

GRAHAM PRIEST. *Doubt truth to be a liar*. Oxford University Press, 2006, xii + 226 pp.

This book is the latest episode of Graham Priest's attempt to elucidate and defend *dialetheism*, the view that some contradictions are true. His campaign has been going strong since the late 1970s, with little sign of slowing down. This book is published at the same time as the second edition of *In Contradiction* (Oxford University Press, 2006), his most detailed attempt to argue for dialetheism. In *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, Priest's stated goal is not to argue for dialetheism, but to give a dialethic treatment of some central philosophical topics, in particular, truth, negation, rationality, and logic (1-2). Of course, these topics were chosen because their very intelligibility seems to require consistency; thus, the traditional understanding of them poses a substantial obstacle to endorsing dialetheism. Priest wants to show that we can have perfectly acceptable accounts of truth, negation, rationality, and logic even though some contradictions are true. As such, the book has four main parts.

Part one, on truth, begins with a long and tedious discussion of Aristotle's attempt to justify the law of non-contradiction (LNC). The law of non-contradiction (as stated by Priest) is: it is impossible that there is a proposition p such that p and $\neg p$ (8). Priest argues that all of the arguments Aristotle offers are either unsound or circular. The rest of part one is dedicated to showing that dialetheism is compatible with most of the popular views on the nature of truth (e.g., deflationism, the correspondence theory, etc.), and that trivialism, the view that everything is true (and false), is unacceptable. That is, although Priest thinks that some contradictions are true, he does not think that all of them are true. Priest's criticism of trivialism involves the claim that the observable world is consistent, but if trivialism were correct, then it would be inconsistent (63). Presumably, that means Priest is a dialetheist only about theoretical, but not observable matters.

In part two, Priest discusses negation; he focuses on the distinction between De Morgan negation and Boolean negation. Priest claims that only the former is "coherent" (88). It is defined by LNC and the law of excluded middle (LEM) so that it is a contradictory-forming operator, but not one that satisfies what Priest calls "explosion" (more commonly known as *ex falso quodlibet*). Explosion is the principle that anything follows from a contradiction. Obviously, since Priest is a dialetheist, but not a trivialist, he cannot endorse explosion. Boolean negation, on the other hand, obeys LNC, LEM, and explosion. Priest argues at length that there is no such thing as Boolean negation. Again, his argument is that there is no non-circular way to show that Boolean negation is a real connective; thus, anyone who accepts that there is such a thing begs the question against the dialetheist.

It might seem odd that after spending so much time arguing against Aristotle's defense of LNC, Priest accepts De Morgan negation, which obeys LNC. This illustrates a confusion on Priest's part—one that infects much of his work on dialetheism. On the one hand, he claims that Aristotle's defense of LNC is "the only major critique of dialetheism," and he argues that there is no non-circular argument for LNC (2). On the other hand, dialetheism implies that LNC is true (and false); thus, Priest actually accepts LNC (at least the formulation relevant to his discussion of Aristotle). It is unclear whether there is a version of LNC that he rejects; either way, his tendency to conflate dialetheism with rejection of LNC is a persistent problem.

Priest's discussion of negation highlights another problem with the book. Here and elsewhere, his major critical tool is to argue that objections to dialetheism beg the question. However, anyone familiar with philosophical work on logic knows that there is a long standing problem with non-circular justifications of logical principles. For example, it seems impossible to justify the inference rules one endorses without using any of these inference rules. So the fact

that there are no non-circular justifications of LNC should not surprise anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with these issues. Nor should it come as a shock that Boolean negation is used in attempts to justify the legitimacy of Boolean negation. Priest does not seem to realize that the problems he points out are general problems. He cannot give non-circular justifications of the logical principles and connectives he accepts either. We are all in the same boat, but it does not follow that LNC is false or that there is no such thing as Boolean negation. The irony, of course, is that if Priest is a dialetheist, then he should accept LNC, since his logic deems it true.

