

André Lascaris OP

HEALING SYMMETRIES? Paradox and the mimetic theory.

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This paper seeks to open up a discussion on a subject that fascinates me: it is about the use of the pragmatic paradox. In general a paradox can be defined as a contradiction that follows correct deduction from consistent premises. Many paradoxes turn out to be false; sometimes we only discover their fallacy after some time or we expect that we may do so in the future. The word ‘paradox’ is often used loosely: a formula or action may look like a paradox or may have paradoxical traits, but is not a paradox. Paradoxes are close to riddles which show that things are not as stable as they appear. They play with conceptual borderlines and declare that two categories have to be subsumed into a higher category.¹

In this paper I am not dealing with mathematical paradoxes – I do not have any talent for mathematics. Nor am I interested in logical paradoxes, - though I try to be logical, for they are highly abstract. I have the same difficulty with mere semantic paradoxes.² No, I am interested in what Paul Watzlawick (1921-2007) and his colleagues call pragmatic paradoxes³, and especially in those that can be used to prevent violence.

Preventing violence is an important theme in my life; after all I was born on one of the most ominous days of the twentieth century, the 29th of August 1939 when West European countries mobilized because it became known that V. Molotov, representing Stalin, and J. von Ribbentrop, representing Hitler, had made a non-aggression pact on the 23rd of August. Three days after the mobilization the Second World War began. In 1971 I taught theology to black students in the South Africa of the apartheid and I was expelled by the government after one year. In the seventies and eighties of last century I was involved in peace work on behalf of Northern Ireland. I was a member of the staff of a small organisation, the Dutch Northern Irish Advisory Committee, which organised conferences in the Netherlands for people from Northern Ireland. Moreover, I was able to use a paradox once or twice in my life that prevented me from being teased in school and helped me to be accepted as the person I am. This discussion paper tries to connect those helpful paradoxes, that

¹ M. Elias, *Rechterraadsels of De twee gezichten van de zondebok*, Maastricht 1998, 30-31.

² See: M. Clark, *Paradoxes from A to Z*. London 2007; R.C. Koons, *Paradoxes of belief and strategic rationality*. Cambridge 1992; V. McGee, *Truth, Vagueness and Paradox. An Essay on the Logic of Truth*. Indianapolis 1991.

³ P. Watzlawick, J Beavin Bavelas, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication. A Study of interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes*. New York / London 1967.

prevent violence, with the mimetic theory. I am trying to say something about different ways of using paradoxes: the phenomenon of the double bind, the psychological technique of prescribing the symptom, paradoxes used by Jesus in a political, social and relational context, and paradoxes that played a useful part in my life. I shall finish with a brief reflection on the use of paradoxes.

Pragmatic paradoxes

Pragmatic paradoxes arise in ongoing interactions that determine human behaviour. The contradiction does not have a semantic character as such, but the contradiction is to be found between two human acts or tasks, both of which people have to fulfil, but that exclude each other. Some of those paradoxes are pretty disastrous as in the case of a double bind when parents order their children: 'be spontaneous' or 'don't be obedient'. How to be spontaneous when one is ordered to be spontaneous? How is one to obey if one is commanded not to obey? The message must be disobeyed to be obeyed. How to imitate while being told not to imitate and how not to imitate if our human existence depends on imitation? Because of the strong link between our humanity and imitation, the order to obey so as not to imitate is extremely confusing and makes it almost impossible to live as a human being.

According to G. Bateson, some conditions are needed for this double bound message to work in this kind of way: two or more persons must have an intense relationship that is necessary to survive as a human being. The message claims something about its own assertion but the two assertions are mutually exclusive. Moreover, the person receiving this message is not in a position to comment on it or to withdraw from the situation.

Bateson developed his double bind theory to explain the schizophrenic attempts not to communicate. Actually, the non-verbal context plays a role in communication as well. It often happens that the person who receives a message finds it difficult to interpret it. However, he or she will try to find the right interpretation by talking about the message or by exchanging non verbal signs, by meta-communication. A schizophrenic situation arises when the possibility of communication about the seemingly contradictory messages is excluded.

If mimesis has the central place in human existence as Girard argues and if we, being decent mimetic people, accept this as true, it will be clear to us that some kind of violence is almost unavoidable when meta-communication is not possible. Language is a mimetic event and generally it is possible to communicate about the way we communicate and to discuss the imitation between us. Our mental sanity is at stake, when meta-communication is made impossible. We may come across double messages, sometimes in the form of paradoxes being placed on us by parents and other people whom we imitate. As long as we can talk about them, it is possible to find the right interpretation. While it is possible to choose one of the alternatives in case of a contradiction, a choice is impossible when we cannot discuss the paradox.

