

Conceivability

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Abstract:

For various reasons grounded in their articulation and conceptualization, objects and contentions can be inconceivable. Proper conceptualizing requires an adequate apprehension of meaning. But while there indeed are objects and contentions that are inconceivable to given individuals and groups, we (obviously) cannot give any concrete examples of items inconceivable to ourselves.

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1. Conceiving facts

For the most part we do not make facts: generally they are just “out there,” beyond our reach and control. All that we can do is to think about them. But alike in making and in thinking about them we must have a conception of the facts.

The human mind has two principal cognitive powers: to image possibilities and to adjudicate realities, enabling it to deal with fact and fiction alike. In a way possibility-management is the more fundamental. After all if it's not possible then it can't possibly be real, and if it's not conceivable by us then we can't possibly accept it as actual. (All this is not, however, to say that if we cannot conceive of it that it can't be actual—reality and possibility alike can hold very big surprises for us.)

Conceivability is a matter of the possibilities that people are in a position to contemplate given the concepts and beliefs at their disposal. It relates to both facts and fictions. A four-sided triangle is inconceivable, one that is small and red is not. The concepts and beliefs at our disposal set our conceptual horizons. They delimit the range of our cognitive domain beyond which there lies what is, for us, mere *terra incognita*.

Epistemologists have focused on our knowledge of the real and have pretty well left possibility to the logicians. But the logicians have left the epistemology of possibility to others: their concern has been with what actually *is* possible, and have omitted concern for how we conduct the applicative business of leaning and reasoning about it. The present discussion will offer some comments on this rather neglected theme.

Conceivability calls for being available as an object of meaningful thought. It is not a matter of imagining or picturing. One cannot picture or imagine thousand-sided polygon but can certainly

conceive in describing it and supposing its possibility. Conceivability is sometimes mis-equated to understandability based on an insufficient knowledge. (“I cannot conceive how she came to realize that he disliked her—he was such a good actor.” Here you can certainly conceive of its being so: it is just that you don’t know how it came to be.)

Some conceptions have to be formed systematically—they ramify out into related issues whose co-understanding they presuppose. To have a proper conception of a propeller one needs some understanding of the technology of early airplanes; To have a proper conception of an electron one need some understanding of subatomic physics.

As construed here, conceivability is the prospect of entertaining something as a meaningful possibility. Two sorts of items can be inconceivable to a person: things and facts. A thing is effectively inconceivable to someone if its definitive features are wholly outside that person’s experience. (A Polynesian cannot conceive of solid water (i.e., ice), Aristotle could not conceive of X-rays.) A fact is inconceivable to someone when they have totally unshakable belief in its contrary. (Pigs that can fly like bats or bees are inconceivable to most of us.) For individuals the personally inconceivable is either (or both) foreign to established experience or contrary to absolutely certain conviction.

The truths we contemplate may well not actually *characterize* reality, but rather be related to its constitution in more complex and indirect ways. For example we can have:

- negative truths (“No cats talk.”)
- vague truths (“He looked thirtyish.”)
- inexact truths (“It looks something like this.”)
- approximate truth (“the table is roughly 32 inches wide.”)
- indefinite truths (“She looked pleased.”)
- possibilistic truths (“It might rain.”)
- impressionistic truths (“They were lucky.”)
- metaphorical truths (“It was a veritable bonanza.”)

No doubt such truths will be so in virtue of what the facts are. But they certainly do not *characterize* the real facts. Thus truths can be indefinite. But reality cannot; It must be concrete (rather than an abstract), definite (rather than vague, approximate, etc.), and positive (rather than negative), whereas truths need not be any of these. Thus truths do not *correspond* to what the realities are, although their being truths is (loosely) dependent upon it of that. All truths have their “truth-makers” in reality—that is, there is (and must be) a “basis in concrete fact” for every truth—an aspect of reality in virtue of which that truth is true.

