

A Logue

‘Well, first of all let me thank Erica and all the other people involved here for putting on this conference, and for inviting me to talk to it. It is a great pleasure to be here.’

‘That’s a polite way to start, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but you do mean it, don’t you?’

‘Of course. It’s great to be able to address an audience of a very different kind from the ones I normally address.’

‘You mean an audience just of logicians or philosophers?’

‘Yes. I wouldn’t normally get to meet many people in this kind of audience and so be able to exchange ideas with them.’

‘So many of them might not know much about you.’

‘I guess not.’

‘Then perhaps you’d better say a bit about yourself.’

‘Okay. Well. I’m a philosopher and a logician, and I work at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, but I’ve spent most of my working life in Australia. I’ve got a lot of interests, though I think that one of the things that I’m best known for is my work on paradoxes. Many paradoxes are arguments which end in a contradiction. The standard response, when one meets such a thing, is to try to explain what’s wrong with the argument. But I think that sometimes one should just accept the argument. And that means accepting its bottom line, albeit a contradiction.’

‘I think you’d better give an example.’

‘Okay. This is a very famous paradox, discovered by Bertrand Russell. Some sets of things are members of themselves. The set of all abstract objects, for example, is an abstract object, and so is a member of itself. And some sets are not members of themselves. The set of all chairs, for example, isn’t itself a chair. So it’s not a member of itself.’

‘I think I’m with you.’



‘Good. So consider the set of all sets that are not members of themselves. Is it a member of itself or not? If it is, then it isn’t. And if it isn’t then, well, it is. Either way, it both is and isn’t. That’s a contradiction.’

‘And you think the contradiction is true. Right?’

‘Right. In the terms of the trade, a *dialetheia* is a true contradiction. And Russell’s argument delivers a *dialetheia*.’¹

‘That’s a bit of heretical view, isn’t it? Most philosophers would reject the thought that a contradiction could be true.’

‘Yes, many philosophers think that the view is totally beyond the pale.’

Pause.

‘Is that enough?’

‘Enough what?’

‘Of telling people a bit about myself?’

‘Well, sort of... but not really.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, what you have described in the public persona, Graham Priest. But that’s just your public face. The real you is what lies behind the face. Someone can learn all that about you by reading your books and listening to your talks. But they wouldn’t really know you at all, would they?’²

‘I suppose not.’

‘No. You’re a bit like an orange. What the world sees is just the outer coating. When you peel that off, the real orange emerges.’



¹ Graham Priest, *In Contradiction*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

² J. L. Borges, ‘Borges and I’, pp. 246-7 of *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, New York: New Directions, 1964.

‘I’m not sure I like that image, but there’s a certain truth to it. The real me is what my friends and family see. The person who is a father, a lover, who enjoys wine and opera, physical exercise, who has creaky knees, who sits in coffee shop reading. That kind of thing, I guess.

‘Yes. That’s much closer to the truth.’

‘Excuse me. It isn’t.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Who are you trying to kid?’

‘What?’

‘That’s not the real you at all.’

‘Uh? So what is?’

‘Well under all that stuff, there is a seething world of drives and emotions. Your ambitions and desires, regrets, sexual tastes and fantasies, hates, fears, shames. Isn’t that what it’s like to be you—from the inside?’

‘I suppose. It sounds to me as though you have been reading Uncle Sigmund.’³

‘Yes, I do dip into that old *Wiener Kopfschrumpfer* sometimes. Sometimes he even gets things right.’

‘You make me sound more like a peach than an orange. There’s the skin, within that the flesh, and in the middle, there’s the kernel — what the fruit is really all about.’



‘You could put it that way.’

Pause.

‘But wait a minute. Why should it stop there?’

³ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, pp. 3-66, *Standard Edition*, Vol. 19, London: Hogarth Press, 1923.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, we’ve been stripping off successive layers. Why should we suppose that we have arrived at the last? Maybe if we dig deeper, we will uncover more and more layers.’

‘That’s not a very pleasant thought, is it?’

‘No, the deeper we dig, the worse things seem to be getting.’

‘True, this is a sort of dance of the seven veils – and you’re no Salome.’

Pause.

‘Oh my God.’

‘What?’

‘Maybe it’s worse.’

‘Worse?’

‘Well, suppose I strip off layer after layer, and in the end there is *nothing*.’

‘Um... So now you’d be more like an onion. One strips of layers and layers, until, in the end, everything has disappeared.’



‘So there is no essential *me* at all.’

Pause.

‘I think I’m feeling a bit dizzy.’

‘Yes. I can see that a void at the centre of your being, could produce anxiety—even nausea.’⁴

⁴ Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics’, pp. 95-112 of D. F. Krell (ed.), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1977. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

Pause.

‘Wait.’

‘Yes?’