Prescribing the symptom

While paradoxes such as double binds may destroy communication, some paradoxical commandments can be healing. The Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Victor E. Frankl (1905-1997) gave several examples of healing paradoxes, of healing symmetries.⁴ A young doctor of the staff of the clinics of the University of Vienna consulted him because, when he was performing an operation, he began to be afraid that he would tremble when the chief of the clinic would enter the operating room. Subsequently this fear led to an actual tremor and the expectation became a fact. Frankl told the young doctor to tremble on purpose when the chief medical man entered the room. He had to say to himself “oh, here is the instructor! Now I’ll show him what a good trembler I am – I’ll really show him how nicely I can tremble.’ So the young doctor did his utmost and incited himself to tremble, but discovered that he was unable to do so.

This is to a certain extent an easy case: a young, basically healthy doctor with a problem. Frankl and the members of his school treated people who had undergone many years of illness for which they were even hospitalized. Mrs. Anna, forty years of age, suffered from a severe obsessive-compulsive neurosis. A washing compulsion was noticed when she was only five years Later she often stayed up until 5 a.m. because of her perfectionism regarding her homework. She received many treatments, including periods of hospitalization. At the time of her admission to the clinic, she had to start toileting at four a.m. in order to arrive at the clinic at noon. During a series of daily therapeutic sessions she learned to wish that everything would be as dirty as possible. By the eighth day she required only half an hour for washing and dressing. Six months later she had resumed her professional work from which she had been incapacitated for a long period.

Prescribing the symptom to the patient does not come out of the blue. The therapist listens carefully to the patients. They often receive treatment in some other way as well, even the use of medicines may be necessary. Frankl does not see the paradoxical intention as a panacea. Further treatment may be necessary.

He explains his success by pointing out that such paradoxes are quite humorous and that humour makes people detached, setting them free from themselves, creating a distance both from the symptom and from their neurosis. When the patient exaggerates his symptoms, he or she may discover that the symptoms disappear. One may think that such treatment only brings short-lived results, or that only the symptoms of a deeper seated conflict disappear. Frankl denied this. According to him it is certain that something is happening at a deeper level whenever the paradox is applied. It is an existential reorientation.

⁴ V.E. Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul. From Psychotherapy to Logotherapy*. Harmondsworth 1973, 205-237.

He is probably right for this treatment presupposes imitation, mimesis, and as we all know this is fundamental to human existence.

P. Watzlawick and his colleagues explain the effect of prescribing the symptom by saying that this amounts to the double bind of instructing the patient: “be spontaneous”. The demand to be spontaneous makes it impossible to be spontaneous. When the therapist instructs the patient to perform his symptom spontaneously, he makes the symptomatic behaviour impossible. Here the double bind is therapeutic. Being forced to imitate two desires which exclude each other at the same moment makes any movement impossible, including the movement of desire. One becomes paralyzed and cannot make any movement at all. Mimesis becomes impossible.

The Italian M. Selvini- Palazzoli and her team used therapeutic paradoxes for some time as well.⁵ A boy and his parents came to the clinic; the boy behaved as if he was an old man, speaking with the voice of an old man and walking like an old man. He was put on medicines, but they did not improve the situation. The therapeutic team soon discovered that he was imitating his grandfather who had died recently. Moreover, they learned that his parents did not find it easy to cope with each other. The boy took over the role of his grandfather who was the scapegoat of his parents and thus kept them together. The team encouraged the boy to continue his behaviour, and immediately the boy gave up his role. This did not end the therapy, rather it started here. The therapeutic process continues for some time and is full of pitfalls.

Some years later the team grew doubtful about the so-called paradoxical intervention.⁶ In many cases it did not work, or it antagonised the clients who saw those paradoxes as a provocation. The team hoped to develop a strategy that could be used in different circumstances and discussed at great length the interventions it should propose. It developed a routine by telling all those involved that the client sacrificed himself for the welfare of the family as a whole. It tended to use paradoxes as a recipe and to repeat paradoxes that were used before or to create very complex interventions that were not very convincing. The paradox became a way to keep the attention of the family, but the team did not expect that a great change would take place. The psychotic game of the family was too complex to be stopped through a paradoxical intervention,

Jesus and paradox

Paradoxes are used in social and political conflicts as well. The powers that be are only successful as long as their subjects allow themselves to be obedient.

