

***"Contradictions ? No ... The Divine Paradox":  
Apparent contradiction as a rhetorical device*** <sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

*In addition to discussing several characteristics of contradictions, this essay deals with the distinction and the confusion of contradictions and paradoxes. Examples of "true" vs. "apparent" contradictions from a wide variety of sources illustrate the discussion.*

The first-century Greek slave-philosopher, Epictetus, threatened to cut off his master's nose when the latter refused to recognize the principle of non-contradiction (in Skrade, 1974). While that Stoic's violent reaction may seem out of proportion, the frequent use of contradictory statements may land one in deep trouble even today (see Bleuler's diagnostic comments on schizophrenia in Kline, 1952). According to Ennis (1962), the absence of contradiction serves as a major aspect of the highly desirable skill of critical thinking. In communication, contradictions provide a source of serious confusion (see Moore, 1995/96; 1999). And yet contradictions abound in human existence. Several authorities even regard contradiction as both essential to, and inherent in, life. Thus Mao (*On Contradiction*, 1937/1967), quoting Marx, Engels, and Lenin concludes that "The fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing. There is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development." Hegel also claimed that everything was contradictory (1841/1969, p. 439; see also Hegel, 1874/1978, p. 133, as well as Adorno, 1973, p. 5).

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1. The quotation in the title comes from Hardt (1999).

But then, what exactly constitutes a contradiction? A common dictionary definition ("a situation in which inherent factors, actions, or propositions are inconsistent or contrary to one another") does not provide all the help hoped for, since now we need to define "inconsistent" and "contrary".<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, we can resort to the plain, logic-based definition: simultaneous assertion of a statement and its negation, or  $p$  and  $\neg p$ .

In the following I shall illustrate three related concepts: "true" logical contradictions, apparent contradictions, a.k.a. paradoxes, and a strange mixture of the two.

As suggested above, we often come across logical contradictions in both speech and writing. The realms of logic and mathematics contain numerous examples, in such contexts as *reductio ad absurdum*, *ex falso quod libet*, syllogisms, and proof by contradiction.<sup>3</sup> Courtrooms provide another great source. I have taken the following examples from a vast number of similar cases, which appear on *Google*:

- "A witness contradicted that, saying Torricelli emerged from the driver's side to inspect the damage before getting back into his vehicle and driving away."
- "The witness contradicted Artis' claim of his whereabouts."
- "The witness contradicted previous statements and now says he fainted and cannot identify any defendants."
- "Testimony by Pfc. Charles Graner contradicted England's plea statement."

In all of these examples the author points at a contradiction, either artificially created, or uttered by someone else, only in order to reject it, due to its absurdity or falsity. Yet this issue becomes more complicated, due to the frequent occurrence of "contradiction" alongside "paradox." Definitions of the latter often include the former (as in "a statement that contradicts or seems to contradict itself" in Wordsmyth, 2002), with the addition of such qualifiers as "apparent" or "seemingly".<sup>4</sup>

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2. The same holds for Aristotle's law of contradiction, according to which "it is impossible for anything both to be predicated and not to be predicated of the same thing in the same sense", for one may always dispute the sameness of two things or senses. See also "A matter of incompatible meanings" in Ennis, 1962, p. 87; and "The incompatibility and evident opposition of two ideas which are the subject of one and the same proposition" (The Lectric Law Library, 2002).
  3. These realms and applications cannot claim universality; see paraconsistency, relevance logics, 3-valued logic, and more.
  4. E.g. "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense" and "an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises" (both in Merriam-Webster; italics mine). See also this definition from Wikipedia: "Antinomy ... is a term used in logic and epistemology, which, loosely, means a paradox or unresolvable contradiction". My favorite definition comes from Cicero: "And because they be meruaylous sentences, and suche as are contrary to the opynion of all men, they are by them [the Stoics] termed Paradoxa, whyche signifyeth, thinges merueilous and inopinable" (Cicero, 46 B.C.E./1569). Just as everything may contain contradiction, many sources – both lay and professional – often describe human existence as paradoxical:

This tension between a "real" as opposed to an "apparent" contradiction (or paradox) finds good use in a wide range of genres. In all of the following excerpts the apparent contradictions intentionally employed by their authors convey a message which reaches far beyond their ostensible meaning:

