**What are contradictions, and what is Dialetheism?**

First of all, let's get this word ‘*contradiction*’ clear, because it is used by people in different ways (and that's fine). But when logicians use the term, they have a very specific meaning. Namely things of the form: it is and it is not. So, the sun is shining, and it's not shining. Donald Trump is corrupt, and Donald Trump is not corrupt. All men are mortal, it's not the case that all men are mortal, et cetera, et cetera. Those are the things that logicians mean by contradictions. And there's a principle in Western Philosophy called *the Principle of Non-Contradiction* [henceforth, PNC], which says that nothing like that can possibly be true.

It's defended by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, and it's clear that he thinks that some people before him believed that some contradictions were true. But he takes them in his sights, and he argues against them, even though the arguments are really not very good—and that's the view of modern scholars of the *Metaphysics*, not just my view. Nonetheless, his defence of the PNC launched the principal into orthodoxy in Western Philosophy. Since Aristotle, most philosophers have *assumed* (I use that word advisedly) that the principle is correct and have done their philosophy on that basis—so much so that there's hardly a defence of the PNC since Aristotle in the West, which is kind of interesting. I mean it's just so embedded in the culture that nobody even thought it needed a defence.

*Dialetheism* is a jargon word which I made up with an old and sadly deceased friend of mine, Richard Routley/Sylvan, a number of years ago now. A *Dialetheia* is a true contradiction*: Di-aletheia*, *two-truths*. Dialetheism is the view that there are some true contradictions.

**How did you become a Dialetheist?**

So my training was in mathematical logic and I got interested in Gödel's theorems, which were profound results in mathematics and mathematical logic in the 20th century, and they steer very close to the wind when it comes to paradox. Gödel's original argument for incompleteness is a very close cousin of the liar paradox. So I got interested in paradox and, for various reasons which I won't go into now, I became convinced that some of these arguments were veridical - they're just sound arguments for contradictions. And so I started to work on how you articulate this view in logic—what kind of logic you need, what its properties would be, and so on. Thinking that you've got a veridical argument for contradiction can only ever be a first move in the game. You’ve then got to work out how that move works in detail, and that's where a lot of the hard work has gone into in Dialetheism in the last fifty years. There's a branch of logic called *paraconsistent logic*, which deals with logical theories in which you can have contradictions which are isolated. They don't blow-up in your face as they do in standard logic. A lot of work has gone into that area of logic in the last 50 years.

So I became persuaded that you should be a Dialetheist about these things. I thought this was a crazy view. I thought there must be something wrong with it. But I couldn't see what was wrong with it. So I thought, OK, well, let's try it. And, you know, I'd try out the idea in the way that philosophers try out ideas; they write papers, they go to conferences, they talk. And of course I got an enormous amount of pushback. People thought this was crazy, and I rather thought it was crazy too in a sense. For about 10 years, every time I gave a talk on this, I thought: someone's gonna put up their hand in the back of the audience and say “yeah, but...” and I'm gonna have to go “Oh, shit”. I was expecting this for 10 years and it never happened. And after about 10 years, I thought, well, maybe it's not so crazy after all.

**What’s the history of Dialetheism?**

There have been Dialetheists in the history of Western Philosophy, but at the very least they've been very few and far between. But a number of philosophers in the last 40 years - I guess I'm one of them - have worried about the PNC and come to the view that it's wrong, and that some contradictions are true. I'm not saying that *all* contradictions are true. That's looney-tunes stuff OK, but some contradictions are true.

And the next question is, well, which ones?

The dialetheias that have got most airplay I guess over the last 40 years have been, unsurprisingly, paradoxes such as the liar paradox, the sorties paradox, various paradoxes of motion, some paradoxes of knowledge. You know, Western Philosophy and Eastern Philosophy are replete with paradoxes, and we've struggled with these paradoxes. Sometimes we’ve come up with good solutions, and sometimes we’ve failed to come up with good solutions. The paradoxes of self-reference are of the latter kind.

