Topic 1

"If the social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy, then there are cute girls and dorky girls, and it would be a mistake not to recognize this. This is important social knowledge. But at the same time it is tempting to say that the cute/dork dichotomy is an illusion. It is socially and morally problematic and because it is reified through a pattern of belief and expectation, it could be undermined by a refusing to have beliefs in its terms. More generally, in cases such as this we seem to be able to generate a contradiction: it is true that p so you should believe p; but believing p makes it true, and it would be better if p weren't true; so you shouldn't believe p."

Sally Haslanger, "'But mom, crop-tops are cute!" Social knowledge, social structure and ideology

critique'. In: Philosophical Issues 17, 2007, p. 73.

Existing unclassified: Thoughts on a paradox of social reality

I.   Introduction

Even though most of us wouldn't use this word to classify ourselves, humans, in a sense, could be described as "neat". Tidy, orderly, hierarchical. Some more than others, naturally, but the effect of the "neatness" is shown through the footsteps of civilisation: our crops are evenly spaced, corn grows along corn, barley along barley. Houses are built in a line, even more so in the current era, with the "american" cul-de-sacs and the perpendicular streets of Manhattan. For our civilisation, maximizing space, minimizing cost, creating a pattern, *organising*, all this is pleasing to the brain. Even in our darkest aspirations, war and destruction, organization is an ideal to strive for: bombers fly in formation, the cavalry is kept separate from the infantry.

The cause of this "neatness" and orderly fashion shall not be debated today, as the origin is not questioned in the topic itself. Rather, for the sake of brevity and clarity, I shall concentrate on how this idiosyncrasy of the human race affects the question of identity itself, basing myself on the quote by Sally Haslanger. We seek to find aspects of our identity in our perception of the world, and as such, the human wishes to be identified, organized and classified. Using the colourful example of the cute/dorky dichotomy, the author implies a certain sense of truth contained within public expectations. Through this essay I shall attempt to categorize this social truth, and propose why it should not have the merit of the moniker "truth", even though it describes a certain social situation perfectly.

The structure of this work shall proceed as follows:
1. Introduction
2. Haslanger's claim to paradox / *analysis of the quote*
3. Relation, hierarchy and the reverse / *argument I*
4. The many faces of truth and bad faith / *argument II*
5. Why, why, why / *considering the root cause of the problem*
6. Conclusion

My goal for today is not to prove or disprove the dichotomy itself, rather to provide an alternative perspective for the idea that a contradiction or a paradox exists in any way, shape or form.

II. Haslanger's claim to paradox

The quote starts with the supposition of the existence of a split within humans, which allows them to be classified as "cute" or "dorky". Let us not fool ourselves with this seemingly benign word choice: this arbitrary division is somewhat "irrelevant" compared to larger divisions that unfortunately exist in society, but the concept is the same, no matter the weight or the validity of this classification.

The first thesis states: if a division in a group currently exists, all members of the group are subject to this classification, and it would be erroneous not to recognize it, to call attention to it, to deem it as existing. It is important to note that it is referable only to the *current* situation, as social reality is malleable by society itself and in a constant changing flux. The "important social knowledge" referred to here is the existence of people who are in groups, not the grouping itself, which is an important distinction.

As follow up, Haslanger notes that it is preferable to an observer, whether in the group or not, to deem the arbitration as void. It is implied that this negation stems from the negative experience of classification, as one part of the group is in a sense now superior than the other, by factors beyond the control of the individual.

The third thesis, which to me presents itself as the most problematic, is the claim that this is a *contradiction*. The contradictory nature is described through this process: the division exists, as such a person should believe in it, but it exists because they believe in it. Since it is preferable for them if this didn't exist, they should not believe in it.

Let us lay all this out in a more straightforward way:
    (1) If classification currently exists, then all are classified, it is a mistake to deny that they are not
    (2) It is preferable to an individual to deny the classification
    (3) The previous two theses cause a contradiction

The declaration of contradiction is a bit misguided, which I plan to show in the following argument.

III Relation, hierarchy and the reverse

The first sentence is structured as a cause-and-effect scenario: if there is x and y, all are in either x or y. It does not imply the same in reverse, however, and it doesn't state that just because all can be placed in x or in y, that that division is current and relevant in society. This is vital for analysis, as therefore Sally has not claimed that just because people can be x or y, we should recognize the groups in society. This means, if the division exists, we need

to acknowledge it exists, because people are divided, but if there is only a *possibility* for people to be divided, then there is no obligation to acknowledge anything.

