Logical Puzzles and the Concept of God

[This is a short semi-serious discussion between me
and three former classmates in March 2010. –S.H.]

[Sue wrote on March 24, 2010:]

See attached cartoon… What's your answer?

[Scott replied on March 24, 2010:]

Hi Sue [and everybody],

A great cartoon for the philosophically inclined! I'll probably use it eventually on my Philosophical Doggerel website.

This is one of a large number of logical paradoxes that fascinate philosophers. (Or maybe sometimes *hypnotize* them and stop them dead in their tracks, the way a deer is hypnotized by car headlights!)

Many paradoxes involve self-reference, such as: "This sentence is false." If it is true, then it is false. If it is false, then it is true. One resolution ploy in these cases is to say that sometimes this self-reference in statements is logically invalid (because it leads directly to logical contradiction). But that sounds like an ad hoc excuse.

So a more general approach to the resolution of many of these sorts of paradoxes is to analyze them as being due to the confusion of different levels of discussion. You can have a discussion about a topic, but also a discussion *about that discussion* (which is called a meta-discussion). And you can have a third-level discussion about the discussion of the discussion, and so forth. Sometimes the intermingling and confusion of these different levels of discussion leads to *apparent* paradoxes, and I think that is what is going on in this case.

The question "If you try to fail and succeed, which have you done?" can be interpreted in at least two ways.

First interpretation: "If you purposely try to fail to do some task X, but nevertheless succeed in doing that task X, which have you done?" In this case the answer is obviously that you have succeeded in doing task X and not failed to do task X (though you have failed in your attempt to fail in doing task X).

Second interpretation: "If you try *to fail* to do some task X, and succeed *in failing to do that task*, which have you done?" In this case you have *succeeded* in failing to do task X, but have therefore also *failed* to do task X.

Thus there is really no paradox here. It only *appears* on the surface that there is a paradox because of the conflation of the two levels of discussion. (The first level is about the task and whether or not that was accomplished. The second level was about the attempt to fail in the performance of that task, and whether or not that attempt to fail was accomplished.)

Well, anyway, that's my analysis? Does it make any sense?!

Scott

[Larry N. wrote on March 25, 2010:]

I went for the "ad-hoc excuse."

[Scott replied on March 25, 2010:]

Hi Larry,

The problem with the "ad hoc" excuse that linguistic self-reference is a no-no, is that most of the time self-reference causes no problems whatsoever! "This sentence is short." is in fact true, and generates no logical contradictions. So those who say that the difficulty with sentences like "This sentence is false." is due to self-reference have the further obligation of saying why self-reference is sometimes innocuous and sometimes (apparently) logically fatal. And that usually pushes them in the direction of admitting that the real problem is the confusion of levels of description. (I.e., not being clear about the difference between a statement and a meta-statement.)

Of course "This sentence is short." is a statement which is also a meta-statement about itself. Linguistic self-reference seems to me to necessarily involve meta-levels of description. But meta-statements are not problematic unless there is confusion between the statement and the meta-statement. "This sentence is very long." is false, but there is still no apparent paradox there.

In the case of "This sentence is false." we are conflicted between our normal appraisal of the truth or falsity of ordinary first level statements and the fact that this sentence itself is also a meta-statement denying that what the statement asserts is actually true! (An assertion is the claim that something is the case, but if the assertion is that the claim being made in the assertion itself is false, there is some serious confusion!)

Moreover, very similar sorts of problems arise in cases where there is no actual self-reference. For example:

A) Statement B is true.

B) Statement A is false.

Neither statement A nor B refers to itself, but there is still an apparent paradox here. (Are statements A and B themselves actually true or false?)

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Larry L. hinted that there is actually something pretty silly about spending too much time trying to resolve all these sorts of puzzles, and I agree with him. There are logicians who spend their whole careers pondering stuff like this!

On the other hand it is true that people are driven toward making their own ideas internally consistent and coherent. From an evolutionary standpoint this drive has been necessary for us to survive (despite the fact that we never fully succeed!). When we find that certain ways of thinking (such as linguistic self-reference) which we have taken for granted will sometimes (seem to) lead us into logical contradictions many of us find this strange and alarming! That's why even us non-logicians will often ponder these matters for a short while!

Scott

[Larry L. wrote on March 24, in response to Scott's first message:]

Yes indeed it makes sense Scott.
Now we need to be thankful that we have the time and energy to put into an analysis like that which does not put food on the table or a roof over our heads.
This mixing of discussion levels does have my interest though.
Do you see an indirect application of this to the following question?
If there is an omnipotent God, can He/She create a rock heavier that He/She can lift?

Larry

[Scott replied on March 25, 2010:]

Hi Larry,

"If there is an omnipotent God, can He/She create a rock heavier that He/She can lift?"

I've never taken that particular argument against the existence of God very seriously! (There are much better ones!) It strikes me at first glance as a sort of non-serious and superficial logical

trick. But I've never tried to analyze it before, so let's see now....

