

# The Covered Father

Post by “Bryan” of March 2, 2024 at 9:43 PM

(Epicurus - On Nature - Book 28, P.Herc. 1479 (1417), fr. 13, col. 9 sup., David Sedley trans.)

"...these will be confuted, if they are false and whether the cause of their error is irrational or rational, either because (1) some other than theoretical opinion expressed on the basis of them is untrue, or, (2) if they become indirectly linked up with action, wherever they lead to disadvantageous action. If none of these consequences ensues, it will be correct to conclude that opinions are not false. For this reason, everybody can easily laugh when somebody gets another to assert that it is impossible to know and not know the same thing, and then cites the riddle of the Covered Father, and others of the same kind."

What is the “Covered Father Riddle”? Also known as “the Megarian Riddle”?

It's often used as an example of a paradoxical situation in philosophical discussions about knowledge and truth. The riddle attempts to force one to admit they both know and do not know something.

This riddle presents a scenario where a father is covered with a blanket and his son is asked to admit that he does not know who is beneath the covering.

The paradox arises because if the son says he doesn't know who is under the blanket, it implies that he doesn't know who his father is, which is strange because he should know his own father.

Therefore it is an apparent paradox that the son simultaneously “**does not** know who” is under the blanket and “**does** know who” is under the blanket. Really the error is in the language, as the son in fact simultaneously “**does not know who is under the blanket**” and also knows “**who**” is under the blanket.

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The riddle, known as the "Riddle of the Covered Father," may come from Diodorus Cronus (Διόδωρος Κρόνος; died c. 284 BC).

Zeno of Citium was one of his pupils, and Epicurus was probably, in part, responding to him in this book.

Diodorus was also known for these other silly and better known "paradoxes":

The Horns paradox (ὁ Κερατίνης): What you have not lost, you have. But you have not lost horns. Therefore, you have horns.

The Sorites paradox (ὁ Ὠρεΐτης): If you have a heap of sand and you remove one grain, it's still a heap. Continuing to remove grains one by one, at what point does it cease to be a heap?

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### Post by “Bryan” of March 2, 2024 at 9:51 PM

I will also repeat this point: (Demetrius Laco, On Textual and Exegetical Problems, col. 67, McOsker translation) [Man is said to be "by nature" a procurer of fo]od, since he does so by unperverted instinct; to be "by nature" susceptible to pain, since he is so by compulsion; "by nature" to pursue virtue, since he does so to his advantage; and we say that the first utterances of names were "by nature"...

So here we have acting "**by nature**" means acting:

[1] by our unperverted instinct (eg, pursuing food and speaking)

[2] by our compulsion (eg, avoiding pain)

and also,

[3] **for our advantage!!!** (ie, pursuing virtues, eg, property management)

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### Post by “Don” of March 3, 2024 at 12:06 AM

These kinds of "paradoxes" seem so disingenuous to me. They seem to just play on the ambiguity of language to \*appear\* to make some kind of deep point. The Covered Father seems to me to simply be using the different meanings of the word "know." Of course, IF the person under the cloth was uncovered, the son would know the father. But how is someone supposed to know a hidden or secret fact before it is "uncovered." Okay, so maybe we (or the ancient Greeks) should have different words for "know"... and we do... and so did they! We have

appreciate

experience

learn

notice  
perceive  
realize  
recognize  
see

as synonyms with other shades of meaning to "know." When I read The Covered Father in Book 28, I found it silly, and it appears to me the Epicurus had the same reaction: "everybody can easily laugh when somebody gets another to assert that it is impossible to know and not know the same thing, and then cites the riddle of the Covered Father,".

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### **Post by “Cassius” of March 3, 2024 at 7:29 AM**

#### [Quote from Don](#)

These kinds of "paradoxes" seem so disingenuous to me.

Presumably because they *are* disingenuous - so what are we to make of that?

One thing I would assert is important to make of them is not just that they are silly, but that they show that there are people who will definitely use philosophy for manipulation just like priests use religion!

So it definitely pays to be discreet on which philosophers you choose to ally with. 😊

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of March 3, 2024 at 8:20 AM**

#### [Quote from Bryan](#)

This riddle presents a scenario where a father is covered with a blanket and his son is asked to admit that he does not know who is beneath the covering.

This occurred to me when pondering the paradox (and this may go off in a completely different direction and not the intended use of this paradox) but it could be of use when someone insists that they know everything (a common idea in immature young people is that they think that they are so smart that they know everything), and it can show that there are

some things which we can know and some which we can't know (the mature adult easily understands this) and the point being that there are many things which we can't know (the future, other peoples thoughts or motives, and even the results of our actions)

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**Post by "Cassius" of March 3, 2024 at 8:42 AM**

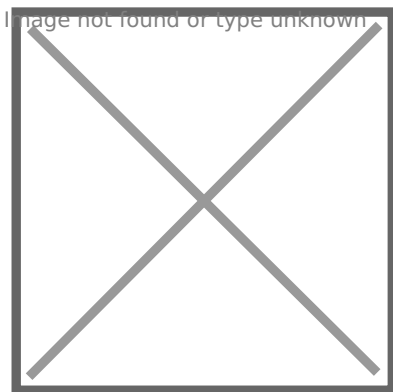
Another separate comment: Of Course, if the purpose of the "covered father" exercise is to point out that words like "know" can have multiple meanings, and that it is important to know which meaning you are referring to in a particular circumstance, then that is very beneficial.

So you'd have to decide whether the purpose of the philosopher is (1) skepticism, or (2) a stronger view of knowledge that takes into account perspective.

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**Post by "Don" of March 3, 2024 at 9:40 AM**

FYI



[Epicurus, On nature, book 28](#)

Epicurus, On nature, book 28

[www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu)

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**Post by "Don" of March 3, 2024 at 10:35 AM**

## Quote

The riddle is better suited to oral than to written exposition,' and indeed Epicurus' description of it in our passage implies that he has recently witnessed its use in debate, perhaps in a direct confrontation between Epicureans and Megarians. Such a clash must almost certainly have occurred in Athens. ... The correct Epicurean retort to the sophist must be to say, 'You have asked me a question about actions, and a purely verbal argument can never answer it satisfactorily. The only proof- that I will accept is an empirical one (επιλογισμος). Only when I see how one can lead one's life well according to the principle that it is possible to know and not know the same thing will I believe that the principle is true '.

... Epicurus then sums up the error of the sophist's victim as failure to work out by (επιλογισμος) (ουχ επελελογιστο , 10 sup.) that in normal circumstances it *is* impossible to know and not know the same thing, and that the sophist has merely played upon an exception to this rule.

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## Post by “Bryan” of March 6, 2024 at 10:29 PM

A more significant apparent paradox (this is my re-wording of a Sedley point): The establishment of the canon as (1) the senses, (2) the feelings, and (3) the anticipations is an empirical process - because belief in the truthfulness of sense-impressions proves in practice more useful than distrust of them. But only when we have *empirically* learned that they are reliable do we have a firm basis for making further *empirical* discoveries. Hence arises the *apparent* paradox that the criterion is both the product and the starting point of empirical reasoning.