

# **A Defense of Trivialism**

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## *Abstract*

That trivialism ought to be rejected is almost universally held. I argue that the rejection of trivialism should be held in suspicion and that there are good reasons for thinking that trivialism is true. After outlining in chapter 1 the place of trivialism in the history of philosophy, I begin in chapter 2 an outline and defense of the various arguments in favor of the truth of trivialism. I defend four such arguments: an argument from the Curry Paradox; and argument from the Characterization Principle; an argument from the Principle of Sufficient Reason; and an argument from the truth of possibilism.

In chapter 3 I build a case for thinking that the denial of trivialism is impossible. I begin by arguing that the denial of some view is the assertion of an alternative view. I show that there is no such view as the alternative to trivialism and so the denial of trivialism is impossible. I then examine an alternative view of the nature of denial – that denial is not reducible to an assertion but is a *sui generis* speech act. It follows given such an account of denial that the denial of trivialism is possible. I respond to this in two ways. First, I give reason for thinking that this is not a plausible account of denial. Secondly, I show that even if it is successful, the denial of trivialism is still unassertable, unbelievable, and severely limited in its rationality.

In chapter 4 I examine two important arguments that purport to show that it is impossible to believe in trivialism: one from Aristotle and a more recent one from Graham Priest. According to Aristotle, it is not possible to believe in trivialism because such a belief is incompatible with being able to act in a discriminating manner.

According to Priest, belief in trivialism is incompatible with being able to act with a purpose. I show that there are a number of ways to respond to such arguments, and so it is far from obvious that it is impossible to believe in trivialism.

In chapter 5 I reply to one of the few sustained arguments against the truth of trivialism. According to this argument, trivialism cannot be true because it entails that every observable state of affairs is contradictory - which is clearly not the case. After raising a number of objections to this line of reasoning, I argue that a contradictory state of affairs will necessarily appear consistent. As such, that the world appears consistent is not a good reason for thinking that it fails to be contradictory.

In chapter 6 I defend the claim that the observable world is indeed contradictory in the way that trivialism implies. I show that a dialetheic solution to Zeno's paradox of the arrow requires one to postulate that a body in motion is located at every point of the path of its journey at every instant of the journey.

## ***Declaration***

*This is to certify that*

- i. *the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,*
- ii. *due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,*
- iii. *the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.*

***Signed*** \_\_\_\_\_

## *Preface*

The majority of chapter 5 was published in my article "When seeing is not Believing: A Critique of Priest's Argument from Perception," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 3 (2006): 443-60.

## *Acknowledgements*

It never ceases to astound me that Graham Priest was willing to take this project seriously enough to act as its supervisor – a clear demonstration of the philosophical spirit. He was always attentive and thorough – and never short on criticism. Thanks Graham. Thank you to my parents, Dave and Dale, for all the encouragement and financial support - the thesis would have been rather difficult to write without this. But the thing that really got me through this was my own little family – without them I see little reason to do anything. I love you Pidor, Elfine, Roy, and Basil.

I dedicate this thesis to the little one growing in Pidor's womb. I can't wait to hold you.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter 1: A History of Trivialism</b>	
1. What is Trivialism and What do People think of it?	29
2. The Pre-Socratics	32
3. Nicholas of Cusa	36
4. Spinoza	37
5. Hegel	40
6. Hua-Yen Buddhism	41
7. Azzouni: a modern advocate	42
<b>Chapter 2: Arguments for Trivialism</b>	
1. Introductory Comments	48
2. The Explosive Liar	49
3. The Curry Paradox	54
4. The Argument from the Characterization Principle	56
5. The Argument from Possibilism	63
6. A Cosmological Argument for a Trivial Entity	68
7. Concluding Remarks	76
<b>Chapter 3: On the Impossibility of the Denial of Trivialism</b>	
1. Introductory Comments	77

2. What does it mean to deny something?	79
3. The Denial of Trivialism is Impossible	85
4. The Consequences of the Impossibility of the Denial of Trivialism	92
5. What if Denial is <i>Sui Generis</i> Speech Act?	97
6. Concluding Remarks	103

#### Chapter 4: Is it Possible to Believe in Trivialism?

1. Is it Possible to Believe in Trivialism?	106
2. Is Belief in Trivialism Compatible with Discriminating Behavior?	109
3. First Response to Aristotle	113
4. Is Belief in Trivialism Compatible with Purposeful Behavior?	115
5. First Response to Priest	117
6. Response 2: Need the Trivialist Believe Everything Entailed by Trivialism?	121
7. Response 3: Have Priest and Aristotle Misunderstood the Nature of Belief?	128
8. Concluding Remarks	131

#### Chapter 5: Is it Possible to Observe a Contradictory State of Affairs?

1. The Argument	134
2. Various Objections	139
3. Contradictory Perceptions as Non-Veridical: The Case of Escher's Belvedere	143



