

CONTRADICTION

Professor Strawson says that contradicting oneself is like writing something down and then erasing it.¹ Perhaps he could have expressed his point equally well by saying that it is like asserting and then rejecting a proposition. He further says that contradiction cancels itself and leaves nothing.² Perhaps this gives the respect in which it is like asserting a proposition and then rejecting it.

The proposition that committing a contradiction is in some respects like asserting and then rejecting a proposition is compatible with the proposition that in some other respects it is unlike doing so. But let us here consider the implications of another theory, viz., committing a contradiction *is* asserting and then rejecting a proposition and is not merely *like* doing so in some respects only. The implications are serious. If it is true that committing a contradiction *is* asserting and then rejecting a proposition, then much of what has been said on the topic since the time of Aristotle, including both Hegelian and Marxian Dialectics, is spurious answer to a spurious question. Thinkers have usually thought that to commit a contradiction is to assert a conjunctive proposition of the form of "Both p and not p"; and they have then answered the question whether conjunctive propositions of this form are false *a priori* or empirically or whether they contain some sort of (Dialectical) truth. But this is a spurious question. There is no conjunctive proposition of the form of "Both p and not p" if to commit a contradiction is to assert and then reject a proposition. By asserting and then rejecting one and the same proposition you do not assert a conjunctive proposition.

But is the theory, which has these implications, true? It is not true. If a proposition is asserted and then rejected, then there is *no* contradiction. There can be a contradiction only if neither a proposition nor its contradictory is rejected.

The truth about the matter seems to be this. The words that can be used to express the contradictory of a proposition are also the words that can be used to reject that proposition. If you assert the proposition that it is raining and then revise your opinion, then you may reject the proposition by saying, "No, no,

it is not raining." And the *reason* why these words can be used to reject that proposition is that they can also be used to express the contradictory of that proposition. It seems that what happens when a person contradicts himself is that he asserts a proposition and then uses words of its rejection (namely, the words for its contradictory) but does not *actually* reject it. And then it is incomprehensible what he is doing by his words. This makes clear a difference between contradicting oneself and asserting and then rejecting a proposition. If you assert a proposition and then reject it, then it is clearly comprehensible what you have done. But if you assert a proposition and then use the words of its rejection without actually rejecting it, then the things become incomprehensible. And if this is really what happens when one contradicts oneself, then all questions and answers that are spurious according to the theory criticised above remain erroneous; and it is wrong, strictly speaking, to regard "Both p and not p" as a proper conjunctive proposition, though it may be convenient and helpful to so regard it for certain purposes. If you assert p and then use the words of its rejection without actually rejecting it, then there is a blur in your linguistic activity; and the blur does not result in the assertion of a conjunctive proposition.

There are many conditions in which it can be truly said that you have used the words of rejection of a proposition without actually rejecting it. You may use the words absent-mindedly, or you may be confused about relations between a group of opposite propositions and may not know that the words for one of them are the words for the rejection of another proposition in the group. The latter possibility is realised very often. You may assert the proposition p and also assert other propositions that contradict it indirectly or by implication without knowing that they so contradict it; and then may not take the words for the other propositions to be words that can be used to reject p.

But how is it that the words that express the contradictory of the proposition p can be used to reject p? The words that can be used to express the contradictory of p can also be used to contradict p. And to contradict p is to reject p.

But what kind of propositions are the propositions "The words that can be used to express the contradictory of p can also be used to contradict p" and "To contradict is to reject"? It

seems that it is *not* necessary to determine this here. Whatever kinds of propositions they may be, if they are *true at all* then the present purpose is served.

The concepts of asserting a proposition and rejecting it are ordinary concepts like that of toothache. Therefore if we fail to find behavioural criteria of them, this should be taken to be an objection to Behaviourism and not to the opinion expressed here.

Before ending this article another point about contradiction may be made clear. If both a proposition and its contradictory are true, then there can be no evidence or reason, empirical or non-empirical, against that proposition. For example, if the proposition "All roses are white," is true when any of its contraries or the contradictory is true, then you have not found any reason against it even if you have been observing red and yellow roses, even if you have found enough evidence to assert the contradictory. And, of course, nobody would suggest that a proposition is to be falsified by other propositions that do not contradict it in any manner. If a proposition and its contradictory can be true together, then refutation of that proposition becomes impossible and disagreement either becomes impossible or loses all importance.

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NOTES

- 1 Strawson—*Introduction To Logical Theory*, p. 3. (London, Methuen and Company 1960).
2. *Ibid*, p-3.

