



**Sophism:** the proposition *a chimera is a chimera* is both true and false. A chimera is a being that has the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent; more precisely, a chimera is a being with the essence of all three at once, of a lion, goat and serpent. It is therefore an impossible being by natural law. Now, on the one hand, *a chimera is a chimera* is false. To see why, consider *a chimera is dancing*. This proposition is false, and its negation *a chimera is not dancing* is true, not because a chimera is really doing something else, like sleeping, but because there are no chimeras and hence none can dance, sleep or

do anything else. That is, in order for a predicate to be true of a subject, there must be a subject there in the first place. Moreover, a creature with the essence of a chimera is impossible by the laws of nature. Hence, not only does *chimera* not stand for anything, it is impossible for it to do so. Therefore, any proposition is false that has *chimera* as its subject term. Thus *a chimera is a chimera* is false. On the other hand, it seems we can imagine chimeras and think about them. Hence the propositions *a chimera is imaginable* and *a chimera is thinkable* are true even though there are no chimeras. To this it may be objected that despite what people say they can think about or imagine, these propositions must be false because there is nothing for their subject term to stand for. The reply is that there something that the term stands for, namely the complex concept fashioned by the imagination by combining the concepts lion, goat, and serpent. Similarly, the proposition *a chimera is a chimera* may be understood in such a way that its subject term stands for something, namely the concept of a chimera, thus making the proposition a true instance of the law of self-identity. To this it may be objected that it is not possible to form a concept of an impossible object. For example, people can mouth the words *square circle*, which is logically impossible, but they cannot really think or imagine a square circle. Similarly, it can seem that we are thinking of a creature that is impossible according to the laws of nature, but that is an illusion. But some may insist that they can imagine a chimera – like those who believe they can think of or imagine, and are not mouthing empty words when the talk about “warp speed,” ghosts, angles, or god.

John Martin, July 2010

Cf. John Buridan (1295/1305-1358/61), Fourth and Fifth Sophismata, *Summulae de Dialectica*.