

It Was So Revolting I Couldn't Take my Eyes Off It

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Abstract

Dialetheism is the view that some contradictions are true. One might naturally ask for examples. This paper offers a new one. There is a well known psychological phenomenon (noted, for example, by Plato in the *Republic*) in which something is so repulsive that one is compelled to look at it. One is attracted and repelled. *Prima facie*, that is a contradiction, and, given the context, a true one. I argue that that is exactly what it is. A brief discussion of dialetheism frames the topic.

1 Introduction: Dialetheism¹

A dialetheia is a pair of statements of the form A and $\neg A$ which are both true—or, assuming that conjunction behaves as one would expect, a true statement of the form $A \wedge \neg A$. Dialetheism is the view that some things are dialetheias. Dialetheism is a view that has been endorsed by a few thinkers in the history of philosophy—perhaps, most notably, Hegel.² Since Aristotle's

¹Talks based on versions of this paper were given at Clemson University, the University of Adelaide, the Central European University (Budapest), as the 2017 Kretzmann lecture at Cornell University, and at UNILOG2018 in Vichy. My thanks go to many members of the audiences in those places for their very helpful comments. Many thanks, too, go to Don Baxter, for setting me straight on some aspects of his view.

²See, §3 of Priest (2007).

somewhat confused and ultimately ineffectual defence of the Principle of Non-Contradiction, though, it has been a highly unorthodox view in Western philosophy.³ Dialetheism has resurfaced again in the last 40 years, however; and this time defended with all the resources of modern formal logic.⁴

If someone claims that dialetheism is true, one might fairly ask for examples of dialetheias. All examples are philosophically contentious. However, perhaps everyone's favourites are the paradoxes of self-reference—with a myopic fixation on the liar paradox. This is the sentence:

- this very sentence is false

If it is true, it is false; if it is false, it is true. So it seems to be both. One might say that this conclusion can be avoided if it is neither true nor false; and so it can; but then we are faced with the “extended” paradox:

- this very sentence is either false or (neither true nor false)

If it is true it is either false or neither; if it is false, it is either false or neither, and so true; and if it is neither, it is either false or neither, and so true again. We are back with contradiction. There is much discussion of these matters in the contemporary literature; but this is not the place to go into it.⁵ Here, my point is simply to give a putative example of a dialetheia.

Discussions concerning the paradoxes of self-reference have so much held center-stage in contemporary discussions of dialetheism, that some seem to think of it simply as a view about about the paradoxes. It is not: it is a quite general metaphysical/semantic view about truth and negation. The paradoxes are but a putative example. And for my part, I have never thought of the paradoxes as the most transparent example. What I take to be so, concerns the philosophy of law.

There are many things that a duly constituted legislature cannot make true. For example, it cannot make true the statement that the Moon is 40km from the Earth. Yet things of some kind they certainly can make true, notably statements to the effect that certain people have or do not have legal rights (in the jurisdiction in question). Thus, suppose that a duly constituted legislature passes a piece of legislation containing the following two clauses:⁶

³For an analysis of Aristotle's defence, see ch. 1 of Priest (2006).

⁴Priest (1987) might be taken as crystalising the beginnings of the new movement.

⁵One point of entry into the literature is Beall (2016).

⁶The example is a toy one; real life example are more complex and arguable. The example makes the point, however.

- Every property holder may vote.
- No woman may vote.

One may imagine that at the time the legislation was passed, it was just not a serious possibility (legal or factual) that a woman could hold property. The law, then, generated no contradiction; and if no woman ever comes to own property, it remains so. However, the times changes, and we may suppose that women do come own property. Perhaps this was first a *de facto* matter, then a *de jure* one. Eventually, a woman who owns property turns up at the polling booth wanting to vote. Let us call her Emily. Then, patently, Emily, being a property holder, has the right to vote; and, being a woman, she does not. The law plus contingent circumstances have generated a dialetheia.

