

The original version of these remarks was presented at the annual Latke-Hamantaschen debate at the University of Chicago on November 20, 1979. I have since revised it slightly.

The Logic of Latke¹

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My remarks are going to be in three parts. First, I shall prove, once and for all, that latke are better than hamantaschen. I trust that, as a result, there will be no debate next year. Second, I shall prove that latke exist necessarily, i.e., in all possible worlds. Finally, with what time remains, I shall discuss God.

Part I

I have two proofs for the superiority of latke. Here is the first. Even the greatest of hamantaschen lovers will agree, I assume, that:

- (1) Eternal happiness is better than hamantaschen.

Indeed, they should concede that:

- (2) Nothing is better than eternal happiness.

But surely:

- (3) Latke are better than nothing.

Of course, it follows immediately from (1), (2), and (3) that latke are better than hamantaschen. QED

Now I can imagine that some of you may balk at premise (3). Notice, however, that the argument goes through even if the premise is denied. For suppose it is not the case that latke are better than nothing. Then nothing is as good as or better than latke. In particular, hamantaschen are not. So, again, latke are better than hamantaschen. QED

My second argument is better than the first because it makes no appeal to prior evaluative judgments. In fact, it is an argument *a priori* that latke are

¹In preparing the remarks, I have freely made use of Raymond Smullyan's extensive research on the subject.

better than hamantaschen. A version of the argument was first presented by the ancient rabbis of Crete.

Consider the following proposition.

P: If P is true or has no truth value, then latke are better than hamantaschen.

There are three possibilities for us to consider: P is true or P is false or P has no truth value. I claim, first, that P cannot be false. (Since it is a conditional proposition, it can only be false if its antecedent clause is true, while its consequent clause is false. But its antecedent clause cannot be true if P is false. Indeed, that clause just asserts that one of the two other possibilities obtains.)

Next I claim that P cannot fail to have a truth value. For if it does not have a truth value, then the antecedent clause of P is true. And the consequent clause certainly has a truth value. (It involves no worrisome self reference.) But if both clauses of a conditional proposition have truth values, then the proposition itself must have one.

So we may conclude that P is true. But if it is true, then its antecedent clause is true. And so, by *modus ponens*, it follows that latke are better than hamantaschen. QED

I trust you are convinced

Part II

Let us now consider Anselm's famous ontological argument for the existence of latke.

To prove the existence of an entity of a particular sort, it suffices to prove the existence of one having some particular attribute. So, for example, to prove the existence of a prune, it suffices to prove the existence of one that is tasty. Similarly, to prove the existence of a latke, it will suffice to prove the existence of an existent latke. Now either there exists an existent latke or there does not. The second alternative is incoherent. An existent latke can no more fail to exist than a tasty prune can fail to be tasty. So there must exist an existent latke. QED

Part III

Finally, I would like to recall the famous *latke heresy* that was widely discussed in scholastic philosophy. It is an argument that there *cannot* exist an omnipotent being and, hence, that God does not exist. The heresy was dealt with severely in the 14th century.

Consider the “latke problem”: Can an omnipotent being cook more latke than it can eat?

Notice that it calls into question the very coherence of the notion of an omnipotent being. If the being *cannot* cook that many latke, then there is a task too difficult for it to perform. So it is not omnipotent. On the other hand, if it *can* cook more latke than it can eat, then there is a different task too difficult for it to perform – namely, eating all those latke. So, again, it is not omnipotent.

I personally find the latke problem deeply troubling.

Thank you.