

## BOOK REVIEW

Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. xv + 274.

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Graham Priest's excellent and thought-provoking new book, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, studies the interaction between two themes. The first theme is that there are limits to thought; the second is that there can be contradictions that are true. The connection between these two ideas is expressed in Wittgenstein's remark from the introduction to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable". On the one hand there are excellent reasons for supposing that there are limits to what we, as finite and limited creatures, can think of. On the other hand, attempts to say what these limits are almost invariably end up contravening the very limits that are being drawn. For example, Kant drew a distinction between the phenomenal world, partly the construct of human thought, and hence graspable by thought, and the noumenal world, reality as it is in itself, which thought cannot

have access to. But his claim that nothing can be said about the noumenal itself says something about the noumenal and hence contradicts Kant's claim that the noumenal cannot be conceived of.

One aim of Priest's work is historical. He provides a series of studies of a number of philosophers who have struggled with these issues: Heraclitus (as represented by Cratylus and reported by Plato), Aristotle, Sextus, Anselm, Nicholas of Cusa, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, Cantor, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson and Derrida. Finding interesting similarities between philosophers as varied as these is itself a great accomplishment.

Priest characterizes the arguments of these philosophers in terms of two situations, which he calls Transcendence and Closure. Closure is the delimitation of a certain totality, for example, the totality of all things that are conceivable or expressible, or the totality of classes which are not members of themselves; Transcendence generates an object that is both within and without this totality, for example, noumena, God or the class of all classes which are not members of themselves. This elegant dialectic of Closure and Transcendence provides a novel approach to the history of philosophy. Unsuspected continuities and similarities are well documented and explained, and while the theme of the limits of thought may not prove the key to understanding philosophy as a whole, it nonetheless does very well as a major, and perhaps hitherto neglected, aspect of our tradition. (Priest also hints at similar trends within traditions of non-Western philosophy, but the book does not go into them.)

The historical figures surveyed, although grappling with the same problems, have very different attitudes to what they discover. We can make an initial subdivision on the basis of

their differing attitudes to contradiction. Most philosophers have believed that contradictions cannot be true. This means they are to be avoided at all costs. Wherever a favourite theory seems to lead to a contradiction, there is an imperative to remove the offending consequence. The only legitimate use for contradictions is in arguments by *reductio ad absurdum*. Into this group fall, for example, Aristotle, Berkeley, Kant, and Russell. A small minority of philosophers, however, have welcomed and embraced contradiction. These philosophers include Heraclitus, Nicholas of Cusa and Hegel. The division of philosophers along these lines depends on no obvious factors concerning time or location or philosophical background.

Each of these groups can be sub-divided according to whether or not the arguments that were alleged to lead to contradiction successfully established their conclusions. In other words, some philosophers saw contradiction (with either pleasure or alarm) where none was really to be found; others were keener sighted and gave arguments that really did lead to contradictions. The moral that seems to emerge from this subdivision is one of historical progress. For it was not until Hegel that philosophers began to give valid arguments for contradictions. (Kant, however, came close and gets extra points for thematizing the relations between contradiction and the limits of thought.) After Hegel, real progress came with Cantor, who gave mathematical precision to arguments for Closure and Transcendence. In a striking phrase, Priest calls Cantor's technique of diagonalization "a boundary-tearing heuristic which, given any boundary of a suitable kind, can be applied to violate it" (4).

Priest, however, aims at more than a historical survey. He himself occupies a place in the historical development he describes. None of the philosophers who have believed in the

possibility of true contradictions lived after the development of mathematical logic associated with Cantor, Frege and Russell. But Priest himself is a supporter of true contradictions, and in a previous book used the resources of modern logic to resuscitate a view more usually associated with mystics like Nicholas of Cusa than with logicians. According to Priest, all contradictions are false; some of them are also true. He calls the view that a proposition can be both true and false "dialetheism". The present book he calls an application of dialetheism to one particular area, a detailed treatment "of one region of the transconsistent" (6).