One might reply that once this situation arose, the law would be changed, either by new legislation being passed, or more likely, by a judge making an appropriate ruling. This is true: the law is meant to be functional, and this contradiction is clearly dysfunctional. But this is beside the point. The reason that the law needed to be changed was exactly that it was contradictory. So after the change in law there is no longer a dialetheia; but before there certainly was.⁷

Let us turn to a third putative example of a dialetheia. Many philosophers have held that there are things which are beyond the limits of our language/concepts. Indeed, they argue that there are such things. Of course, to argue that there are such things one has to talk about them. So they are not beyond those limits. Many philosophers have found themselves in this situation.⁸

- In the *Critic of Pure Reason* Kant argues, thereby applying categories, that we must suppose that there are some noumenal entities (such as God). The categories cannot apply to such entities, however, since the criteria for their application are spatio/temporal, and such entities are outside space and time.
- Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* gives us a theory of the relationship between language and the world. Propositions are arrangements of names; states of affairs are arrangements of objects; and a proposition describes a state of affairs if the names in it are arranged with the

⁷For further discussion, see Priest (1987), ch. 13.

⁸On the following, see Priest (2002), chs. 5, 12, and 15.

same form as the objects in the state of affairs which they name. But form cannot be an object: it is the *way* that names are arranged in a proposition or objects are arranged in a state of affairs. So one cannot talk about form. The *Tractatus* is, of course, replete with such talk.

- At the very beginning of *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger famously asked the question of being (*Seinsfrage*): what is being, what is it that makes beings be? And he tells us immediately that there is one central mistake to avoid. Being is not itself *a* being. It follows that one cannot answer the *Seinsfrage*. To do so one would have to say 'Being is such and such', and hence to treat it as a being. Indeed, one cannot even ask it. For even to say 'What is being?' is to treat it as a being (cf., What is the United Nations?).

The three philosophers just mentioned were well aware of the putative contradiction involved in speaking of the ineffable, and tried to wriggle out of it.⁹ Their attempts were singularly without success, though this is not the place to go into the matter.¹⁰

Of course, one may not buy into the projects of Kant, Wittgenstein, or Heidegger. One might even take the contradiction at issue here as showing that there are no things beyond our language/concepts. But if one does buy into any of these projects, or ones like them,¹¹ then one would appear to be stuck with the fact that there is something that is both effable and ineffable. This is our third example of a dialetheia.

Our three examples of dialetheias do not exhaust the possibilities. There are others, concerning change, motion, time, and further matters.¹² But this will suffice here. For the present section is just a—somewhat lengthy—prologomenon to what is to follow. In this, I wish to offer a new candidate for a dialetheia. Perhaps it is not a candidate that will, on its own, convince someone of the truth of dialetheism. But once the possibility of dialetheism is taken seriously, it certainly looks like a good candidate.

⁹With the exception of the later Heidegger. See Casati (2016).

¹⁰See the discussion in Priest (201+).

¹¹As I do. See Priest (2014), 13.11.

¹²On which, see Priest (1987) and (2002).

2 The Phenomenon in Question

By a *psychological dialetheia* I mean a dialetheia which describes some agent's mental state. Normally, our mental states are, it would seem, quite consistent. If I am thinking of the Taj Mahal, I am not also not thinking of it. If I see a polar bear, I do not also not see it. But one should not be taken in by an inadequate diet of examples—as Wittgenstein put it.¹³ Unusual things may happen in unusual situations; and arguably some odd sorts of situations may give rise to psychological dialetheias. Thus, take the phenomenon of self-deception. In this, one might argue, an agent both believes and does not believe something. (Note that this is different from believing something and believing its negation. That mental state is quite consistent.) That is not the phenomenon I wish to discuss here, though.¹⁴ I wish to discuss a quite different sort of unusual situation.

This was well illustrated by Plato in the *Republic* 439a:¹⁵

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner's feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face, but, finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses saying, "Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of this beautiful sight!"

Note that this is not simply a case of wanting to look and wanting not to look,¹⁶ which is quite consistent. Being repelled by something is not simply wanting not to look. For example, I might want not to look at something (for example, pornography) because my mother told me not to, and I wish to respect her wishes. I may not be repelled by it at all, however. As far as I can see, wanting not to do something does not have any very significant phenomenology. By contrast, mental revulsion has a very powerful phenomenology.

This kind of situation on view here is one, I think, that many, perhaps most, of us have occasionally experienced: a situation where something is

¹³*Philosophical Investigations*, § 593

¹⁴It is discussed in Priest (2016), ch. 16.

¹⁵The translation is taken from Grube (1992).