4. The Inconsistent Observer	149
5. Do the Conjuncts of a Contradiction Act Independently?	158
<b>Chapter 6: Zeno's Arrow Paradox and the Contradictory Nature of the World</b>	
1. Introduction	168
2. The Orthodox Account of Motion	169
3. Zeno's Paradox of the Arrow	170
4. Priest's Hegelean Solution to the Paradox of the Arrow	175
5. A New Version of the Paradox of the Arrow	178
6. The Arrow Paradox and the Ontology of Points	181
7. A Solution to the New Paradox of the Arrow	184
8. Various Objections	185
9. Is this Really an Improvement for the Hegelean Theory of Motion? The Problem of Perception	190
<b>Conclusion: Summary and Existential Implications</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>200</b>

## Introduction

It is a characteristic of humans that they are stingy in their dealings with reality (a fact that is also reflected in their dealings with one another). Their sciences and logical systems all seem to have in common the fact that they privilege off a certain class of propositions as true – the rest are left to flounder as second class citizens. But *Reality* does not so discriminate. Unlike humans, *Being* exhibits a generosity that is without limit, and it will not allow itself to be contained by the rationings of mere humans. In this thesis I argue for the truth of a claim that, to put it mildly, violates commonsense in a way that no other philosophical theory to date has achieved. In this regard it even surpasses Berkeley's idealism or Lewis's modal realism or the Indian philosophy of Advaita Vedanta. I have in mind here the theory of trivialism.

Trivialism is the claim that every proposition is true. This is such a bizarre view that one wonders why anyone would have taken an interest in it – let alone think that it is true. The reason why there is an interest in trivialism is due to the fact that there has been a revival in a view known as dialetheism - the claim that some contradictions are true. Trivialism is often understood as an extreme form of dialetheism (all, as opposed to some, contradictions are true). There has been pressure on dialetheists to distinguish their own view from trivialism. There is no doubt that there is a tendency to conflate the two. This dates back to Aristotle's formulation and defense of the Law of Non-Contradiction in his *Metaphysics* Γ.<sup>1</sup> It is clear, given Aristotle's intended target, that he is

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 86-110. Although not everyone agrees that Aristotle is making a mistake here. Berto, *How to Sell a Contradiction*, 279-80, argues that Aristotle was onto something quite significant concerning the relationship between dialetheism and trivialism.

often defending the Law of Non-Triviality, i.e. the law that there is at least one proposition that fails to be true. So, these passages are misunderstood if they are interpreted to be an attack on dialetheism solely and not also trivialism. But the temptation to conflate the two positions remains today. Priest reports that:

I often find myself being asked the following question: ‘Since you believe some contradictions, but not all, you must have a criterion for deciding between those that are true and those that are not. What is it?’<sup>2</sup>

According to Priest, the implication of such a query is that the questioner is unable to see how the slippery slope toward trivialism can be avoided.

But, of course, there is a reason intrinsic to classical logic that is the probable source of the accusation that dialetheism amounts to, or at least leads to, trivialism. In classical logic, explosion is a valid form of inference, i.e.  $\alpha, \neg\alpha \vdash \beta$ . Hence, if you hold there to be a true contradiction (as the dialetheist does hold), then you are committed to trivialism. It is clear then that if a dialetheist does not wish to be committed to trivialism, he/she had better replace classical logic with an alternative system in which explosion fails to be valid. Such systems have been extensively explored in the last fifty years or so and are known as paraconsistent logics.<sup>3</sup> It is arguably the case that the program has been successful – so far at least. As far as I can see, one essential insight behind the program is the realization that classical logic is mistaken in the way it understands negation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 56 (n).

<sup>3</sup> An excellent primary document illustrating the early history of the program is the collection of essays to be found in Priest, Routley & Norman, *Paraconsistent Logic*. But the program has grown since then. Note also that the major proponents of the view claim that the program has ancient roots – see the introductory essay by Priest & Routley, “Part 1: The History of Paraconsistent Logic.”

<sup>4</sup> A few points need to be kept in mind here. First is the realization that there has been in the history of logic more than one theory of negation, with the classical account probably being the

Whatever the final details of a true theory of logic, some logicians are of the opinion that it will be paraconsistent. All this shows that the dialetheist is right to insist that their view be distinguished from trivialism.

But not everyone is convinced that a mere denial of the validity of explosion will suffice to let the dialetheist off the charge of being a closet trivialist. Take the following challenge from Kroon, who is a dialetheist himself:

Dialetheists ... think that their rejection of *ex contradictione quodlibet* means that they can't be saddled with the claim that anything whatsoever is true ... They believe that there are true contradictions aplenty ... but that such true contradictions can be pretty well insulated from the rest of our beliefs. Of course, they agree that logic can't guarantee that there are not many more true contradictions than just these; it can only tell us not to look to 'laws' like *ex contradictione quodlibet* to generate this result. But this raises the question of how they can defend the view that not everything is both true and false. In rejecting the Law of Non-Contradiction, they can't appeal to the incoherence of something's being both true and false, since they claim that some propositions, indeed a substantial number of them, are both true and false. So what makes the claim that everything is both true and false incoherent? (I assume without further ado that it is incoherent – as flagrantly nonsensical as any claim could be).<sup>5</sup>