Broadly speaking, I discern two parts to Priest's defense of dialetheism, neither of them without persuasive force. The first part draws attention to the fact that there are no convincing arguments in favour of the Principle of Contradiction, the principle that says that a contradiction cannot be true. Aristotle went to some lengths to defend the Principle of Contradiction in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, but the arguments there are not convincing and highly difficult to understand. An argument of fairly recent origin is that if any contradiction were true we could prove, by rigorous logical means, anything whatsoever. This would be an unwelcome consequence even for Priest; but in his earlier book he showed how the consequence can be avoided with relatively small changes to the inferential principles of classical logic. This argument may, therefore, be considered disarmed.

Priest is right, therefore, when he says that those who reject the possibility of true contradictions have little to support them in the way of argument. We might wonder, though, whether there could be a defense of the Principle of Contradiction. Won't all arguments for it be bound to beg the question? For instance, the argument that attempts to establish it

by showing that we could prove anything from a contradiction relies on an inferential principle (the disjunctive syllogism) which is only valid if a sentence cannot be both true and false. This is precisely what dialetheism rejects. Similarly, any attempt to prove the Principle of Contradiction by *reductio* would beg the question even more obviously. But if we cannot expect there to be any good argument for the Principle, it should hardly count as a mark against it that there is no good argument for it.

The second part of Priest's case for dialetheism is more troubling. Priest claims that we should accept that there are true contradictions because we have some good arguments that prove contradictions. In fact, many so-called paradoxes, apparently good arguments that appear to establish contradictions, are exactly what they seem to be. Unlike most philosophers, who seek to disarm the paradoxes, Priest can simply accept them at face value. In some respects, this is a very attractive position to take. The really good paradoxes have no generally agreed solutions; they are still matters of great controversy. And many solutions that are proposed turn out to be subject themselves to similar versions of the paradoxes they are intended to solve. Furthermore, the paradoxes often seem to be getting at something deep and it is easy to catch oneself thinking that their point, whatever exactly it is, will be missed if we succeed in showing what has gone wrong. In other words, it seems as if solving a paradox retroactively deprives it of whatever interest it had. Taking the paradoxes at face value, as Priest does, would allow us to continue seeing them as something special.

Notwithstanding the attractive elements in this approach to the paradoxes, most philosophers will feel that giving up the Principle of Contradiction is still out of the question. They will

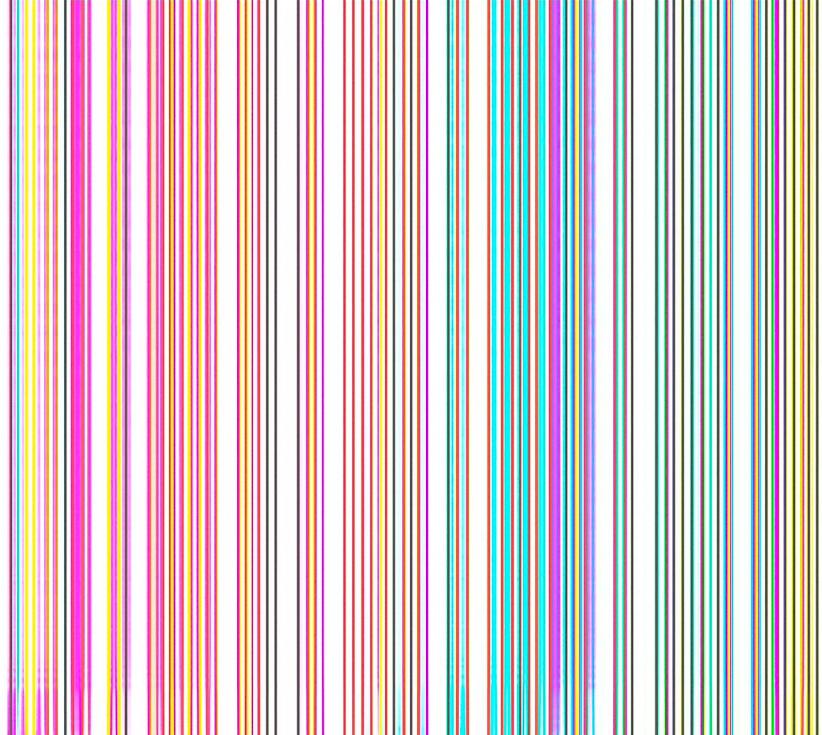
continue to search for solutions to the paradoxes, despite a not altogether encouraging track-record. Any thoughts that the paradoxes should not be solved, but simply accepted, will be ascribed to what Lovejoy memorably called “the metaphysical pathos of obscurity”. Is this behaviour ostrich-like? It is difficult to know what to say. The Principle of Contradiction is surely philosophical bedrock if anything is. How one is to assess the justification for accepting such things is notoriously problematic. But I do think that, for whatever reason (or lack of reason), Priest is destined to remain in the minority on this issue. One comfort available to the supporter of the Principle of Contradiction lies in the fact that Priest does not think all contradictions are true. In fact, he seems to hold that a true contradiction is philosophically noteworthy, since the only kinds of examples he adduces lurk within the shadowy realms of paradox and limits. So Priest should agree that for an arbitrary proposition, there is a *prima facie* plausibility to the claim that both it and its negation are not true. Non-contradiction is the norm, contradiction the exception. But then Priest, just like the defender of the Principle of Contradiction, will owe some explanation of the normality of non-contradiction.