To *characterize* reality—to “agree” with it—would be to give an accurate representation of it that is correct and complete in all relevant detail. Thus only a detailed (precise, exact, accurate) account of something can actually correspond to the reality of it. And this is something which our

language-framed statements about the real—however true—almost invariably fail to achieve. An account that is vague, imprecise, approximate, fuzzy, or the like may well be *true* but nevertheless not be accurately consonant with it. The truth in general falls well short of the detailed accuracy that would be required here. No doubt the truth is *grounded* in reality, and concurs with it. But it certainly need not and often will not *correspond* to it.

Seeing that our true contentions regarding reality are generally indefinite (vague, ambiguous, metaphorical, etc.) whereas reality itself is always definite (precise, detailed, concrete), it follows that those truths of ours do not—cannot—give an adequate (faithful, accurate, precisely correct) account or representation of reality. It is a merciful fact of life in human communication that truth can be told without the determinative detail of precision, accuracy, and the like, required for an accurate representation of the facts. Reality’s detail involves more than we can generally manage. We can achieve the truth and nothing but the truth, but the whole truth about something is always beyond our grasp.

There was a time when it was fashionable for English Hegelian philosophers such as Bernard Bosanquet to say that only the accurate truth is the real truth and that the real truth of things must be altogether exact and fully detailed. But this contention would involve us in critical errors of omission regarding reality. Thus we would not be able to declare the truth that grass is green or the sky is blue. And moreover we would lose the crucial principles that the logico-conceptual consequences of the truth must also be true, seeing that the inference from “There are 48 people in the room” to its vague logical consequence “There are several dozen people in the room” would now not qualify as correct, since the later would not qualify as a truth. The truth is one thing, and the *precise* truth or the *exact* truth quite another.¹ Our truths need surely not convey the detailed nature of the realities that make them so. But in the end we cannot come to cognitive grips with reality save via our true acceptance about it.

2. Inconceivability

Certain considerations may be inconceivable to someone owing to having mistaken ideas on the subject or because certain matters do not fall within the range of their experience. This sort of subjective (person-relative) inconceivability is not at issue here. We are here concerned only with inconceivability relative to meaningful conceptions and correct convictions, matters inconceivable on the basis of correct and adequate information.

And there is also the impersonal or generic conceivability characteristic of the typical and representative members of the group. Generic inconceivability is not a matter of what a particular individual can manage in thought but of what can be managed in rational thought as such. Items that are inconceivable include a greatest integer, a fastest motion, a largest circle—things whose very identification include a contradiction in terms. But either way personal or generic, conceivability requires experiential access and consonant belief.

We must, however, distinguish between subjectively person-relative conceivability, which is a function of a particular individual's knowledge and objective or culture-relative conceivability which is a function of language and cognitive state of the art. Both alike set limits but they differ in that the former are personal and the latter societal. From the theoretical point of view it is the latter that are paramount, and our focus will be on groups rather than individuals, and principles rather than people.

There are three principal levels of inconceivability/conceivability:

I. *Grammatical*. Meaningless gibberish: having not informative sense (“Twas brillig . . .”) Violation: Meaninglessness.

II. *Logico-Conceptual*. At odds with what is to be seen as absolutely necessary. (“A day without hours; a four-sided triangle; a sphere without a center.”) Violation: Incoherence.

III. *Factual*. Inconsistent with what is seen as a patent and necessary fact. “A talking tree; a brass banana.” Violation: Unacceptability.

Rather different modes of necessity/possibility are at issues with II and III. No. II deals with absolute or logico-conceptual necessity/possibility (\square and \diamond). This is the way in which it is necessary for triangles to have vertices or a bird to have wings. By contrast, III is the way in which it is necessary for animals to secure nourishment in order to survive or for fires to have oxygen in order to burn. These envision the sort of necessity involved in accommodating to the workings of the actual world (\boxplus and \boxtimes). In this sense of the term the basic laws of nature provides the basis for necessity.

One cannot or course give an illustrative example of something that is in principle inconceivable because presenting it defeats the very purpose.