‘But it can’t be like that.’

‘Oh! Why?’

‘Well, we dig and dig, and what do we find?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Who is it that’s constructing this whole edifice?’

‘You mean, who is at the base of the whole regress?’

‘Yes, who?’

‘It’s, er...’

‘It’s the philosopher, the public philosopher. It’s you who’s doing this now, right?’

‘I suppose so. So the public philosopher is at the base of it all?’

‘Yes, though that’s not a good way of putting it.’

‘Why?’

‘Think about it.’

‘Erm...’

‘The public philosopher is where we started.’

‘Good grief.’

Pause.

‘You mean that when we dig as deep as we can, we come back to where we started? So there’s no *base* at all. That certainly doesn’t sound like any fruit or vegetable I know!’



‘No. We’ve gone round in a loop. When we reach the bottom, we find ourselves at the top. Fruit don’t work like that!’

‘So there’s no bottom. There’s no essential me. There’s just a hierarchy of layers that bends around on itself.’

‘You’ve got it.’

‘That’s weird. I’m speechless.’

‘Ah! Ineffability!’

‘Not exactly.’

Pause.

‘Oh dear.’

‘What is it?’

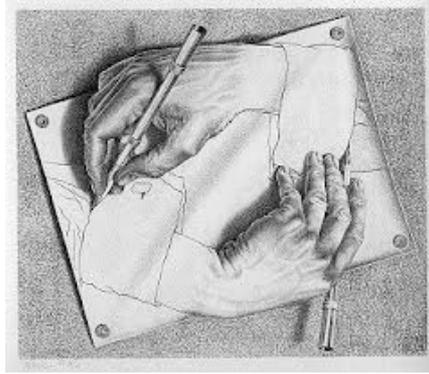
‘Now I’m really troubled.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it was bad enough having nothingness at the centre of my being, but now I seem to have disappeared entirely.’

‘I don’t get it. Why?’

‘Well, the public philosopher Graham Priest depends for being what he is on the private individual. The private individual depends for his being what it is on the subjective individual. The subjective individual ... and so on ... depends on the public philosopher. There is nothing to ground out the whole bag of tricks. There is nothing that determines my being. So I don’t exist. I’m just a conjuring trick.’



‘I’m still not sure that I get it.’

‘Well, suppose that you were an astronomer in Ancient Greece or Ancient China. You might have wondered why the Earth doesn’t fall down. So suppose that you said that it must rest on something.’

‘Okay. That seems reasonable.’

‘It doesn’t really matter what it is. Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that it rests on an elephant.⁵ You might then start to wonder why the Elephant doesn’t fall down.’

‘I guess.’

‘Suppose you said that it rested on a turtle.’

‘As good as anything, I suppose.’

‘But then you’d wonder why the turtle doesn’t fall down.’

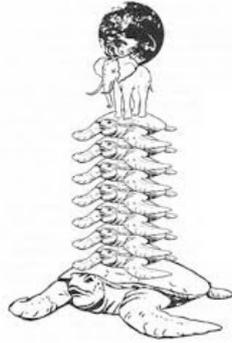
‘Sure would.’

‘And suppose I said that it rests on the Earth?’

‘Well, that would be rather silly. Then there would be nothing to support the whole configuration. Earth, elephant, and turtle would all fall down together.’

‘Exactly. There must be a bottom somewhere, or nothing would determine the lack of falling.’

⁵ J. Charpentier, ‘A Treatise on Hindu Cosmography from the Seventeenth Century (Brit. Mus. MS. Sloane 2748 A)’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 3 (1924), pp. 317-342, citing John Hay, *De rebus Japonicis, Indicis, and Peruanis epistulae recentiores* (Antwerp, 1605, p. 803f.).



‘Right.’

‘Well, it’s the same with me. The regress of *mes* must bottom out somewhere. Or there would be nothing to determine me. My being would be infinitely deferred, never achieved.’⁶

‘So you wouldn’t be anything. You wouldn’t exist.’

‘Right.’

Pause.

‘I’m not so sure that that would have to follow.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘Well, suppose that I find a note telling me how to make a time machine. So I build it, and go back in time. When I’m there, I write the note and leave it at a place where my later self will find it. That’s exactly a loop of this kind. Isn’t it? And the events *do* exist.’

‘In some sense. But it’s just a story.’

‘Of course. But it’s a quite coherent story. You have a causal loop. Each event depends on another event, and the whole thing goes round in a circle. Perfectly possible, in some sense.’

‘Well – and suppose that when I go back in time, I murder my grandmother as well as leaving the note. Then I’m not born. But I must have been born to build the time machine. That doesn’t sound very coherent.’