¹⁶Though it may be that as well.

so revolting that one cannot take one’s eyes off it. For example, one may sometimes go past a gruesome traffic accident, where mangled people and bodily parts are strewn round a crash-site. It is revolting, but one cannot help but look. Another example: many of the portraits of the British artist Francis Bacon are of faces horribly distorted. They are hideously revolting, but riveting. In situations like this, one is phenomenologically attracted to and repelled (or repulsed) by the same thing.¹⁷

This is the phenomenon that I want to examine.

3 Attraction and Repulsion

Let us write Ax for ‘The agent in question is attracted by x ’, and Rx for ‘The agent in question is repelled by x ’. Then in such situations, for some x , we have $Ax \wedge Rx$. However, *prima facie* at least, *being attracted by* and *being repelled by* are contraries. That is: $\neg(Ax \wedge Rx)$, and so $\neg Ax \vee \neg Rx$. So we have $(Ax \wedge Rx) \wedge (\neg Ax \vee \neg Rx)$, from which it follows that $(Ax \wedge \neg Ax) \vee (Rx \wedge \neg Rx)$. Whichever disjunct is true, we have a psychological dialetheia—and given the symmetry of the situation, presumably two of them.

A natural thought at this point is that A and R are not really contraries. After all, in the kind of situation in question, *something* is both. But not so fast.

Take, first, not mental attraction and repulsion, but physical attraction and repulsion. Moving towards something and moving away from it (in Euclidean space) are certainly contraries. So, for an object to be *forced* to move towards something and *forced* to move away from it by the nett force in action are also contraries. Now come back to psychological attraction and repulsion. These are attraction and repulsion, not for a body, but for a mind; but the point is the same. The mind is being forced towards something and away from it simultaneously. These are contraries for the same reason. The point is nicely made by Don Baxter:¹⁸

To have an internal conflict like Medea’s is like trying to move in opposite directions.

¹⁷The phenomenon may well be present in non-human animals as well. See Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975), ch. 10.

¹⁸Baxter (2017), p. 3. In Greek mythology Medea was a character who was torn as to whether she should kill her children.

Of course, it is not a contradiction to say in the physical case that one *component* (say electro-magnetic) of the nett force is attracting, and another (say, gravitational) is repelling. The analogue of the distinction between a nett force and its components in the mental case is not entirely clear. However, there is no conflict in a body that moves under the influence of component forces: it simply moves according to the their resultant. Yet there is a distinct tension in the kind of mental state we are talking about; indeed, the agent is *torn* both ways. So whatever the correct analogy is, it would seem to be the analogue of the nett physical force that is at issue.

4 *Distinguo*

When one meets an apparent contradiction, a natural way to try to avoid it is to draw an appropriate distinction. To say that it is 3pm and 8pm, is a contradiction. The contradiction disappears once we note that it is 3pm in New York, and 8pm in London. So if it appears that *s* is attracted and repelled by *o*, one might attempt to draw a contradiction-defusing distinction in the same way. There are two obvious loci for such a distinction. One concerns the subject, *s*; the other concerns the object, *o*.

Take the object first: one might say that it is not *o* itself that attracts/repels. It is a certain aspect of *o* which attracts/repels. Things like this can certainly sometimes be the case: one might be attracted by someone's beauty, but repelled by their political views. However, this move does not work here. In the case we are dealing with, it is one and the same object that is attractive and repulsive: the car-crash or the painting. Indeed, it is precisely the repulsiveness of an object which is attractive. Thus, it is the horror of the car crash which is both revolting and fixating. It is one and the same thing that attracts and repels.

So let us move to distinctions on the subject side. One might say that it is *part of s* which is being attracted, and *part of s* which is being repelled. After all, it is no contradiction for part of an object to be physically forced towards something, and part of it to be forced away from it. Being forced towards and forced away are contraries only when it is the whole which is so forced.

At this point let us return to Plato. The passage I quoted is taken from Plato's argument that the soul has different parts—roughly, the rational, the moral, and the appetitive. He has just enunciated a version of the Principle of

Non-Contradiction. Given this, it cannot be the same thing that is attracted and repelled. It is the moral part which is repelled, and the appetitive part which is attracted. The moral part creates a desire to avert one's gaze; the appetitive part creates the desire too gaze.

