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THE PRINCIPLE OF CONTRA-ACTION

Douglas A. Fox

Among the major principles of traditional formal logic, none has been more important than that which precludes contradiction. The present paper intends to draw attention to what may be regarded as a particular species of the fallacy assailed by this principle, and to suggest that it is important and distinctive enough to warrant special nomenclature and consideration.

First we shall try to justify the specification of our sub-principle, then indicate a manner of expressing it, and finally we shall exemplify its critical use. We shall claim that it may be of special interest for theological discourse, and that it has a damaging effect on certain time-honored formulas, including the celebrated Vedantic "*Tat tvam asi.*"

I

It is now some years since John Macmurray attempted, in his Gifford Lectures (which were published in two volumes entitled *THE SELF AS AGENT* and *PERSONS IN RELATION*)¹, to demonstrate the pressing need for the development of a logic adequate to carry personal expression. He argued that, on the whole, Language Philosophy had recognized a crisis in logical form and that Existentialism had often seen the inadequacy of previous attempts to express the personal, but that neither had found a way to accomplish the urgent task of modern thought: the logical expression of the personal.

It would take far too long to recount in full Macmurray's argument, but a minimal restatement of a segment of it should help us to see the milieu in which we are moving. Macmurray asserts that Descartes exemplified a major tendency in philosophy, namely the assuming of the primacy of *thought* in and for human experience. "*Cogito, ergo sum*" not only makes "I think" the proof of being but sets it up to become the first premise of metaphysics. Our reasoning, and our logic, tend to begin with the fact and experience of thought, and a consequence is the eventual problem of accounting for any confidence we may have in the actuality of an object—of anything other than or independent of thought. Thus philosophy dooms itself at the outset to a monumental failure: the failure to do justice to anything other than thought itself.

We are invited to begin at a new place. Thought, we are told, does not begin



until stimulated by some contact between the potentially thinking organism and something other than itself; thought is provoked by discontinuity. The mother, for example, does not come immediately upon the baby's cry, and he infers that she is "other" than himself. It is as a consequence of this discovery of non-self (or discontinuity) that the awakening to self begins, and from the beginning there is a naive recognition that the world consists of a subject and objects.

If this is more or less true, we may be justified in saying that thought arises from *action*, since this word includes within its range of meaning the relating of the self to the non-self through event or motion. In turn this means that it is action and not thought that is the primary datum of human existence, thought arising from action.

Macmurray takes us further. Thought exists *for* action. Since action is primary, when we think the supreme function of this subjective act is to modify our responsiveness, to shape consequent acting in response to the objective world. A "self" is, then, primarily an *agent* (one who acts), but true human agency includes formatively within itself reflection, which arises from earlier acts of relationship and may be directed toward later ones.

This is to take as the basis of human experience, and therefore as the foundation of a humanistic philosophy, the interaction of subject and object; it is to reject as a suitable first premise the idea and perspective of the imaginary isolated subject, the thinker who says "*cogito*" and must thereafter have trouble accounting either for the arising of subjective processes or the reality of the environment. And Macmurray argues that just as the form of the personal self is agent/subject (or Doer whose acts are shaped by thinking), so the proper form of personal propositions must be similar. A proposition about personal reality consists of a "positive" element which contains and is structured by its own "negative" pole.

An example may be useful, although we shall not here draw on Macmurray's own material. When one says, "I love you," the meaning of the statement cannot be grasped unless it is understood as a proposition whose fullness is partly constituted by an unspoken "negative" content, the appropriate and necessary formative pole within the expression, and experience, of love. The negative, structuring element of authentic love is judgment, and this is therefore implied within the form "I love you." It is important to note that judging, here, means "I *know* you as you really are; I am not unaware of your foibles, your weaknesses, you idiosyncracies." If the sentence affirming love does not mean all this, then its true significance is reduced to "I desire you," or "I am infatuated with you," or "I have superimposed on you my own ideal, and in seeming to love you I am endorsing my own values and loving myself." In short, true love is not blind but accepts, endorses, embraces the other as authentically *that* other. It does not necessarily approve of all that it recognizes in the other, but it accepts him or her with a warmth that deserves the word "love."

Love, then, is only love when it contains sensitive awareness (or “judgement”) of the other which allows him/her to remain in his/her integrity. The *expression* of love requires a proposition which must be understood to entail, within its positive form, a “negative” or constructive polarity.

Let us summarize what we have said so far:

- (1) Thought arises from and for action (including relationship);
- (2) Action is therefore primary and thought secondary in personal life.
- (3) The form of personal logic is similar to the form of personal experience in being dipolar: a positive that can be understood only after its negative implicit polarity has been recognized.

I would like to stress one element in this: the dependence of thought upon action, and the consequent role of action as the proper “positive” human polarity within which thought operates as a shaper.