- Heraclitus' writings (c. 544--483 BCE) contain numerous examples of apparent contradictions, such as "all things are and are not" (in Lloyd, 1966, p. 99, n. 2). Marcovich (1967) felt that Heraclitus' entire doctrine of Logos or Truth, rested on the "unity or coincidence of ... opposites" (p. 8). Indeed, not only do many of the *Cosmic Fragments* deal directly with *coincidentia oppositorum*, as "The way up and the way down is one and the same" (Marcovich, 1967, fragment 33), but other ones even present paradoxical statements: "Though present, they are absent" (fragment 2 in Marcovich); "... expect the unexpected" (fragment 11); as well as the lice riddle (fragment 21): "All we saw and caught we have left behind, but all we neither saw nor caught we bring with us". These statements greatly disturbed Aristotle because they seem to violate one or more of his three laws of thought (the law of identity, the law of the excluded middle, and the law of contradiction). "Heraclitus, by saying, for example, that good and bad are the same, invalidates all significant predication" (*Physics* A 2 185 b 19; p. 16 in Kirk, 1954). It seems that Aristotle mistook apparent contradictions for real ones, but then he found an amusing way to settle this difficulty: "A man like Heraclitus need not really believe what he says..." (*Metaphysics* K 51062 a 31; p. 16 in Kirk, 1954). I find support for my interpretation in Kirk's (1954) analysis of the Heraclitan *Fragments*: "Aristotle seems entirely to misinterpret the opposite-doctrine... by saying that opposites were 'the same'. Heraclitus did not mean 'identical' in the strict sense" (p.19; see also Lloyd, 1966, p. 100).

Hegel's work of 2300 years later, especially his famous "identity of identity and non-identity", received a similar interpretation from Acton (1967): "Either, then, Hegel's philosophy has no value or he must have meant by 'contradictions' something different from what formal logicians mean by it." Of course he did: A careful reading of Hegel, as well as of Marx, shows no repudiation of the principle of non-contradiction (see a similar view expressed by

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--"Man's condition is, after all, ambiguous and paradoxical" (Halmos, 1978, p. 22).

--"Group life is inherently paradoxical. We argue that it is impossible to have a group without certain types of conflict and that the wish to have those conflicts 'resolved' stems from an imperfect understanding of the meaning that conflict has in the life of the group" (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 11).

--In a section entitled The antinomies of action: "Thus one finds himself in the presence of the paradox that no action can be generated for man without its being immediately generated against men" (de Beauvoir, 1948, p. 99).

-- "Ritual is a statement in metaphoric terms about the paradoxes of human existence" (Crocker, 1973).

Wilde, 1991): rather than implying logical contradiction, they talk of tensions, conflicting interests, opposing tendencies, systems in motion<sup>5</sup>.

Another case of apparent contradiction appears in the Talmudic saying: "All who add – detract" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 29A*). The Talmudic sages explained this injunction by referring to Eve who, by adding to god's words in Genesis 2:17, detracted from them, when she said: "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die" (Genesis 3:3; the emphasized words are Eve's addition). You can find a further reference in the exegetical work *Bereshit Rabba* (19:3), which makes clear the multidimensionality of this issue, and hence the lack of true contradiction: "One should not render the fence [the restrictions] stronger than the principle, lest it falls and cuts down the seedlings [commits heresy]." By using this metaphor of center versus periphery, the author informs us that adding to, and detracting from, the injunction do not refer to the same object: One should not add to the peripheral, so as not to detract from the central. The same logic holds for Mies van der Rohe's statement, summarizing his attitude toward art: "less is more", first coined in 1855 by Robert Browning (see Drexler, 1960). Adding more detail reduces a work's aesthetic value.

The idea that the two parts of a seemingly contradictory statement do not serve as "the subject of one and the same proposition" (see footnote 2) holds true for the following New Testament verses, as well: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25) and "Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).

Kierkegaard's description of Abraham (1843/1983, pp. 16-17) also has a rhetorical character: "But Abraham was the greatest of all, great by that power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by that hope whose form is madness, great by that love that is hatred to oneself."

A long tradition of such paradoxical statements exists in poetry, possibly starting with the Roman poet Catullus (1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE). Martin's translation of his "*Odi et Amo*" (Martin, 1861, # 85) starts: "I hate and love, nor can the reason tell: But that I love and hate I know too well." In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Villon wrote two ballads of similar nature. One, subtitled *of counter-truths*, contains the following: "There is no joy except in sickness,/ nor truth outside the theater,/ nor coward like a knightly man,/ nor grimmer sound than melody...."<sup>6</sup> His other poem appears

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5. See, for example, Giddens' (1993) definition: "CONTRADICTION. A term used by Marx to refer to mutually antagonistic tendencies in a society" (p. 750). Similarly, Wright (1985) uses contradictory rather freely, when he refers to white-collar employees as having "contradictory class location": neither capitalists nor manual workers, yet sharing some common features with each.

