Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Reviewed by

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This book deals with a most appealing problem: what happens at the boundaries of human thinking. The history of philosophy displays many cases in which thought seems to have been pushed to its outermost limits, and the argument of the book is that contradictions are usually a symptom of the fact that the limits of our mental and linguistic capacities are not too distant. As the author acknowledges in the "Preface" (p. xiv), the book originated in some discussions about the relative merits of the philosophies of Kant and Hegel, with the argument later on progressively becoming extended to virtually the whole history of Western philosophy. Yet this work is not just a historical analysis of contradictions, paradoxes and antinomies; it has a most serious substantive thesis: it defends the idea that contradictions at the limits of thought can be true.

Beyond the Limits of Thought is divided into 14 chapters and also includes an introduction, in which the structure and purpose of the book are presented, and a few pages of conclusion in which the author summarizes his main ideas. The book ends, in a mixture of Hegelian and Wittgensteinian spirit, with the following words: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one has just contradicted oneself" (p. 256). Its fourteen chapters are classified into four parts. In the first part, "The Limits of Thought in Pre-Kantian Philosophy," Priest discusses some paradoxes related to time, space and God. In the second part, "The Limits of Thought in Kant and Hegel," the Kantian antinomies and Hegelian dialectic are displayed. Priest maintains that Kant and Hegel were the first thinkers who completely understood the situation at the limits of thought, and that Hegel was the only important philosopher who accepted that there are real contradictions. The third part, "Limits and the Paradoxes of Sself-reference," deals with set-theoretical paradoxes (Cantor, Russell, Burali-Forti), and the fourth, "Language and Its Limits," treats the semantical difficulties generated by the philosophy of language in the last one hundred years; here he comments on aspects of the views held by Frege, Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson and Derrida.

Priest argues that there are some features which are shared by all the paradoxes dealt with in the book. In all cases, there is a totality of objects and, by means of some rule, it is possible to define an object that, at the same time, belongs and does not belong to this totality. The author baptizes the principle that first generates the totality as *the Principle of Closure,* and the rule that shows that one of the members of the totality cannot belong to it as *the Principle of Transcendence.*

Throughout the book the author displays an impressive familiarity with the history of philosophy and stresses some similarities among apparently very different arguments in the history of Western thought. His thesis that all paradoxes are generated by a combination of the Principle of Closure and the Principle of Transcendence is shown to be very plausible and is cleverly argued, as is the idea that these paradoxes appear when language and thought are pushed too far.

Nevertheless, I cannot agree with the main substantive thesis of the book: that there are real contradictions. On p. 4, Priest says: "That a contradiction might be true, or that dialetheism (the view that there are true contradictions) makes sense, may still be abhorrent, and even threatening, to many contemporary English-speaking philosophers. More likely than not, even the suggestion of it will be met with a look of blank incomprehension. How could a contradiction be true? After all, orthodox logic assures us that for every statement, α, only *one* of α and $\neg\alpha$ is true. The simple answer is that orthodox logic, however well entrenched, is just a *theory* of how logical particles, like negation, work; and there is no *a priori* guarantee that it is correct." Yes, I think that dialetheism is abhorrent, although not particularly threatening (except for mental health). And I also agree that orthodox logic is a theory of how some linguistic particles work. But concluding from this that at the limits of thought (or wherever) contradictions can be true only shows misunderstanding of what logic is about. I concede that contradictions appear at the limits of thought and language, but only if by this we understand that they appear when we lose contact with soundness and common sense, and when language has turned into a game with meaningless signs. To mention only a few examples, paradoxes about time and space usually come from an inadequate comprehension of the continuum; the paradoxes of Cantor and Burali-Forti appeared because mathematicians lacked a complete understanding of the notions of infinite cardinal and ordinal numbers; the Liar paradox and the like depend on a deficient knowledge of the way in which the truth operator works in natural languages and so on. And all these paradoxes are solved (or even vanish) when their theoretical backgrounds become clearer and focused.

Logic is not the science of logical calculi but the science of valid arguments. And an argument is a set of sentences in a language which, in its turn, is a system of signs used by people for some purposes. Logicians sometimes use artificial languages, *logical calculi,* as a tool in their re-

search, but it is a mistake — although a very widespread one — thinking that these calculi can become independent from our intuitions and, as it were, establish by themselves counterintuitive conclusions. Logic is a part of semantics, not a part of mathematics. All this is quite basic, but forgetting it might lead us to think that if, in a deductive system, it is possible to *produce* a formula and its negation, both formulae *must* be true. Of course, not all contradictions arise or are couched in artificial languages, although most of them appear connected to notions about which we do not have clear intuitions. Showing, using logical calculi, that it is possible to construct a formal deduction both for a thesis and its contradictory does not prove that there are real contradictions, but only that we are moving in unfamiliar territories.

Pushing thought too far from rationality has probably been an old philosophical vice, and applying to nonsense the resources of formal logic does not make it any better. Contradictions are a symptom that something has gone astray, but accepting them as a positive sign of the borders of intelligibility would make of us experts in sophistry, but would take us away from the realm of philosophy.

Priest´s book has many positive features, although one regrets that so much knowledge, effort and intelligence should have been invested in as useless a proposal as dialetheism. Contradictions are marks of error, not announcements of a deeper truth. Priest defends his position as if it were the battle of tolerance versus scholastic dogmatism. But, as I see it, we do not stand here in front of a dispute between antiquated orthodoxy and liberalizing heterodoxy, but between philosophy and charlatanism. Probably philosophy does not have its limits very sharply drawn but this does not mean that we should have to accept every shade of foolishness as a part of it, even if this foolishness is supported by all the technical and historical skills that Priest displays in this book.

Related readings

ENGEL, Pascal. 1991. *The norm of truth: An introduction to the philosophy of logic*, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf.

HAACK, Susan. 1978. *Philosophy of logics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.