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Paradox

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PARADOX

'Paradox' is derived from two words that literally mean *against opinion*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989; vol. 11, p. 185) identifies several meanings for 'paradox'. It may refer to: (1) claims contrary to common opinion, often suggesting that the statement is incredible, absurd or fantastic, but sometimes with a favourable connotation as a correction for ignorance; (2) a statement that seems self-contradictory, but which is actually well founded; (3) a statement that involves a genuine *contradiction; (4) in *logic, a conclusion based on acceptable premises and sound *reasoning that nonetheless is self-contradictory. These inconsistent uses of the term pose practical problems for communication, as the intended meaning may not always be apparent.

For philosophers, paradox has a special place in the context of logic and the basic principles of thinking they have held for centuries. Three principles of thinking are commonly given: the principle of identity: if anything is A it is A; the principle of non-contradiction: nothing can be both A and not A; and the principle of excluded middle: anything must be either A or not A.

Although discussion of paradoxes can be traced back to Greek philosophy, serious concern about paradoxes emerged among philosophers only at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the period from 1897 to 1906, several important paradoxes were discovered. With the report of *Russell's paradox in 1902, it immediately became apparent that Russell's paradox posed significant challenges to mathematics and logic as then conceived.

Two major classes of paradoxes are: (1) set and property paradoxes, including logical paradoxes dealing with sets and cardinal numbers, such as Russell's paradox, and semantic paradoxes, such as the Liar paradox; and (2) epistemic paradoxes, including the Lottery, Preface, and Surprise Examination paradoxes.

The Liar paradox, attributed to Eubulides, asks whether the claim 'I am lying' is a true statement. The problem with this statement is that it is false if it is true, and true if it is false. It has been proposed that it is absurd, that it addresses a non-existent event, that it is self-destructive and self-defeating, and that it cannot be considered a *truth claim at all. Alternatively, we may consider the claim a

meta-claim; that is, it involves statements at another level of language or analysis, rather than being a simple truth claim. Similar considerations apply to the other paradoxes.

Russell's paradox revolves around the question whether a set of all sets contains itself as a member. The Preface paradox reflects the common practice of text prefaces to state that any errors in the text are the responsibility of the author despite the author's belief that all errors were corrected in the editing process. Thus the book is (presumably) error-free but (presumably) contains errors due the author's shortcomings.

For *Kierkegaard, God, as 'Wholly Other', is a paradox. By this he means that God is beyond human reason and thus cannot be known by rational means.

*Kant proposed that the categories of reasoning cannot be applied to reality. For example, the paradox of First Cause exposes this antinomy. If we assume that everything must have a cause, then there must be a first cause. But the first cause, too, must have a cause. As a solution to this paradox, Christians have proposed that God is self-existent.

Similar to paradox, *dialectic* is a central feature of *Buddhism and *Hinduism. For these religious world-views, the quest for knowledge involves an ongoing process of thesis and antithesis from which emerges a synthesis of the competing views. In response to synthesis, a new antithesis emerges, and the dialectic process continues until particularity is superseded by the universal oneness of experiencing the unity of all that exists.

Closely related to the Buddhist position is the thesis that every argument must have its counter-argument. Every issue has two sides. This leads to the paradox of human reason, the notion that therefore we must *doubt the truth of all positions.

A striking twentieth-century development was that 'paradoxes have repeatedly been turned into theorems' (Craig [ed.], *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, p. 219). According to Craig, the Zermelo-Fraenkel axioms regarding the hierarchical organization of sets have come to be generally accepted by mathematicians as the preferred solution to the logical paradoxes. But no generally accepted solution has yet emerged for the semantic paradoxes.

Another major development that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century

was the development of *paraconsistent logic*. Paraconsistent logic at least partially rejects the principle of non-contradiction. Traditionally, it has been held that rejecting this principle requires accepting that everything is true. But paraconsistent logic contends that one can accept inconsistency without agreeing that everything must be accepted.

Paraconsistent logic allows for situations in which our information is inconsistent but we wish to draw conclusions nonetheless. Examples include court decisions when witnesses disagree, competing scientific theories (such as wave and corpuscular theories of light), and using inconsistent information in computerized databases. The term *dialetheia* is used in referring to such inconsistencies. It has been proposed that Russell's paradox, the Liar paradox and moral dilemmas are examples of *dialetheias*.