One of the strange things about the (usual) conception(s) of God is that "he" is supposed to have a variety of human attributes, but to have them to "an infinite degree". There is a question in my mind about whether that even makes much sense, at least for many attributes. What would it mean to be "infinitely intelligent" for example? (To be capable of making an intelligent decision in one set of circumstances is to assume certain things which would prove to be quite unintelligent in different circumstances.)

One of the great many different ways of being intelligent is that you are able to come to good and reasonable decisions based on limited evidence. You may not know with absolute certainty that the floor in your house will hold you up tomorrow (even though it has every day for 30 years), but except in rare situations it would show a lack of intelligence (and maybe sanity) to suddenly suppose that the floor won't hold you up tomorrow.

So I imagine that "infinite intelligence" would include that sort of intelligence based on partial or limited knowledge, as well as every other sort of intelligence.

But now we come to a problem: God is also supposed to be "all-knowing" (i.e., know everything there is to know). Therefore he can't possibly be intelligent about some intellectual process that only occurs in situations where substantial, *but still limited*, knowledge is a requirement. By definition that situation just never applies to him. This means that God cannot possibly be "infinitely intelligent"!

The reason for that seems to be that the two "infinite" capabilities, being *all-knowing* and being *infinitely intelligent*, are incompatible (at least in certain situations).

The "problem of evil"—the very powerful argument against the existence of the Christian God (which actually predates Christianity)—is an argument of this type. Here is my very brief discussion of the problem of evil from a dictionary I've been working on:

PROBLEM OF EVIL
An internal logical flaw in the conception of God as put forward by many religions including Christianity. The religious doctrine is that God is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing) and omnibenevolent (all good). The trouble is, given the obvious fact that there is much evil in the world, these three characteristics are logically incompatible and inconsistent with each other. David Hume expressed the difficulty this way:
> If evil in the world is the intention of the Deity, then He is not benevolent.
> If evil in the world is contrary to His intention, then He is not omnipotent.
> But evil is either in accordance with His intention or contrary to it.
> Therefore, either the Deity is not benevolent, or He is not omnipotent.

Of course from the materialist point of view there is one other, much more sensible, alternative: No "Deity" exists at all!

Another such theological conundrum is summed up in this little ditty:

Can omniscient God, who
Knows the future, find
The omnipotence to
Change His future mind?

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—Karen Owens

Again, it sure looks like there is a logical incompatibility between two "infinite" capabilities.

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So let's turn to the "heavy rock" argument. Initially, at least, It doesn't seem to be like the three examples above, where the supposed attributes of God are in conflict with each other. Instead, it talks only about one specific attribute, omnipotence, and suggests that if you are omnipotent in one respect you must thereby *not* be omnipotent in another respect!

However, creating big rocks is indeed one capability. And lifting rocks is another, *different* capability. For a mortal it does seem quite possible to create a rock (by pouring a load of concrete into a pile for example) that you are then unable to lift. The problem only comes when you suppose that an entity has the power to do *both* things to an infinite degree! (I.e., no matter how big a rock you want, and no matter how heavy it is.)

The trouble seems to be that there are *many different ways* of being powerful, and some of them conflict with others (at least when you assume infinite omnipotence).

So it seems there is more rationality to this argument against an omnipotent God's existence than I formerly assumed! It does indeed seem to be parallel to other more accepted arguments against the usual conceptions of God, which are based on incompatible (or inconsistent) capabilities that God is claimed to have (but could not logically have all at the same time).

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I don't myself see any applicability of the "different levels of discussion" method of resolving supposed "paradoxes" to this "heavy rock" argument against God's existence. We are not talking about different levels, but merely the incompatibility of "infinite" degrees of different capabilities.

If you can construct a resolution of this "heavy rock" argument based on different levels of discussion, by all means let me know!

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Of course none of these arguments about "incompatible attributes" proves that there can be no kind of god or gods whatsoever! They only show that a god with all the capabilities commonly assumed of him is impossible.

To prove that there are *no gods of any kind* you need to focus on the attribute(s) which are common to all conceptions of what a god is supposed to be, such as: 1) immortal, and 2) an immaterial being which nevertheless has a mind, thinks, remembers, interacts with the material world, and so forth.

I know of no way to prove that an entity could not possibly live forever. However, certain

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theories of cosmology, such as that the universe will end someday in the "Big Crunch" [the opposite of the "Big Bang"] would at least preclude any *material being* from living forever. And there is of necessity an element of chance in the continued existence of any material being. (If a nearby star goes supernova then all of us on earth will have had it!)

But a scientific understanding of *what mind is*, does indeed show that no gods of any sort can possibly exist. The reason for this is that it explains mind as a property of (or better, a set of functional aspects of) certain very complex and constantly developing organizations of matter (brains or their equivalent). Once you understand this, you see that the very notion of any "disembodied mind or spirit", such as gods are supposed to be on the modern conception, is quite incoherent and unscientific. But I've talked about that before so I won't get into it further here.

Scott