Another issue, about which I have less easily stateable worries, is the following. The recurrence of Closure and Transcendence in the various cases that Priest studies reveals that they are all subject to a certain formal unity. This in itself is of some interest. But by describing all the cases as concerning the limits of thought Priest suggests that there is some material, and not merely formal, unity to them. That there is some material unity to the diverse cases studied, though, is never established, and is often belied in practice. Take, for instance, the discussion of Kant’s Third Antinomy. (Priest acknowledges that this is slightly different from Kant’s way of expressing it.)

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The Antinomy concerns a generator *a natural cause of  $x$*  (it is called a generator because it can be applied to some object, a value of  $x$ , to generate another object, something which is a natural cause of  $x$ ). Starting with some arbitrary event, we apply the generator to the limit to obtain a chain of natural causes. The antinomy shows, by arguments that need not concern us here, that this chain both has and does not have a first member. The limits of thought, according to Priest, have four varieties: limits on what can be conceived, known, expressed, and limits to the iteration of certain operations. The Third Antinomy, as described, clearly falls within the last of these rubrics. Yet there is nothing, from Priest's perspective, that should lead him to describe this as a limit of thought. Of course, if we try to think about the chain of causes generated in the manner described, we may find ourselves, if Kant's arguments are good, running up against contradictory theses. The difficulty, however, (if it is a difficulty) does not lie with thought as such but rather with its object, in this case the series of causes obtained by applying the generator to the limit.

This point, that the contradiction here is not essentially about the limits of thought, is complicated by the fact that for Kant there is a moral about the nature of thought. This is because Kant argued (to continue in the un-Kantian terminology we have adopted) that the application of the generator *a natural cause of  $x$*  is a necessary feature of thought. But Priest, as far as I can tell, makes no similar claims on his own behalf. All those contradictions and limits explored in connection with the notion of the infinite, and those which are generated by the iteration of operations which are not themselves operations concerning thought, are somewhat misleadingly grouped together with other problems that do seem to suggest an inherent limitedness to thought as such.



faculty of vision will be unable to conceive of purely visual

qualities. But, according to the authors mentioned, the mind's structure goes well beyond which sensory capacities it has.

If Priest had located his claims about the limits of thought in something like the context just described, if he had attempted to show why, in general, the mind might (or might not) be subject to limits, this would have made his book even more interesting. A brief reference to human finitude at the beginning of the book, however, is all Priest has to say on why thought should be limited. Nonetheless, despite this lacuna, Priest has provided us with an entertaining, well-written and thought-provoking work.