Priest closes part two with a discussion of negation, denial, and rejection. This discussion is intended to reply to the many critics who claim that a dialetheist has trouble expressing disagreement. For example, in a discussion with a dialetheist, I assert that grass is green, and the dialetheist wants to disagree with me. It will not help for the dialetheist to assert that grass is not green, since he might accept that grass is green and grass is not green. To allay these concerns, Priest distinguishes between assertion and denial (two speech acts) and between acceptance and rejection (two propositional attitudes). The traditional view is that to deny something is just to assert its negation (likewise for rejection). For Priest, there is a big difference between asserting $\neg p$ and denying p , because one can accept both p and $\neg p$. The dialetheist can disagree with someone by denying what that person has said (instead of the more traditional way of asserting its negation). These distinctions are important not just for dialetheism, but also for anyone who thinks that there are truth-value gaps (i.e., sentences that are neither true nor false); Priest's discussion is a strong contribution to this topic. However, I would have liked to see some empirical evidence that people actually perform these two different speech acts and have these two different kinds of propositional attitudes.

Part three of the book focuses on rationality. Priest argues that a theory's consistency is just one of many possible cognitive virtues it might have, and that it might be more rational to accept an inconsistent theory than a consistent rival. Thus, Priest not only accepts that there are some true contradictions, but that it is sometimes rational to believe contradictions. He also focuses on belief-revision, in particular the AGM theory of belief-revision, which has been very influential. AGM theory, of course, presupposes that a rational agent's beliefs should be consistent and that if an inconsistency is discovered, the belief set should be revised to eliminate it. Priest formulates a theory of belief-revision on which one assigns a rationality index to each of the ways of revising a belief set, and a rational agent should adopt the revision with the highest rationality index. What Priest has to say about the rationality of belief revision is of interest independently of dialetheism; however, his suggestion is not really novel (which he admits) and does not add much to the discussion of belief-revision. It would have been much more interesting to see a more general discussion of formal epistemology (Bayesianism, decision theory, confirmation theory, etc.) from a dialetheic point of view.

Priest ends part three with a discussion of inconsistent theories in the empirical sciences. Here he argues that an inconsistent empirical theory might be acceptable (not just provisionally) so long as it does not have inconsistent observational consequences and allows adjunction (i.e., the rules that a conjunction follows from its two conjuncts).

The final part of the book concerns logic. Priest endorses a paraconsistent logic (i.e., one that rejects explosion) to go along with his dialetheism, but it is not the focus of this part. Instead, Priest discusses several important topics in philosophy of logic. I found much of this part tacked on, having little to do with dialetheism, especially the last chapter on logical pluralism. However, there is much of interest in this part. Priest offers a general account of logic as a

theory of validity and then a general theory of validity as truth preservation in all situations. The theory of validity purports to be acceptable whether one is a classical logician, intuitionist, relevantist, dialetheist, or whatever. It is also intended to cover both deductive and inductive validity. Again, Priest's view is not very novel, but it does suggest that a dialetheist can still accept a plausible account of validity.

The final chapter is on logical pluralism (i.e., the view that there is no single logic that is correct for every discourse). Priest argues that there is no interesting and correct version of logical pluralism. He agrees that in different domains different logics are appropriate, but he does not take this to be a point for pluralism. Instead, he explains it by saying that in domains where stronger logics are appropriate, there is additional information that can be used as premises in reasoning. For example, it might be that paraconsistent logic is the one correct logic for all domains, but in certain situations, one is permitted to reason classically since one has the additional information that these situations are consistent. However, as Priest acknowledges in *In Contradiction* (ch. 16), legitimizing classical reasoning in a paraconsistent logic cannot be a matter of adding more premises, because an inconsistent context might very well validate the claim that it is a consistent situation. Instead, a new logic is required, which Priest calls minimally inconsistent logic of paradox (LPM). Thus, Priest's alternative to logical pluralism is incompatible with his views on legitimizing classical reasoning by way of LPM. As far as I can tell, Priest does not address this problem at all.