Not everybody may know what these paradoxes are, so let me just talk a little bit about the liar paradox, because this is the oldest paradox of self-reference we know. It was discovered or invented by Epimenides we think, a rough contemporary of Aristotle. It's very simple. Suppose I say to you: “what I'm now saying to you, it’s not true”. Ask yourself whether it's true or false. It says that it's not true. So if it's true, it's not true. But if it's not true, well, hey, that’s what it says, so it's true. So if it's true, it's not true. If it’s not true, it's true. That's the paradox. Logicians in Greece, in mediaeval Europe, and in the modern world have been trying to solve this paradox, telling you what's wrong with the argument. I mean, you've got an argument entailing a contradiction. If it ain't right, either a premise is not true, or an inference that's involved is invalid. Lots of solutions have been tried and we haven't been very successful—at least if consensus is a mark of success. Because after two-and-half thousand years, there's still no consensus on what's wrong with that argument. So some people (including myself) think there's nothing wrong with it. It's a veridical paradox - it proves that the liar’s sentence is both true and it isn't. Of course, that can only be a first move in the game, an opening gambit, because you want to know: how does that affect the notion of truth? How does that affect the notion of valid inference? How does that spill over into epistemology in general? What does this tell you about the nature of the world in which we live (using the word ‘*world*’ in Wittgenstein’s sense, namely, all that is the case)?

It's the paradoxes of self-reference that have gotten the most airplay in discussions of Dialetheism in the last 40 years. But once your eyes are open to the possibility of true contradictions, then at the very least it opens your eyes to a new possibility in various philosophical debates. Philosophical questions are hard, and they are often hard because there are considerations pushing you both ways, and they both seem plausible. Could they both be right?

**How does Dialetheism effect Philosophical discourse?**

At the very least, Dialetheism says: *hey, there is a philosophical move out there in logical space, contradictory statements can both be right*. That may be a position you don't want to endorse on any particular topic, but it's at least one that's gotta be thought about now. And then what you make of it... Well, as in all philosophical questions, we're always going to argue about these things. I mean the PNC has been *so* fundamental to philosophy – at least in the West – that if it’s wrong, then this just has to open up new vistas onto so many old philosophical issues, and I think we're really only starting to explore those. What's gonna happen? Well, as I say, we’ll wait and see.

And of course, new theories may appear, and then you've got to revise your views in the light of these. The effect of Dialetheism is simply to put new theories on the table, or the possibility of new theories, which are inconsistent. So it's going to widen your scope of choice, as it were. And that's not really a change in methodology, except in the sense that you might think of the inconsistent theories as having been off the table for methodological reasons. But when it comes to theory choice, I don't think it makes much difference to the game. It just gives you a wider choice. So in a sense, nothing much changes. And one of the shocking things I think is that in one sense, Dialetheism *doesn't actually* change the picture much. It gives you more different packages of soap powder to buy, so to speak. But we go on much as philosophers have ever done; namely, trying to engage in fascinating, important questions, coming up with possible answers and thinking which is the best one. That ain't gonna change.

**How does a Dialethiest decide what contradictions are true?**

That's a very good question. As you can guess, I often get asked that question. And usually, I turn the table and I say: well, how *do* *you know* what’s true? It's a kind of smart-arse answer, but I mean, how do you know that something, anything, is true? You look at the evidence. So in Philosophy, that means you look at the arguments. And one thing that the Philosophy of Science taught us in the 20th century was that there's no algorithm for determining what's good and what's bad. Rational life is far too messy for that. You have to consider everything on a case-by-case basis. And so the answer to your question, which is not a smart-arse answer is: you're going to have to consider things on a case-by-case basis and just look at the evidence.

So to return to the lair paradox, for example, we've been examining these arguments for two-and-a-half thousand years, and all the known, all the proposed, consistent solutions, have well-known problems. So that doesn't look so promising. But if you look at a Dialetheic solution, it's simple, it's natural. So a lot of the evidence points towards it.

And then you have to look at the other possibilities where you might want to consider a dialetheic solution to a problem and do similar kinds of things. In Philosophy, any question we're going to be dealing with is going to be complex, and to answer it you need a kind of articulated philosophical theory - whether it's metaphysical, ethical, logical, aesthetic. And so you're bound to have a bunch of competing theories. What you’ve got to do is some serious theory choice. Well, Dialetheism puts a new player into the ring, namely: some of your theories might be inconsistent ones. So all the old consistent theories are there, but there are some new players on the table, and now you've got a broader range to choose from.