⁵ M. Selvini Palazzoli (ed.), *Paradosso e controparadosso. Un nuovo modello nella terapia della famiglia a transazione schizofrenica*. Milano 1975.

⁶ M. Selvini Palazzoli (ed.), *Family Games. General Models of Psychotic Processes in the Family*. London 1989.

Generally, a paradoxical action is useful: if one is too obedient, for instance by working to the rule, everything comes to a standstill.

Jesus seems to have been a master in using pragmatic paradoxes in the context of human conflict. We have to read his sermon of the mount (Mt. 5) from a paradoxical perspective. Calling the poor happy is a kind of paradox already, but a true paradox seems to me: “If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two.” The “man in authority” - I use here the New English Bible – is the Roman soldier who could force every farmer to carry his luggage and weapons, but not for more than one mile. For every Jew this was awful. You lost time, of course, but much worse, you turned into a collaborator of the oppressor of your people and assisted an idolater. A refusal may cost you much hardship or even your life, obeying seems to be sinful. So Jesus advises the farmer to go the one mile but then to go on for another mile refusing to give the luggage and weapons back. At that very moment, the soldier trespasses the military rule, which allows him to force a farmer to carry his luggage for one mile only. So the soldier’s use of force is challenged. He may well abstain from forcing farmers to carry his luggage and weapons in the future.

The other sayings in this context must be interpreted as paradoxes as well. “If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left cheek. If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well.” It is very difficult to slap someone who offers you his cheek for a second punishment. It makes a person very uneasy when he sues for your shirt and gets the coat as well. He realises what he is doing: taking clothing from someone that would be a protection on cold days and nights.

Jesus introduces these paradoxes by mentioning one of the basic rules of human behaviour: “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth”. (Lev. 24: 20) When someone wrongs you, he or she has to pay for the damage caused. This is the mimetic rule of reciprocity, of symmetry, and often of fearful symmetry. It is supposed to limit violence but at the same time it often maintains or even increases violence. For the person who wrongs you may have done this in order to put things right because you wronged him before or your father did, or one of your children. It is often impossible to say who started the wrong doing, but when it starts there is no end to reciprocal revenge.

There are several examples of paradoxical behaviour in the New Testament. When the Pharisees ask Jesus whether they are permitted to pay taxes to the Roman Empire, or not, he asks them to produce a Roman coin. They are able to do so, showing that they are willing to possess and use the coin and also to pay the taxes. (Mt. 22: 15-22) There is a lot of humour in the Old and New Testament, but, we do not recognize it because we read the texts in a liturgical and solemn context. It may well be that the Jewish wisdom tradition plays some role here. Jesus is not the only person in the gospels to use a paradox. A Canaanite woman uses it against Jesus when he refuses to heal her daughter with the argument: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and

throw to the dogs” She replies: “True, Lord, and yet the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters.” (Mt. 15: 21-28) She defeats Jesus who then heals her daughter.

In these examples of paradoxical responses to wrong doing or to a simple refusal, the violent man seems to get his way but falls into the pit he dug for himself. He looks at himself in the mirror and sees a person he does not want to be, a person who is nasty, violent. By not putting up any obstacles against the obstacle that is placed in front of him and by even exaggerating the evil request, the potential victim refuses to imitate his opponent who expects the ordinary reaction of being obeyed albeit with a silent protest. The potential victim runs some risks. His adversary can become very unpleasant because he is like a boxer who beats the air. One should do one’s utmost not to humiliate the opponent and not to give the impression to be cleverer and more powerful than he is. Otherwise one becomes simply a part of the vicious circle of competition and violence. Paradoxical solutions are not to be repeated; in different circumstances one has to behave differently. Developing a strategy is out of the question, because this is already part of the mimetic circle of violence as the word ‘strategy’ itself suggests.

St Paul uses paradoxes as well – “when I am weak, then I am strong” (1Cor. 12: 10) - and we may consider Christianity as one great paradox: by gaining his life a person will lose it, by losing his life for Christ’s sake, he will gain it. (Mt. 10: 39)

Autobiographically

Finally it may be useful to look at one’s autobiography. Did you ever use paradoxes in such a way that evil was prevented? I give three examples from my own life.

In the midst of the troubles in Northern Ireland, the Dutch Northern Irish Advisory committee, of which I was a member, advised the police in Northern Ireland to publish an advertisement. In this advertisement they would thank the IRA for the increase of their salary; the improvement of their equipment; and the expansion of their career prospects. The members of the police we talked to realised immediately the value of our advice - this could make the members of the IRA think, even paralyze them. But such an advertisement may well have caused a public outcry, as well as among the political leaders who may not have appreciated the paradoxical character of this action. So the idea was thrown out of the window.

