The Logical Paradox of Unreal Things;

a dialogue.

By Peter Spurrier

Introduction

I believe that the argument, which is expressed in the following dialogue, is clear and logical and that it explains a logical paradox. No specialist knowledge is required to understand it. (The argument explained here is a shorter and simpler version of the one in a previous document, *'Logical Mysticism; why paradox is unavoidable'.*)

Part of the dialogue explains why there seem to be important flaws in the ideas contained in Bertrand Russell's famous paper *'On Denoting'* .

The Dialogue

Speaker **A** I have an argument as to why there is a logical paradox, on the subject of whether anything is real and whether anything is unreal.

Speaker **B** Very well. What is your argument?

A Imagine two boxes, box 1 and box 2. Box 1 contains everything that is real, while box 2 contains everything that is not real. (The 'boxes' just represent the two categories of the real and the not real, but they may make it easier to follow my argument.)

B I understand.

A Assuming that the Earth is round, the round Earth would be in box 1. Now, if the Earth is round, it cannot also be not round. For example, the Earth cannot be flat, or shaped like a cube. If it isn't true that the Earth is cube-shaped, then a cube-shaped Earth is one of the things which is not real, and is therefore in box 2.

So the world can only be round if it isn't true that the world is cube shaped and this means that the round Earth can only be in box 1, if a cubed-shaped Earth is in box 2.

The same principle applies to anything else that is in box 1. In other words, it's only possible for any particular thing to be in box 1, if a different particular thing is in box 2.

B I understand what you're saying, but I can see a problem with it.

If box 2 contains only unreal things, then it should be empty, shouldn't it? What I mean is this. Let's assume that, in reality, there are some horses, but there are no unicorns. This would mean that, although some things manage to be horses, there is nothing that is a unicorn. On the same principle, there is nothing that is *anything* that is unreal. There is nothing which is able to pull off the impossible feat of *being* something that does not exist. So, logically, there is nothing that is actually unreal. Therefore, it is not possible for anything to be in box 2.

A I agree. Box 2 should be empty.

B But you just said that a cubed-shaped Earth is inside it.

A No, what I said was that there can't be a round Earth in box 1, *unless* there is a cube-shaped Earth in box 2. However, for the reasons you explained, there can't be a cube-shaped Earth in box 2, because that box must be empty. I'll repeat these two points, because they're important to my argument. To have a round Earth in box 1, there needs to be a cube-shaped Earth in box 2, but there can't be a cube-shaped Earth in box 2. So, what logically follows? It follows that there can't be a round Earth in box 1!
On the same principle, there can't be anything in box 1. In other words, there cannot be anything which is real. Or, to be more precise, it would be logically contradictory for anything to be real. This is because, if something is in box 1, then something else (which is an opposite of the thing in box 1) must be in box 2. And since nothing can be in box 2, nothing can be in box 1 either. In other words, nothing can be real.

B That can't be right. It can't be right that nothing is real. In fact, I can think of several objections to that idea.

A I can also think of an objection to the idea that nothing is real, which is why that is not my real conclusion either.

B But you've just argued that there can't be anything which is real.

A Let me explain.

I think my preceding argument is correct in showing that it would be contradictory for anything to be in box 1. However, the idea that there is nothing that is real (i.e. that there is nothing in box 1), also turns out to be contradictory. At least, it is contradictory, based on my definition of 'reality'.

B What is your definition of 'reality' ?

A My definition is such that ‘reality’ means that which is real, or, in other words, that which ‘exists’. Also, according to my definition, if a statement is true, it describes all, or part, of ‘reality’. The main way, in which a true statement does this, is to describe a real occurrence (or incidence). For example, if 'the world is round' is a true statement, it describes a real occurrence of the world being round. In fact, I would say that any true statement describes a real occurrence.

B That overall definition seems OK. Why does that mean that it would be contradictory for nothing to be in box 1?

A Because, according to that definition, a true statement describes a real occurrence. So, if the statement 'nothing is real' is true, then,

by definition, it describes a real occurrence (an occurrence of nothing being real). But, clearly, it would be contradictory for there to be a real occurrence, if nothing was real. Therefore, we can't say that nothing is real, without saying something contradictory.

B So you're saying that it's contradictory for something to be real, but it's also contradictory for there to be nothing that is real?