For example, let's say all humans in the world could be placed into pensioners and non pensioners. This is a division that exists in society, as the treatment of one group is different, the elderly are treated with more care and have certain benefits such as cheaper transport tickets, etc. If I say that we are not divided, according to Haslanger, I would be wrong, and I agree that I would be wrong, because society has already divided (organized itself into this social reality) and *I* assumed that the premise of division is true.

However, let us entertain the possibility of dividing mankind into those that like aubergine, and those that do not. It's a simple question of taste, and as such bears no relevance to the productive world (save for perhaps aubergine farmers). If I assume that this division is possible, which I do, I am not obligated to pronounce it as existing, as society has not organized around it. If I assume that the division exists, only then do I have to also assume that we are all under that division, and not the other way around.

Let us look at the first and second thesis once again. Notice in the first thesis that it is wrong to deny that all are placed, not that it is wrong to deny the placement itself. The second thesis provides us with the information that it is preferable to deny *the placement itself*. The first says it is wrong to deny the effects of a dichotomy, the second that it is preferable to deny the dichotomy itself, to see it as an illusion. As such, no problems should be able to occur in this progression, and a contradiction is nowhere to be found.

But let us say that the example deals in unclear terms, that the third thesis is strong and that even though there is room for debate inside the example itself, the segment "it is true that p so you should believe p; but believing p makes it true, and it would be better if p weren't true; so you shouldn't believe p" should still be valid. This, too can be countered, if we inspect the hierarchy or the chronology of the statement. Haslanger provides this progression:

p - true, therefore believe in p.
Belief in p exists, therefore p - true.
Better if p - not true, therefore do not believe in p.

On it's own this is a contradiction, but it fails to claim relevance within the thesis, as the p refers to two things at once, and it supposes chronologically that p was true before, even though the only measure of truth is belief. Let us exchange the p with terms from the example, as we have already previously explained them, for a clearer picture.

Division in society - true, therefore believe *all are divided*.
Belief in *division in society* exists, therefore *all are divided* - true.
Better if *all are divided* - not true, therefore do not believe in *division in society*.

When laid out like this, it is obvious that there is no contradiction, as nowhere in the theses is it said that it is wrong to believe in the division itself *only* if it is true, we must believe all are divided, and only if we believe in the division, it is true that we are divided, but the example

says nothing about disbelief in the division itself, which is possible, and, in her own words, "tempting", therefore preferred. Even without this semantic conundrum, the progression fails, as argued by the next part of the essay.

IV The many faces of truth and bad faith

For this argument we must first understand which type of truth this is. Even though the traits upon which the division is based can be proven and do exist outside the realm of the imaginary (age in the pensioners example), the division itself is arbitrary and chosen solely for its effectiveness in society (pensioners provide less income to the system, and as such are treated differently than those that are at the height of production and therefore purchasing power). For this I would like to introduce a subdivision of truth, and I apologize if it as such has been already created by another philosopher, for I do not know of such division at the present moment.

Let us say that the truth which lies on the basis of being proved, on the existence of a trait or nonexistence, should hereafter be referred to as a *truth of being*. Such truths only refer to the question whether something exists or not, which in most cases can be proven. But for example, the existence of God cannot presently be proven, so it does fit into this category, but has no truth value. This truth excludes subclauses as "...exists as part of x/within x", as those I would like to call the *truths of classification*, a truth that is significantly more temporal and depends on the intent of the classification itself, and here for example, if the Greek pantheon existed, we would have some truths.

Gravity can (through some advanced science experiment or through brute force of mass reduction) be altered on Earth, but then it is such for all its inhabitants until the next change, whereas planets of the Solar System can be classified in a million ways according to their gravitational pull, and each way is used independently as it proves useful to an individual.

The unavoidable implication here is that truths of being take supremacy over truths of classification, not only because of strength against time and preference, but also for the simple fact that if something doesn't exist, it cannot be classified.

To bring this back into the view of Sally Haslanger, the truth of the possibility of division is a truth of being, as pensioners and non pensioners can be proven to exist, and the truth of there actually being a socially pertinent division is a truth of classification, as the division only suits the current situational thought, and it is more likely to stop existing than the concept of age itself. To clarify - truth of being: some people are pensioners, some people are not. We *can* divide them. Truth of classification: within all people we divide pensioners and non pensioners. We *are* dividing them. Just because we cease this classification does not mean they cease to exist, however, if they cease to exist no classification can be extracted.

