

From One Self-exiled in Academia.

26 Jan 93

Dear friends,

I'm sure you are wrong-- I will not regret my exile. I'm more than a bit surprised that you're surprised by my decision? I've always been drawn to academia's garden; I'm sure you noticed. Some people are social butterflies, others are bookworms. There's no reason to fret; I've just graduated to a moth's eye view of the Torch of Knowledge. So, please, no more letters like the last one-- you should be happy for me. When I tell you all the amazing things that have been happening to me, you will begin to see how much I am enjoying it here in the Universe of Thought (or, as we call it here, the Universe o' T).

I have recently been several times accosted by the most incredible thoughts. Just last week, I was at a party and I met three different infinities. They are known as The Three Sisters, and their parents must be very proud of them. They were such perfect darlings- genteel and charming. The youngest one catches everyone's attention; she is the Counting Numbers (she is really a countessa). Everyone knows her, {1,2,3,...}. She's the perfect courtesan- completely discrete. Time spent with her is always enlightening.

That evening, I induced her to show me a few things about language. She showed me a beautiful semantic solution to a meta-mathematical question (and afterwards she showed me her latest parlor tricks). Can you tell I am smitten by her? I am. She's an enchantress. But you have to be open minded to appreciate her. She even introduced me to a friend of hers, Finite Language, another divine beauty of infinite veils. I blush just thinking about the encounter. But you will forgive me for not telling you more about that evening. I'm reserving the subject for later- you can read all the details in the fictional work I've entitled, At the Limits of Socially Acceptable Intercourse with Three Sisters. (Of course, I had to change all the names to protect everyone's innocence- but as you will see, we were all wrong).

I have also seen a mutual friend of ours- that old chap, Professor Liar's Paradox. I see him often now; he was born and bred here in Academia. He's pledged Greek for over 2,000 yrs. I still haven't made up my mind- he's profound, or senile. I believe you know that he is a Professor of Logic here. You won't believe it when I tell you what he said to me the last time we met. His choice of words was so peculiar, that I will never forget them:

I saw him in the distance, and I called out to him, "Prof Liar's Paradox, how are you?"

And he ran over to me and said, "I'm sure I'm wrong!"

"About what?" I asked.

He said, "It doesn't matter does it? I'm sure I'm wrong."

"Well, why do you think you're wrong?" I asked.

He said, "Well, probably because I have Free Will and I want to think "I'm sure I'm wrong", but that doesn't really concern me right now; all I am concerned with now is that I'm sure I'm wrong." Then he looked at me waiting.

I could tell he was waiting for me to smile and say, "Oh, Yes, I see what you mean." The whole scene was preposterous. But I am getting accustomed to hearing Professors say strange things, so I collected my

feeble wits, and tried to examine what he was telling me. I said, "I don't understand, because I don't see what you're sure you're wrong about."

He said, "About being sure I'm wrong of course!"

I said, "Then you can't be right that you're wrong."

"Well, you misunderstood me; I didn't say, 'I'm wrong'; I said, 'I'm sure I'm wrong.' You must agree that any fool can see how that's different... don't you?"

Not wanting to be any fool, I answered, "No, if you're certain that you're wrong, you must be wrong. That's what certainty is all about."

Oh, how he chastised me, "Where have you been studying logic- with Descartes? This is basic stuff. I'm sure you should have already had it, but I'll go through it with you again and put it all together. You agree that right and wrong are opposites, don't you?"

"Of course" I said.

"And that either I'm right, or I'm wrong?"

"I guess so." I said.

But he said, "No, you don't guess so, you know so- by the Law of the Excluded Middle. Something can't be both an orange and not an orange. Or do you disagree?"

"No, I agree."

He attempted to drill me, "Good then, by the Law of the Excluded Middle, I'm right, or I'm not right"

I agreed: "Yes, you're right!"

"NO! 'I'm right, or I'm not right.' Please, try to stay with me." he said.

"Ok, You're right, or you're not right."

He went on: "And, if I'm not right, then I'm wrong. So, I'm right, or I'm wrong."

"Oh, yes," I said, "but I was ready to agree to that without having to go through all those preliminaries."

Obviously disturbed he said, "PLEASE, you can't really agree to anything, if you haven't been through all the preliminaries. In any case, let's try to stick to the argument. We now agree that the possibilities are that either I'm right, or, I'm wrong. So, let's look at the possibilities. If I'm right, then I'm right; but If I'm wrong, what then?"

(Do you remember the Abbott and Costello skit: Who's on First? Well, I did, and ...) I said, "I see where you're going with this -but it's just a paradox."