And inconceivable theses cannot sensibly be maintained as informative truths, they can only be maintained, if at all, as suppositions or hypothesis. In failing to make tenable assertions and convey a meaningful message they fail to fall under the descriptivity of correct/incorrect (and similarly probable, plausible, and the like). Its unintelligibility precludes it from qualifying for those evaluative assessments which—like the proceeding—are applicable only to propositions able to make a coherent claim of some sort. And only meaningful propositions (claims) can have a truth status—be it actually or even by assumption or supposition. Incomprehensible (and thereby meaningless) discourse cannot even be assured to be true or false. Its lack of truth status is unconditional and unavoidable.

In actual fact claims to the realization of something inconceivable are always untenable and false. However here as elsewhere error is possible. Someone ill-informed can certainly think (mistakenly) that something inconceivable is real. It is clear that something can be acceptable to one person and not to another. Thus when one person is better informed than another they can differ

in regard to conceivability—either way. If x does not realize that squaring the circle is impossible he mistakenly conceive of someone (perhaps himself) having solved the problem. On the other hand if x does not realize that black swans are possible, he may mistakenly regard the prospect of a black-swan dinner as inconceivable.

3. Meaninglessness

Logic deals with the truth-relationships among propositions. But before there is truth there must be meaning. And the *bête noir* in this regard is meaninglessness.

Meaninglessness is a malfunction of communication, something that results when our apparatus of communication does not manage to do its intended job.

There are several importantly distinct ways in which a statement can be meaningless, although all of them are alike in basing what is said on a presupposition that is simply false.

One mode of meaninglessness results from asserting absolute gibberish. “The number three ate yellow.” We cannot even begin to make sense of this. This is *assertoric* meaninglessness, the failure to make any intelligible contention whatsoever. The mistaken presupposition here is that meaninglessness can be achieved simply by stringing words together grammatically. The senselessness of such gibberish that one can make neither heads nor tails of is the most drastic mode of meaninglessness. All of its other modes are at least minimally intelligible in that what is being said is sufficiently intelligible that one can comprehend the senselessness of it.

A prime form of such meaninglessness is *categorical* in nature and consists in ascribing to something a certain type some feature that items of its category simply cannot have, as for example assigning a physical location to numbers (one cannot position the number three at the North Pole) or ascribing a color to obligations (one cannot have a yellow duty toward one’s children).

A further form of meaninglessness is *conceptual* in making statements that conflict with the established meaning of words. Thus consider such statements as “John’s spouse is unmarried” or “Two’s double is an odd number.”

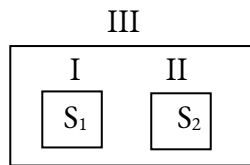
Then too, meaninglessness obtains when any attempt to class a statement either as true or as false results in failure because a contradiction results either way. This is *alethic* meaninglessness, the failure to have any determinate truth status. The classically paradoxical self-contradictory thesis “This statement is false” is an example.

Yet another mode of meaninglessness is the *delusional* which presupposes as existent something that just is not there. Examples are such statements as “The present king of France is bald” or “Noplace is the capital of Antarctica.”

A further pathway to meaninglessness is by purporting the existence of something that not only does not but actually cannot exist. “The prime number between five and seven.” or “The product of three multiplied by an even divisor of seven” are examples. This is *referential* meaninglessness, rooted in the in-principle unavoidable nonexistence something that the statements purport to characterize.

Why is it that meaningfulness statements can and should be dismissed from serious consideration without much further ado? We do so for reasons of *cognitive economy*. We thereby spare ourselves from any further fruitless effort to deal with the matter.

Are self-contradictory statements meaningless? It all depends. Individually self-contradictory statements are indeed meaningless. There is nothing we can do with such statements as “The pair of them consisted of three items.” But by way of contrast consider the example of the three boxes I, II, III:



Now let it be that that S₁ is:

The statement in Box II is true, but some statement in Box III is false.

Suppose S₁ is true. Then so (according to S₁ itself) is S₂. But with S₁ and S₂ both true, all the statements in Box III are true, so S₁ is false. Since S₁-true entails S₁-false, S₁ is self-contradictory and thus false.

S₁'s falsity means that not-S₁ will be true. But by the content of S₁ we have:

$$\sim S_1 \text{ iff } \sim S_2 \vee [S_1 \ \& \ S_2]$$

Since S₁ & S₂ is inescapably false by the reasoning indicated above, we have: $\sim S_1$ iff $\sim S_2$. So the falsity of S₁ constrains that of S₂. That is, S₂ will be false *irrespective of what it is that S₂ asserts*. But this is absurd and we can make no stable sense of this paradoxical situation.