‘Perhaps not. But that’s a tricky issue. Let’s not go into it now, or our discussion is itself liable to go into a regress from which we will never come out!’⁷

⁶ Jonathan Schaffer, ‘Monism: the Priority of the Whole’, *Philosophical Review* 119 (2010), pp. 31–76.

⁷ David Lewis, ‘The Paradoxes of Time Travel’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976), pp. 145–52.

‘Okay.’

‘The point is that a loop of dependence is not, *in itself*, incoherent — even if some kinds are.’

‘Right.’

Pause.

‘So it seems that there are lots of *mes*. And somehow they all lock together, in mutual dependence. Just like the causal sequence in the time-travel story.’

‘Yes.’

Pause.

‘You know, I read somewhere⁸ that, according to Indian Jaina philosophy, reality is many-sided. And each aspect of reality is as real as any other. It’s a bit like a crystal, a cut diamond, with many facets. Each facet is one aspect of the unity which is the whole.’



‘A beautiful metaphor.’

‘And it now seems that you are like that. You are a jewel. And each aspect of you is one of its many facets.’

‘I like that image! Now we’re getting somewhere. So there are many perspectives. And each one is as real as any other.’

‘Yes, or perhaps better, there are many *yous*, each having a perspective on things; and each is equally valid as an expression of you.’

‘So any time one of me speaks, it’s from one of these perspectives, these facets of the jewel.’

⁸ Graham Priest, ‘Jaina Logic: a Contemporary Perspective’, *History and Philosophy of Logic* 29 (2008), pp. 263-78.

‘Exactly.’

‘And the totality of me is the “whole jewel”, the totality of all facets.’

‘Yes.’

‘Which is greater than any one facet.’

‘Naturally.’

‘I think I’m getting it at last.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘What?’

‘No, you’re not getting it.’

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘I’m the jewel.’

‘Don’t be silly. Jewels can’t talk.’

‘It’s a metaphor.’

‘Oh yes, of course. I forgot that.’

‘Wait a minute. Now I’m really confused. How many voices are there in this dialogue?’

‘Monologue?’

‘I really don’t know. Some sort of logue.’

‘Whatever. I’m the jewel, the totality of all facets.’

‘What?! That’s impossible. We just established that if one of me speaks, it’s from some facet, not the whole.’

‘Correct.’

‘So you have to be just a facet.’

‘Correct. I’m that as well.’

Pause.

‘Let me get this straight. You are the whole jewel *and* one of its facets?’

Pause.

‘So there’s a part which is the whole?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can that be?’

‘Maybe this can help. There is a lovely story by Borges, called the *Aleph*.⁹ In it, the narrator finds—or is shown—a small place in a cellar which contains everything in the cosmos, the Aleph. Looking into the Aleph one can see everything in space and time. So the Aleph is a part which is identical with the whole.’

‘I see. Hm... But if you look into the Aleph, you must be able to see yourself looking into the Aleph. And within *that* Aleph, you can see yourself looking into another Aleph. And so on.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Good grief. It’s Alephs all the way down!’

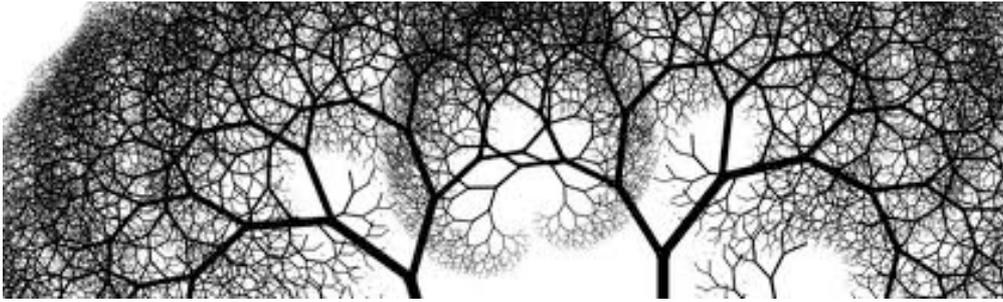


‘Look, I don’t want to be a killjoy, but this really is just a story—a flight of Borge’s fantasy. Things can’t really be like that.’

‘Oh yes they can. There is a whole branch of mathematics dealing with structures called fractals.¹⁰ Fractals are mathematical structures in which if you take any part, it’s exactly the same as the whole.’

⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, London: Penguin Classics, 2004.

¹⁰ Kenneth Falconer, *Fractal Geometry: Mathematical Foundations and Applications*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2003.



‘So this facet of me has a fractal structure.’

‘Exactly.’

‘I had no idea I was so complex!’

‘Well, perhaps boring. You just keep repeating yourself.’

‘Yea. That’s what some of my friends say.’

