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Beyond the Limits of Thought
by: Graham Priest
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xv+274.

Reviewed by Dale Jacquette

In *Philosophical Investigations* §125, Wittgenstein speaks of 'The civil status of a contradiction, or its status in civil life', about which with rare emphasis he adds, 'there is the philosophical problem'. Graham Priest's dialethic logic tolerates true (if also false) contradictions that describe as they transcend the limits of thought. Priest thereby accords contradictions a legitimate function of the type Wittgenstein imagines in the social language games people play, in a theory that might be said to have identified the one underlying or single most imprtant problem of philosophy.

Beyond the Limits of Thought is an ambitious sequel to Priest's formal exposition of dialethic logic in his (1987) *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent*, and the more encyclopedic (1988) anthology, *Paraconsistent Logic*, coedited by Priest, Richard Routley, and Jean Norman. Priest's new book offers an insightful survey of selected concepts in the history of philosophy, which he combs for evidence of dialethic contradictions at the limits of thought. Although Priest disclaims an historian's expertise, his scholarly handling of original sources in translation is exemplary—which is not to say that his conclusions will not be found historically and philosophically controversial.

The principal figures in Priest's study include: Zeno of Elea, Plato, Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, Cusanus (Nicholas of Cusa), Anselm, Aquinas, Leibniz, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Cantor, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Ramsey, Gödel, Tarski, Quine, Davidson, Montague, and Derrida. The philosophical topics covered in this wide-ranging historical panorama are equally impressive. Priest develops four major themes around which he weaves his historical narrative, concellling the role of contradictions in limiting expression, iteration, cognition, and conception.

The book's Introduction explains dialethism and outlines its advantages in understanding contradictions that mark even as they transcend the limits of thought. Parts 1-4 examine *The limits of thought in pre-Kantian philosophy, The limits of thought in Kant and Hegel, Limits and the paradoxes of self-reference, Language and its limits.* The Conclusion offers Priest's reflections on *The persistence of inclosure*, in recurrent contradictions about the limits of logic, metaphysics, and epistemology.

Priest's first example of contradiction going beyond the limits of thought is Cratylus' Heraclitean theory of naming. Semantic flux and instability result from attempts to use language to name objects and express truths about a constantly changing world. Cratylus in Plato's dialogue concludes that meaning is therefore impossible, a limitation that does not prevent Cratylus from meaningfully expressing this very thesis. The search for similar contradictions and hints of dialethism proceeds through Aristotle's metaphysics of substance, accident, and the theory of prime matter, Cusanus on God's incomprehensibility, back to Aristotle's criticisms of infinite divisibility and the distinction between actual and potential infinity in reply to Zeno's paradoxes of time, motion, and the continuum, Aquinas' cosmological proof for the existence of God, Leibniz on the principle of sufficient reason, Anselm's ontological argument and related problems about the inconceivability of God, Berkeley's main argument for idealism, Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena, categories of judgment and the antinomies, Hegel's logic of the Absolute, Cantor's diagonalization in transfinite set theory, the liar and heterology paradoxes, Russell's paradox, parameterization as a misguided solution to logical, set theoretical, and semantic paradoxes in Russell's type theory and Tarski's hierarchy of object- and semantic metalanguages, concepts of totalities and proper classes, limitations of language and the world in the early Wittgenstein, problems of reference, translation, and truth in Quine and Davidson, and Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysics into presence, absence, and *différance*.

The heart of Priest's analysis is his identification of a common pattern of reasoning concerning the limits of thought. The limits appear as and are transcended by contradictions displaying a definite structure. A thesis is advanced that purports to establish a limit or boundary to some domain of interest, which Priest labels in parentheses as the domain's (Closure). The closure

thesis, however, implies or requires for its truth or intelligibility an exception, violation or transgression of the limit it sets when the principle is applied to itself (Transcendence). Priest describes Cratylus' inclosure contradiction of expression in this way: "We meet here the inexpressible, and the contradiction to which it leads, for the first time. By applying Cratylus' theory to itself it follows that it is not in the domain of the expressible (Transcendence); but he does succeed in expressing it, at least to himself (Closure)" (p. 16). To leap from his first to his final example, compare Priest's interpretation of Derrida on the deconstructionist economy of *différance* in the contradiction resulting from this irresistible self-application:

> A text, then, expresses no intrinsic meaning, but may be taken to mean indefinitely many things. Now apply this observation to Derrida's own text. We take Derrida to be advocating a certain view, namely, arguing against presence, the determinacy of sense. Yet, if he is right he is not advocating anything with stable and determinate sense at all. What, then, are we supposed to make of what he says if there is nothing *as such* that he says? Or, to put it the other way, given that he does express certain views (those that I have summarised), he is expressing something (Closure) that, if he is right, cannot be expressed (Transcendence) (p. 240).