If thought were autonomous, that is, if it did not arise from and serve action and relation, it might be possible to argue that the most important single principle of logic is that of contradiction: a statement may not simultaneously affirm and deny the same predicate. This is a beautiful principle for pure thought. But if thought and action are related in the manner indicated by Macmurray, something more is needed. Pure thought (that is, reflection that has no effect upon subsequent action, which has been abstracted from its environment of objective events) is a kind of short-circuit. This does not mean that all our thought *must* issue in action, or even that it *should* do so, but that thinking in general must have a constructive relation to activity, at least in the sense that by means of it we become a different sort of responder in the universe of otherness.

II

Now, between action and thought, speech stands as a unique mediator which participates in both. It gives expression to thought but does so in order to modify or constitute a relationship. It is thus firmly in a middle ground, and as such it is self-defeating unless it manages to do justice to both thought and action. This is the premise on which we base our proposal of what we shall call the principle of “contra-action”: *That speech is invalid which denies the possibility or effective reality of action.* Since action is a form of relation, moreover, a particular version of our non-action principle could be restated as, “That speech is invalid which denies the possibility or effective reality of relation,” and with this modification we are fully equipped to consider a couple of venerable examples of the fallacy of contra-action.

III

“*Tat tvam asi.*” In these few words, advocates of Advaita Vedanta affirm the

essential oneness of reality. Brahman is All, and that which is not Brahman simply is not. The serious depth of this non-dualism is indicated by the radical nature of the program designed to achieve the subjective state in which it is believed to be confirmed and fulfilled. As M. Hiriyanna puts it, "One that desires to realise *Brahman* should rise above the notions of obligation...and renounce the world completely."

The doctrines of non-dualism have undergone many philosophical assaults over the centuries, but from the perspective of Personal Logic, *Tat tvam asi* is simply an invalid proposition because when pure identity is affirmed of reality, there is no genuine relation possible, and therefore there is also no true action. There is no space for action to occur in Brahman, no otherness for relation to embrace, and therefore there cannot be speech, including the speech that denies its own possibility.

In other words, the sentence "Thou art It" or its corollaries denies the function and possibility of speech itself as a true relational event. Brahman might, of course, be speaking to itself, but if it is, it has divided itself (that is, reality) into subject and object and has established within itself the duality it seems intent on denying. More seriously, as the speech under consideration is often used persuasively by Vedantins, we must observe that the intention of the speech is then subverted by the meaning: if it were a true speaking there would be no object to persuade since the speech intends to deny duality. Thus, instead of being a transcendent mystification and the expression of a valuable experience, *Tat tvam asi* is disclosed as a fallacy.

It may be that a Vedantin will try to persuade me that I am wrong; he will show, perhaps, that my logical principle is based on an assumption he does not find it necessary to make, namely that action and relation are the primary realities of our existence. But I seem to have an advantage here. In the very act of trying to persuade me, he is violating his own premise. His argument will, therefore, turn against him and its form will deny its content. As persuasive act it will affirm my otherness and therefore the duality of persons present. Nor can he take shelter in the proposition that the trouble lies merely in logic: that logic is dualistic, but reality is not. For it is not only the logic of his argument that betrays him; the very need to argue does as much. Personal experience and personal logic together affirm a single fact: *that speech is invalid which denies the possibility or effective reality of action and relation.*

In summary: the principle of contradiction disqualifies a statement if its terms are found to be in mutual conflict. There may, however, be a statement which seems less than obviously contradictory, but which is fallacious because it represents contra-action. "Reality is not-two" is such a statement. This, as a diction, may be held to be contradictory, or it may be defended against this charge,

depending on certain assumptions of the respective combatants, but it can be shown without doubt to entail contra-action. As diction it seems to mean that there is no truth or reality in such distinctions as subject-object or subject-predicate, but if this diction is correct, there is a unitive reality which makes action impossible, since action requires distinction (at least of time and place), and since diction is an action, we obviously have a fallacy, not simply of contradiction, but specifically of contra-action, the species of contradiction most incompatible with personal value.

Recourse is sometimes had, by defenders of non-dualism, to a “two-level” theory of truth. There is the sphere of absolute, undivided, unqualified, distinctionless truth (Brahman) which is real-in-itself, and there is, in some fashion impossible to denominate precisely, a second or relative level of truth in which all experience of duality occurs. Such a device can hardly be taken seriously: it either destroys the non-dualist case by its blatant dualism, or it disaffirms its own meaning by reducing the relative level of truth to non-reality. If the absolute truth exists without containing distinctions, where can the other level be found to exist?

In brief: if discourse is possible at all, there is distinction. And any diction that denies distinction denies its own possibility, and is thus fallacious.

