PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTIONS – WHAT KIND OF CURIOUS ENTITIES ARE THEY?

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As far as I know, no Swedish philosophy department teaches anything about the concept of performative contradiction. Nor can one find an explanation of the concept in the Swedish Wikipedia; let it be noted, though, that the English Wikipedia has a very condensed explanation. Therefore, in this essay, I want to say a few words about the concept and its brief history, starting with the latter.[1]

1. The History of the Concept

The term "performative contradiction" became rather well-known in certain parts of Western philosophy and social science in the 1980s and 1990s. Mostly thanks to the very renowned German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who, despite emphasizing the importance of communicative consensus-building, is not a knowledge relativist. Among other things, he used the concept of performative contradictions to launch a general attack on the postmodernist and poststructuralist knowledge nihilists of the time. He argued that they were guilty of performative contradictions in that they used individual rational argumentative loops to demonstrate that all rational discourse is illusory. In other words: With rational arguments, they believed they could prove that reason does not exist. The description "Reason says that reason does not exist" has the same structure as the description of the paradigmatic performative contradiction "He says that he lacks the ability to speak" (see section 2).

About the same thing was also at the time claimed by another German philosopher (and close friend of Habermas), Karl-Otto Apel (d. 2017). However, there is a difference between them that is worth remembering. Apel is, so to speak, a fundamentalist (in his own terminology: transcendental pragmatist) and believes that anyone who commits a performative contradiction has demonstrably claimed something incorrect, while Habermas sees the existence of a performative contradiction in a thinker as a reason to investigate whether something is wrong somewhere in the thinker's overall philosophy; that is, he views performative contradictions as a heuristic tool. The discussion surrounding Habermas' views has continued to this day, although for a long time with significantly diminished intensity. Habermas says he has borrowed the concept of performative contradiction from Apel, who says he has borrowed it from the Finnish philosopher Jaakko Hintikka (d. 2015), whom I will return to in section 4.

2. Paradigmatic performative contradictions

When discussing *logical contradictions*, the originator of the contradictory statement is always abstracted away. The identified logical contradiction must exist within the internal semantic-syntactic structure of the statement. To understand what a *performative contradiction* is, one must not perfunctorily abstract away the external originator of the statement. The entire semantic-pragmatic structure must be taken into account.

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[1] I have previously written about performative contradictions in section 3 of the paper "Performatives and Antiperformatives" (2003) and in chapter 3 of the book *Free Will and Evolution* (2023), in Swedish 2022.

Performative contradictions are most easily noted in certain cases where two people are speaking to each other face to face. Suppose one person says, "I lack the ability to speak." The other person then hears a statement whose supposed truth is contradicted by the existence of the very utterance in which the statement has been presented. This is a paradigmatic performative contradiction.

Performative contradictions should not be confused with communication that contains so-called double bind messages. In these, one thing is claimed in a statement (e.g., "How nice to see you!") while the opposite is shown in body language (e.g., a very distancing bodily behavior). The body language and the statement are here clearly separated in a way that the utterance and the statement in a performative contradiction are not. In a paradigmatic performative contradiction, the statement is spatiotemporally exemplified by the utterance itself.

However, it is not only utterances that can contain performative contradictions. Suppose two children are having fun communicating through written notes that they pass to each other across the table they are sitting at. If one of them writes "I have lost the ability to write," then a performative contradiction arises. What is claimed on the note is contradicted by the sequence of actions that the recipient of the note saw the sender perform.

The same thing can also occur between two individuals who do not directly hear or see each other. It is enough that they silently take things for granted about the other. Assume that two individuals are chatting with each other via their computers. If one of them suddenly writes, "I have lost the ability to write," a performative contradiction arises for the other, unless, of course, the other suspects it is a joke.

Here are two other examples of performatively contradictory utterances: "I am dead" and "I have forgotten all, really all, my English." The examples I have used are utterances made in the first person, and this is no accidence. If they are changed to statements about a person other than the speaker, the contradiction disappears. The following claims are statements whose truth value can be empirically determined with the speaker abstracted away: "He lacks the ability to speak," "She has lost the ability to write," "He is dead," and "She has forgotten all, really all, her English."

The absurdity of performative contradictions often becomes clear when one describes the situation in which the performative contradiction presents itself from an observer's perspective. Here are some examples: "He says that he lacks the ability to speak," "He says that he is dead," and "She says in English that she has completely forgotten all her English."

The examples above are without deeper philosophical interest, even though they are of some semantic-pragmatic interest. However, philosophical positions are sometimes also presented without their propounders finding a need to discuss whether their writings and/or oral presentations contain or lead to performative contradictions. But this usually does not mean, as in the paradigmatic cases, that the performative contradiction manifests itself in a *single utterance*. It rather emerges through the character of a series of utterances or through more than merely speech or writing acts. I call this type of performative contradiction speech act transcending.

3. Performative contradictions that go beyond single speech acts

I will give three examples of speech act transcending performative contradictions. In contemporary philosophy, I have encountered all three: (a) a complete denial of all commonsensical personal identity, (b) a complete denial of all knowledge of an external reality, and (c) a complete denial of ordinary free will. For the sake of pedagogy, I now directly address you, the reader.