In 1998, Graham Priest proposed that paraconsistent logic violates the principle of non-contradiction, much as intuitionist logic violates the law of excluded middle. To address this problem it has been suggested that both the conflicting principles may be true 'in some possible world', or that they can be 'both true and false'. In summary, Priest concludes that the viability of paraconsistent logic presents a significant challenge to consistency as a cornerstone of contemporary philosophy.

Paradox has important practical implications and important implications for Christians. *Science involves several paradoxes – competing theories (above), for example. Another paradox is that of freedom and *determinism – or *causality and choice. Subjective/participant and objective/observer perspectives on the same events are also paradoxical; the actor observes his or her choices, while the observer attends to the events that cause those choices. Commonality and uniqueness form another paradox; each person or event shares both qualities in common with other persons or events and unique attributes. Finally, science uses measurement to discover the properties of events, yet measurement changes whatever we measure.

Christian beliefs involving paradox include (1) the belief that God is one yet God is three persons; (2) tensions between law and grace or *justice and mercy; (3) the view that humans make responsible choices for which God will judge them, yet God knows the end from the beginning; (4) the view that human knowing is fallen and imperfect, yet all stand guilty before

God because they suppress the truth and practise *evil (Rom. 1:20–21). Also, Christians believe that God is utterly holy and cannot abide sin, thus his judgment rightly falls on all persons; yet in his mercy God himself paid the penalty for sin. It has been proposed that the Beatitudes are paradoxical, since Christians commonly profess to believe them yet seldom practise them.

Moreland and Craig describe two ethical paradoxes associated with ethical egoism: the paradox of *hedonism, and the paradox of egoism. Hedonism involves seeking one's own happiness. Yet it has been observed that those who seek happiness commonly fail to find it, while those who pursue other goals, such as justice or social service, often find personal happiness as 'a byproduct of a life well lived and of doing what is right' (*Philosophical Foundations*, p. 427). Similarly, ethical egoism involves looking out for one's own best interests. Moreland and Craig propose that a number of common virtues, such as self-sacrifice, altruism, deep love and genuine friendship, are incompatible with seeking one's own best interests. Serving others, for example, is not compatible with egoism, since it requires putting their interests above one's own. Thus, paradoxically, seeking one's own happiness or best interests ultimately fails as a fully satisfying approach to life.

Paradox also has important implications for the relationship between science and Christian beliefs. Many Christians view scientific and divine causality as paradoxical. In general terms, if we believe that the earth was created and is sustained moment by moment by God's divine power, then we may conclude that all events that happen on the earth are ultimately a result of God's action, and hence have underlying divine causality. At the same time, we can also talk meaningfully about natural (or 'creational?') causes. Thus conception may be understood both as the result of the human acts that bring together egg and sperm, initiating a set of biological processes, and as a consequence of God's divine activity in creating and sustaining these processes.

This paradoxical view has important practical implications. For example, a Christian faced with cancer, diabetes or a broken bone may both pray for God's healing and seek medical or surgical intervention. When healing occurs, the Christian may respond with gratefulness both to God and to his or her physician

for their respective roles in the process. An interesting anomaly, however, is that many Christians remain reluctant to seek medical or scientific help for schizophrenia or other mental disorders.

A special form of paradox sometimes accounts for the fact that science and Christian beliefs appear to be contradictory. Several possibilities must be considered when theological conclusions and scientific conclusions appear to be in conflict. First, our scientific conclusions may be wrong. Secondly, our theological conclusions may be wrong. Thirdly, and theoretically more troubling, both scientific and religious conclusions could be wrong (though we may never know it in this life). Finally, it is possible that neither the scientific principle nor the theological principle is wrong, although they appear to be in conflict. This could occur (1) in instances where their perspectives are different, (2) where different aspects of the same phenomenon are under consideration by the two disciplines, or (3) where each addresses one side of a paradox. For example, *theology often emphasizes the subject perspective and choice while science normally emphasizes the observer perspective and causality. Similarly, enduring earthly hardship for spiritual rewards, especially heavenly ones, does not seem to make sense psychologically to some, but the capacity for delayed gratification generally is considered a hallmark of psychosocial maturity.

In summary, the term 'paradox' is troublesome because it is used inconsistently. Paradoxes have become important in logic, mathematics, philosophy and science since the twentieth century. Paraconsistent logic has been proposed as one solution to some of the practical challenges, but has in turn posed a challenge to the fundamental principles of knowing commonly held in modern philosophy. Finally, paradox plays an important role in Christian beliefs and in the relationship between Christian beliefs and modern science.

Bibliography

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