PRAGMATIC PARADOXES AND FUGITIVE PROPOSITIONS

BOTH Mr. L. J. Cohen (MIND, January, 1950) and Mr. Peter Alexander (MIND, October, 1950) have clarified some important points connected with the puzzles which I have mentioned in my discussion note on pragmatic paradoxes (MIND, July, 1948). But there are still some points on which I would like to disagree with them.

(a) I shall consider, first of all, the paradox involved in the statement " I remember nothing at all ". (This paradox was suggested to me in discussion by Professor F. B. Ebersole.) Mr. Alexander points out that this sentence can be interpreted in two different ways : (A) " I cannot recall my past experiences " ; (B) " I can no longer construct an English sentence correctly ". He adds that (B) is the only interpretation which involves a paradox and that the paradox arises from self-reference like that involved in " I am lying ". In support of this opinion he says that " the proposition is falsified by the structure of the sentence which expresses it ". Now it seems to me that this is a mistake. " I am lying " or, to take the more convenient form in which Grelling discusses it, " this sentence is false " is certainly contradictory through self-reference and is, as Ramsey showed, a *semantic* paradox involving and arising from the naming relation. But Ebersole's paradox, in the form in which Mr. Alexander discusses it, does not involve self-reference in the same sense at all. The sentence (B) does indeed *exhibit* by its grammatical and syntactical structure the fact that it is false but it does not *refer* to itself. There is a very important difference between sentences which are falsified by their own structure and sentences which predicate falsity of themselves. This difference may be shown in two ways.

(i) Propositions of the second type involve semantic paradoxes which can be made manifest by a formal proof that, where p is the proposition in question, p is equivalent to not-p. Such proofs have been given by Grelling (MIND, October, 1936) and Ushenko (*Problems of Logic*, London, 1941, p. 60). But it is not possible, so far as I can see, to prove formally that p is equivalent to not-p, where p is Mr. Alexander's proposition (B).

(ii) We can remove Ebersole's paradox by expressing the same proposition in different words as : " Me no more savee talk English good " or " Je ne sais plus construire correctement une phrase en anglais ". But we cannot remove Grelling's paradox by translation. The contradiction in " this sentence is false " remains when we translate to " cette phrase-ci est fausse ".

The reason for this is that Grelling's paradox is a contradiction arising from the relation between the index-sign " this " and what is denoted by the sign whereas Ebersole's is pragmatic in that it arises from the relations between signs and their *users*. I think

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that Mr. Alexander may have been misled by a secondary feature of this paradox, namely, that the sentence which embodies the paradox refers to the natural language in which the sentence is expressed. (The statement " I am not now using the English language " embodies a similar contradiction.) Such sentences are sign-vehicles or sentence-tokens which refer to themselves but do not, like the semantic paradoxes refer to the proposition which the sentence-token expresses. That is why the contradiction is dissipated by translation, since translation changes the sign-vehicle or medium of expression without changing the proposition or the meaning expressed.

It seems to me obvious that the main difficulty involved in the use of such statements as " I remember nothing at all ", " I am not speaking now " or " I never speak English " arises from the use of the token-reflexive word " I " together with the present tense of the verb. For the paradox vanishes if we substitute " he " or " you " for the pronoun or change the tense of the verb.

(b) I think that this point will help in discussing the solution proposed by Mr. Cohen. He points to the distinction between two senses of the word " statement ", an utterance or sentence-token and a proposition. There is nothing to prevent a proposition from referring to an utterance and " accordingly there is nothing in principle to debar propositions from being such that they can be verified or falsified by their own utterance ". He concludes that the paradox involved in such statements as " I am not speaking now " can be seen to result from the relations between a proposition and its utterance. The utterance may be used to falsify the proposition, and in this case we have a pragmatic paradox. But it may also be used in such a context that it does not falsify the proposition. For example, I may think silently " I am not speaking now "; or I may make a record of myself saying " I remember nothing at all " which is afterwards played as part of my funeral service when the sentence may very well be true.

But here again there is a difficulty which arises from the use of token-reflexive expressions which I do not think that Mr. Cohen has taken fully into account. It seems to me that the distinction between proposition and utterance cannot be usefully applied to statements which refer to the contemporary behaviour or experience of the speaker. Token-reflexive expressions function in use as variables whose values are specified by the context in which the utterance occurs. Thus its meaning, like the validity of a bus ticket, is exhausted by the single occasion of its use. Such statements are, as it were, incomplete. But normal *complete* statements like " All swans are white " or " Nero died in A.D. 69 " resemble season tickets in retaining their validity through a series of successive presentations. We might state the comparison more exactly by saying that the normal relation between a proposition and the utterances which express it as a one-many relation, whereas in the case of

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a statement referring to the contemporary behaviour or experience of the user, the relation between proposition and utterance is one-one. This is an analytic consequence of the fact that our experience is temporal.

Thus Mr. Cohen's explanation does not entirely dispose of the problem because in the case under discussion the type token distinction cannot be usefully invoked. Mr. Duncan Jones has recently discussed some analogous problems which arise from the use of what he calls " fugitive propositions ". It is an " odd yet obvious feature " of such propositions " that the proposition in question cannot be entertained twice " (*Analysis*, October, 1949). The class of Mr. Duncan Jones' fugitive propositions contains as a sub-class what I have called above " incomplete statements ". Dismissing the " Class A Blackout " paradox, which I think Mr. Alexander has exorcised successfully, we could sum up by saying that all pragmatic paradoxes arise from the use of a sub-class of fugitive propositions. Such paradoxical propositions belong therefore the the genus " fugitive propositions ". What is their *differentia ?* First, that they shall refer to the contemporary experience or behaviour of the user of the proposition. Secondly, as Mr. Cohen has suggested, on the occasion of the use of such an incomplete statement, the utterance must falsify the proposition. Thirdly, the proposition must be falsified by attributing to the user contemporary behaviour or states of mind which are incompatible with those entailed by uttering or otherwise stating the proposition in question. But I am not sure that this is the whole story.

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