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most recently developed, and the paraconsistent account arguably the earliest – see Routley & Routley, "Negation and Contradiction." Secondly, it would appear to be the case that the paraconsistent account of negation is a more plausible account of how negation is actually used in natural reasoning – see Routley & Routley "Negation and Contradiction." Thirdly, it would seem that it cannot be demonstrated that classical negation is coherent (i.e. its coherency will always be an assumption rather than being rationally justified), and so it is epistemically possible that classical logic is working with an incoherent notion of negation – see Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 88-102. Finally, it would appear the classical logic confuses the notion of negation with other distinct concepts such as the arrow *falsum*, and denial – see Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 85-6, 103-7.

<sup>5</sup> Kroon, "Realism and Dialetheism," 245-6. In this particular paper Kroon argues for a most unusual form of dialetheism (unusual compared to other forms of dialetheism), specifically non-realist dialetheism. Kroon is of the opinion that the only way that a dialetheist can avoid the possibility of trivialism is to either reject realism with respect to that part of our discourse that is dialetheic or to give up dialetheism itself. Pitted against the trivialist, this is a rather weak argument. After all, why think that trivialism is something to be avoided in the first place? Surely Kroon needs independent reason here for avoiding a realist account of dialetheism.

As Kroon has pointed out, much of the rejection of trivialism has relied on a mere pointing out that the inference of explosion (or *ex contradictione quodlibet*, ‘from a contradiction anything’, as it is traditionally named) is invalid given the truth of dialetheism. But even if the inference is invalid given a denial of the Law of Non-Contradiction, all this will show is that a particular argument for trivialism fails to be sound – it does not show that there is reason for rejecting trivialism *per se*. The challenge to the dialetheist is to find a reason for thinking that not every contradiction, and so every proposition, is true. Almost no one has bothered to take up this challenge, so entrenched is the view that trivialism is unacceptable. I know of only one exception – Graham Priest – and I will be examining his objections to trivialism in various chapters of the thesis.

A second issue requires addressing before heading into the main body of the thesis: Surely the fact that trivialism violates commonsense to such a monumental degree counts decisively against it. I agree that the fact that trivialism violates commonsense counts against it. But I deny that the violation of commonsense is decisive. One might keep in mind here the attitude of David Lewis in regard to his theory of modal realism and the initial reactions to it.

The incredulous stare is a gesture meant to say that modal realism fails the test [of compatibility with common sense]. That is a matter of judgment and, with respect, I disagree. I acknowledge that my denial of common sense opinion is severe, and I think it entirely right and proper to count that as a serious cost. How serious is serious enough to be decisive? - That is our central question, yet I don't see how anything can be said about it. I still think the price is right, high as it is ... The theoretical benefits are worth it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 135.

I too will argue that there is reason to believe that trivialism is true, and in a way that I think trumps commonsense. As such, I request of the reader that he or she put aside the dictates of commonsense for a while and see where the arguments I present take you. I hope to show that trivialism is not as bad as has been made out.

However, having said that, it seems to me that the relevant line to draw in such matters is not between claims that are commonsense and claims that fail to be commonsense. Rather, it is between what David Armstrong refers to as Moorean truths and non-Moorean truths (named after that champion of commonsense, G.E. Moore). David Armstrong explores such a distinction in a recent article, and according to him, such truths have two characteristics:

One mark of such truisms is that, in ordinary circumstances, it is embarrassing to mention them ... [a second mark is] the *shallowness* of truistic or Moorean knowledge. Moorean Knowledge is vague and imprecise in many dimensions and it takes us little way into the true nature of things.<sup>7</sup>

A case in point (one given by Armstrong and one that is important for the discussion in chapter 6 of the thesis) is motion. That things move is a Moorean truth: it is so obvious that it is embarrassing to even raise this as an example of knowledge, and it is a very superficial claim about the world. It is superficial in the sense that we are no nearer the correct analysis of the nature of motion than Zeno was two-thousand years ago.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Armstrong, "The Scope and Limits of Human Knowledge," 159, 160-1.

<sup>8</sup> Although I know that many philosophers might disagree with this claim and wish to insist that their preferred account of motion is the correct one and that there is no room for dispute on the issue. I use this example because it is one used by Armstrong himself. If you do not like this particular example, then there are plenty of others that you can choose from, e.g. the nature of time (is time B-theoretic or A-theoretic?), the existence of God (does he exist or not?), the nature of vagueness (is it merely epistemic or is it semantic?) etc.

question of what motion actually consists in is an ongoing and most fascinating philosophical problem. But the banality of motion itself remains.