This is not the place to take on Plato's moral psychology, but I note that one cannot appeal to the Principle of Non-Contradiction in the present context. That is exactly what is at issue. Moreover, even if it is different mental mechanisms which generate the conflict, this is actually irrelevant. What is at issue here is the phenomenological state in which the agent finds themself, and this is a unity. It does not fall apart cleanly into two neat fragments. Even if it is produced by different parts of the soul, it, itself, is a single conflicted state of a single agent.

Quite generally, and the details of Plato's moral psychology aside, the attempt to defuse the contradiction by appealing to different parts of the agent fails for similar reasons. What we are concerned with is not the different aspects of the agent's cognitive psychology which generate the phenomenological state: it is the phenomenological state itself. And it is one and the same phenomenological state which is torn. As Baxter, again, puts it:¹⁹

... it is going too far to conclude that there are distinct parts of the self or distinct co-habiting selves. Such a conclusion neglects the unitariness of the conscious self. It is one oneself who tries to move in each opposite direction.

5 Baxter's Aspects

I have quoted Baxter with approval a couple of times above. In the paper from which the quotations come, he is very much concerned with the kind of phenomenon I am discussing here.²⁰ He also advances a variant of the strategy of making a distinction in the subject, but of a very different kind.

Baxter postulates a kind of entity he calls *aspects*. These are neither properties nor objects, but a *sui generis* kind of entity. In the sort of situation when a person, say Emily, *e*, is attracted (*A*) by an object, and repelled

¹⁹Baxter (2017), p. 4.

²⁰And the paper may be consulted for an illuminating discussion of it. In the final part of the paper, he extends his analysis to non-mental matters. I would not follow him down this path.

(R) by it, then Emily has aspects $e_x[Ax]$ and $e_y[By]$, such that it is the former of which one may truly predicate attraction, and the latter of which one may truly predicate repulsion: $A(e_x[Ax])$ and $R(e_y[By])$. The aspects are not parts of Emily, however. Indeed, they are identical with her! So $e_x[Ax] = e = e_y[By]$. The unity of the unfortunate Emily is, therefore, not threatened.

There are a number of things to note about Baxter's account. First, there would seem to be no independent grounds to posit aspects. They are simply a way of protecting the Principle of Non-Contradiction. In this way the postulation is *ad hoc*. It is quite unlike the situation concerning 3pm and 8pm: we have quite independent reasons for believing in different time zones. Baxter claims that one may experience these aspects. But what we experience is the torn state. To say that we experience aspects is precisely to posit them.

Next, it would appear that we are going to violate the principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals, since $A(e_x[Ax])$ and $e_x[Ax] = e_y[By]$, but to infer that $A(e_y[By])$ would restore the contradiction we are trying to get rid of. Baxter is well aware of this. He suggests that the correct way to formulate the principle is as applying only to objects. Now, whether it is correct or not, I see little reason for this formulation, except to preserve the Principle of Non-Contradiction. Aspects are the kinds of thing which can have properties, and can be identical with other things (objects and aspects). At the very least, then, this seems to be a very counter-intuitive way to formulate the principle.

Thirdly, the theory tells us that $A(e_x[Ax])$ and $R(e_y[By])$, but what are we to say of $A(e)$ and $R(e)$ themselves? Baxter's theory is silent on this matter, though both cannot be true. At the very least, this is an incompleteness in the theory. But worse, despite the move to retain the unity of the subject in question by endorsing the identity of Emily and her aspects, in the end the theory appears not to do so. After all, it is *Emily* who is attracted and repelled: it is *she* who is torn. But this is exactly what we do not have.

Better, it seems to me, just to accept the contradiction at face-value, and so avoid all the fast footwork, clever though it is.

6 Content and State

I have emphasised, as does Baxter, the unity of the *phenomenological* state at issue here. This invites another objection. The phenomenological content is, let us agree, contradictory. It does not follow that the agent's mental state is itself contradictory. Let me explain.

Consider the waterfall illusion.²¹ In this, a subject's visual system is conditioned by constant motion in one direction. After an appropriate time, the conditioning is stopped, and a negative after-image is perceived. A stationary visual field will appear to be moving in the opposite direction. But if the agent focuses their attention on a single point in the field, say a black dot, *o*, it will appear to be stationary. *o* appears to be both moving and stationary, as subjects naturally report matters. The content of the visual field is contradictory: *o* is both moving and stationary. But this is an illusion: in actuality, *o* is quite consistently stationary. So, it may now be suggested, if *o* is the attractive/repulsive object, the phenomenological content of the agent's mental state is contradictory: *o* is both attractive and repulsive. It does not follow that the agent's mental state is contradictory: that *s* is both attracted and repelled.