His thin hair visibly bristled, and I could tell he was outraged. Still, his tone of voice never wavered. "A 'paradox'?" he said, "You mean from the Greek word, paradox meaning a wrong thought?" He rolled his eyes to heaven, then back at me, and he said, "Well, I never heard of such a thing! People call ME a paradox all the time-- behind my back, of course. You know, you might just as well have called me a Cretan to my face!" He stepped away from me for a second and paced back and forth. Then he very calmly said, "Just because you call something by a name doesn't make that thing whatever name you called it." His calm was a deception, he was plainly exasperated with me and said, "I know my last name is Paradox, but that doesn't make me one. I have a friend from North Carolina named Jack Kass. But you

wouldn't call him a jackass to his face. So tell me, what do you mean when you call something a paradox?"

Not knowing what to say I blurted out "A paradox is a wrong thought." I was sure he was going to pounce on me again. But this time he just smiled. Apparently, I had said something rife with implications. All good for his argument (of course) and bad for mine (whatever mine was- I still didn't know).

He questioned me: "So you believe there are right thoughts and wrong thoughts?"

"Yes"

"And a right thought is one that agrees with logic?"

"Yes"

"And is a wrong thought one that disagrees with logic?"

"Yes"

"So it is a thought that logic doesn't like?"

After only a short pause I answered, "No, it's a question logic can't answer."

He said, "And for this it gets called a bad thought?"

This time, after a bit more than a very, very long pause... I still had no answer.

So he continued, "Logic feels impotent and thinking gets a bad reputation? Can you explain yourself?"

I was sure I couldn't, but I tried, I said, "A wrong thought is a thought which logic says is both true and false."

"And what's wrong with being both true and false?" he asked.

"Logic says that a thought can't be both true and false." I said.

Parroting me, he asked, "So, Logic says that a thought can't be both true and false?"

Feeling I may have crawled onto some safe ground, I said, "Right!"

Then the Professor schooled me: "Then what you are saying is that Dean Logic has been up to his old tricks. I've been acquainted with him for quite some time. I recall a party one night where he made the prediction that no thought could be both right and wrong. To no one's surprise but his own, in comes a thought that is both right and wrong. All of a sudden Logic begins quoting Robert's Rules of Order; a commotion breaks out, and Logic starts shouting and calling the thought a rake or a hoe-- or some other garden implement-- and then he tries to have everyone in the better social circles put the thought completely out of their minds- he said, 'the creature is a wrong thought!'"

I was completely taken aback, and exclaimed, "I have never heard that story before!"

"Yes, and of course, the poor thought's feelings were crushed."

I must admit, I was dazed by this. And yet, I was rather amazed at my surprise-- because in truth, I had seen Logic pull this same trick on me, often. But I had never before seen how unsociable Logic was being to all those sensitive thoughts.

"So you see" Prof. Paradox continued, "you can't dismiss a thought just because someone calls it some name or other. It's still a valid thought."

Then I saw what he meant. I suddenly felt very sorry for the way others had treated him. It must be tough being a paradox.

I said, "Oh, yes, I see what you mean."

He smiled and asked me if I could finish the argument for him.

And I said, "Oh, Yes,

I'm sure you're wrong, because

A.) if you're right- then you're right, and

B.) if you're wrong- that's what you claimed, so you must be right.

This means that you can be certain you're wrong.

Q.E.D. "

I said, "Oh, YES, I see what you mean. Yes, I see. " (And the scary part is that I believed it each step of the way... and still do)

He was obviously pleased and immediately thereafter jovial.

Without thinking I asked him how he was, again, and of course he said, again, 'I'm sure I'm wrong.' "

But this time I understood; I smiled and said, "Oh, yes, I see what you mean."

He asked me how I was, and I said, "Oh, I'm sure I'm wrong too."

"I'm glad to hear it" he said, "Now if I could just figure out what's wrong with the phone in my office; the world would be perfect."

As you might appreciate, I was curious, and so I asked him, "What's wrong with your phone?"

"I think that's undecidable" he said. "Every time I call 411 and ask a question, they switch me to 911."

I thought about it a second, and said, "Oh, yes, well I see what you mean." and I excused myself to go to Bertrand Russell's seminar on Gödel Numbering.

Yes, I tell you, the words were so peculiar I'll never forget them.

And that my friends, is a slice of life here in Academia. There is never a dull moment. In the morning we begin calculations to launch a missile at Uranus; then I'll have places to do and things to be, but right now my lamp is flickering and I must retire from writing.

Please write back soon. Your recent accounts of prison over-crowding, sectarian warfare in Bosnia, and the AIDS epidemic were so entertaining. After reading them, I'm sure Prof Paradox is absolutely correct; I'm sure we are all wrong.

Sincerely,

One, Self-exiled in Academia