomy [*Dichotomy 2.*]:

[DICHOTOMY 2.]

nomophoric impossibility (or rule-related impossibility)

vs.

non-nomophoric impossibility (or rule-unrelated impossibility).

2.2.3. The relationship between the concept of *rule* and the concept of *impossibility* is new. But the relationship between the concept of *rule* and the concept of *possibility* is not new at all.

2.2.3.1. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein [Wien, 1889 – Cambridge, 1951] (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 86), explicitly asserts that what the king of chess can do is laid down by the rules.

What idea do we have of the king of chess, and what is its relation to the rules of chess? [...] What the king can do is laid down by the rules. Do these rules follow from the idea? [...] No. The rules are not something contained in the idea and got by analyzing it. They constitute it. [...] The rules constitute the “freedom” of the pieces (Wittgenstein 1979, 86).

2.2.3.2. More recently, the thesis according to which rules are condition of the *possibility* of an action has been explicitly affirmed by Amedeo Giovanni Conte [*Pavia, 1934] and by John R. Searle [*Denver, 1932].

2.2.3.2.1. First document: Amedeo Giovanni Conte, *Saggio sulla completezza degli ordinamenti giuridici*:

⁷ Amedeo Giovanni Conte (Conte 2001, 72) has distinguished three forms of nomophoric impossibility:

- (i) deontic impossibility;
- (ii) anankastic impossibility;
- (iii) eidetic impossibility.

In che senso affermo che un ordinamento normativo è trascendentale? In due sensi può affermarsi che un ordinamento normativo è trascendentale: e nel senso che esso è condizione di pensabilità dell'azione, e nel senso che esso è condizione di possibilità dell'azione stessa (Conte 1962, 196).

In which sense do I affirm that a normative order is transcendental? We can say that a normative order is transcendental in two senses: a normative order is condition of conceivability of an action, and a normative order is condition of possibility of the action itself.

2.2.3.2.2. Second document: John R. Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*:

I want to clarify a distinction between two different sort of rules, which I shall call regulative and constitutive rules. [...]

We might say that regulative rules regulate antecedently or independently existing forms of behavior; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate interpersonal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but they create the very possibility of playing such games. [...]

Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules. Constitutive rules constitute (and regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on rules (Searle 1969, 33-34).

2.2.3.2.3. The correlation between the concept of *constitutive rule* and the concept of *possibility* occurs again in (Searle 1995):

Some rules regulate antecedently existing activities. For example, the rule “drive on the right hand side of the road” regulate driving; but driving can exist prior to the existence of that rule. However, some rules do not mere regulate. They also create the very possibility of certain activities. Thus, the rules of chess do not regulate an antecedently existing activity. [...] Rather, the rules of chess create the very possibility of playing chess (Searle 1995, 27 and 43-48, Searle 2010, 97-98).

2.3. Third Dichotomy: Presence-Impossibility vs. Absence-Impossibility

2.3.1. Let us consider now the two following examples of *nomophoric* (or *rule-related*) impossibility:

[Example 3.] impossibility of castling if the king is under check;
[Example 7.] impossibility of castling in draughts/checkers⁸.
 These look similar (they are both *nomophoric* or *rule-related* impossibilities).
 They are apparently homogeneous. But are they really?

2.3.2. In the first example (**[Example 3.]** *impossibility of castling if the king is under check*), the impossibility derives from the *presence* of a certain rule: in particular, it derives from the presence of a *deontic* eidetic-constitutive rule that forbids castling if the king is under check.

In the second example (**[Example 7.]** *impossibility of castling in draughts/checkers*), the impossibility derives from the *absence* of a certain rule: in particular, it derives from the absence of an *ontic* eidetic-constitutive rule, that constitutes the *praxeme* “castling” in draughts⁹.

We shall call the impossibility deriving from the *presence* of certain rules: “*presence-impossibility*”.

We shall call the impossibility deriving from the *absence* of certain rules: “*absence-impossibility*”.

Thus we may draw a third dichotomy [*Dichotomy 3.*]:

[DICHOTOMY 3.]

presence-impossibility (due to the presence of certain rules)

vs.

absence-impossibility (due to the absence of certain rules).¹⁰

2.3.3. The distinction between *presence-impossibility* and *absence-impossibility* might very well explain a thesis formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein [Wien, 1889 – Cambridge, 1951] (Wittgenstein 1967, § 134, 315):

Statt: ‘kann nicht’, sage:

⁸ See (Wittgenstein 1967, § 134, 315).

⁹ On the concept of eidetic-constitutive rule see (Conte 1985).

