

## PRAGMATIC PARADOXES

IN MIND of January this year, Mr. Cohen attempts to deal with the "Pragmatic Paradoxes" put forward by Professor O'Connor in July, 1948. It seems to me that both Mr. Cohen and Professor O'Connor have overlooked the real confusion in one of these paradoxes, at least.

Professor O'Connor gave as an example the statement "I remember nothing at all" which is not logically self-contradictory and not merely factually false; and although it could not conceivably be true because I must at least remember the proper use of the English sentence "I remember nothing at all" it is not like the statement "I am lying now", which raises puzzles by self-reference.

Mr. Cohen considers that the paradox alleged to be involved in the statement "I remember nothing at all" arises from an ambiguity of the word "statement". Thus, within the meaning of this word he distinguishes "utterance" from "proposition" in such a way that the same proposition can be uttered at different times, so that the proposition "I remember nothing at all" might conceivably be true if a record of it made by me were played at my funeral, because then I might truly be said not to remember the correct use of the English sentence "I remember nothing at all", or indeed anything else. (It should be noted that this post-mortem performance is necessary to Mr. Cohen's elucidation and that no other would serve.)

I shall not here dispute the necessity of making his distinction between "proposition" and "utterance" for some purposes, but I do want to question whether it is of any use in connexion with the statement "I remember nothing at all".

It seems to me that the egocentric particular "I" can only be used sensibly by a living person of himself.<sup>1</sup> When the gramophone record is played at my funeral whom or what does "I" denote? Normally "I" denotes the person speaking. Here the gramophone "utters" the proposition and yet "I" could not sensibly be said to denote the gramophone; at the most it could denote the person who made the record *at the time at which the record was made* and certainly not my corpse at the time at which the record was played. Possibly if "I" were regarded as a proper name irrespective of context or if the gramophone could point to my corpse there might be some reason for supposing it to denote my corpse but even here there are difficulties. It would be necessary for the "I" denoted to be the same as the "I" denoted by me when I made the record; and part of what "I" denotes when I use it of my living self may be held to be the very thing whose absence is now demanded—my remembering or my "consciousness" or at least

<sup>1</sup> Except in quotation, e.g. "He said, 'I remember nothing at all'"—a usage which is irrelevant here.

my ability to use or understand the English language. It is probably not sensible to say of my dead body either that it remembers something or that it remembers nothing : it has ceased to be the kind of thing that, as far as we can know by any normal means, could remember—or be denoted by “I”. On the other hand, as Mr. Cohen points out, if the gramophone were to utter the proposition “He (or that) remembers nothing at all”, even if it could be taken to be a sensible statement about my corpse, this would embody no paradox whether I were dead or alive.

Mr. Cohen's solution then appears to be unsatisfactory in two ways for (1) we should not think it sensible to use “I” to denote a corpse because the use of “I” is restricted to use by, and of, living persons, and (2) even if we could sensibly use “I” of a corpse the position is simply reversed, but not cleared up, for in this situation the proposition “I remember something” is not self-contradictory but could not be verified (although it might conceivably be true) and the proposition “I remember nothing at all” is not analytic but could not be falsified (although it might conceivably be false).

It seems to me that the “paradox” contained in the statement “I remember nothing at all” arises not from an ambiguity of the word “statement” but from an ambiguity, quite as familiar, of the word “remember”.

We can distinguish at least two senses of the word “remember”. I can remember (1) how to ride a bicycle or how to swim and (2) riding a bicycle through Brighton in 1939 or swimming in the sea at Bangor in 1949—and it is obvious that I use “remember” in two quite distinct senses. In the first sense I retain an acquired skill or habit, and it is in this sense that I remember how to construct English sentences ; in the second sense I recall, by means of images or otherwise, events from my past experience. Through this distinction lies the way out of the paradox which is, *prima facie*, involved in the statement “I remember nothing at all”. We can recast the statement to allow for this distinction so that it might read—

“I am still able to construct an English sentence correctly but I cannot recall my past experiences”.

Now the proposition expressed by the subordinate clause of this sentence can be verified or falsified and it is not falsified by its utterance. The proposition expressed by the main clause is verified by its utterance or by its entertainment—and the puzzle is one of self-reference like that of “I am lying now”.

On the other hand, the proposition “I am no longer able to construct an English sentence correctly” would be falsified by its utterance but is not comparable to the paradox thought to be embodied in “I remember nothing at all” by Professor O'Connor and Mr. Cohen. The paradox contained in the proposition “I am no longer able to construct an English sentence correctly” arises, like that contained in “I am lying now”, from self-reference. The proposition is falsified by the structure of the sentence which expresses it.

I think that this analysis of the proposition "I remember nothing at all" is consistent with what would normally be meant by anyone who uttered it.

Now this "pragmatic paradox" differs from the one involved in the statement "I am not speaking now" because it does not seem possible to remove this paradox by distinguishing two senses of "speaking". Perhaps Mr. Cohen's distinction is satisfactory here for the proposition "I am not speaking now" need not be false if merely entertained (unless we subscribe to the view that "entertaining" is equivalent to "sub-vocal speaking") so that the uttering of it falsifies it and, as Mr. Cohen points out "there is nothing in principle to debar propositions from being such that they can be verified or falsified by their own utterance". Thus this proposition differs from "I am lying now" and the alleged paradox in "I remember nothing at all" for these would be falsified by their mere entertainment. If "entertaining" is taken as equivalent to "sub-vocal speaking" or "sub-vocal uttering" then the proposition "I am not speaking now" is peculiar in just the way that Professor O'Connor suggested—but we have no need to accept this view of "entertaining".

Now both paradoxes with which I have dealt differ from Professor O'Connor's "Class A Blackout" paradox, although he seems to think they have much in common. If they are different then the "Class A Blackout" paradox, though interesting, it is of no great concern, unless there are others like it which might arise in normal philosophical discussion. But it seems to me that any announcement of an intention is implicitly recognised to be conditional on the possibility of carrying out that intention. Even if I make a simple statement like "I will go to the cinema to-morrow" I mean, although I do not state, that I shall do so if I am not in any way prevented. Thus Professor O'Connor's statement, which can be abbreviated to read "A 'Class A Blackout' will be carried out next week" *ought* for completeness, to read "If the conditions of a 'Class A Blackout' can be realised, a 'Class A Blackout' will be carried out next week." Now this seems to raise no other difficulties than are raised by any conditional statement whose condition is unrealisable, like, for instance, "If I can live without air I will not breathe all day to-morrow". Of course, I might be able to live without air to-morrow but, similarly, men might cease next week to be able to realise that if the blackout had not occurred by Friday it must occur on Saturday, and then the condition would be realisable.<sup>1</sup> Any problems raised by these statements do not appear to be similar to those raised by the other statements with which I have dealt nor to be properly called "paradoxical".

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<sup>1</sup> Professor O'Connor stresses the point that no logical contradiction is involved. If that is so, his statement is not like the statement "To-morrow things equal to the same thing will not be equal to one another". There is no logical contradiction in men ceasing to be able to see a relation.