I seriously doubt that the claim that trivialism ought to be rejected can be considered a Moorean truth. The average man or woman has given no thought at all about the issue of whether everything might be true. It is not the kind of thing they would consider when getting about the business of living in the world. There is no guarantee that upon reflection the average man would side with any one who rejected trivialism, once they have considered the relevant arguments. Indeed, one of the implications of the case that I make is that one can go about the business of everyday living and be a trivialist (see chapter 4, for example).

But neither would I classify the consensus view concerning trivialism (that is to say, nontrivialism) as being among that other part of human knowledge, namely well established mathematical and scientific truths. In saying this I am not denying that it is part of well established mathematics and logic that trivialism plays a role in the method of proof – usually in the form of argument known as *reductio ad absurdum* (the idea being that a proposition or set of propositions is to be rejected if it entails trivialism). What I am contending is that nontrivialism is part of what Armstrong calls belief that is more or less justified and he places all of philosophy in this category, including presumably any thesis about trivialism.<sup>9</sup> The point of mentioning all this about Moorean truths is that one should never overplay the significance of commonsense. All we should really be

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<sup>9</sup> Armstrong, "The Scope and Limits of Human Knowledge," 164.

worried about is whether a philosophical position can be justified with argument – and I think that trivialism can be.

One final issue that might be playing on the reader's mind: what on earth bought me to seriously consider trivialism in the first place? There are four factors that have driven my investigation of trivialism. First, a defense of trivialism just might fill what I see to be a major lacuna in the defense of various logical theories and claims. Two examples come to mind here: the theory of dialetheism, and the inference of contraction. At least some of the resistance to dialetheism comes from what is perceived to be the inadequacies in the various attempts to develop a paraconsistent logic. Take this quote from Littmann, for example:

There are a number of logics which are not explosive. A system is explosive if within that system, the truth of a contradiction entails the truth of every sentence. Classical logic is explosive. If a system of logic is not explosive, it is called a "paraconsistent logic". Obviously, dialetheism is going to be a much less attractive view if there are no satisfactory systems of paraconsistent logic. After all, the truth of dialetheism would require the truth of every theory, which is an infinitely expensive requirement.<sup>10</sup>

It is Littmann's view that there are no adequate systems of paraconsistent logic currently available, and so it is unlikely that dialetheism is able to avoid entailing trivialism.<sup>11</sup> One obvious response the dialetheist could make to this is to defend one of the current systems of paraconsistent logic from objections made to it, or develop a system that does work. But an alternative method would be to show that, contra Littmann, trivialism is

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<sup>10</sup> Littmann, "A Critique of Dialetheism," 7.

<sup>11</sup> Or at least there are no adequate systems of paraconsistent logic at the time that Littmann wrote his thesis – see Littmann, "A Critique of Dialetheism," ch. 2. I am uncertain if Littmann has changed his view on this given more recent developments. See Littmann and Simmons, "A Critique of Dialetheism" for more recent evidence that he has not changed his mind.



not an "... infinitely expensive requirement."<sup>12</sup> A defense of trivialism should therefore figure in any defense of dialetheism. After all, there is no guarantee that logicians will come up with a system of paraconsistency that satisfies everyone.

Similar things could be said about the inference of contraction:  $p \rightarrow p \rightarrow q \vdash p \rightarrow q$ . Despite the inference being intuitively valid (I have had it described to me as being like a stutter), there have been attempts to develop logics without contraction. This is because one can use the inference to prove the truth of any sentence. I will have more to say about this inference in chapter 2, section 3, when I discuss the use of the Curry Paradox as a proof for trivialism. But for now it is important to note that one way to defend the validity of this inference is to show that there is nothing really problematic about trivialism.

Secondly, most of my philosophical interests are driven by what may be referred to as the big cosmological or metaphysical questions<sup>13</sup>: *Why is there something rather than nothing? Why does the world appear designed and contrived?* There are a range of answers to these questions around today, including both naturalistic and super-naturalistic accounts.<sup>14</sup> But it occurred to me that trivialism should be included among such views,

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<sup>12</sup> Littmann, "A Critique of Dialetheism," 7.

<sup>13</sup> I am aware that there are philosophers who take the position that questions of this sort are largely non-starters and pseudo-questions (see for example Grünbaum, "The Poverty of Theistic Cosmology.") I have some sympathy for this view and so it might be that my interest in such questions is largely a hang-over from certain cultural and emotional dispositions (inherited from a Catholic up-bringing perhaps) rather than rational considerations.