But even though you’ve got a broader choice, you still do theory choice in much the same way. In the theory, you're looking for something that explains the phenomenon you're interested in, something that's hopefully simple, something that unifies lots of different phenomena. These are very broad criteria of theory choice that work whenever we theorise, I think. We theorise in Physics, we theorise in Economics, we theorise in metaphysics, we theorise in ethics, we theorise in logic et cetera, et cetera. And these are the sort of general criteria of theory choice. You’ve got to choose the theory which is overall best on those criteria. If it turns out that an inconsistent theory is the best, then you should believe it. As Hume said: “*the wise person apportions their beliefs according to the evidence*”. So that's how you can come to a rational belief on an inconsistent view: rationally endorse an inconsistent theory. And the rest is now looking at all the case-by-case hard details.

**How has Dialetheism been received in contemporary discourse?**

I made many friends in Australia who were sympathetic to the idea [of Dialethism], including my old mate and co-dialetheist *Richrad Routley/Sylvan.* We got a lot of pushback, but we pushed the idea, talking at conferences in Australasia for about a decade and at least established it as a position in a fringe of philosophical space. Then we pushed it in other countries; the US, the UK, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia. And we got further push-back and that’s fine. You know, Philosophy is complex, and philosophers disagree about everything, so you expect pushback; but slowly the view has been establishing itself as a position in philosophical space. A lot of people still don't want to engage with it because they think it’s too far out on the fringes, but slowly we’re seeing it move into a position that you can’t simply ignore.

There have been some very interesting occasions in this process. I remember I was once giving a talk at the Aristotelian Society. I wanted to do something more than just defend the idea, so I was talking about how this affects our notion of rationality. With the Aristotelian Society, you may or may not know that people have the paper beforehand – they're supposed to have read it, and then there's a free discussion. But of course, people don’t read it. So they had this paper on Dialetheism and rationality, on how you handle true contradictions. And I sort of summarised my paper in 10 or 15 minutes, and the chairperson says “OK, questions”. There was a long silence, and then someone said: “you don't really think the contradictions can be true, do you?”. I said: “Well, as a matter of fact, yes”. And *woomf!* The session took off and people were so engaged with that question that, for the next hour, we never got around to talking about what the paper was about. But that was OK, and it is indicative of the sort of reaction that 20th century Dialetheists, such of myself, got in those days. So yeah, they were interesting times and the times haven't gone away. There are still plenty of people you meet now who think, “well, the contradictions can't really be true, can they?” And the first question is: why do you say that? The answer is a lot harder to find than they might have thought.

**So how many incredulous stairs do you reckon that is?**

Innumerable. I think the people who are prepared to give it the most time of day are actually logicians, and you might be surprised by that, but good logicians have always known the problems with *classical logic* – the logic that was invented by Frege and Russell around the turn of the 20th century. It's always had problems; good logicians have always known this, and they've done things to try to address these problems. They've known that a lot of the sorts of strategies that logicians have come up with haven't been terribly successful. And they know that there are alternatives – various non-classical logics, like intuitionism, paraconsistent logics, and lots of others. They're aware of the spectrum of positions and their problems. And though they still may think their classical logic is right, they are at least aware of the kind of difficulties of the landscape. People who don't work at the cutting edge of logic are not in that position. They're taught classical logic as an undergraduate, they use it as a tool in what they do (maybe), but because they don't work at the cutting edge of things, they're not aware of these problems. They can believe classical logic and leave it to logicians to worry about the hard cases, and just use the tool that they've been taught. So, as I said, it's often that the most sympathy for Dialetheism will come from logicians – at least that's been my experience.

**What has the reception of Dialetheism been across cultures?**

There have certainly been plenty of philosophers in the East who have subscribed to the PNC*.* But the principle hasn't been as well entrenched in Eastern cultures (those of China, India and other places) as it has been in the West.