It must be stressed, however, that those individual sentences S₁ and S₂ are not really meaningless. After all, their meaning is essential to the derivation of the paradox. Moreover, if you change one of them, the other can become perfectly meaningful. What is meaningless here is the whole complex—the entirety of what is being asserted. The difficulty of meaningful construal is collective not distributive. Individually regarded the meaningfulness of those statements is incontestable.

A very special sort of purported lack of “meaning” is at issue with the “empirical meaningfulness” purported by the logical positivists of the 1930s. For them, a proposition was “meaningless” in the sense of failing to admit of observational disinformation. In adopting this line, they thought they could demolish traditional metaphysics by dismissing it as meaningless nonsense. Unfortunately, for this program, it came to light all too soon that a whole host of perfectly meaningful scientific statements would have to be classed as empirically meaningless, so that the baby was being thrown out along with the bath water. For it is clear that discursive verification will

be unavailable with statements about the remote past or future, or such generalizations as “*X* will never happen” or “Caesar would have left the Rubicon uncrossed had he wanted to” and many other sorts of statements whose meaning is intelligible and whose truth is plausible.²

It is tempting to dismiss as meaningless those claims that we simply do not understand—to blame the message, as it were, for our own lack of comprehension. Many or most of us would not hesitate to adopt this line in relation to the explanation that Chinese adepts of acupuncture use in explaining their practice. And while such an argument may well be appropriate, one should nevertheless proceed with caution in these matters. For it is one of the most fundamental facts of epistemology that to those who proceed at a lesser level of understanding the proceedings of their higher-level interlocutors are bound to seem like magic, and that the discussion promising technical experts unable seems gibberish to the uninitiated.

As already noted, meaningfulness is a mode of malfunction. And as such it is a phenomenon that is both inevitable and instructive. It is inevitable because anything that can be used can also be misused. And it is instructive because in looking to the boundaries between the potential pursue of an instrumentality we shed light on the nature of its proper use.

4. The corrigibility of conceptions

It must be stressed that these deliberations regarding cognitive inadequacy are less concerned with the correctness of our particular claims about real things than with our characterizing conceptions of them. And in this connection it deserves stressing that there is a significant and substantial difference between a true or correct statement or contention on the one hand, and a true or correct conception on the other. To make a true contention about a thing we merely need to get one particular fact about it straight. To have a true conception of the thing, on the other hand, we must get all of the important facts about it straight. And it is clear that this involves a certain normative element—namely what the “important” or “essential” facets of something are.

Anaximander of Miletus presumably made many correct contentions about the sun in the fifth century B.C.—for example, that its light is brighter than that of the moon. But Anaximander’s conception of the sun (as the flaming spoke of a great wheel of fire encircling the earth) was totally wrong.

To assure the correctness of our conception of a thing we would have to be sure—as we very seldom are—that nothing further can possibly come along to upset our view of just what its important features are and just what their character is. Thus, the qualifying conditions for true conceptions are far more demanding than those for true claims. With a correct contention about a thing, all is well if we get the single relevant aspect of it right, but with a correct conception of it we must get the essentials right—we must have an overall picture that is basically correct. And this is something we generally cannot ascertain, if only because we cannot say with secure confidence what actually is really important or essential before the end of the proverbial day.

With conceptions—unlike propositions or contentions—incompleteness means incorrectness, or at any rate presumptive incorrectness. Having a correct or adequate conception of something as the object it is requires that we have all the important facts about it right. But since the prospect of discovering further important facts can never be eliminated, the possibility can never be eliminated that matters may so eventuate that we may ultimately (with the wisdom of hindsight) acknowledge the insufficiency or even inappropriateness of our earlier conceptions. A conception based on incomplete data must be assumed to be at least partially incorrect. If we can decipher only half an inscription, our conception of its overall content must be largely conjectural—and thus must be presumed to contain an admixture of error. When our information about something is incomplete, obtaining an overall picture of the thing at issue becomes a matter of theorizing, or guesswork, however sophisticatedly executed. And then we have no alternative but to suppose that this overall picture falls short of being wholly correct in various (unspecifiable) ways. With conceptions, falsity can thus emerge from errors of omission as well as those of commission, resulting from the circumstance that the information at our disposal is merely incomplete, rather than actually false (as would have to be the case with contentions).