<sup>14</sup> Some naturalistic accounts include Smith, "Time was Created by a Timeless Point"; Smith, "Kalam Cosmological Arguments for Atheism"; Smith, "Big Bang Cosmology and Atheism"; Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos*; Unger, "Minimizing Arbitrariness." Two well known theistic accounts are Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*; and Swinburne, *Is there a God?*

although it defies classification under the categories naturalism/supernaturalism (it does after all entail both). Trivialism answers some of the big cosmological questions in a manner that avoids the standard replies: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* Because trivialism is true and trivialism entails that there is something rather than nothing. *Why does the world appear to be designed?* Because trivialism is true and trivialism entails that the world is designed.<sup>15</sup> It is not hard to see that trivialism has going for it the epistemic virtue of simplicity. It postulates an entity known as a proposition and a property known as truth (both of which are widely, although not universally, accepted), and asserts:  $\forall pTp$  is true. You cannot get simpler than that. In addition, trivialism would appear to be far less arbitrary than nontrivialism (the claim that only some, but not all, propositions are true). A problem arises for the nontrivialist that does not arise for the trivialist: if only some propositions are true, then which ones? And of course, this generates all the epistemological and skeptical problems surrounding the issue of how one knows that one has designated the correct propositions as true. By holding all propositions to be true, the trivialist bypasses the problems of skepticism and the attendant need for an epistemology. There is no special class of propositions (the ones that are true) and so no need to justify the exact membership of this class over some other characterization of its membership. But is trivialism true? Well, it is the task of this thesis to show that it is.

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, trivialism will also entail that there is nothing rather than something and it entails that the world is not designed. The reader may suspect that this counts against trivialism being an acceptable answer to the big cosmological questions – ‘it entails all the right things, but it entails all the wrong things as well!’ I will explain in chapter 3 why I do not think this is a sound objection to trivialism.

Thirdly, it seems to me that trivialism may have the potential to ground a non-theistic concept of deity. There has been an intuition expressed by a minority of thinkers, from a wide range of religious traditions, that the only acceptable account of God is one in which he is portrayed as the greatest possible or conceivable being. In many quarters of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, it is taken for granted that the concept of a being of which no greater is conceivable goes hand in hand with classical theism. I am of the opinion that it fits much better with something more like trivialism. I will explore this theme in more detail in chapter 3, but for now I wish to draw attention to the idea that if trivialism is true, then reality consists of the greatest possible totality – a totality so inclusive that it includes everything, even its opposite. That the ultimate or God is to be understood in this manner can be illustrated by the following passage taken from the second century C.E. Gnostic text, *The Secret Book of John*:

The One is a sovereign that has nothing over it ... It does not exist within anything that is inferior to it, since everything exists only within it. It is eternal since it does not need anything. For it is absolutely complete: it has never lacked anything in order to be complete ... It is illimitable, since there is nothing before it to limit it.<sup>16</sup>

That God is to be understood in some sense as an all inclusive entity is a sentiment expressed much later in the fifteenth century by Nicholas of Cusa:

And it is not, as well as is, all that which is conceived to be; and it is, as well is not, all that which is conceived not to be. But it is a given thing in such way that it is all things; and it is all things in such way that it is no thing; and it is maximally a given thing in such a way that it is it minimally. For example, to say "God, who is Absolute Maximality, is light" [is to say] not other than "God is maximally light in such a way that He is minimally light."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Meyer, *The Secret Teachings of Jesus*, 56-7.

<sup>17</sup> Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance*, 51-2.

Of course, such conceptions of deity have always been controversial, but I hope in this thesis to show that there is at least some philosophical plausibility to them, even if the theology that emerges from these is found to be questionably.<sup>18</sup> There are religious prospects offered by trivialism other than a concept of God. In the conclusion to chapter 4 I suggest that trivialism can be the basis for a religious pursuit that has more in common with religions in which the ultimate goal is the dissolution of the self – religions such as Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. In the conclusion I make suggestions as to how trivialism may contribute to a life characterized by that ancient Greek virtue of *ataraxia*. The point of emphasizing such religious and ethical prospects is to show that the truth of trivialism is far from being an esoteric subject of interest to logicians only. Rather, it has the potential to be of great existential import.

Finally, I hope that trivialism can contribute to the development of philosophy much in the same way that skepticism has.<sup>19</sup> Ever since its conception in classical Greece, skepticism has served to stimulate the development of sophisticated theories of epistemology and high-minded reflections on the nature of philosophy. Few have

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<sup>18</sup> For a very recent critique of such conceptions of deity see Craig, “Pantheists in Spite of themselves.”

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, a comparison between trivialism and skepticism reveals interesting symmetries between the two views. If we understand the trivialist to be someone who believes everything and the skeptic who believes nothing, we can see that skepticism is the opposite of trivialism. Indeed, Priest has noted that one of the main arguments against the skeptic (that he cannot act in a purposeful or discriminating manner) can also be leveled at the trivialist – see his “Could Everything be True?” I will examine such objections to trivialism in chapter 4 of the thesis. There is, interestingly enough, a version of trivialism that has the trivialist also believing nothing. This is a version which takes for granted the so-called cancellation view of negation. On this account of negation, trivialism will have no content, as every sentence and its negation is true, and negation serves to cancel the content of a sentence. Thus the trivialist is left believing nothing at all. I will not be defending this version of trivialism in this thesis. Rather, I will take it for granted that trivialism has total content (but, of course, that it has total content will entail that it also has null content).

accepted the conclusions of the skeptic, and in their rush to refute the arguments of the skeptic, philosophical history has been made. Indeed, one wonders whether there would even be a discipline and pursuit like philosophy if it were not for the catalyst of skeptical thought (would Plato have composed his *Theaetetus*, for instance, or Hegel his *Phenomenology of Spirit* if it were not for the skeptical challenge?). I would like to think that trivialism could play a similar role: even if it is rejected as the basis for an account of God and the world, I hope it could inspire those who are repulsed by it to develop concepts and arguments of great beauty and sophistication in order to refute it. Certainly I would like to think that the responses that are made to this thesis are more sophisticated than the current arguments against trivialism are. May the next stage in the history of philosophy be a reaction to trivialism. To that end, a summary of the thesis follows.

