

The Transformative Potential of Paradox

Henri Bortoft

The practical value of paradox is that it can be a doorway to a new perception. To think of it as a sign of failure, or reduce it to a form of intellectual puzzle, greatly underestimates its real significance. Through paradox our coarse perception and understanding can be transformed into something finer and more subtle.

I was first introduced to this possibility in the 1960s by JG Bennett, for whom the attempt to hold opposites together at the same time – i.e. not oscillating from one to the other – was a key to the transformation of psychological life to a greater degree of freedom in which real choice and action (instead of just reaction) becomes possible. As he put it, we have to try to hold ‘yes’ and ‘no’ together at the same time (e.g like and dislike, agreement and disagreement, etc.)

Bennett also believed that, as well as in psychological life, paradox was very important in philosophical work, where it could lead to a less coarse and more subtle form of understanding. He pointed out that the basis of Jacob Boehme’s *Realdialectik* was his insight that “In yes and no all things consist” – which should certainly not be reduced to “all things consist of yes and no”. He thought that this was the real basis of Hegel’s dialectic – and it is interesting that, in his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel says that Boehme is the true founder of modern philosophy, not Descartes (one reason why this looks so strange is that most people don’t understand what Descartes was really trying to do, but don’t realize this).

This made a deep impression on me at the time, and it has greatly influenced my own work and understanding ever since. I will try to give some indication of this.

One of the things which has often struck me is the importance of the distinction between passivity and receptivity, and how often these are conflated. Active and passive are clearly opposites, and we might therefore be tempted to think in exclusive terms, as if either we are active or we are passive. But being receptive is neither passive nor active in this either/or sense – it is both active and passive at the same time. Receptivity is a paradoxical state – when we are receptive we are “actively passive” and “passively active”. It is a more subtle or finer state than being active or passive. Yet these are both “ingredients” in the state of receptivity, but in a way that unites and transforms them – I think it is a brilliant example of what Hegel means by *Aufhebung*, a term which really has no ready equivalent in English. If it were not for the fact that we can experience this, we would never believe it.

Understanding how the either/or of being active/passive can be transformed into being receptive, is crucial for understanding Goethe’s way of science. His practical way of proceeding is designed to bring a person into a state of receptivity, so that it becomes possible for the phenomenon to show itself and “be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger). But it’s not just in Goethe’s way of science that the “paradoxical” state of receptivity is to be found. We find it in the encounter with meaning in hermeneutics where, as Simon Glendinning put it: “you have to let the text you are reading teach you how to read it”. In the event of understanding there is a hermeneutic reversal in which the meaning *becomes* us (not becomes *us*) – i.e. we are *becomed* by the meaning. In general, this is the deeper dimension of phenomenology, in which the phenomenon is not only something that appears but appears *as appearing*. If we are not receptive we can only encounter the phenomenon as what appears, and not as the *appearance* of what appears.

The Italian philosopher, Mauro Carbone (commenting on the later philosophy of Merleau-Ponty), has drawn attention to the need to go beyond the “grasp” of the concept (in German the word for concept, *Begriff*, carries with it the meaning “grasp”) to the gesture of welcoming which receives something, and which is more in tune with the Latin meaning of “concept” (*concipio* – to be pregnant; to create a space for something). Empiricism construes the concept as passive; idealism construes it as active.

Paradox is inevitable for us because, as Bergson pointed out, “the human intellect feels at home among inanimate objects, more especially among solids”, so that “our concepts have been formed on the model of solids; our logic is pre-eminently, the logic of solids”. The key characteristic of the “world of bodies” is separateness, which means that it is the world of separate and independent entities which are self-enclosed and external to one another. It is the quantitative world because, as Aristotle said, quantity is that which has parts external to one another. I like the image which Austin (the Oxford philosopher, not the novelist) gave of this when he said that the mind is basically at home in the world of medium size dry goods. This is a very limited domain indeed, and it is when we try to fit things into this restricted framework that we find ourselves confronted by paradox. Contrary to the way we often respond, this does not mean that the phenomenon is “impossible”, or “mystical”, or even just “tiresome” (the English response). What it means is that our thinking is too restricted, and the form which the paradox takes will quite possibly give us some clue as to the way in which thinking needs to be transformed.

Before mentioning my own experience with the idea of “the one and the many”, I want to bring up my favourite illustration of this: Edwin Abbott’s story of *Flatland* and the mysterious case of the sphere. This concerns a society of creatures who are entirely confined to a two-dimensional surface, and what happens to one of them when a sphere makes its presence felt one day. The sphere passes through Flatland, but what the hapless Flatlander experiences is that a point suddenly appears out of nowhere, turns into a circle of expanding diameter, reaches a maximum size and then begins to shrink back to a point and vanishes. He is very puzzled, and when he says aloud to himself “what is this?” the sphere, who is not supposed to communicate with Flatlanders, announces “I am a sphere”. Of course, this doesn’t help at all. When the sphere tells the Flatlander that he must go “up”, he has no concept of this and can only try to make sense of it in terms of his own familiar, but limited, experience. “Do you mean go “north”?” he asks the sphere, drawing on his experience with a compass. After struggling for some time with the paradox of “go up, yet not north”, the sphere loses patience, and casts him out of Flatland into the three dimensional world. Naturally this is too much for the Flatlander and “blows his mind”. He is eventually sent to an asylum where he joins other Flatlanders who have been found wandering about muttering about a “higher dimension” – which every sane Flatlander knows doesn’t exist.