‘I know another beautiful image for this: the Tower of Maitreya.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Well, there’s a Buddhist sutra which is central to the Huayan version of Chinese Buddhism. It’s called the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.¹¹ In this, there is a story about a man seeking enlightenment, Sudhana. He seeks out Maitreya—the Buddha to come. When he finds him, Maitreya lets him into his tower.



And when he enters, Sudhana sees countless universes spread out before him. And in each of these, there is Sudhana in the tower of Maitreya, looking at countless universes, in which... You get the picture?’

‘Wow, yes. I wonder what kind of psychedelic drugs the author of the sutra had been taking?!’

¹¹ Thomas Cleary (tr.), *The Flower Ornament Scripture: a Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, Boston, MA: Shambala, 1993.



‘Good question.’

‘Well, at least I get it now. I’m a bunch of facets. But there is one facet which is identical with the whole—a sort of global facet.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But which one is that?’

‘I guess you might have to achieve enlightenment, like Sudhana, to find out!’

‘Yea. Or drop acid.’

‘That’s probably easier.’

‘But there *is* something I know about it.’

‘What?’

‘This discourse, right now, is being given by one of your facets. Right?’

‘Well, one or more of them. I’m a bit confused about this... Maybe they’re taking to each other!’

‘Doesn’t matter. They’re *all* encoded in the global facet. Right?’

‘So whether it’s one or many, the whole discourse is in the perspective of the global facet.’

‘I guess so.’

‘Okay. There’s something else about it.’

‘What?’

‘Well, there’s a paradox of self-reference in set theory. It’s a bit more complicated than Russell’s. It’s called Cantor’s Paradox, and it’s something like this.’

$s_1 = 0000000000 \dots$
$s_2 = 1111111111 \dots$
$s_3 = 0101010101 \dots$
$s_4 = 1010101010 \dots$
$s_5 = 11010110101 \dots$
$s_6 = 00110110110 \dots$
$s_7 = 10001000100 \dots$
$s_8 = 00110011001 \dots$
$s_9 = 11001100110 \dots$
$s_{10} = 11011100101 \dots$
$s_{11} = 11010100100 \dots$
\vdots
$s = 10111010011 \dots$

‘Yes?’

‘Think of the totality of everything—every set, every person, every star. Sometimes this is called the *universal set*.’

‘That’s a very big set!’

‘Yes, the biggest. There couldn’t be a bigger one, could there?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘But there could be one bigger.’

‘Oh! Why?’

‘Here’s one way of seeing it. Even though the universal set contains everything, there *could* always have been something else, and adding this to the set would have made it bigger.’¹²

‘So it must be the biggest set, but it cannot be. That’s certainly a contradiction.’

‘Indeed so. And here’s another way of looking at it. We started with the universal set, the biggest set possible. Then we added something to it to make it bigger.’

‘So?’

‘Well, this thing we added must have been in the universal set to start with. After all, it contained *everything*. So this bigger set *is* the universal set.’

‘Erm...’

‘So the universal set is bigger than itself.’

‘I see.’

¹² It is not entirely obvious that there could be such a thing. Cantor’s genius was in coming up with a construction—diagonalisation—which showed that there not only *could be*, but actually is. See ch. 8 of Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 2nd. ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

‘And by the same token, it’s smaller than itself.’

‘And that’s one of these dialetheias?—one of these true contradictions?’

‘Yes.’

Pause.

‘Well, that’s very interesting. But I don’t see what it has to do with me and my self... or selves.’

‘Okay. Let’s go on. The global facet is one of you. Maybe a very special one, but just one, none the less.’

‘Indeed.’

‘But it’s identical with the whole, the whole jewel.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the whole was, we agreed, bigger than any one part.’

‘Yes. That’s right.’

‘So this whole is bigger than itself.’

Pause.

‘Oh... I see where we’ve been going! It’s exactly like the universal set, except that it’s about me!’

‘You get it.’

‘So I’m bigger than myself!’

‘Yes.’

‘There’s more of me than there is!’

‘Quite... and of course less!’

‘And that’s one of these dialetheias too?’

‘Looks like it.’

Pause.

‘I think it will take some time for me to get my head around this. And all this thinking has done me in for today.’

‘Yes, it’s about time to go for a drink.’

Pause.

‘I have one more question first, though.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Which of the facets of Graham Priest was giving that last part of the discourse, the one about sets?’

‘Evidently, the logician—the public philosopher.’

‘But that’s where we started.’

‘Indeed.’

‘So we are back to the beginning *again*. We’ve come round in another circle.’

‘Yes.’

‘But I know a lot more about myself than when I started! Perhaps, as T. S. Elliot put it, the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.’¹³

‘Perhaps.’

‘No. You’ve gone nowhere.’

‘Huh?’

‘This logue never really took place. It’s just a work of fiction.’

¹³ T. S. Elliot, ‘Little Gidding’, *Four Quartets*, London: Faber and Faber, 1943.