To be sure, an inadequate or incomplete *description* of something is not thereby false—the statements we make about it may be perfectly true as far as they go. But an inadequate or incomplete *conception* of a thing is ipso facto one that we have no choice but to presume to be incorrect as well,³ seeing that where there is incompleteness we cannot justifiably take the stance that it relates only to inconsequential matters and touches notion important. Accordingly, our conceptions of particular things are always to be viewed not just as cognitively *open-ended* but as *corrigible* as well.

We are led back to the thesis of the great idealist philosophers (Spinoza, Hegel, Bradley, Royce) that human knowledge inevitably falls short of “perfected science” (the Idea, the Absolute), and must be presumed deficient both in its completeness and its correctness.⁴

5. A “logic” of inconceivability

The notion of a “logic of inconceivability” would seem to be a contradiction in terms. For logic looks to what must (or cannot) be true if something related is accepted (or rejected) as such. It deals in relationships among claims in the face of their actual status as true or false—be it actual of assumptive. Any discussion which by virtue of inconceivability lacks a definite truth-status falls outside logic as traditionally conceived.

There are, however, some cognate issues. To facilitate our deliberations we shall assume that our person variables x, y, z etc. will range over limited—that is, finite—intelligences at the level of homo sapiens. And we shall adopt the convention that:

Cp abbreviates “ p is conceivable,” that is it is possible for a human of ordinary intelligence to access the meaning of p ; and Cxp abbreviates “ p is conceivable to x .”

Given that Cxp abbreviates “x’s having a meaningful conception of p ,” we will have it that:

$$Cp = p \text{ is conceivable} = \diamond(\exists x)Cxp$$

And note that this neither states nor entails $(\exists x)\diamond Cxp$. The conceivability at issue need not be realizable by some actual person. Also, when one can conceive of p one can conceive of not- p as well, with the result that Cxp iff $Cx\sim p$. (And note, moreover, that by using \diamond rather than \heartsuit in equating Cp with $\diamond(\exists x)Cxp$ we take purely theoretical rather than effectively practical conceivability into view.)

An assertion may be made with or without affirmative intent. In the former (deliberately affirmative) case the object is to endorse what the assertion maintains, in the second (merely deliberative) case the object is only to pose the assertion as an item of consideration.

In the context of the present deliberations the assertions represented by the variables p, q, r , etc. are also to encompass those made in the merely deliberative rather than substantively affirmative mode. An assertion so made is not being stated as a true affirmation, but merely put forward for consideration. And since the range of our assertion-variables, p, q, r , etc. encompasses conceivable proposition in general, so that assertions come to be coordinate with conceivability rather than actual truth. In the context of the present deliberations we thus do not have the Tarski equivalence:

$$p \text{ iff } |p| = T.$$

Instead all we have is:

If p then Cp , though not always conversely, since we have:

$$Cp \leftrightarrow \diamond(\exists x)Cxp$$

There now follows:

$$\sim Cp \leftrightarrow \Box(\forall x)\sim Cxp \text{ and thereby also } \sim Cp \leftrightarrow \Box(\forall x)\sim Cx\sim p$$

Accordingly, that which is inherently inconceivable must be so of necessity for anyone.

It transpires that any claims whose prerequisites or consequence are inconceivable will themselves qualify as such. Thus $p \vdash q$ and Cp , then $C(q)$; and also if $p \vdash q$ and Cq , then $\sim Cq$. (As usual, \vdash here represents logico-conceptual entailment.) Moreover impossible or impossibility-entailing claims are not conceivable:

$$\text{If } p \vdash q \ \& \ \sim\diamond q, \text{ then } \sim Cxp$$

These principles provide for the rudiments of a quasi-logic of conceivability.