Clearly there are parts of East Asian and South Asian traditions where people have been Dialetheists. There is a principle in early Buddhist metaphysics called the *Catuṣkoṭi,* which means literally ‘four corners’ or ‘four positions’. The four positions are, given any answer to a question, it can be true, false, both, or neither. This is actually the basis of a very familiar, very stable four-valued logic that Western logicians have been investigating for quite different reasons over the last 60 years. So there are strong elements of paraconsistent and Dialetheic thinking in a number of these Eastern traditions. Although there’ve been thinkers in most traditions that have gone each way. So, early Buddhist philosophy in India is probably sympathetic to Dialetheism, but it changes around the 5th or 6th century of the common-era, when thePNC becomes much more orthodox in Buddhist thought because of a couple of philosophers called Dignāga and Dharmakīrti. They're working in India in about the 5th century; India is a hot-bed of philosophical debate at this time. So, very different schools of Buddhism are all in argument with each other. There are the orthodox Hindu schools, like Nyāya, there are the Jain schools, there are some other minority views, and all these guys are arguing with each other. The Buddhist epistemologists (Dignāga and Dharmakīrti), are arguing with the Nyāya (who are kind of the Hindu epistemologists). The Nyāya subscribe to the PNC, and so there's a debate. The Hindus win, and so the Buddhist epistemologists (Dignāga and Dharmakīrti) come round to endorsing the PNC. And after that, Buddhist Philosophy is much more sympathetic to principle than it had been before.

Let me tell you, if I may, another story. Buddhism goes into Tibet relatively late, around the 8th century of the common-era and is established there by about the 12th or 13th century. Over that period, a number of different schools of Tibetan Buddhism emerge. And the older ones tend to be more sympathetic to contradiction than the newer ones. So way back in the early part of this millennium, I was in India. I went there, as I have been a number of times, to teach myself something about Indian Philosophy. I was at a Tibetan university in northern India with Jay Garfield, who was the guy who first engaged my interests in the Asian traditions. We’d just written our first paper together - I've written quite a lot with Jay - on *Nāgārjuna;* probably the most important Buddhist philosopher after the Buddha himself, 1st or 2nd century. He had an enormous impact on all subsequent Buddhist Philosophy, and was arguably a Dialetheist - that’s my view, that’s Jay’s view, but not everyone agrees.

Jay and I were giving a talk to the university community. It’s a Tibetan Buddhist university so there were Buddhists, some monks, and some lay-people in the audience who were teachers or members of the university. We talked about Nāgārjuna, and everyone was on board. Then we got round to the point in the lecture where we started to argue that Nāgārjuna was a Dialetheist and the reaction of the audience was quite amazing. Half the people in the audience were nodding, “Yeah, yeah, of course. That's obvious. Yeah”. And the other half of the audience were going, “No! No! How can that be?”. So it was clear that this audience of Tibetan Buddhist philosophers were really divided on this issue. I guess this shows that the PNC was not as entrenched in that particular Asian tradition as it was in the West.

**And more generally?**

The world has so many cultures that I know little about that I can't really address that question. But philosophers are strange birds. You know, everyone thinks about philosophical questions. I once heard a talk by Tom Stoppard, who said:

“you know the difference between plumbers and philosophers? When philosopher’s go down the pub they talk about philosophy. Whereas when plumbers go down the pub, they talk aboutphilosophy*”.*

This is true because philosophical questions engage everyone's life. You know: what are the rights and the wrongs of the Supreme Court in the United States overturning Roe versus Wade? What should the British Government be doing about the National Health Service? Should we be supporting the war in Ukraine? These are the things that any thoughtful person will talk about. Of course, maybe they don't examine these questions in the kind of intensive and careful way that philosophers do, but they're philosophical questions that people argue about. So philosophical questions engage everybody at some level. Some philosophical questions are really esoteric. OK, let’s give those to the philosophers. But a lot of the philosophical questions are important in everyone's life. So these are questions you are going to find in every culture. But philosophers are slightly strange birds in that what they do - either out of interest or out of their profession - is try to articulate answers to these and the sort of general positions in which they’re embedded in very careful and self-conscious terms. I think you find people doing that in all countries too, but it's always going to be a minority because you need some people with the luxury of the time to do that. You need at least the culture where there's a chunk of people who have the liberty to sit around drinking alcohol and arguing about these things. And that's not all cultures, but most cultures have had a group of people who are lucky enough to be able to do that.

When philosophers try to address these kind of problems, they'll try to embed their answers in general theories. They'll try to dig out general principles in just the way that in science, to answer a question, one tries to dig out general principles to do so. Call them *laws* if you want to sound highfalutin. But philosophers do the same: they think of *general principles* about the way the mind works, or about ethics, or about logic. So principles, like the PNC, are going to turn up in that process. And we've talked about how that principle turned up in the West, and a little bit about how it's turned up in the East. There is a certain cultural variability. Now, whether that variability is due to something more profound in the cultures, or whether it's just a historical accident that the attitude that was there was there—that's an interesting question.