Let us next turn to a less blatant and more interesting example of what we are calling the fallacy of contra-action. The second century Buddhist, Nagarjuna (not to be confused with the later and intellectually less adequate Tantric author of the same name) developed a kind of dialectic which seemed to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of speech. He considered, for example, the basic questions of metaphysics, and concluded that his method had shown that no statement could be made, no position affirmed, without demonstrable error. As a consequence, he himself asserted a “non-position” which consisted of refuting all claims that might be made about reality, including the nihilistic or skeptical claims of nothingness and meaninglessness. In response to his critics he placed himself outside the range of their attacks: “If I would make (sic) any proposition whatever, then by that I would have a logical error; but I do not make proposition; therefore I am not in error.”³

It is instructive to look briefly at the route by which Nagarjuna reached this apparently unassailable point, and it will serve our purpose sufficiently if we consider his discussion of the notion of causality.

Nagarjuna’s dialectic is based on the conviction that there are four, and only four, possible states of being and, correspondingly, four possible relations to truth for any proposition. These are:

A is B (identity, or affirmation)

A is not B (difference, or negation)

A is and is not B (identity *and* difference; affirmation *and* negation)

A neither is nor is not B (not identity nor difference, affirmation nor negation).

In regard to causation, our philosopher found that there were schools of thought representing each of the options listed. There were those who said that cause and effect are identical; others taught that they are different; some said that they are identical in some respect and different in another; and finally there were those who said they were neither the same nor different. Now, Nagarjuna examined each of these possibilities in turn, and rejected them all. Among other difficulties, identity cannot be the relation of cause and effect because it cannot even be affirmed without the tacit admission of their difference. But difference cannot be true of them either, for if effect is quite other than cause, any effect might arise from any cause, but no cause could be expected to produce regularly a consistent effect. Neither can one say that effect is identical with cause in some respects and different in others, for this is to concede to the effect two "opposed" characteristics, which Buddhist logic will not tolerate. In any event, if one then asks of the identical and different aspects singly the question about their relation to the cause, they will each fall under one of the objections already raised. Nor can one fall back on the last of our options, for this amounts to a denial of any form of relation, and it either collapses through its inherent implausibility, or it is destroyed by the argument which intends to defend it, since any argument, even for non-relation of cause and effect, is an instance of cause and effect, the conclusion being the effect of the premises and their relation.

Nagarjuna's own conclusion now seemed self-evident. Nothing can be said about causality, since it clearly escapes every possible classification.

At first glance Nagarjuna's accomplishment may seem to be impenetrable. He who has demolished all the paths of speech and then refuses to affirm a proposition of his own must surely be safe. Second glances, however, are notoriously disillusioning. In the first place we may note that the effectiveness of the dialectical demolition of all conceptual options depends on a preconception about the nature of reality which is not universally shared. To put it simply, Nagarjuna's objections to the four relational options he recognizes all presuppose that reality and truth come to us in segments: that a "cause" is an isolable entity, a module of reality, and effect is similar. This is essentially a static view, and the entire dialectic built upon it falls into irrelevance if we take instead a *process* approach to things. If nothing simply "is" but everything is *becoming*, and we base our discussion on this fact, we find Nagarjuna to be playing in a different arena—and with a square ball! He is engaged in a language game we simply need not play. Our objection here is similar to Aristotle's dismissal of Zeno's famous riddle of Achilles and the tortoise: time and space may be arbitrarily divided into segments for purposes of measurement and convenience, but this is not their character and Achilles may indeed overtake a tortoise because the real nature of space and time is continuity, not segmentation.

Our present objection to Nagarjuna, however, is a little different. We are alerted to the fact that there is a problem in his dialectic precisely because it presents itself in a form of speech which claims some kind and degree of cogency. If cause and effect do not offer some real progression, there can be no valid argument at all: indeed, it is questionable whether Nagarjuna can frame a meaningful sentence. In short, Nagarjuna's dialectic is self-defeating and, in fact, betrays that fallacy of contra-action. If its conclusion (that no "position" can be held) were tenable, then not only is Nagarjuna correct in boldly affirming no proposition, but pure silence would be the only adequate mode of expression. After all, the affirmation that no position is possible is itself a position, and if Nagarjuna responds that he does not affirm this, but demonstrates it, we reply that the demonstration is an exercise in futility, for the dismissal of all the ways of speech makes the dismissing act itself untenable.

Silence is the apparent "end" of Nagarjuna's dialectic: but pure silence is sufficient only if reality is absolutely without distinction. Now we are back with the sort of objection we made to "*Tat tvam asi*": if non-distinction is the truth, there is no one with whom Nagarjuna might converse; if there is conversing, then distinction is a fact not only affirmed, but actually constituted in part, by the conversation. If the distinction is an illusion, either nothing exists except the illusion (which Nagarjuna would certainly not want to admit) or the illusion is suffered by some consciousness, and therefore a distinction between the illusion and its host is unavoidable.

To conclude: our response to Nagarjuna amounts, in brief, to this. If the cause and effect relation (among others) cannot be "said" then the argument in support of his conclusion is itself invalid and speech is silenced. But this contention can be taken seriously only by him who never speaks. When the ineffectiveness of speech is affirmed, it is denied. And since the act of speaking and persuading (speech as cause leading to the hope of conversion as effect) is denied by the act itself, we have another instance of the fallacy of contra-action.

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