In more general terms, Priest characterizes the common form of thought-limiting paradox as an 'inclosure contradiction', which he represents topologically and equivalently in set theoretical terms (p. 172) as:

(1) $\Omega = \{y; \Psi(y)\}$ exists and $\Psi(\Omega)$ Existence

(2) if $x \subseteq \Omega$ and $\Psi(x)$ (a) $\delta(x) \notin x$ Transcendence

                        (b) $\delta(x) \in \Omega$ Closure

The same pattern of limiting inclosure contradiction is found in Kant's antinomies and Hegel's logic of the Absolute. Priest reconstructs the contradiction as conflicting dialectical moments of closure and transcendence in self-applications involving a triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis for the concepts of the finite, false infinite, and true infinite.

Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction and the picture theory of meaning in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is similarly interpreted. 'What can be shown cannot be said' (4.1212), says (ostensibly) Wittgenstein (Closure). Yet, as Russell wryly remarks in his 'Introduction' to the *Tractatus*, 'What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said . . .' (p. 22) (Transcendence). Priest moreover finds evidence of Wittgenstein's awareness of the conflict in his metaphor of the ladder and admission that the sentences of the treatise are all nonsensical pseudopropositions that convey a meaning despite their meaninglessness.

Few philosophical treatises positively scintilate as Priest's does with such remarkable insights and unexpected conceptual connections. The text spins a

coherent explanation of the history of philosophy as a struggle with a single set of underlying problems about the limits of thought. Priest's study promises to explain many different philosophical conundrums arising in a wide variety of doctrines, methods, and ideologies, with horizons of enticing possibilities for continuing fruitful inquiry. The idea that so many different thinkers in logic and philosophy have reacted in different ways to the same family of consciously acknowledged or dimly-sensed contradictions involving existence, closure, and transcendence is as powerful and captivating a concept as any recent metaphilosophy has dared. The theme is so skillfully shown to run through so much of philosophy that it is tempting to think of Priest as having found a master skeleton key to unlock the mystery of all philosophical puzzles.

Still, I am troubled by many things. I think I am sufficientiy openminded about the dialethic concept of true contradictions. Yet Priest, at least parenthetically, allows that contradictions are or can also be false, which plays havoc with my intuitive understanding of entailment. I can only suppose that logical implication both holds and does not hold where a contradictory assumption is dialethically interpreted in an argument containing an unequivocally false conclusion. What more importantly remains unclear to me as I consider Priest's theory is why classical (necessarily false) as opposed to dialethic (true if also false) contradictions could not equally serve to demarcate the limits of thought, in somewhat the way that Kant sought to stake out the bounds of sense in a critique of pure reason by the discovery of antinomies. Priest says only that: "The thesis of this book is that such limits [of thought] are dialethic; that is, that they are the subject, or locus, of true contradictions. The contradiction, in each case, is simply to the effect that the conceptual processes *do* cross these boundaries" (p. 3). Does this statement offer a good enough rationale for accepting inclusion contradictions as true? Can contradictions both limit and transcend the limits of thought only if they are true?

This should have been the main burden of Priest's argument, yet he nowhere tries to demonstrate that contradictions must be interpreted dialethically in order to mark the limits of thought. Since an inclosure contradiction also includes a closure claim, why not say that conceptual processes cross the boundaries of thought by virtue of the falsehood of closure rather than the truth of transcendence? For that matter, why not conclude that Cratylus, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and others were simply confused in trying to have their closure cake and transcend it too? Or that they just didn't notice the problems entailed by self-application of their limiting principles? (Wittgenstein might be off the hook here, since the picture theory precludes self-application and self-non-application constructions within a correct logical notation.) Or that all such limiting principles are necessarily false and classically contradictory, that there are no limits to thought, or, again as Wittgenstein believed, that

thought logically cannot describe its own limitations? An inclosure contradiction may need to be true if both the limitation holds and if thought can somehow transcend it. But if transcendence is admitted, why not conclude that after all there are special exceptions to the limitation, so that the less-than-absolute limitation principle is neither classically nor dialethically contradicted by transcendence?

