

Preface

The aim of “*Contradictions*” is to explore the problems that are implicit in the simultaneous and naive acceptance of science, religion, and abstract objects that permeate our culture. Scientific and empirical knowledge are coherent, but they seem to be at odds with popular religious and spiritual beliefs which contradict not only each other, but also the unity of truth. “*Contradictions*” has a long history that is deeply ingrained in my life and work. My brother Willy died when I was 12 years old, so I became preoccupied with the problem of survival after death. I was very sad, but everybody told me that we have a body and a soul and that his soul survived his death. I had no doubt that we have a physical body, and religions and the subjective view tell us that we also have a “spiritual” component that seems nonphysical. I suspected, however, that faith was not a rigorous method for answering fundamental questions, because it gave rise to innumerable contradictory religions that have created animosities and caused many wars in Europe and elsewhere.

I gradually concluded that the shortest route to learn about human nature was to become a physician, like my father and grandfather. In medical school, I was captivated by most subjects, but mainly by the brain and its diseases. I was initially fascinated and later terrified by the disintegration of the mind that I witnessed in the neurology wards during my student days in La Plata, Argentina, and later during my residency training at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. By then, I thought that the physical nature of the mind was well established, because the agents that modify it, such as words, psychoactive drugs, diseases, and trauma were all physical.

There are of course additional factors that are easily acceptable, but confuse the picture. For example, the external world is concrete, but what we call *abstract objects* such as those of ethics, esthetics, and mathematics are generally considered nonphysical entities. Since Plato, pure forms have been conceived as immaterial or abstract. The problem with abstract concepts, pure forms, and numbers is that brain diseases can wipe out the information about words, facts, faces, or even half of our bodies in a *modular fashion*, as if this information were stored like the individual files in a computer. Additionally, we have all seen people with Alzheimer’s disease, whose minds progressively disintegrate to the point that they do not even recognize their close relatives. My conclusion about the physical nature of the mind is not unique, but implies that our *soul* is also physical, an opinion that many authors of popular books are reluctant to express.

Since my student days I have been interested in the philosophy of mind, but I thought that it should be complemented with what we know from neuroscience. In the process, I realized that there is something very peculiar about our brain, namely, that *we cannot sense it*, because sensing the sensors that sense the sensors and so on, would create a never-ending chain of events, which philosophers call *infinite regress*. Thus, I discovered that the imperceptibility of the brain was logically necessary, but leads to the universal but deeply misleading intuition that we have a *supernatural soul*. This is of course an attractive idea, because a supernatural soul should be immortal. Unfortunately, neuroscience indicates otherwise.

The problems of human nature are complex and intertwined, so my book is not only about what we are, but also about the nature of our knowledge. Inspired by reading C. P. Snow's "*The Two Cultures*", [1] I realized that the arbitrary division of our knowledge into disciplines allows us to create tight compartments to protect incongruent beliefs. For example, we could justify almost any belief by taking refuge in a particular religion, philosophical doctrine, or narrow academic discipline. The trick is to convince other scholars that other disciplines have no relevance to the subject or that they have an "independent nature". We tend to forget that the *unity of truth and the universe* supersedes our provincial cultures. Opinions are subjective, but truth is universal, and it has a unity and beauty that leave no room for contradictions. Today, the unity of knowledge and truth are both essential, not only for our personal satisfaction, but also for the survival of our civilization. Science—especially neuroscience—provides a unique window into human nature. Most existing books on the brain are certainly fascinating, but they stop short of explaining the deep implications of neuroscience.

Throughout the book, I elaborate on the meaning of the *physical nature* of the mind and the self, which is based on the observation that the physical disintegration of the brain also destroys the essence of what we are. The piecemeal destruction of the soul by physical agents seems to contradict its presumed unity and supernatural nature. Despite the scientific evidence, some outstanding philosophers and mathematicians still believe that the universe is composed of independent physical, mental, and abstract realms, and most people believe in supernatural entities, such as gods and spirits. Others, including some mathematicians, philosophers, and artists believe in *abstract objects* as if they were independent from the physical world and from the brain. The roots of my determination to find the unity of knowledge were deep, but some questions kept nagging me.

In the midst of my intellectual problems, I realized that faculty members of New York University could attend, with permission of the course director, any lecture at the University. For a couple of years I thus attended some lectures given by professors Ned Block, Paul Boghossian, and Stephen Schiffer in the Department of Philosophy. They in turn frequently had invited speakers, selected from the who's who in philosophy. As a result, I was able to attend lectures and seminars presented by Daniel C. Dennett, John R. Searle,

Paul M. Churchland, Patricia S. Churchland, Susan Haack, Colin McGinn, Robert Nozick, David J. Chalmers, Thomas Nagel, Saul A. Kripke, Susan Blackmore, and many others. I am grateful, therefore, to all the professors that allowed me to come to their lectures, and helped me to navigate through some of the deep waters of philosophy.

Reference

1. Snow CP. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1993.



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