THE PARADOX OF THE PREFACE

By D. C. MAKINSON

IT is customary for authors of academic books to include in their prefaces statements such as this: "I am indebted to . . . for their invaluable help; however, any errors which remain are my sole responsibility."

Occasionally an author will go further. Rather than say that *if* there are any mistakes *then* he is responsible for them, he will say that *there will* inevitably be some mistakes *and* he is responsible for them. For example, in the preface to his *Introduction to the Foundations of Mathematics* (1952) R. L. Wilder writes

> "To those of my colleagues and students who have given me encouragement and stimulation, I wish to express sincere thanks. I am especially grateful to . . . for suggestions and criticisms; but the errors and shortcomings to be found herein are not their fault, and are present only in spite of their wise counsel."

Although the shouldering of all responsibility is usually a social ritual, the admission that errors exist is not—it is often a sincere avowal of belief. But this appears to present a living and everyday example of a situation which philosophers have commonly dismissed as absurd; that it is sometimes rational to hold logically incompatible beliefs.

Suppose that in the course of his book a writer makes a great many assertions, which we shall call $s_1, \ldots, s_n$. Given each one of these, he believes that it is true. If he has already written other books, and received corrections from readers and reviewers, he may also believe that not everything he has written in his latest book is true. His approach is eminently rational; he has learnt from experience. The discovery of errors among statements which previously he believed to be true gives him good ground for believing that there are undetected errors in his latest book.

However, to say that not everything I assert in this book is true, is to say that at least one statement in this book is false. That is to say that at least one of $s_1, \ldots, s_n$ is false, where $s_1, \ldots, s_n$ are the statements in the book; that $(s_1 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&s_n)$ is false; that $\sim (s_1 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&s_n)$ is true. The author who writes and believes each of $s_1, \ldots, s_n$ and yet in a preface asserts and believes $\sim (s_1 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&s_n)$ is, it appears, behaving very rationally. Yet clearly he is holding logically incompatible beliefs: he believes each of $s_1, \ldots, s_n, \sim (s_1 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&s_n)$, which form an inconsistent set. The man is being rational though inconsistent. More than this: he is being rational even though he believes each of a certain collection of statements, which *he knows* are logically incompatible.

The example we have used can of course be supplemented by others. The philosopher who says

"All my present philosophical views are correct"

would be regarded as rash and over-confident. The one who refrains from such a view is playing safe. The one who says

"At least some of my present philosophical beliefs will turn out to be incorrect"

is simply being sensible and honest. Yet here too we have a belief in logically incompatible propositions.

We are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, we have found a situation in which a man seems to be behaving quite rationally in holding beliefs which are incompatible. On the other hand, we feel compelled to say on quite general grounds that this is impossible.

The paradox is closely related to one discussed by A. M. MacIver in ANALYSIS Vol. 17 (1956). Briefly, MacIver's problem is that whilst we sometimes wish to say things like

"I believe that there is a train at 10.15 a.m., but I could be wrong"

or

"I believe that there is an omniscient, omnipotent being; but of course I may be mistaken"

such statements express a state of mind which, one may argue, it is impossible to have.

There is however a difference between MacIver's paradox and the one here: MacIver's problem turns on the employment of modal terms like 'may', 'might', and 'perhaps', whereas these concepts do not even enter into our problem. Hence any solution of MacIver's paradox which proceeded via an analysis of the role of modal terms like 'may' would leave our paradox untouched.

The most obvious moves in an attempt to resolve the present paradox consist in accepting one of its two sides and arguing against the other. However I feel that neither of these two approaches is entirely satisfactory, and tentatively offer another account.

We can describe a belief as rational, but we can also describe a *set* of beliefs as rational. This is often what we do when we assess a person's "position" on a subject, for his position is a collection of beliefs. To say that a person's position as a whole is rational is to say more than that each of the beliefs which make it up is rational. Now let $s_1, \ldots, s_n$ be the statements which our author makes in the body of the book, and let s_{n+1} be the statement $\sim (s_1 \,\&\, \ldots \,\&s_n)$. Let $b_1, \ldots, b_n, b_{n+1}$ be the author's belief in $s_1, \ldots, s_n, s_{n+1}$ respectively. When we say that it is rational to believe each of $s_1, \ldots, s_n, s_{n+1}$ we can be suggesting either of two things:

1. Each belief from the set $\{b_1, \ldots, b_n, b_{n+1}\}$ is rational;
2. The set $\{b_1, \ldots, b_n, b_{n+1}\}$ of beliefs is rational.

In the case of the author and the preface, all that the example really yields is (1): each of the beliefs $b_1, \ldots, b_n$ expressed in the body of the book is rational, and so too is b_{n+1} expressed in the preface. The result (1) is perhaps rather surprising, but not paradoxical. We only enter into paradox when we read the ordinary English conclusion as (2), and mistakenly take a demonstration of (1) to be a demonstration of (2).

If this tentative account of the paradox is correct, it does have one remarkable and perhaps unwelcome implication. Even though each individual belief expressed by our author or philosopher is rational, the collection of all his beliefs is not. If the author is to have a rational *set* of beliefs he must change them.

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REPLY TO MR. KENNER

By COLIN RADFORD

MR. KENNER ("The Triviality of the Red-Green Problem", ANALYSIS, March 1965) takes me to task for failing to say in my article on the incompatibility of red and green (January 1963) that when one mixes red and green pigments *or does anything else* one fails to produce a colour that is reddish-green or greenish-red.

But his main criticism is, I think, that since there is no difficulty in conceiving of the *possibility* of producing a colour that could be classified as red or green (p. 149), the philosophical assertion that there can be no such colour, i.e. that it is analytic that there is no such colour, does not await the actual production of the colour for its refutation. Moreover, since I entertain this possibility myself, I am doubly wrong in saying that prior to our actually discovering something having the colour, we must be unable to say whether the claim that there is no such colour is analytic, or synthetic but necessary, or synthetic and contingent. For since we can conceive the possibility of there being such a colour, the claim that there actually is or is not such a colour (patches of it) must be contingent.

Of course if astronauts *could* discover such a colour, etc., the claim that there is no such colour would be a contingent one. I should not have described their doing so as a possibility but rather as something whose possibility *cannot be established in advance of its actuality*. This was my thesis, and it remains unthreatened. For, apart from the preceding argument, Kenner simply says (p. 149) that "there is no *a priori* reason why we should exclude this possibility" (that of somebody's producing