6. Inconceivable possibilities

But are there actually—can there really be—such things as inconceivable objects, facts, or possibilities? Of course one cannot provide examples. But it is clear on general principles that such items must exist. For we humans have to conduct our conceptualizing business by means of language. And more linguistic formulation is a recursive process—explanatory claims for a finite vocabulary via finite grammatical principles—we can realize at most a denumerable number of experience. But there is no good reason to think that items, facts, and possibilities are not similarly limited. So—as in *Musical Chairs*—when the music of language stops there will yet remain unaccommodated possibilities. The range of what is theoretically conceivable outnumbers the reach of what can possibly be realized.

And so the idea of identificatory vagrancy considered in the preceding chapter comes into play at this point. We can conceive and indeed be convinced *that* there is an integer no-one ever specifically thinks of; but of course we cannot conceive *of* this integer as the specific individual it is.

Moreover actually conceiving of things is something personal and potentially idiosyncratic. But conceivability as such is something impersonal and objective inherent in the nature of the issues involved and the possibilities of conceptual operation. And even as a chasm may be bridgeable without ever being bridged, so an idea or circumstance may be conceivable without ever being conceived of. Conceivability is a matter of the possibilities of conceptualization: what actually happens within the contingent eventuations of the real world is irrelevant. What individuals can manage to conceive of in practice is a fraction of their range of experience. But what is conceivable in principle is something above and beyond the capabilities of individuals.

But would there actually be a bridgeable chasm if no bridge were ever built—and indeed if the very idea of a bridge were never even conceived of? The answer is of course affirmative. The domain of possibility—possibilities of bridging and conceiving included—is independent of and detached from what actually happens in the world. The bridges we build and the concepts we entertain are products of our doings. But the associated possibilities of things are independent of us. Of course the contemplation and entertainment of these possibilities is a matter of reality and actualization. But not so with the possibilities themselves that are at issue. It is noteworthy and significant that we possess a faculty of imaginative thought that enable us to enter a realm of abstract possibilities whose being we do not produce and whose features we discover rather than create. Like the real word itself, the realm of possibility that lies open to our conception is not of our making but is an independent manifold that we can contemplate but not produce. What we *do* conceive of is up to us, but what we *can* conceive of is not.

Appendix

An assertion may be made with or without affirmative intent. In the former (deliberatively affirmative) case the object is to endorse what the assertion maintains, in the second (merely deliberative) case the object is to make it an object of consideration.

In the context of the present deliberations the assertions represented by the variables p, q, r , etc. are to include statements made in the merely deliberative rather than specifically affirmative mode. An assertion so stated is not being denied as a true affirmation but merely put forward for consideration. In this context the Tarski equivalence

$$p \text{ iff } |p| = T$$

does not hold. For this deliberative contention may turn out to be inconceivable and meaningless.

Any statement that has a definite truth value as T or F (rather than an indecisive *tertium datur*) must be conceivable, and conversely.

Thus

$$(1) \quad Cp \text{ iff } (|p| = T \vee |p| = F)$$

But suppose we were to adopt the Tarski Principle that

$$p \text{ iff } |p| = T \text{ (and correspondingly } \sim p \text{ iff } |p| = F)$$

Then of course (1) will come to

$$Cp \text{ iff } (p \vee \sim p)$$

This would entail $(\forall p)Cp$. In view of our determination to accept even meaningless claims as objects of consideration this result is unacceptable. Thus the implementability of this result betokens a determination but it postulates that the present diagram be limited to conceivable propositions. In the context of the present deliberations the Tarski Principle must be put into suspension.

Endnotes:

1. For relevant material see also the author's *Metaphysics: The Key Issues From a Realistic Perspective* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), pp. 101-104.
2. See C. G. Hempel, "Problems and Changes in the Empiricists Criterion of Meaning." *Révue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 4 (1950), pp. 41-63.
3. Compare F. H. Bradley's thesis: "Error is truth, it is partial truth, that is false only because partial and left incomplete" *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), p. 169.
4. The author's *Empirical Inquiry* (Totowa NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982) discusses further relevant issues.

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