The distinction between the phenomenological content of an agent's state, and the state itself is a good one. From the fact that *o* appears to be both moving and stationary, it does not follow that it *is* both moving and stationary. In the present case, however, the distinction collapses. In the motion case, to get from appearances to reality, we would need the bridge principles:

- if an object, *o*, appears to be moving to subject *s*, *o* is moving
- if an object, *o*, appears to be stationary to subject *s*, *o* is stationary

which principles appear to have little to recommend them. By contrast, in the attraction/repulsion case, we require the principles:

- if an object, *o*, appears attractive to subject *s*, *s* is attracted by *o*
- if an object, *o*, appears repulsive to subject *s*, *s* is repelled by *o*

These principles are hard to gainsay. There seems to be little more than an object being attractive/repulsive to a subject than it appearing to them in

²¹See Priest (2006), 3.3.

that way. Unlike the case of perceived motion, then, the contradiction of the subject's phenomenological content and the objective contradiction go hand in hand.²²

7 The Physical Basis

At this point one might essay another objection. If the agent's mental state is contradictory, this means that its physiological base must be contradictory too. So physics itself must be inconsistent. Surely that cannot be right?

The objection, however, presupposes an over-simple reductionism. Whilst mental states may well supervene on brain states, it does not follow that a contradictory mental state entails a contradictory physical state. Attraction to o might be encoded in some neurological structure, s_A . Repulsion from o might be encoded in some other neurological state, s_R . It may be that normally the states s_A and s_R inhibit each other, but that in odd circumstances they do not do so.

As an analogy (not to be pushed too far), if someone is asked a question of a certain kind, they may answer it verbally or by pointing; and they will normally give what amount to the same answers. But in the case of a "split brain" patient (whose *corpus callosum* has been cut), this may not be so.²³ For example, suppose that a cup is shown to only the lefthand side of such a person's visual field. If the person is asked what they see, they may say that they see nothing. The visual input goes to the righthand side of the brain, and does not reach the speech centres, which are on the lefthand side. If asked to *point* to what they see, however, they may point to a picture of a cup with their hand. The visual input does reach the motor centres that control this. Normally the visual input goes into both sides of the visual

²²There is an interesting intermediate case. There is an auditory phenomenon in which a note sounds to be continually ascending, even though it also appears to stay put. (See Shepard (1964).) The corresponding bridge principles required to generate a contradiction are:

- if a sound, o , appears to be rising to subject s , o is rising
- if a sound, o , appears to be stationary to subject s , o is stationary

The status of these principles is moot, simply because the notion of a sound balances precariously between the subjective and the objective.

²³See Gazzinaga (1998).

field, so this does not happen; but in the experimentally contrived situation of the kind described, it does.

I note that different parts of the brain do, in fact, seem to be involved in affective states such as attraction and repulsion. Positive affect seems to be correlated with activity in the left frontal cortex, whilst negative affect is correlated with activity in the right frontal cortex.²⁴

8 Conclusion

The phenomenon of being attracted and repelled by one and the same thing is, indeed, a very strange one. The phenomenological state is one, but intrinsically conflicted. This would seem to give rise to a psychological dialetheia. And that is exactly what, I have argued, it does.²⁵

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²⁴See Davidson (1992). The matter is, however, a complex one. See Harmon-Jones, Gable, and Peterson (2009).

²⁵The editors of this volume asked me to respond to a comment made by a referee, who said (their italics): ‘What is really remarkable is that Priest decided to endorse once and for all the view according to which contradictions are *not* ontological, in the sense of an object *a* and a property *P* not related to or independent from human mind (*sic*). Indeed, a central issue on the dialetheist view on paraconsistency used to be examples of real contradictions that would succeed as examples of dialethias’. Now, first, there is absolutely nothing I say in this paper to suggest that all dialethias are mind-dependent. I am offering one which obviously is, in a certain sense. I am simply *adding* this example to the old list. Moreover, by the definition with which I started this essay, a dialetheia is simply a true statement of the form $A \wedge \neg A$. The referee seems to think that this is not sufficient for me: the contradiction has to be ‘real’. I have no idea what they mean by this; nor is it something of a kind I have ever said.

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