A Yes.

B Well, in that case, what are left with, that we can think without contradiction?

A Consider this question. Can we think anything that is correct? To answer 'yes' would be to contradict the previous argument. And yet to answer 'no' would mean that we can correctly think that we can't think correctly. Which would also be contradictory.

B So can we think anything correctly?

A Consider this. How can any answer to that question, and anything that we think, avoid being contradictory?

B How indeed?

A So consider this question. How, without contradiction, can we correctly understand what this conclusion means?

Silent Pause

A So now I've explained my central argument and reached its 'conclusion'. (Since the word 'conclusion' might imply something that can be stated and understood, I generally say this argument has an 'end point', rather than a 'conclusion'.)

Let's now go back and address objections to my earlier argument which led to this point. You earlier mentioned that you had several objections to it.

B Well, my first objection is an obvious one. Your argument must be wrong, somehow, because it is obvious that something exists. And if something exists, that's another way of saying that something is real.

Generally, we regard a physical reality as existing. A physical reality containing such things as our bodies and physical objects, such as cars, houses and the Earth. I accept that some people would argue that we cannot know for certain that these physical things really exist outside of our consciousness of them. But even if they don't exist outside our consciousness, our consciousness definitely exists. One cannot correctly deny the existence of one's own consciousness.

So whether or not physical things exist, it has to be true that

something exists.

A I cannot see a logical flaw in my preceding argument. If it is correct, it shows that there is a contradiction within the idea that anything is real, or within any idea that any particular thing is real.

The ideas that there is something physical, or that there is consciousness, are ideas. When those ideas are examined in the light of my argument, they appear to be contradictory ideas.

Bearing that in mind, how can we be philosophically justified in believing in those ideas? I don't see how we can be.

On the same principle, belief in any other idea does not seem to be justified.

Now, when it comes to the idea that consciousness exists, I, accept that there is a contradiction in the idea that one's own consciousness does not exist. However, because my argument shows that any idea of the existence of anything is a contradictory idea, it shows that the idea, that consciousness exists, is also a contradictory idea. This leaves us with unavoidable contradiction, on the subject of whether consciousness exists, and so we are left in the same place as the place we reach at the end of my argument. Therefore, I don't see how we can really be philosophically justified in believing in the

existence of consciousness.

As I say, my argument appears to be logical and to show that there is a contradiction within any idea that any particular thing is real. If you bear that in mind, would you then be able to honestly decide, or assert, that any particular thing is real? If you understand my argument, I don't think you honestly could.

And, so long as you have understood my argument and you are then not able to honestly decide, or assert, that something is real, that should be sufficient to lead you to my argument's 'end point'.

B Well, I have some other objections, including one that is based on Bertrand Russell's thinking. But I'll come on to that later.

Before that, could you just quickly clarify some definitions? You've talked earlier about 'something' and 'nothing' and about whether the two boxes, 1 and 2, can contain something or nothing. Could you just define exactly what you mean by 'something' and 'nothing' , because different people may understand different things by those terms?

A Yes.

What I mean by 'nothing' is 'not anything' or 'none of anything'. The

best way, which I've thought of, to define that kind of 'nothing' is to say that, if 'nothing' possesses attribute X, then attribute X is not possessed at all. This would mean, for example, that empty space is not nothing, because if empty space possesses an attribute, then that attribute is possessed by the space.

Also, by my definitions, anything which is not nothing is 'a thing', and 'something' means 'some thing'.

B OK, thank you.

My next objection to your argument is this.

You said that there can't be a round shaped Earth in box 1, unless there is a cube shaped Earth in box 2. You also say that that gives rise to a problem, because nothing can be in box 2.

Well, perhaps the answer is that there is no such thing as a cube shaped Earth. A cube shaped Earth is not a thing. Or the phrase 'a cube shaped Earth' means nothing and is meaningless.

That would mean that there could be a round Earth in box 1, even though there was nothing in box 2. It's only because you think that 'a cube shaped Earth' is something, or means something, that you have this idea of a cubic Earth being in box 2. To be more precise, it's only because you think a cubic Earth is a thing, that you think that it isn't possible to have a round Earth in box 1, without having the cubic one in box 2.