### Chapter 1: The History of Trivialism

After outlining what has been and is currently the dominant and prevailing opinion concerning trivialism (a view that amounts to a denial of trivialism), I inquire into whether there has been or are any supporters of trivialism. I explore a range of thinkers and traditions in this regard: various Pre-Socratic philosophers (Anaximander, Anaxagoras, and Heraclitus); Nicholas of Cusa; Spinoza; Hua-Yen Buddhism; and Hegel. I conclude that although there are elements and ideas from such thinkers and traditions that suggest a trivialist interpretation, it would be unwise to conclude they are in fact examples of trivialists – none of them explicitly claim that every proposition is true, for example (although some come close to this). There are trivialists on the

contemporary philosophical scene – myself (or at least the persona from which I am writing) and Jodie Azzouni. I provide a brief outline of Azzouni’s efforts at articulating and defending trivialism. The rest of the thesis is an outline of my own account and defense of trivialism.

## Chapter 2: Arguments for Trivialism

In this chapter I begin defending the truth of trivialism. To this end, I examine various deductive style arguments for the truth of trivialism: the explosive liar; the Curry Paradox; an argument from the Characterization Principle; an argument from possibilism; and an argument from a trivial entity. I show that only the first of these is obviously unsound. The other four, however, are arguably sound and so give good reason for thinking that trivialism is true. On the other hand I am willing to concede that such arguments may fail to be dialectically useful, as they are based on premises or inferences that might reasonably be rejected by someone wishing to resist the claim that trivialism is true. But this seems to me to be a small loss when it is remembered that there are few if any arguments in philosophy that can succeed, in the sense of satisfying everyone. For any given philosophical argument one can always resist its persuasive power by refusing to believe a crucial premise. Trivialism is no worse off than any other philosophical theory in this regard.

## Chapter 3: On the Impossibility of the Denial of Trivialism

This chapter provides additional reason, to those developed in chapter 2, for committing oneself to trivialism. In this chapter I argue that the denial of trivialism is impossible – and so one cannot avoid committing to it in some sense. In a sense we have no option

but to accept trivialism. After developing an account of what I mean by the denial of some view (a view is denied by asserting an *alternative* view), I then show that it is not possible to deny trivialism, as there is no alternative view to trivialism that one can assert. I then spell out two important implications of this conclusion: that the denial of trivialism is at best irrational; that at very worst the trivialist has no opponent who disputes her view, and so in the debate between the trivialist and the nontrivialist, the trivialist wins by default – there is literally no such thing as the nontrivialist. I then examine a possible response from the nontrivialist. This response is centered upon an alternative account of denial. On this account denial cannot be reduced to a form of assertion – it is, rather, a *sui generis* speech act. It would seem that one could deny trivialism given this account of denial. I respond to this in two ways. First, I suggest reasons for thinking that this is not a plausible account of denial. Secondly, even if it is a plausible account of denial that enables one to deny trivialism, it still remains the case that there is nothing that one could assert that amounts to the performance of the speech act of nontrivialism, and so nothing one can believe that would qualify one as a nontrivialist.

#### Chapter 4: Is it Possible to Believe in Trivialism?

Some of the most ancient analyses of trivialism have concerned not the truth of trivialism but the question of whether it is even possible to believe that it is true. This chapter analyses the various arguments for the claim that it is impossible to believe in trivialism.

The first recorded attempt to show that trivialism is impossible to believe is to be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ.<sup>20</sup> According to Aristotle, if one were to believe everything, then one could never act in a discriminating manner. That is to say, the trivialist could not choose action x over action y because of reason z, as the trivialist believes that either course of action is equally as good for achieving z.

More recently, Priest has argued that if one were to believe everything, then one could not even form a purpose to act. The trivialist believes that every state of affairs obtains, and so could not form the intention of bringing about a state of affairs. But it would seem that purposeful behavior is unavoidable for any conscious being. So, one cannot be a trivialist.

In this chapter I suggest three responses a trivialist might make to such arguments. The first response I make to Aristotle is to take up a suggestion made by Priest. According to Priest, Aristotle fails to take into account that belief is not sufficient to account for an action – desire must also be taken into account. Accordingly, a trivialist may not have the desire to undertake many actions even if they have the requisite beliefs. My first response to Priest involves suggesting a different account of action that diverges slightly from the orthodox account in terms of belief and desire or intention. I suggest ways in which a trivialist may act despite not actually having any desire or intentions. I also show how one might become a trivialist over a period of time such that one maintains certain purposes for acting despite believing everything.

