

Dialetheists against Pinnochio*

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In his ‘Pinocchio against the dialetheists’ [3], Peter Eldridge-Smith tells us the story of poor Pinnochio whose nose grows if and only if Pinnochio lies. One day, Pinnochio, in an effort to resist the powers of the dark side and rid himself – and the world – of dialetheists, did the dreadful deed: ‘my nose is growing’, said Pinnochio, and the world ended in an explosion of absurdity.

What has the story to do with dialetheism? According to Eldridge-Smith, the story’s aim is to undermine certain versions of dialetheism that, in some fashion or other, restrict the existence of ‘true contradictions’ to only the level of language – the ‘[a]stute dialetheists [who] do not believe in metaphysical contradictions, just semantic ones’, as Eldridge-Smith puts it [3, p. 307]. I am such a dialetheist [1, 2], and there are others [4].¹ In a nutshell: there are ‘true contradictions’, but they’re one and all restricted to the merely semantic fragment of our language (e.g., ‘spandrels of truth’ like Liars, etc.); and no true contradictions carry any noteworthy metaphysical baggage.

The story of (paradoxical) Pinnochio is supposed to undermine such simply-semantic approaches to dialetheism. But it doesn’t. While the story is enjoyable and interesting, it has a straightforward reply, which runs as follows.

Consider the Barber paradox. Why are dialetheists not committed to contradictions involving barbers shaving and not shaving themselves? The answer is that such barbers exist only as fictions: it is only *according to the story* that we have a barber who shaves all and only those who don’t shave themselves.

Paradoxical Pinnochio, while more charming than the barber, poses no new threat to the sanctity – the consistency – of the (non-semantic) world. Eldridge-Smith writes:

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¹I should note that I am not the sort of hermeneutical-trick dialetheist whom Eldridge-Smith also briefly mentions (e.g., thinking that ‘I am in the room and not’ may be true without carrying metaphysical, non-linguistic consequences). While I respond on behalf of – and concentrate only on – what I take to be the only endorsed versions of ‘simply-semantic dialetheism’ [1, 2, 4], the response is equally open to the curious hermeneutical-tricks sort that Eldridge-Smith mentions; indeed, the response is perhaps easier for such views, were they endorsed by anyone. (Eldridge-Smith cites Priest’s well-known work [5], but Priest himself fully endorses ‘metaphysical contradictions’ in a realist fashion – not in the sort of hermeneutical-trick fashion that Eldridge-Smith mentions.)

The Pinocchio paradox turns on the truth of Pinocchio – whose nose grows if, and only if, what he is saying is not true – saying ‘My nose is growing.’ ‘Is growing’ is an empirical predicate, not a semantic one. Furthermore, it is not just a matter of interpretation whether Pinocchio’s nose is and is not growing. If it is a true contradiction that Pinocchio’s nose grows and does not grow, then such a world is metaphysically impossible, not merely semantically impossible. [3, p. 307]

But the truth about Pinocchio’s nose is prefixed by the usual operator: *according to the story*, Pinocchio’s nose grows and does not. How this truth (about what’s true in the story) is supposed to bleed into the real world – or any of its possible worlds – remains both unclear and without argument from Eldridge-Smith. Indeed, whether there is a *world* described by the Pinocchio story is – of course – highly controversial, especially in the context at hand.

That there is no possibility in which non-semantic, metaphysically noteworthy contradictions occur is perfectly compatible with the existence of stories in which Pinocchio-like craziness occurs. Pending (much) further argument, simply-semantic dialetheists may treat the Pinocchio story as just what it is: an enjoyable story without noteworthy metaphysical consequences.

References

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- [3] Peter Eldridge-Smith. Pinocchio against the dialetheists. *Analysis*, 71(2):306–308, 2011.
- [4] Edwin Mares. Semantic dialetheism. In Graham Priest, Jc Beall, and Brad Armour-Garb, editors, *The Law of Non-Contradiction*, pages 264–275. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.
- [5] Graham Priest. *In Contradiction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, second edition, 2006. First printed by Martinus Nijhoff in 1987.