Here's a view: the West are ultra-consistent about things, they don't like contradictions, so they formulate the PNC; whereas in the East, people have always been more engaged in seeing both sides of question, they've been more tolerant of contradictions, so the principle hasn't been so entrenched. That's a view – I'm not endorsing it. Here's another possible view: Aristotle is a very famous philosopher, he defended the PNC, and he got there first, so everyone believed him; whereas in the East there wasn't an Aristotle; there was a Nāgārjuna who had a different attitude, and he had the kind of impact on the East that Aristotle had in the West. So that makes it nothing to do with culture at all. It makes it to do with which great philosopher got there first. Now there are different possible views on this. To engage in that question further, you really have to be a cultural historian, and I'm not.

**Why do you think the West has largely neglected Eastern Philosophy, and why might this now be changing ?**

It’s not uncommon in Anglo departments not to touch on Eastern Philosophy. Even the ones that are kind of “Continentally” oriented; not that there are so many in the UK - there're quite a lot in the US of course - but very rarely do they stray East of the Urals, which is where 2/3 of the world’s philosophy originated. These places have really rich philosophical traditions. 50 years ago, Western philosophers would say: “*well*, that stuff coming from India and China, it's not *really* Philosophy: it's religion. It's sort of *wise-man* (I use the word advisedly) pronouncements, and you know it's not really philosophy at all”.That attitude is now changing. I rarely hear people say that, but I do hear people say: “*well*, you know that it's fringe stuff, isn't it? It's like aesthetics and feminism and so on”. Look, *I'm quoting,* I'm *not* endorsing the view, let me get that clear! But it’s still very standard to hold that the Asian philosophical traditions are fringe Philosophy; and of course they are not. These are traditions which are as rich and deep as anything coming from Greek-inspired culture.

The answer is partly external, and partly internal (I use these as terms from the Philosophy of science.) The external answer has nothing essentially to do with the content of Philosophy. It's to do with the fact that people in the Western world - that’s a slightly strange phrase because I include Australasia in the Western world, but, you know, there's a sort of Europe-orientated world, so the Anglosphere, but also France, Germany, et cetera, et cetera - really knew very little about the Eastern traditions. Its main interest has been in conquering the East and exploiting it via its imperialism. If you're the conqueror then you don't need to know much about those cultures, you just want to impose your culture on theirs – which the West did fairly successfully. But the centre of gravity of the economic world is changing. Now China nearly has as big an economy as the US and it'll be bigger than the US in 10 years. India is capitalising very fast and those two countries between them have a third of the world's population. So the West is being forced to recognise Eastern cultures in a way that it was not 30 years ago. That's forcing an engagement between the West and East. Of course, the East has had to engage with the West for a long time, and so the knowledge of Western Philosophy in Eastern countries, like India and Japan, is much greater than the reverse.

That's the external answer, but the internal answer is this: as philosophers have become more aware of these traditions, they explore them and they recognise the traditions for what they are, and they are deep philosophical traditions which have lots of questions and answers that should be engaged with. So we - and include myself in this - get to know more about these traditions. We are learning that they're worth engaging with philosophically; and of course we have to teach ourselves, and that means learning the appropriate languages and cultures. And as we slowly teach them to our students, as best we can, the students get interested in them and they learn more about them and start to write about them. And so we've seen an increasing number of courses on the Eastern traditions in the Anglosphere. Maybe the UK's still behind the ball here, but in Australia, every department will teach at least some courses in Asian philosophy.

It remains the case that Western philosophers don't know much about this stuff; they’ve largely had to teach themselves, and then they teach their students who learn from people who don't know a lot, but they learn a bit, and then more is taught, more courses are taught, and slowly the ball rolls. I expect that in 20 or 30 years in the West, we will see plenty of Philosophy inspired by Eastern traditions, as we see Philosophy inspired by the Greek traditions in the West now. We're moving to the first period in history which is truly global, I think.

We've talked about the fact that Philosophy is approaching a transition and the sort of thing that you're doing is really helping to make this transition – it's helping to form a generation of philosophy students and so of future philosophers. You know, you guys are important. You're the next generation of philosophers. What you think about things is gonna determine what happens in philosophy over the next generation, and what you're doing – you and thousands of other people – is actually forming the new philosophical consciousness, and that's gonna be a global philosophical consciousness. All power to you.