A OK, I will now explain an argument which shows that there is a

contradiction, unless there actually is something in box 2 (in other words, something is actually unreal). Some of the wording may seem a bit strange, unnecessarily long winded or comically phrased, but it does seem to prove my point and I haven't found a better way to make the argument.

I'll start with a question. If the truth is that the Earth is round, can the truth *not* be that the Earth is round?

B No, it can't.

A Right. So, if the truth is that the Earth is round, then the truth *can't* actually *not* be that the Earth is round.

B I agree. (I see what you mean about the strange phrasing.)

A If the truth can't actually not be that the Earth is round, then the truth is not that the Earth is not round.

B Yes.

A If the statement ***'the truth is not that the Earth is not round'*** is true, then so is the statement ***'the truth is not that there is an occurrence of the Earth being not round'***. The one can't be true without the other being true, because the two statements describe the same situation.

B Yes, agreed.

A Now, if we use 'a Y' to mean 'an occurrence of the world being not round', this means that the truth is not that there is a Y.

B Yes.

A If the truth is not that there is a Y, then a Y must be unreal. Now comes the important point. If there was nothing which was unreal, then nothing could occupy the place that 'a Y' is occupying in the true statement 'the truth is not that there is a Y'. In other words, that place would not be occupied. This principle applies whatever 'a Y' means, so long as the statement 'the truth is not that there is a Y' is true.

B Hmm. Yes, OK.

A However, that place in the statement is occupied, by 'a Y'. It follows that it is not true that there is nothing that is unreal. It also follows that whatever is meant by 'a Y' is not nothing, but something. This is because what 'a Y' means must be unreal, so there is an incidence of being unreal. If 'a Y' was unreal but 'a Y' meant nothing, then there would be no incidence of being unreal. Therefore what 'a Y' means is something. (At least, the alternative to these conclusions would be contradictory.)

B I see. So you're saying that a Y is something and also unreal?

A I'm saying that, if the world is round, then logic shows that a Y is something and also unreal. If the round Earth is in box 1, a Y is something in box 2. On the same principle, if anything is in box 1, something else must be in box 2. Or, to put it another way, there can't be anything that is real, without something else being unreal. (Or, at least, there would be a contradiction, unless all these things, that I've said, are the case.)

Incidentally, in addition to the argument that you have made, I am aware of other arguments as to why there isn't really anything which is unreal. I have addressed these arguments elsewhere and shown that they contradict themselves. Also, the argument, that I have just given, about why, if the world is round, it follows that something (a Y) must be unreal, is by itself sufficient to counter those other arguments.

B OK, I follow what you're saying, but I have another objection. This is based on Bertrand Russell's thinking.

Many philosophers think that the main issue that you have raised in your argument (i.e. the paradox concerning whether anything is unreal) was resolved, by Russell, in his famous paper 'On

Denoting'.

I'd like to take a bit of time, here, to explain how he would attack your argument.

A Please do.

B Russell would say that your argument is mistaken and that the reason for your mistake is that you're using what he called 'denoting phrases'. I will explain his argument.

Roughly speaking, to 'denote' something means to refer to it. What he meant by 'denoting phrases' were names and also phrases such as 'a horse', 'some horses', 'the horse', 'every horse'. It might be thought that a denoting phrase would denote something, such as a horse. However, Russell defined 'denoting phrases' as phrases with a certain form, which do not necessarily actually denote anything. For example, 'a flat Earth' is a denoting phrase which does not denote anything.

Now, you have argued that, firstly, there cannot be anything in box 1 unless there is something in box 2, and, secondly, there cannot be anything in box 2. Russell would agree that box 2 must be empty, but he would say that you are wrong to think that this means that there cannot be anything in box 1.

In effect, Russell believed that he had found a way to describe how something can be real (i.e. be in box 1) without anything being in box 2. He would say you think otherwise, because you are using denoting phrases. Examples of denoting phrases, which you used when you replied to my last objection, are 'the Earth'., 'an occurrence of the world being not round' and 'a Y'. Russell's method involved radically rephrasing statements, so the statements avoided using denoting phrases.

For example, instead of saying 'A round Earth is real' he might say **'For one example of x, x is generally called 'Earth' and is round'** and, instead of saying 'A flat Earth is unreal', he might say **'For no examples of x, x is generally called 'Earth' and is flat'**.

