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Absurd Claims

1. The Problem

In the following we shall consider a type of sentence, which if seriously uttered in the relevant context, makes a claim which can be impossible to be true.

“I am not here.”

“I am dead.”

“I do not exist.”

might serve as introductory examples. At a first look they might appear as the type of playful jokes which populate so much of Lewis Carroll's books and logical puzzles. But there is something more to them - as I shall try to demonstrate. They belong to a region of what Sören Halldén called “The Logic of Nonsense” which illuminates some aspects of Meaning in general.

I have already remarked that the claim made in each of my examples is a claim that can “impossibly be true”. But what sort of impossibility are we talking about?

It has to be observed that the air of paradox is achieved only if the egocentric particular, “here” is taken in an authentic sense. In a sentence “I am not here, but I can take a message” recorded on a telephone answering device, there is nothing absurd, because “here” is used in a metaphorical sense. The same would hold for “I am not here any longer” in a letter from an already deceased person to those who live after him. The possibility of such meaningful and true utterances is based on the fact that “here” in such situations is not referring to the place and time of the speaker. In order to constitute an absurdity, “here” in “I am not here” has to refer to the actual place of the utterance.

The claim that I am here, expressed by myself by the sentence “I am here” might seem to be true. But is it a *necessary truth*? What makes “I am here” different from “Professor X. is here” or “Professor Y is here”?

The truth of such claims, if they are true, is obviously contingent, and if I reformulate something like “I am here” to “Professor X is here” it becomes obvious that I might as well not have been here. And if we take “I am here” as synonymous with “Professor X is here” (where “X” serves as my proper name) - which seems quite reasonable - “I am here” should be contingent as well.

There is, however, a strong temptation to answer yes, - “I am here” is a necessary truth, because the negation “I am not here” seems to involve some sort of contradiction. And by a valid, even axiomatic, theorem in modal logic:

$$-\diamond(-P) \text{ if and only if } N(P)$$

the negations of the absurd claims in my three examples seem to be necessary truths. Now to claim that with logical necessity I am here, that I do exist and that I am not dead seem to be as absurd as the other claims.

There is nothing necessary about "Professor Y is present."

2. First Pattern of Analysis; Hintikka's Performatives

A reasonable interpretation of Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*" which fits well with Gassendi's objection "*Ambulo, ergo sum*" – what is necessary about “ambulo”? – is that rather than intending a logical inference in the Aristotelian sense, Descartes has the apparent absurdity of the claim “I do not exist” in mind. As Jakko Hintikka has observed in a very useful analysis of the Cogito, there is nothing wrong with the *sentence* “I am not here” or the *sentence* “I do not exist”. They are in perfect order and have nothing of the contradictoriness of “A is a circular triangle” nor the obscurity of “It smells like a sphere”. What is contradictory about them, or creates the appearance of contradictoriness is connected not with their sentential structure but with the idea of a speech-act or other performance (thinking them) which would make use of them.

What Dr Hintikka, among other things, observed in his essay on the Cogito is that the first person statements of this type seem to be - or can be analyzed as - *performatives*, (performative speech-acts in the sense of J. L. Austin and Searle) which, because of the weird circumstances in which they are attempted, cannot simply be carried out, or performed – cannot be performed. The radical doubt of my own existence, expressed in the question – “Is it the case that I do not exist?” – cannot be *expressed*

(or if you prefer to stick to the Hintikka terminology, *performed*) by me, whether it is true or not. Thus, the Cogito. Rather than expressing a logical inference the *Cogito, ergo sum* describes a situation. That I cannot claim that I do not exist is not a *contradictio in adjecto* . Of course it could be the case that I do not exist ! After all I am mortal. After all my parents might never have met. The claim is not a contradiction it is a case of *absurdity*. Some things can simply not be done. We cannot smell the spherical form of a sphere. In Lewis Carroll’s “Through the Looking-Glass” the White Queen refuses to accept Alice’s confession that she cannot believe the unbelievable. The naught Red Queen claims that – after some training – she has been able to believe six unbelievable things before Breakfast. You only have to try with both hands.

All these are absurd claims. Things or acts are demanded which simply do not belong within the framework of these acts. Which might be assertive performances.

Is this all that there is about it ?
Not yet.

3.Second Pattern of Analysis; incompleteness

Reformulating a third-person statement like “Professor X is not here” to first-person; “I am not here” is not the only way to produce absurd claims, and this fact limits the use of Jaakko Hintikka’s “performative” pattern of analysis. I shall try to show that we actually need something stronger, a more general pattern of analysis.

Let us consider a new set of examples:
 “*There is nothing such as red in the world*”
 “*There is nothing such as hot in the world*”
 “*The universe does not exist.*”

Let us first have a look at the first example. Its negation is “There is something red.” We shall –in this context—suppress the question whether this something that we have called “red” is external or internal to our mind. The sentence “There is nothing such as red in the world” can of course easily be interpreted as stating that the red we perceive is of a purely perceptual character and that the external world has no colors. Which might be a perfectly reasonable position, taken by many philosophers. But that is not

the present interpretation. We mean that there is nothing red whatsoever, denying the possibility of any red or reddish color experience. (I add “reddish” for the case that somebody might wonder whether that which is denied is the lowest possible determinable. The argument is – as we shall see – not sensitive in this respect.) So if the sentence “*There is nothing such as red in the world*” is true, it means that a color experience, such as red or reddish is not possible. Of course this is not the case. But it could be the case. What is possible in a population where everybody suffers from cerebral color-blindness (*achromatopsia*)¹ could of course be the state of affairs of mankind or of mammals in general. Did the trilobites see color through their crystal eyes? They might as well not. The point – which the reader has already got – is that even in the strong interpretation there is nothing nonsensical or fundamentally wrong with the sentence “There is nothing such as red in the world”. Our experience contradicts and rejects it but it *could* have been the case. So the sentence expresses a contingent false proposition.

