Tanner Bingaman

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Contradictions as Non-Rational Pragmatisms

In Gilbert Ryle’s essay, “The Theory of Meaning” he proposes a Wittgensteinian pragmatism wherein the worth of a statement is not the meaning (think canonical definition) it possesses but rather the use thereof. This is what is meant by, “the use of an expression, or the concept it expresses, is the role it is employed to perform, not any thing or person or event for which it might be supposed to stand” (Caton, pg. 144). Ryle proposed this as a theory of meaning (there is potentially an issue with calling a theory of meaning so when it disregards meaning as a useful concept, but this nicety can rest for now) derived from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus,* but Wittgenstein makes this view more apparent in later work such as *Remarks on Colour.* It is the expression of this same sentiment Wittgenstein is suggesting with statements such as, “here too it is not a matter of the *words* one uses or of what one is thinking when using them, but rather of the difference they make at various points in life” (Wittgenstein, 317. pg. 58e-59e).

Now, what of when someone utters a statement of contradiction? For example, the sentiment derived from (although Socrates never utters this explicitly) what is referred to as the Socratic Paradox which states, “The only thing I can be sure of is that I’ll never be sure of anything,” in various forms (Apology, 21d-e). This is surely a logical contradiction, for, in simpler form, this sentiment states, “I know that *p* and it is not the case that I know that *p*,” or simply, “*p* & ~*p*.” What of the case where the person uttering said falsity insists it is the correct expression? Perhaps, they claim, it is not *only* the proper expression, but also the one used out of linguistic necessity: it is the *only* way in which to convey the proper meaning to the listener. Further, they claim, no semantical breakdown or denotative interpretation of the contradiction will suffice other than the contradiction itself: the contradiction might very well be the closest thing to express knowledge one can obtain.

Let us suppose this is the case: linguistic contradictions are uttered out of necessity. This can provide insight into the seemingly non-rational teachings (here I wish to make use of non-rational in the Ottoian sense, where the non-rational is maintained as a meaningful alternative to rationality, rather than irrational) of Buddhism, for example, the necessity of mutual arising from being and non-being, Buddha’s proposed ‘middle way’, and the moral mandate to hold no extreme ideologies (Otto, pp. xxi-4). Buddhist practitioners are entirely comfortable with the notion that there are times when contradictions, as pragmatic and pedagogical tools, are the necessary ways to express the ‘meaning’ of what one says. This is the working behind what Edelglass means when he states, “the Buddhist teachings are a *means* of helping people,” in an effort to explain, for example, a Buddhist teaching similar to the Socratic Paradox to hold no extreme ideologies. Edelglass explains this teaching further, “according to Buddhist teachings, knowledge itself can be an obstacle to true understanding, and views can be a barrier to insight” (Edelglass, pp. 441-442). Perhaps, when examined through this lens, contradictions arise not out of nonsense and die useless but rather out of necessity.

Up to this point, it seems as if Western philosophy has fallen short of Eastern teachings: this may not be the case entirely, but, at a minimum, Western thought in general has epitomized the scientific, mechanical, and masculinized processes of logic over all else. Perhaps we are dreadfully fearful of allowing room for uncertainty, that which patriarchy calls the conquerable natural world, the feminine, the spiritual, and the non-rational. As a case in point, let us consider the simple development of a set wherein all members of the set must satisfy the parameters of attributes ‘x & ~x’. Of course, any good logician knows this set to contain no members, and the logical positivist will know this set to be utterly false and fruitless (Irvine). Now consider the Buddhist insight: there is a self, and there is not a self (we can define these parameters as ‘s & ~s’ for consistency). The practicing Buddhist will know this set to contain all of the cosmos and, furthermore, will know this koan to be a single step in a long journey of meaningful contradictions. At risk of sounding cliché, the difference in Western and Eastern thought might simply be a, “two sides of the same coin,” case. Perhaps, though, one side perpetuates suffering, while the other allows for a playful toiling with the consensual drama at hand: to find the cosmos at large, from the awe-filled to the mundane, as a fundamentally relational experience: given all at once, and not at all.

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