Instead of using 'a flat Earth' as a denoting phrase, he has used 'x', which Russell called 'a variable', and he has talked about the properties of that variable. By talking like this, he avoids having to refer to anything (such as a flat Earth) which is unreal and, thus, avoids having to say that something is unreal

By avoding denoting phrases, he can, in effect, say that there is something which is called 'Earth' and which is round, without having to say that there is <u>not</u> something which is called 'Earth' and is flat. So, in effect, he can say that a round Earth is real, without having to accept that it follows that something else (a flat Earth) is unreal

(although he wouldn't put it like that, because he wouldn't use denoting phrases such as 'a round Earth').

For information, the way of talking, which Russell used, is how things are expressed in what is called 'first-order logic'.

By the way, the earlier statements, about examples of x, are my attempts to phrase things as Russell would. It's possible that he might not really use phrases such as **'generally called 'Earth"** and that he would use some other phrase to convey much the same meaning. However, that isn't important here. I think the example I've used, above, illustrates the principle of his argument and how he thought it showed that something can be in box 1 without anything being in box 2.

A I do not think that Russell has really found any reason why my argument should be be rejected. I will explain why. (My explanation will be longer than my responses to your other objections. This is partly because I will make this argument very carefully, as it's an argument to show why I disagree with Russell's thinking, which is widely respected within philosophy.)

If we talk in the way Russell suggested, it is only possible to talk about real things. This is because, it only allows us to say how

many examples of a real 'variable' (such as 'x') have a certain thing which applies to them. For instance, we can say 'For one example of x, x is round' or 'For no examples of x, x is flat'. Under the system he advocated, everything, that is said, has to be a statement of that kind. So, if we use that system, we can only talk about real things (real variables) and whether, or not, particular facts apply to any of them.

However, just because Russell has chosen to use a system which only talks about real things, it doesn't follow that there are no true statements that can talk about unreal things. I believe I can show there is a contradiction unless there are true statements which refer to real things and unless there are true statements which refer to unreal things. This is the case, even though both those lots of true statements may use denoting phrases in the process. I believe that I show this in an argument, which follows shortly. Russell would presumably defend the use of his system on the grounds that it avoids the paradox, which arises once we start to talk about unreal things. I agree that, once we start to talk about unreal things, then there is a paradox. But I believe there is also a contradiction unless what I will say, in the following argument, is correct. Given the meaning of what I will say, I don't see how it can fail to be true.

Before I get on to my main argument, I will also say something here

about the issue of what Russell called 'indefinite descriptions'. What Russell meant by 'denoting phrases' included what he called 'definite descriptions', such as 'the tree', and what he called 'indefinite descriptions', such as 'a tree' or 'some tree'. As well as objecting to the use of denoting phrases in general, he also objected to 'indefinite descriptions', on the grounds that they don't refer to precise things and so don't have precise meanings.

However, indefinite descriptions and denoting phrases in general (or at least a very large number of them) do have generally understood meanings. Just because the phrase 'a tree' doesn't necessarily identify which, of all the trees in existence, it means, that doesn't mean that it doesn't have any meaning. Its meaning is still generally understood. And this is certainly the case, if we look at other examples of indefinite descriptions, such as 'a fact'. This means it can't be correctly argued that, because they don't have meanings, indefinite descriptions can't form parts of true statements. Furthermore, I think my following argument will show that regarding certain statements, if the indefinite descriptions within them mean what they are generally understood to mean, then those statements are true.

So, to return to my main argument against Russell. Russell thinks we shouldn't use denoting phrases. Despite that, as I've said, there

are some things or statements which, so far as I can see, must be true, because of what they mean, even though they involve the use of denoting phrases. Or, at least, it would be contradictory for those statements to fail to be true. Some of these truths form my argument on the subject of unreal things, as I will explain.

In summary, the principle of the argument, which I'm about to describe, is this.

A true statement means that something is real.

It also means that something else is not true and therefore, implicitly, that something is not real.

And this is all the case because of the relationship of what I mean by 'true', 'real' and 'not real'.

And that means that Russell is wrong to think that there are no true statements about unreal things.

So, I'll now explain that argument more fully.

Part of the reason why the things I say in my argument must be true, is because they're based on what I mean by the words I'm using. In particular the words 'true' and 'real'.