Throughout part four, Priest emphasizes that logic is an empirical theory of how people ought to reason (176). He writes, "we have intuitions about the validity of particular inferences. ... These act like the data in an empirical science: if the theory gives the wrong results about them, then this is a black mark against it," (182). Of course, if we extend this view to soundness (i.e., truth and validity), it is hard to imagine a worse theory than dialetheism in this regard. Only a handful of people in the Western tradition have the intuition that an argument whose conclusion is a contradiction can be sound. This point raises the issue of whether dialetheism is supposed to be a descriptive theory (one that purports to describe our actual practice) or a revisionary one (one that purports to describe how our practice should be changed). As a descriptive theory, it seems to fail miserably since almost no one explicitly accepts contradictions, thinks that contradictions can be conclusions of sound arguments, or thinks that asserting the negation of a proposition is not a way of expressing disagreement. However, it does not seem to fare any better as a revisionary theory because it does not seem possible to convince anyone that it should be adopted; any argument whose conclusion is a contradiction will be treated by almost everyone as a *reductio*, instead of as an argument that some contradiction is true. Moreover, since it is difficult to imagine a more entrenched belief than the belief that no contradictions are true, adopting dialetheism would be such a huge change that almost any other change would be preferable to it.

Overall, the book is lucid, wide-ranging, and thought-provoking, but I was bothered by something throughout reading it. Since Priest claims to be a dialetheist, and I take him at his word, it is difficult to know how to interpret what he writes. For example, on p. 63, he writes that the observable world is consistent. But, of course, that is compatible with his believing that it is inconsistent. Even if he says 'the observable world is consistent, and furthermore, I do not think that it is also inconsistent', that does not help. He might believe that ((the observable world is consistent and it is not inconsistent) and it is not the case that (the observable world is consistent and it is not inconsistent)). So, how can Priest ever convince us that he believes something and not both it and its negation? I do not see any way for this to happen. So, there is

a pragmatic slide from treating someone as a dialetheist to treating that person as a trivialist. That is, once you begin treating someone as a dialetheist, nothing they say can convince you that they are not a trivialist. Thus, although dialetheism does not imply trivialism (at least in the logic the dialetheist claims to honor), treating someone as a dialetheist leads to treating them as a trivialist. Once one begins treating another as a dialetheist, it does not seem that one should ever trust anything they say.

Priest would probably say that this is just the problem that the dialetheist has in expressing disagreement—you can trust the dialetheist when he asserts something and denies its negation. After all, he will not both assert and deny something even though he might assert a contradiction. Of course, the problem then is: how can you tell that a dialetheist is denying something instead of asserting something? Well, he could tell you that he is denying something. But that again could just be an assertion and so it is not unreasonable to think that he might also assert that he is not denying it. Perhaps Priest accepts that one should not both accept and reject the same proposition and he accepts that one may do so. Or maybe he accepts and rejects that one should not both accept and reject the same proposition. Who knows? This just illustrates the slide problem. Again, it seems that you should not trust anything a dialetheist says. I would love to find a good basis for a discussion between dialetheists and non-dialetheists, but I have yet to see one, and Priest does not even seem to recognize the problem.

Most people react to dialetheism by denying that the view even makes sense. This book goes a long way toward showing that it does (although I still have some doubts); that in itself is a major accomplishment and a good reason for anyone interested in these topics to read it. Before reading this book (and *In Contradiction*), I would not have guessed that dialetheism could be made to sound so intelligible. It is a Herculean effort, and Priest has done us all a great service in making us reflect on why we are not dialetheists.

KEVIN SHARP

Department of Philosophy, The Ohio State University, 350 University Hall, 230 North Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210-1340. Ssharp.1@osu.edu.

Entry for the Table of Contents:

Graham Priest *Doubt truth to be a liar*. Reviewed by Kevin Scharp..... xxx