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 96-7.



In the second response, rather than critique the arguments of Priest and Aristotle, I offer an alternative account of what it means to be a trivialist – an account that avoids the difficulties raised by these critics. It is suggested that all that is required of someone to be a trivialist is that they believe the proposition, ‘all propositions are true’, and everything else they believe is either entailed by this sentence or at least compatible with it. Of course, every proposition is entailed by trivialism, and so it is rather easy to qualify as a trivialist on this account.

The third response takes up the Humean idea that to have a belief is merely to have a greater degree (relative to an imagination) of affection toward a mental object. I show how this might enable the trivialist who believes each and every proposition to act in both a discriminating and purposeful manner. The idea is that the trivialist might very well have varying degrees of affection toward objects of belief that enable discrimination and purposeful action to take place.

I conclude the chapter by suggesting that there is still a role for trivialism to play in both a philosophical and religious context even if the arguments presented by Priest and Aristotle are sound.

#### Chapter 5: Is it Possible to Observe a Contradictory State of Affairs?

I begin this chapter by spelling out one of the few attempts made by advocates of the consensus view to explain why trivialism is to be rejected. Graham Priest presents an a posteriori argument in response to this question. The idea is something like this: if

trivialism were true, then every perceptual observation would be contradictory; but it is not – our perceptual experiences are overwhelmingly consistent.

As I argue in chapter 3, the dialectical context in which Priest is trying to define his defense is not even assertable, as there is no such position as a rejection of trivialism. Any observation we have of the world is part of the content of trivialism. The argument then cannot be used to perform the speech act of the denial of trivialism. But even as an argument to show that the observable world is consistent, I believe that it fails for independent reasons. I argue that if there were a contradictory state of affairs, it would necessarily (given the nature of a contradiction) appear consistent. As such, the appearance of consistency is equally evidence for a contradictory state of affairs as it is for a consistent state of affairs.<sup>21</sup>

#### Chapter 6: Zeno's Arrow Paradox and the Contradictory Nature of the World

This chapter examines an argument that is not in support of trivialism *per se*, but rather in support of what might be termed physical trivialism or near trivialism. The idea is that the physical world is deeply contradictory. By assuming that there is such a thing as an instantaneous state of motion, I reach this conclusion by developing a dialethic solution to Zeno's Paradox of the Arrow. The basic idea is that for any body in motion over an interval from A to B, the body in question is located at every point of the interval at every instant of the journey. This, of course, gives rise to an obvious objection: If this is the case, then why do we not observe such contradictory states of affairs. I provide an

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<sup>21</sup> Much of this chapter has been published as Kabay, "When Seeing is not Believing."

answer to that objection in chapter 5 above. I also discuss various other objections to this argument.

Given that there are arguments for thinking that the physical world is trivial, the step to an absolute version of trivialism (in which every proposition and not merely every proposition about the physical world is true) is not as unintuitive as it might have been.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

I bring the thesis to a conclusion by reflecting on the possible existential implications of trivialism in addition to the comments made in the conclusion of chapter 4. I suggest parallels between a trivialist way of life and that of the skeptic in order to illustrate how trivialism might contribute to the ancient Greek project of achieving *ataraxia*. I end by drawing attention to the philosophical value of undertaking a project of this sort.

### *A Note on Dialectic*

In this thesis I take on the persona of a trivialist. That is to say, it is written from the perspective of one who holds all things to be true and is seeking to convince others of

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<sup>22</sup> Of course, this is not to say that the biggest problem facing trivialism is the inconsistency of the empirical world. Indeed an opponent may think that this is the least of its problems. Trivialism entails things that are probably even more controversial. Take these examples: 'the number three is a concrete object' or '1+1=56'. This, of course, assumes that such examples are genuine propositions and not merely nonsense. It is always open to the trivialist to reject a certain sentence as not expressing a genuine proposition. But this would require independent argument in cases such as the two examples given, as they appear to express a genuine proposition even if they are in fact quite bizarre.

this. As a trivialist I accept as true every premise of every argument in the thesis. But note also that I accept the negation of each and every premise of these arguments.

But the tone of many of the arguments I present may seem puzzling in light of my acceptance of every proposition. It would seem that I am trying to get my opponent to accept some premises over others, for example. But it might seem from this that I accept some propositions over others. Many of the arguments I present have to be understood as being *ad hominem* in nature. That is to say, they are aimed at a particular audience. In presenting such arguments I am attempting to push the members of that audience into seeing that given their commitments they really should be trivialist as well.