But still – what would “There is nothing such as red in the world” mean, said in a world where the sentence expressed a true proposition? It seems as if, if true the sentence would be senseless. And if it were senseless it could not be true. So if it were true it could not be true, and – by *reductio ad absurdum* – not true. But not meaningful either.

The reason is that “red” cannot be defined.² It is a *qualium*. If the word “red” shall have any meaning at all it must be based in one way or another on the possibility of color experiences, specifically in the “reddish” field. So what would “There is nothing red whatsoever” mean if it were true? Nothing. The word “red” would lack all sense and by the principle of the dominance of the atheoretical element, if a sentence contains one meaningless constituent, it becomes meaningless as a sentence.

So, again, we have landed in an absurdity. The claim is not contradictory but impossible. So it seems as if we were again in a similar dilemma as with Descartes’ “I do not exist” – but with the important differ-

¹ See Oliver Sacks “The Case of the Color-Blind Painter” in *An Anthropologist on Mars*. London: Picador, 1995, pp. 1-38

² If we do not accept the rather naive reductionist view that red or any lowest determinable of red is nothing but a spectral frequency (in the field 400-800 nm). Actually already Goethe has good arguments against this view, among them the shadow-colors and in later research the discovery of the *metameric* color stimuli, i. e. spectrally different radiations under identical viewing conditions. Of course it cannot be reduced to a neural process either. An electro-chemical process in the V4 section of the brain has nothing reddish about it.

ence that this time no egocentric particular like the first-person “I” is involved.

There is nothing (logically) wrong with the statement, but if the proposition it expresses is true, this truth cannot be meaningfully expressed. So if it were true, this truth would not be expressible, while its negation does not provide any similar problem.

Clearly, it would be very strange to say that the absurd claim “There is nothing such as red in the world” would be senseless if, and only if, it were true. Because that is an unacceptable contradiction that something should be senseless and true at the same time.

The performative exit seems of no value in this example. Nothing prevents us from saying something which is obviously false. Personal pronomina do not play any role in these examples. Instead of talking about a paradox it might make sense to speak about *a paradoxical situation*. If the expressed proposition were true, nobody would be able to express it. But of course it could be true.

So here a language, in this case standard English, is able to produce a string of words which masquerades as expressing something which it cannot meaningfully assert. The second example in this second group can be treated analogically. If these sentences expressed something which were the case, they would not be able to express it. There is a self-referential element implicit in the absurd claims. Their claims seem to undermine the very conditions for their use. It is a well-known fact that a natural or a formal language can produce more strings than can be realized as meaningful representations. In the language of Chemistry it is possible to combine letters for elements and numbers for valences which suggest molecules which could never exist, and in the Laban notation it is possible to suggest movements which no dancer could perform in the real world.

One might say that the absurd claims can express more than they can signify, or that their expressivity exceeds their meaningfulness.

4. Absurd Claims and the Anthropic Principle

The implicitly self-referential element becomes more visible, maybe, in our last example, i. e.

“The universe does not exist.”

This example has some relevance for the sometimes rather intense

discussion of a cosmological principle which J. Wheeler baptized *The Anthropological Principle*.

Obviously human life, intelligent to the extent to which it is intelligent is only possible in a universe which satisfies some fundamental physical conditions. Exactly which these might be does not have to be analyzed here. Let it be enough for the present discussion that a universe in which questions can be asked has to have such an equilibrium between contractive and dissipative forces that galaxies and stars are able to form.

When the child asks "Why is there something rather than nothing?"³ and the helpless parent answers "In order that you shall be able to ask the question" this answer - which clearly applies the anthropological principle - implies that the existence of the world we know is a condition for the question to be asked. Again, there is no self-evident reason to believe that the universe by logical necessity has to be as it is. It might of course be the case that a universe with - say a weaker gravitational force for some physical reason might not have been able to exist. But what excludes the possibility of such a universe can hardly be the fact that I could not have been there to observe it. For such an assumption would make my observation a necessary condition (among other necessary conditions) for the existence of the present universe, an assumption which sounds a bit egocentric, especially as all facts bear witness to the fact that the world I found has been here before me.

Like in the earlier discussed cases, we have a sentence which cannot meaningfully express the fact that the world does not exist inside the language where it is formed. If it is the case that the world does not really exist.

So the generalizable conclusion is that everyday languages make possible formations of strings which if certain facts were the case could not simply be expressed in these languages. The expression we see is a pseudo-expression, a something which appears in the disguise of a true or false sentence but can be neither because its place in the general network of actual or possible speech situations is not well established.

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³ Which might be the most fundamental and the most impossibly difficult of all philosophical questions.