Let's remember my definitions of 'true' and 'real', which you accepted. Those definitions are such that a true statement describes a real occurrence. If you prefer, instead of the phrase 'a

real occurrence', you can use 'a real incidence' or just 'a real thing' or 'a reality' or 'a part of reality' , but wherever there is a true statement, it means that there is something which is real. So the definitions are such that, if there is a true statement, it means that a particular thing is real, and that is implicit in the true statement's meaning.

(Of course, the really important things are not the words themselves, but their meanings. It wouldn't matter if other words were used, so long as they had the same meanings as the words I'm using.)

So if something is true, then something is real. For example, let's consider the most basic kind of true statement. This could have the form 'X is Y', where 'X' and 'Y' could mean various things. For example, just to clarify the kind of thing I mean, 'X' could mean 'the Earth' and 'Y' could mean 'round'. (In that example 'the Earth' and 'X' are denoting phrases. We could use an example without denoting phrases, although it would be less simple. However, whether or not we use denoting phrases at this stage, by the next stage of the argument, it should become clear that there are definitely true statements which include denoting phrases.)

Now, in line with my definitions, if 'X is Y' is true, then there is an occurrence, which is such that X is Y. Or, to put it another way, an

occurrence exists and that occurrence is such that X is Y. As I said in the definitions, you may prefer to use a different word to 'occurrence', such as 'incidence'. The point is that something exists, whether it's called 'an occurrence', 'an incidence' or something else . So, if something is true, then something exists; i.e. something is real.

Given what I mean by the various terms, 'something', 'true' and 'real', etc., I do not see how this can fail to be true. I don't see how what I mean by what I've said can fail to be true. Or if it did, there would be a contradiction. This is despite the fact that I have used various denoting phrases, such as 'an occurrence' and 'something'. So now we can see that there are true statements that include denoting phrases.

From this point in the argument, I will use denoting phrases, such as 'the Earth' and 'the truth'. I could rephrase them as Russell would, but it would be harder to understand and it wouldn't make any difference to whether particular occurrences are real or unreal. Also, it must be true that one can correctly use the phrase 'the truth' in a true statement.

So, I can now say that if the truth is such that the Earth is round, then the truth is such that there is an occurrence of the Earth being round.

(For convenience, instead of saying 'the truth is such that..', I will, from here, say 'the truth is that..' without altering the intended meaning.)

My next point is this. Just as a true statement means that something is true, it also means that something else is not true. So if we take the statement '**The truth is that the Earth is round**', then another statement follows from that, which is '**The truth is not that the Earth is not round**'. The reasons for that were explained in my answer to your last objection.

Let's call '**The truth is not that the Earth is not round**' statement 1.

And just as it follows from **'The truth is that the Earth is round'** that the statement **'The truth is that there is an occurrence which is such that the Earth is round'** is true, it follows from **'The truth is not that the Earth is not round',** that the statement **'The truth is not that there is an occurrence of the Earth being not round'** is true. The reason for that is as follows.

Let's call **'The truth is not that there is an occurrence of the Earth being not round'** statement 2. The meaning of statement 2 is implicit in the meaning of statement 1, from which it follows.

Given the statements' meanings, there would be a contradiction if one of them was true but not the other. The one can't be true without the other being true, because the two statements describe the same situation.

We have now reached the same point as one that we reached part way through my answer to your last objection. From this point, I showed that the following 3 points are the case.

1. The truth is not that there is a Y, where 'a Y' means 'an occurrence of the Earth being not round'
2. Therefore, what is meant by 'a Y' is unreal.
3. Therefore, something is unreal (or otherwise, there is a contradiction.)

So that is my argument as to why, despite what Russell says, there is a contradiction unless something is unreal.

As I said earlier, the principle of this argument, of mine, can be summarised as follows.

A true statement means that something is real.

It also means that something else is not true and therefore, implicitly, that something is not real.

And this is all the case because of the relationships of what I mean by 'true', 'real' and 'not real'.