By giving precedent to this truth of classification over the more stable truth of being, we are stating that natural existence is less of an authority than the organization of society. Even though it is erroneous to claim nobody is divided when division exists, this societal system is a prime example of "bad faith" that Sartre championed. It is erroneous to claim non-being of

groups after after agreeing with the authority that caused the grouping, but it is, through an existentialists perspective, more wrong to adjust to that authority in the first place. Haslanger describes the idea of negating division as "tempting", whereas I believe that Sartre would describe it rather as possible, but non-obligatory. Existentialism poses that we are solely responsible for our beliefs and choices, so there is no such thing as a "tempting choice", because if it was tempting, and your choice was authentic, you would have already chosen that option. This authentic choice is what started the societal organization in the first place, the arbitrary elements of classification were chosen by a previous authority and as such it is bad faith to follow inauthentically, but it is also incorrect to show any decision as tempting.

But this is only when viewing from an existential perspective, as there are those who believe that society dictates the choices we have, and the pressure and the temptation are real. Then the choice to believe or not to is not in us anymore, and the "paradox of choice" is removed one step down towards society itself. But we have failed to ask, why is that?

V Why, why, why

If, through this, the choice of not believing in societal divisions has been proved reachable and better for humanity, why isn't it taken more often? A possible explanation would be that some divisions in society are harder to perceive than others, and for the fear of being wrong, we play a low-stakes version of Pascal's Wager.

Pascal famously explained his religious stance from a gambler's perspective: if there is a God and he believes in Him, then he is granted entry to heaven, which in this gambling scenario is the best outcome, winning. If God doesn't exist, than no matter if he believed or not, when he dies, he has the same neutral outcome - nothing. However, if God exists and Pascal doesn't believe, then eternal damnation or losing is sure to follow. Therefore, for Pascal, it's better to believe and hope for the best than to disbelieve and hope for the same thing.

We do this as well in society because fitting in is the ultimate goal, if division exists, and we believe in it, we fulfill a part of our identity and we take similar traits in others as symbols of belonging, and even fool ourselves into doing the same thing when it doesn't exist. If we don't believe in division and it doesn't exist we gain nothing for our identity, and if it exists and we don't believe in it, then we shall be cast out for not sharing the vision of our community, whatever that vision may be.

The way out of this thinking is to reduce elements of our identity that are produced simply by fitting in. By this I do not mean removing them, rather removing their significance. My identity is partly what it is because I go to the school I go to, and I cannot change that, but I implore myself and all possible friends, acquaintances and enemies that a larger part of my identity be what I choose to learn myself. As you can see, the latter is a more authentic choice, therefore we should search for belonging through our authentic choices, which may sound like an advertisement for existentialism, but it is just one of the many escapes from mindless conformity.

Let us now conclude this essay.

VI Conclusion

To summarize, this essay has not questioned the social forces that govern us, or the difficulty in escaping division, which is more often than not a system of oppression. The work has not doubted that social realities are the way they are, and that Sally Haslanger has a good representation of the behaviour of large communities. It has not diminished the role of any person currently suffering from any division, no matter how banal it may seem. However, the essay has questioned the use of the term "contradiction", because the example itself, as mentioned in the first argument, does not show a contradiction or a paradox through its entirety, and the "simplification/generalization" and the end of the quote has proven non-applicable for the examples that are provided, as the terms do not match up. Even more important is the fact that the division itself and the possibility of division were treated as conjoined twins, which was a misstep, as one can also see them as two separate entities, as shown in the example of aubergine fans.

After we have provided arguments why the contradiction does not exist, we tried to tackle the question of why this scenario exists at all, proposing the theory of a wager, similar to the one that Pascal had.

The intention of this analysis is not to provide despair or resignation upon reading, on the contrary. I consider the original view which finds illogicality to be rather bleak, depressing and limitative. Not only does it assert that the burden of division on society is as heavy as it is, it also gives little hope in trying to exist with it, describing the regular person as paradoxical simply for believing or disbelieving. Through existentialism I have given another perspective, one that gives the freedom to oppose or follow the rules, in whichever way the individual desires.

If we cannot give anything to a victim of grouping, at least we can make them see that hope is justified.