In the world of bodies ‘one’ and ‘many’ are mutually exclusive – either something is one (and not many) or many (and not one). This is the Flatland version of “the one and the many”. But there is another dimension of the one and the many which seems paradoxical to us because it is one and many at the same time. If, instead of *either one or many*, we hold both of these together, then we can come to the experience of an intuitive perception in which we see intensively instead of extensively. We see intuitively in another dimension, which is the *intensive* dimension of “multiplicity in unity” instead of the *extensive* dimension of many ones. Hologram division and vegetative propagation both illustrate this. In the former case, when a hologram is divided it does not result in another one (like copying a photograph) but the very same one. So there is not one and another one, but one and the other of the one. “Multiplicity in unity” means that there can be multiplicity within unity without fragmenting the unity because each is the very same one and not another one. This and other examples – especially the organic ones – can become “templates for thinking” (Bohm’s phrase) intensively as well as extensively. I have found that by visualizing these examples it is possible to practise switching from the extensive to the intensive dimension of the “the one and the many” and back again. My own work with this led to the development of an intuitive perception in which I found myself “seeing intensively”. When I did this kind of work a lot in late 1970s, I used to feel as if my head had been taken off and another one put in its place, and sometimes this would happen spontaneously while walking down the street, doing the washing up or whatever. I emphasize this practise of what I call doing philosophical work – which in this case entails the intuitive seeing of what appears paradoxical to “the logic of solid bodies” (think of the three principles of Aristotle’s logic) – because the possibility of doing this seems to be overlooked today. This is also something to which I was first introduced in the 1960s by JG Bennett. It seems to me now, on reflection, that it might be something like an “intermediate case” between the rational-empirical mind and “mystical experience” – though I think it is very important not to conflate it with the latter, otherwise the very possibility of doing this kind of philosophical work is lost and human experience is correspondingly impoverished.

Examples of the need for this kind of thinking abound. The intensive dimension of “the one and the many” is essential for understanding Goethe’s notion of the metamorphosis “by which one and the same organ

presents itself to us in manifold forms". Similarly we find that in the unity of organic nature the diversity *is* the unity. This paradoxical form of "the one and the many" is also found in the philosophy of hermeneutics, which is concerned with the phenomenon of understanding in the case of written works, works of art, presentations of plays, and performances of music. Here also we find a further kind of intensive distinction, which seems to be characteristic of the phenomenon of something coming into expression – e.g. a work and its interpretation/presentation, language and the expression of meaning, expressive behaviour and gesture, etc. In such cases we find what Gadamer refers to as "a distinction which is not really a distinction at all". In other words, it's a paradoxical distinction, and it's because of this that we find it so difficult to grasp and instead fall into dualism. What kind of distinction is a distinction which isn't (really) a distinction? It's an intensive distinction which takes the form of neither one nor two and at the same time both one and two. We need to think in a way that does not separate into two, but at the same time doesn't collapse into one. We can develop this capacity by philosophical work, but it's a bit like trying to walk along a tightrope – most of the time we fall off on one side or the other. For example, in the case of language and meaning, either we "separate into two" and think of the meaning as already formed and we just put into words, or we "collapse into one" and think of the meaning as simply being produced by the words. Both misrepresent the lived experience of expression, which is pre-separation and for which the distinction between language and meaning is intensive. When we do glimpse this intuitively it seems so simple – and then we fall off the tightrope again. The key thing here is to realize that lived experience, i.e. experience *as lived*, always seems paradoxical to the way in which we think of experience after it has been lived – which is the basis for the "common sense" description of experience which seems so "obvious" but misleads us. A very clear example of this is seen in the phenomenon of expressive behaviour, where we usually either fall into mind-body dualism or collapse into reductionist behaviourism. Wittgenstein shows us the intensive distinction which enables behaviour itself to be expressive without any need for meaning to be added on extensively.

When it comes to science I think paradox is to be expected. Think of light in the special theory of relativity. It is a consequence of the universal constancy of the measured speed of light that light itself is not subject to the space-time separation which is characteristic of material bodies. So if we look at Betelgeuse which is 240 light years from us, for light itself there is no separation between the star and our eye. Light itself is before separation, and it is a consequence of the null-interval that the universe for light is an intensive point including all within itself. To the logic of solid bodies, for which separability is a defining characteristic, such non-separability is highly paradoxical to put it mildly. But now imagine a being of light. For such a light-being the world of bodies would be impossible to imagine, and the idea of separability would be highly paradoxical. So if we say that the behaviour of light is paradoxical, we should not imagine that this paradoxicality is somehow intrinsic to light itself. Non-separability, in whatever form it takes, will always seem paradoxical *to us* in the world of bodies where separability is the major characteristic. In quantum mechanics, the superposition of states tells us that paths – e.g. for the photon in an interferometer - which are separable for us are non-separable for the photon. So the behaviour of a single indivisible photon seems paradoxical to us – but it's not paradoxical for the photon.

Henri Bortoft

is an independent researcher in the philosophy of science. He did postgraduate research on the problem of wholeness in quantum physics with David Bohm and Basil Hiley at Birkbeck College. He regularly opens up a new world to his listeners, including on the MSc in Holistic Science at Schumacher College. He is the author of *The Wholeness of Nature*.

journal@earthlinksall.com