So, what does my preceding argument show? It shows that, even

though Russell found a way to avoid using denoting phrases, there are some true statements which do use denoting phrases, including denoting phrases which refer to unreal things. Or, at least, it shows that, if that is not the case, then there is a contradiction. It also shows that there is a contradiction unless some things are unreal. In other words, it supports the part of my main argument which says that, if something is real (in box 1), there is a contradiction unless something else is unreal (in box 2). Therefore my main argument, which is that there is a logical paradox on the subject of whether anything is unreal, is successfully defended against your attempt to defeat it by using Russell's thinking.

B So you have an argument against Russell. Very interesting. But some philosophers would say that there is another, simpler, theory, which could be used against your general argument. This is the theory of Frege.

This theory is based on a distinction between what Frege called the 'sense' of a word or phrase and the 'reference' of that word or phrase.

According to this theory, a phrase, which speaks of an unreal thing, such as 'the present King of France', has a sense but not a reference. This is because, although it has a meaning, there is

nothing that it refers to. This would also apply, for example, to the phrase 'an occurrence of the world being not round', which you used in answer to my previous objection.

I'll use the word 'meaning' to mean what Frege meant by 'sense', as it seems more appropriate nowadays.

If meaning can really be distinguished from reference, then this could be used to argue against a part of your argument. That part is the one where you argue that, if one thing is real, then there is a contradiction unless something else is unreal.

Frege would disagree with you on that point. He would say that his theory provides a way for us to say that particular things are real, without having to accept the contradictory idea that there are also unreal things. This is because, instead of having the old distinction between real things and unreal ones, the theory enables us, instead, to distinguish between those phrases which have a reference as well as a meaning, and other phrases which only have a meaning. Take the earlier example 'an occurrence of the world being not round'. While you would say that is a description of something which is unreal, Frege would say that it is just a phrase which has a meaning but not a reference.

A I believe Frege's theory does not provide a way to defeat my argument. This is because I believe he was mistaken concerning the distinction between meaning and reference. In my view, where a phrase has a reference, it is the same as the meaning of that phrase. And, in a true statement, the two (meaning and reference) are the same. I will explain this as follows.

It is only where the meaning is also a reference, that a reference is possible. For if the meaning is not the same as a reference, then what is being referred to and how?

Also, in a true statement, the meanings are references, otherwise what the statement describes isn't real and, therefore, the statement can't be true. For example, regarding any statement of the form 'X is Y', in order for the statement to be true, what 'X' means must really be X and what 'Y' means must really be Y. Therefore, both 'X' and 'Y' must have references. Or, at least, there would be a contradiction unless that is the case.

Therefore, it would be contradictory, when dealing with true statements, to distinguish meaning from reference. So Frege's idea (which was that, within true statements, there are some phrases which have a meaning but not a reference) turns out not to be true. Frege's idea cannot be justifiably used to oppose my

argument.

B Wait a minute. You've just argued that a true statement can only describe real things. But, previously, in your answer on Russell, you argued that a true statement can refer to an unreal thing.

A With everything that I argue for, my position is that there is a contradiction *unless* it's true. So, when I was responding to your objection on Russell, I explained why there is a contradiction unless some true statements can refer to unreal things. Now, in my response to your objection on Frege, I've explained why there is a contradiction unless true statements can only refer to real things.

My overall argument, as you know, is this. If one thing is real (i.e. in box 1), then there is a contradiction unless something else is unreal (i.e. in box 2). However, it is contradictory for anything to be in box 2. Therefore it's contradictory for anything to be in box 1, but it's contradictory unless something is in box 1. Therefore, contradiction is unavoidable.

As I've explained, Frege's argument cannot be correct, because there is a contradiction, unless a true statement only refers to real things. This is the equivalent of saying that it's contradictory for anything to be in box 2. It doesn't change the fact that it's also

contradictory for anything to be in box 1 without something being in box 2.

B Yes, I see.

A I believe I have now dealt with all the objections, which you've raised to my argument.

Regarding a Longer Version of the Argument

The preceding dialogue explains a relatively short and simple version of my argument, and deals with the some of the most likely objections to it. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a longer document, '*Logical Mysticism; Why Paradox is Unavoidable',* which covers this overall argument at greater length and in greater detail. That longer version also addresses some other possible objections to the argument, and explains how I believe they can be overcome, and it includes further discussion of related issues, such as the meaning of the argument's 'conclusion' or 'end point'.

Contacting me

Responses to these documents would be appreciated. I can be contacted at

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