6. In Bonner, 1960. Compare, furthermore, Villon's additional lines "Nothing's sure save what is yet uncertain,/ nor more obscure than what is evident", with Tertullian's (c. 200/1975, pp. 228-9) famous statement: *credibile est quia ineptum est*, translated by Mahe as *Il faut y croire puisque c'est absurde*.

among fifteen commanded by Charles d'Orleans at Blois, all beginning with the perplexing line: "I die of thirst beside the fountain" (see Champion, 1956). Villon's ballade goes on to say: "I rejoice and have no pleasure;/ I am strong, but have no force or power, well received, rebuffed by all." A poem by the 16th century English poet Sir Thomas Wyatt continues this tradition: "I find no peace, and all my war is done;/ I fear and hope; I burn and freeze like ice;/ I fly above the wind, yet can I not arise;/ And nought I have, and all the world I seize on" (Wyatt, 1968). Shakespeare made use of this same device in *King Lear*, where France addresses Cordelia: "Fairest Cordelia, thou art most rich, being poor;/ Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd! (I, I, 151-152)."

Modern writers and poets have joined the trend. Thus T. S. Eliot (1936) in *Ash Wednesday* writes "Lady of silences/ Calm and distressed/ Torn and most whole/ Rose of memory/ Rose of forgetfulness/ Exhausted and life-giving/ Worried reposeful..." Eliot adapted his following lines in *East Coker* "And what you do not know is the only thing you know/ And what you own is what you do not own/ And where you are is where you are not" from St. John of the Cross' *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1588/1974, Book I, Ch. 13): "...in order to arrive at possessing everything/ Desire to possess nothing.../ In order to arrive at knowing everything,/ Desire to know nothing".

I shall end this list with Orwell's "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength" in his *1984* (Orwell, 1950).

By their intentional use of manifest contradictions, the above authors achieve two partially overlapping results. They illustrate the often lamented paradoxical nature of human existence, and they draw the readers' attention to their message by employing an apparent contradiction as a rhetorical device.

And now for the strange mixture of true versus apparent contradictions. I have suggested above that, as a rule: a) critics point accusingly at those who provide true, logical contradictions; and b) sophisticated authors make use of contradictions, which, on further inspection, turn into paradoxes. But what about those cases in which a disagreement arises, and one person's contradiction becomes another's paradox? This happens with respect to biblical texts<sup>7</sup>. On the one hand, several skeptics marshal a long list of contradictions in the Bible<sup>8</sup> (e.g. Burr, 1859/1987 and McKinsey, 1995). Christian polemicists, on the other hand, defend their source by attempting to convert contradictions into paradoxes:

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7. We know of other instances of the "transcendence" of contradictions. Thus André Breton's 1924 Manifesto of Surrealism had the following as the movement's principal aim: "to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality" (Waldberg, 1971, pp. 66-75).

8. Fromm (1966) also recognized the numerous contradictions in the Hebrew Bible and in the oral tradition, and regarded them as "aspects of a whole" (p. 8).

- "The concept [of the Trinity] is contradictory and therefore irrational, but we see a paradox here, not a contradiction"(Anonymous-a).
- "The Bible, while it may contain "apparent" contradiction, actually contains no contradiction at all. Paradox maybe, but not contradiction" (Anonymous-b).
- "Let me first differentiate between a contradiction and a paradox. There are paradoxes in the Bible, as well in life. That doesn't make it a contradiction, only *currently unexplainable*." (Anonymous-c, italics in original).
- "A paradox, but not a contradiction" (Vibert, 2002).
- "It is a thin line that divides a paradox and a contradiction, and we must be well versed in Scripture and study to determine the truth, or we will have bad theology in the church!" (Krejcir, 2003).

We have now encountered three different contexts in which contradictions appear: "true" or logical ones; paradoxes camouflaged as contradictions; and contradictions camouflaged as paradoxes. A rhetorical motivation appears in all three. Logical contradictions serve only to demonstrate their absurdity; apparent literary contradictions act as attention-drawing devices; while the authors of apparent paradoxes try to convince their readers of the non-contradictory nature of their message.

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