Another example. I was thirteen or so and returned to the minor seminary after the summer holidays. It was quite crowded in the recreational hall where we were waiting for our supper. A tall boy – at least in my eyes he was tall - asked me whether I would like to have a piece of chocolate. Of course, that was very welcome. I got the chocolate, put it in my mouth and as you already may have expected, it was not chocolate but a piece of soap, a well known joke.

Straight away, without thinking, I said to the boy: “Thank you very much, it is very nice indeed“. I still see the disappointment on the face of the boy when he turned quickly away. I could take the soap out of my mouth without him noticing. This small incident turned out to be quite important for my life. Somehow my attitude prevented me from being teased.

The usual reaction to such a ‘joke’ is to feel miserable and maybe to express this feeling in some way. Another likely reaction may be sudden anger leading to hitting the offender. Both reactions would have been typical examples of a fearful symmetry. They are reciprocal. However, I imitated him as if he was a person with good intentions even though he was not. He behaved as if he did me a favour and I behaved as if he did. He knew I did not tell the truth, but he could not very well say this. If he had done, we may even have become friends

Thirteen years later I went to Oxford to study Patristics. I stayed in the Dominican priory where at that time there was an interesting group of people from different backgrounds and from different nations: English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish. Among them a Maltese and an American Dominican who studied at the University and who did their utmost to speak the Queen’s English, something I would never achieve. They lived at the margin of the community and somehow they were not considered to be full members. At that time the English were quite nice to foreigners, but of course foreigners were still only foreigners. Spontaneously I started telling everybody how happy I was to be a foreigner. ‘It must be awful to be British, English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish’. I said, ‘I thank God every night that I am a foreigner and do not belong to the English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish nation, that I am not British.’ {With my apologies to the Irish who are not British either.} After about three months one of the leading figures in the community said to me: “Now, stop this nonsense. You are not a foreigner any more.” I stopped, and became aware that I had been accepted as a full member of the community. My four years at Oxford were very happy.

I imitated the British attitude of ‘natural’ superiority. This caused confusion. They were used to foreigners who behaved properly, accepting somehow the superiority of the British race. Either they had to give up their superiority or they had to consider me as one of them, a strange kind of Englishman. I had not thought out what I was doing; it was a spontaneous creative action. My success was limited, though; I could not change the position of the Maltese and American confrere.

Reflection

Since the discovery of ‘mirror neurons’ it is obvious that children start imitating other human beings straight away after their birth. The child focuses on the intentions and goals of his models, not simply on their actions. We imitate the intention of other persons, not just their outward actions.

However, in those paradoxes, the subject does not imitate the intention of his adversary, but because he discerns his intention and goal, he imitates his acts and confronts his adversary with his behaviour. It is a form of meta-communication that reveals the violence of the adversary. The hidden desire of the adversary is revealed; his behaviour turns out to be a lie. His intention becomes transparent. The adversary is imitated, sees himself in a mirror and has to admit that he plays a power game. As soon as he discovers himself to be violent, it becomes quite impossible to continue. A human being can only be violent as long as he does not recognize his actions as pure violence. Violence is always to be justified by covering it up and surrounding it by a wall of good reasons such as rectifying a situation, bringing the other person to justice, obeying higher authorities, saving the world or the Church or at least saving oneself. Being violent is living in a chaos, in a universe without differences, in which everybody is mirroring everybody else. The confusion of the person when he is unmasked is a sign of the chaos which he is in already.

The expectation that the potential victim will respond with some violence or will surrender immediately by recognizing that he is a person who is not worth while - for instance by bursting into tears -, seems to justify the use of violence in advance. It is a kind of pre-emptive strike and thus the person who started the action can deny that he is a man of violence for he is only responding to the violence he knew was coming. Unmasking violence is only possible by non-violent actions, for otherwise one remains in the vicious circle of violence and counter violence. Developing a strategy is already becoming a part of the circle of violence in which one act of violence is countered by another act of violence, even when it is hidden in a seemingly peaceful gesture.

Even discovering that one is imitating an opponent may suffice to stop this process for one becomes aware that the more one imitates this person the more one is losing oneself, abolishing the differences, and increasing the chaos. Or in the cases of prescribing the symptom, the client is unmasked as a person who expects others to frown on him and he lives up to this and imitates this expectation. He is instructed to express this imitation. When he becomes aware of his imitating behaviour, he has to stop imitating in order not to get lost in a chaos. He or she awakens and the real process of healing can begin.

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