I have further doubts about whether any of the conflicts of limit and transcendence that Priest identifies are rightly understood as genuine let alone true contradictions. There is a logical distinction between external propositional negation in genuine contradictions that both assert and deny a proposition, and internal predicate complementation in the joint attribution of a property and its complement to an impossible nonexistent object. The metaphysical incompatibility of property and property-complement predications is (nonstandardly) irreducible to the logical inconsistency of a genuine contradiction. Then why not interpret transcendence and closure merely as the possession of an ontically incompatible property and property-complement pair by a nonexistent object like the round square construed as a limit of thought? Why not enlist impossible limit-and-limit-transcending objects to occupy the bunkers along the Maginot Line that defines the disputed boundaries (if any) of thought?

Priest's misunderstanding of Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie* in his note 6 to p. 143 is relevant here. The distinction between contradictory and ontically incompatible predications is associated among other theories especially with Meinong's extraontology of beingless objects. Priest seems to think that Meinong equates existence with being, whereas Meinong observes the Scholastic distinction between two modes of being or *Sein*, in (physical spatiotemporal) Existenz and *Bestand* (subsistence of timeless abstract platonic entities), and regards impossible objects not only as nonexistent but entirely beingless. Even beingless impossible objects like the round square, or the (Transcendent) expression of the inexpressible (Closure), do not lapse into outright contradictions in Meinongian semantics, but describe impossible intended objects that are excluded from both the existence and subsistence modes of being by virtue of their ontically incompatible possession of a nonstandardly logically consistent property and property-complement pair. It is interesting to remark in this connection that Meinong spoke of the principle by which existent, subsistent, and beingless intended objects are comprehended in the domain of *Aussersein* as the thesis of *unbeschränkten Annahmefreiheit*, which is to say literally *un*limited or *un*restricted freedom of assumption. If we are not supposed to balk at true contradictions, why not consider the logically more conservative interpretation of closure and transcendence at the limits of thought posed by ontically impossible Meinongian objects?

This is an excellent book that is sure to challenge philosophical imaginations in new provocative directions. Priest writes an admirably concise, fluent

and engaging philosophical prose. He warns the reader of formal technicalities involving symbolic logic in parts of his exposition, but states that the main points can be understood by anyone who has taken a first course in logic willing to work patiently through the arguments, and advises skipping over the more challenging proofs. I think this is optimistic, since much of Priest's discussion involves compact formal demonstrations that require prior familiarity with many of the classical results of mathematical logic. Priest is onto something interesting about the role of apparent contradictions at the periphery of thought in some of the most important chapters of the history of philosophy. To have raised and boldly tried to answer these difficult questions concerning contradiction at the limits of thought is a sufficiently valuable contribution in itself to recommend Priest's argument to anyone interested in logic and the history of philosophy.

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L'argumentation
par Christian Plantin
Paris: Seuil, 1996. 96pp.

Reviewed by Claude Gratton

This is a very short book written by the French linguist, Christian Plantin, the author of *Essais sur l'argumentation, Introduction linguistique à l'étude de l'argumentation*. He does not state anywhere the main purpose of his booklet. It is probably not intended to break new ground in argumentation theory, for the author touches on so many topics in so few pages that his discussion is unavoidably superficial. It is also probably not intended to help students improve their reasoning skills, for in addition to the light and quick coverage of many topics, there are no exercises, and only one textbook is mentioned among the suggested readings. His main goal seems to be to help a novice to become quickly acquainted with many topics of argumentation theory, or perhaps to help a student to review quickly such topics.

As I was reading this booklet I was getting the impression of looking at many snap shots of the theoretical landscape of argumentation. I will give a general description of this "photo album", and identify some of the "photos" that depict the landscape correctly, and some that are out of focus.