¹⁰ Notice that example 7 (**[Example 7.]** *impossibility of castling in draughts/checkers*) is a counterexample to the so-called Hume’s Guillotine according to which a norm(ative statement) cannot be derived from a fact(ual statement). In example [7], a *Cannot* (a normative cannot) is derived from an *Is*.

‘Es gibt in diesem Spiel nicht’.

Statt: ‘Man kann nicht im Damenspiel nicht rochieren’, sage:

‘Es gibt im Damenspiel kein rochieren.’

Instead of ‘you cannot’, say:

‘It doesn’t exist in this game’.

Instead of: ‘you cannot castle in draughts’, say:

‘In draughts castling doesn’t exist’ (Wittgenstein 1967, § 134, 315)¹¹.

2.4. Fourth Dichotomy: Token-Impossibility vs. Type-Impossibility

2.4.1. Example 7. ([**Example 7.**] *impossibility of castling in draughts*) recalls another famous example of *absence-impossibility* discussed by legal philosophers: the impossibility of electing judges of the Constitutional Court (according to the Polish Constitution of 1952), because of the lack of norms, within the Polish Constitution itself, concerning the practice of electing the judges of that particular Court.

The problem is described by the Polish legal philosopher Zygmunt Ziemiński [1920-1996] (Ziemiński 1966).

According to Ziemiński, there is a gap (a gap of construction, a construction-gap) in the Polish Constitution of 1952, because while the Constitution establishes that the judges of the Constitutional Court may be elected, it does not lay down the conditions or procedures according to which the judges are to be elected.

Therefore, in the Polish legal order (of 1952), the election of the judges of the Constitutional Court is an impossible act because of the lack of norms concerning the mode of election.

Here is Ziemiński’s relevant passage:

Selon l’article 50 de la Constitution de la République Populaire de Pologne du 22.VII. 1952 les juges sont éligibles: la loi ordinaire déterminera le mode d’élection. Mais [...] aucune loi concernant l’élection des juges n’a été instituée depuis 1952, et les juges sont nommés par le Conseil d’État en application de lois instituées antérieurement. La Constitution a ordonné l’élection des juges, mais faute de règles d’organisation construisant cet acte, l’élection est impossible. Elle ne peut pas être organisée d’une façon quelconque, parce qu’elle doit être organisée selon les dispositions d’une loi, et cette loi n’existe pas. C’est un exemple typique d’une lacune de construction (Ziemiński 1966b, 41-42).

¹¹ According to Conte’s interpretation (Conte 2001): “the phrase ‘castling in draughts/checkers’ is incompatible both with the semantics of the term ‘castling’ (that is determined by eidetic-constitutive rules), and with the semantics of the term ‘draughts/checkers’ (that is determined by eidetic-constitutive rules)”.

Under chapter 50 of the Constitution of the Popular Republic of Poland of 22.VII. 1952, the judges are elected. Ordinary law will establish the modes of their election. However, [...] no law regarding the election of the judges has been passed since 1952; consequently, the judges are appointed by the State Council following the laws established in the past. The Polish Constitution has decreed the election of the judges; yet, because of the lack of norms regulating that act, the election is impossible. It cannot be organised differently, for it has to be organised according to the law, a law which does not exist. This is an example of a construction gap.

Ziemiński distinguishes two kinds of gaps [in German: *Lücken*; in French: *lacunes*, in Italian: *lacune*] in a legal order:

- (i) the gap due to the lack of a *norm of conduct* and a second type of gap;
- (ii) the gap due to the lack of a *norm of construction* [in Polish: *norma konstrukcyjna*] (as in the case of the election of the judges of the Polish Constitutional Court).

[...] dans le domaine des règles d'organisation, le manque d'une certaine règle construisant un acte de caractère conventionnel a des conséquences tout à fait différentes de celles du manque d'une simple règle de conduite. À défaut d'une règle de conduite, un acte est indifférent au point de vue de la loi. À défaut d'une règle d'organisation, un acte de caractère conventionnel est impossible (Ziemiński 1966b, 42)¹².

Within the domain of organisation rules, the lack of a certain construction rule for a conventional act produces an entirely different effect from that produced by the lack of a simple conduct rule. In the absence of a conduct rule, an act is legally indifferent. In the absence of an organisation rule, a conventional act is impossible.

There is a parallelism between **Example 7.** (*impossibility of casting in draughts/checkers*), and **Example 8.** (*impossibility of electing the judges of the Constitutional Court according to the Polish Constitution of 1952*).

But there is a crucial difference between these two examples of nomophoric *absence-impossibility*.