(a) Assume that you are discussing with a philosopher who intensely argues that no enduring egos exist. Everything ego-like that exists consists only of temporarily existing distinct mental

states that follow upon one another in time. During the short time that you are discussing, the philosopher does not produce any performative contradictions. Assume further, however, that you find out that they are always eager to have their name on everything they write and to collect royalties for their published books. Also, assume that they are very interested in how criminals should be punished, i.e., what future consequences a person´s criminal actions should have. Then you have two possible interpretations. Either, you think that the philosopher does not notice that in everyday life they perform actions that for their meaningfulness require a certain enduring personal identity of both the author and the criminals, implying that they do not notice their speech act transcending performative contradictions. Or, you say that the philosopher, despite their intense engagement in discussions, never intended to influence any traditional everyday actions. Personally, in such situations, I have often found the first option to be the most likely.

(b) Assume that you are discussing with a philosopher who intensely claims that empirical knowledge of an external world simply does not exist. All that exists are people's temporarily existing beliefs. During the short time you are discussing, the philosopher does not produce any performative contradictions in the conversation. But, suppose further, that you find out that they always tries to gather information about the doctor's education and probable competence before medical examinations. Then you have two interpretive possibilities. Either, you conclude that the philosopher does not realize that in their everyday life they perform actions that seem to presuppose that they believe that medical knowledge exists, thus not acknowledging their performative contradiction. Or, you conclude that the philosopher, despite their intense engagement in the discussion, never intended to influence anyone's everyday actions. Personally, in such situations, I have often found the first option to be the most likely.

(c) Assume that you are discussing with a philosopher who is arguing intensely against you that the will is not free. They claim that everything that happens and occurs, both what we call events and what we call actions, happens in accordance with deterministic or indeterministic (probabilistic) laws of some kind. However, assume further that you find out that the philosopher you are discussing with really wants you through his or her argumentation to voluntarily abandon your belief that we sometimes have a little bit of free will. For example, trying to bribe you or using hypnosis to make you change your opinion would be horrendous and something completely alien to the philosopher. There are then two interpretive possibilities for you. Either, you tell yourself that the philosopher does not realize that they want to make you – regardless of the laws they believe govern the world – want to change your opinion, and thus, without noticing it, exhibits a speech act transcending performative contradiction. From an observer's perspective, one could say that they argue that argumentation in the usual sense is a chimera. Or, you tell yourself that the philosopher, despite their intense engagement in your discussion, never really intended to try to make you by an act of free will change your opinion. Personally, in such situations, I have often found the first option to be the most likely.

4. Performative contradictions in solitary thinkers

Performative contradictions can only arise in communicative situations where a statement is made in the first person. Usually, such situations involve several people, but as is well-known, a person can also talk and discuss with themselves (although it is unusual to say that they are communicating with themselves). And even for such solitary thinkers, performative contradictions can arise, as the thinker often moves back and forth between a first-person perspective and an observer perspective on their own first-person perspective. I take you, the reader, as an example.

Suppose you have started to ponder what you can doubt. You think of one invented claim after another and ask yourself if you can doubt the statement in question; that is, you ask yourself whether you can at least temporarily consider the statement to be false even though

you might actually believe it to be true. Simple empirical claims and natural laws do not pose much of a problem for you, and you can manage to doubt logical and mathematical truths with the help of (albeit far-fetched) assumptions about how your brain might have deceived you. But then, in one of those moments when you try to doubt everything, you come to think of the statement "Right now, at least one part of me, my doubting-thought, exists." Can you doubt this? The statement is not a logical truth. The logical form is the same as in "Right now, at least one part of X, X's doubting-thought, exists," which is not a logical truth. But if I were in your situation, I still couldn't doubt the statement. If you agree with me, you can, like me, ask yourself whether it is possible to characterize this doubt-impossibility.

My answer is that it is possible. You have, in your (and I in mine) solitary thinking, encountered a performative contradiction. The content of the statement you are contemplating is contradicted by the very act of thought (the silent utterance) through which the statement has entered your mental realm. From my observer perspective, I can describe you like this: "You are currently trying to doubt that you are currently doubting." And it seems to me an absurd effort. Furthermore, you can also, in hindsight, when you reflect on what you have previously silently uttered, come to the same conclusion.

Readers who are familiar with Descartes' famous sentence "I think, therefore I am" ("Cogito, ergo sum") have probably already made associations to it. And this is no accidence. I believe that Descartes' sentence (slightly modified), despite the use of the word "therefore," is not best understood as from the premise "I think" making an inference to the conclusion "I exist," but rather as an insight that doubting the statement "At this moment, at least part of me, my doubting-thinking, exists" constitutes a performative contradiction. And that because of this, the statement "I am thinking/doubting now, therefore a certain part of me exists now" must be considered undeniably true at the moment of thinking it.

What I have said here in section 4 is not solely my own creation. It essentially goes back – though not in its terminology – to Hintikka's essay "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" (1962).

5. Concluding Remarks

Just as certain philosophical questions can be raised in relation to the concept of logical contradictions, some philosophical questions can of course be raised in relation to the concept of performative contradictions. However, where such contradictions represent a blank spot on the philosophical map, it is logically impossible even to begin to discuss them.[2]

Literature

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