¹² According to Ziemiński (Ziemiński 1968, 132-133) there is another example of impossibility due to the *absence of a norm of construction*: [Example 9.] *impossibility of revoking a deputy of the Polish Parliament after the promulgation of the Constitution of 1952*. Ziemiński says: "Selon l'article 2 al. 2 de la Constitution de la République Populaire de Pologne du 22.VII.1952, les députés à la Diète (*Seym*) sont révocables par les électeurs qui les avaient élus au suffrage universel. Mais aucune loi concernant la révocation de députés à la Diète n'a été instituée depuis 1952, donc la révocation d'une député est, par conséquent, *impossible*." On *absence-impossibility* see (Passerini Glazel 2003, 202-207).

2.4.2. Let's look more closely at the two examples (Example 7. and Example 8.).

[Example 7.] impossibility of castling in draughts/checkers (Ludwig Wittgenstein);

[Example 8.] impossibility of electing the judges of the Constitutional Court according to the Polish Constitution of 1952.

In both examples, the impossibility is a matter of (absence of) *constitutive rules*. But there is a difference.

To understand the crucial difference between these two examples, we may apply the fundamental distinction made by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce [Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1839 - Milford, 1914]: the distinction between *type* and *token*.¹³

2.4.2.1. In the game of draughts/checkers, castling is not possible because there is not the type “castling”.

We shall call this first form of *absence*-impossibility “*type*-impossibility”.

2.4.2.2. On the other hand, in the Polish constitutional game, there is, according to the Constitution of 1952, the type “electing the judges of the Constitutional Court”. But, in the Constitution of 1952, there are no rules (hypothetical-constitutive rules) that make possible to instantiate a *token* of the type “electing the judges of the Constitutional Court”.

Therefore, we shall call this second form of *absence*-impossibility “*token*-impossibility”.

Thus we may draw a fourth, and last, dichotomy [Dichotomy 4.]:

[DICHOTOMY 4.]

***token*-impossibility**

vs.

***type*-impossibility¹⁴.**

The example [8]:

[Example 8.] *impossibility of electing the judges of the Constitutional Court according to the Polish Constitution of 1952*

is an example of *token*-impossibility.

¹³ See (Passerini Glazel 2003).

¹⁴ The paradigm “*token*-impossibility” and “*type*-impossibility” has been introduced by Paolo Di Lucia, *Token-Impossibility vs. Type-Impossibility* (paper delivered at the Bocconi University of Milan, 8th March, 2011).

The example [7]:

[Example 7.] *impossibility of castling in draughts/checkers*
is an example of *type-impossibility*.

3. Overview (Four Dichotomies, Eight Eidotypes, Nine Examples)

3.1. List of Our Four Dichotomies [Dichotomy 1.-Dichotomy 4.]

- [Dichotomy 1.]** *Praxical impossibility vs. non-praxical impossibility*
[Dichotomy 1.] *Nomophoric impossibility vs. non-nomophoric impossibility*
[Dichotomy 3.] *Presence-impossibility vs. absence-impossibility*
[Dichotomy 4.] *Token-impossibility vs. type-impossibility.*

3.2. List of Our Eight Eidotypes [Eidotype 1.-Eidotype 8.]

Through the four dichotomies (*first dichotomy: praxical impossibility vs. non-praxical impossibility; second dichotomy: nomophoric impossibility vs. non-nomophoric impossibility; third dichotomy: presence-impossibility vs. absence-impossibility; fourth dichotomy: token-impossibility vs. type-impossibility*) we have determined *eight forms of impossibility*.

These eight forms of impossibility are eight ideal types, eight eidotypes [in German: *Idealtypen*, or *Eidotypen*; in Italian: *tipi ideali*, or *eidótipi*] for a philosophy of impossibility:

- [Eidotype 1.]** *Praxical impossibility*
[Eidotype 2.] *Non-praxical impossibility*
[Eidotype 3.] *Nomophoric impossibility*
[Eidotype 4.] *Non-nomophoric impossibility*
[Eidotype 5.] *Presence-impossibility*
[Eidotype 6.] *Absence-impossibility*
[Eidotype 7.] *Token-impossibility*
[Eidotype 8.] *Type-impossibility*

3.3. List of Our Nine Examples [Example 1.-Example 9.]

- [Example 1.]** *impossibility for two colours to cover an identical piece of surface completely;*
[Example 2.] *impossibility in a chess game of moving right off the chessboard;*
[Example 3.] *impossibility of castling if the king is under check;*
[Example 4.] *impossibility to ordain a woman priest in the Roman Catholic Church;*
[Example 5.] *impossibility for someone to forgive himself;*

- [Example 6.]** impossibility of promising feelings;
- [Example 7.]** impossibility of castling in draughts;
- [Example 8.]** impossibility of electing the judges of the Constitutional Court according to the Polish Constitution of 1952;
- [Example 9.]** impossibility of revoking a deputy of the Polish Parliament according to the Polish Constitution of 1952.

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