Once a person has been convinced of the truth of trivialism, however, these arguments become rather superfluous from the perspective of the trivialist. After all, such a person asserts the truth of any given proposition directly without having to arrive at that proposition through some chain of reasoning. However, like the persona representing the author of this thesis, they may wish to use these arguments to convince others of trivialism. The thesis then is not entirely the proverbial ladder that one kicks away upon having arrived at the top.<sup>23</sup> Having said that, let us begin.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.54.

## Chapter 1: A History of Trivialism

### 1. What is Trivialism and what do people think of it?

I define trivialism as the claim that each and every proposition is true, i.e.  $\forall pTp$ . For example, if trivialism is true, then a whole host of propositions that no one would think twice about are true – ‘Australia is a constitutional monarchy’; ‘ $1+1=2$ ’; ‘The First Fleet arrived in Botany Bay in 1788’; ‘the hydrogen atom has exactly one proton in its nucleus’; and ‘trivialism is false’. But, of course, if trivialism is true, then the negations of each of these are also true. Indeed, even propositions such as the following are true: ‘nothing is identical to itself’; ‘two physical objects can occupy the same place at the same time’; and ‘a body can be colored red all over and green all over’. I define a trivialist as someone who asserts or believes the truth of each and every proposition.<sup>24</sup> I define nontrivialism as the denial of trivialism. I define the nontrivialist as someone who denies that every proposition is true, that is to say, denies that trivialism is true. Note that I have defined nontrivialism in terms of the performance of a speech act – specifically, the speech act of denial. This has important implications for the very possibility of nontrivialism, and I will discuss this in chapter three along with alternative notions of what it is to be a nontrivialist.

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<sup>24</sup> In chapter 4, where I consider arguments against the possibility of being able to believe in trivialism, I will consider the need for alternative definitions of ‘trivialist’ in order to reply to such arguments. Specifically, I will suggest the following alternative definition of trivialist: *a trivialist is someone who at the very least believes the sentence ‘ $\forall pTp$ ’*. On this definition all the beliefs of such a person are entailed by trivialism, but they do not necessarily believe every proposition entailed by trivialism.

Now it should be pointed out here that my definition of trivialism assumes that the truth predicate obeys unrestricted capture and release (i.e.  $p \leftrightarrow Tp$ ). Indeed, I think that this is obviously assumed by all the opponents of trivialism, and is the reason why trivialism is thought to be so problematic. One can envisage a sort of disingenuous defense of trivialism, in which either the release or capture of the truth predicate is restricted, in an attempt to make it more palatable. A version of trivialism in which the release of the truth predicate is restricted would enable the trivialist to avoid what are thought to be the most unintuitive consequences of trivialism. For example, such a trivialist might be quite happy to assert that it is true that  $1+1=3$  (after all, she believes that all propositions are true). But she might very well fail to assert that  $1+1=3$ . That is to say such a trivialist denies that  $Tp \vdash p$ , where  $p$  is ' $1+1=3$ '. It should be realized that I will not make use of such a strategy in this thesis, and there are two very good reasons for this. First, such a defense would be something of a straw-man. Such a form of trivialism is not really trivialism at all given the parameters of the debate – no one is really attacking such a view. Secondly, that this is a more plausible or intuitive version of trivialism is perhaps greatly exaggerated. The fact is that the idea that the truth predicate fails to behave according to unrestricted release is very odd indeed. A defense of this kind of trivialism would be difficult and certainly beyond my ken. Having made clear then the relevant definitions, it is time to say a little about what people think of this view.

There is a consensus among philosophers concerning the topic of trivialism. It can be described as nontrivialism, i.e. the denial of trivialism. Nontrivialism is well represented (or at least thought to be well represented – I will show in chapter 3 that this is not so) by the following quote:

It is important to distinguish between two positions. The first is that some contradictions are true – dialetheism; the second is that everything, and a fortiori, every contradiction is true – trivialism ... a substantial case can be made for the first; belief in the second, though, would appear to be grounds for certifiable insanity.<sup>25</sup>

Some comments concerning trivialism are so strongly and negatively worded that you would never think that an intelligent or even sane person would advocate such a metaphysic. Take the following example:

What makes the claim that everything is both true and false incoherent? (I assume without further ado that it is incoherent – as flagrantly nonsensical as any claim could be) ... the thought that the truth of trivialism is a genuine open possibility ... ought to strike us as bizarre and intolerable. Unlike other incredible doctrines, it deserves not an incredulous stare, but no stare at all. It is not even a starter for a stare.<sup>26</sup>

More restrained but similarly skeptical is the position taken in a recent introduction to logic. The authors strongly advise the dialetheist to ensure that they develop an alternative to classical logic so as to avoid a contradiction from implying the truth of every proposition:

A dialetheist should ... make sure that his or her system of logic does not have such a feature, or else every statement would be true according to the system. It is hard to imagine why anyone would want to embrace such systems, for to accept every statement as true is to give up reasoning indeed, and most likely with disastrous practical consequences.<sup>27</sup>

Or take the view of Bueno – perhaps the most restrained expression of nontrivialism ever:

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<sup>25</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 443.

<sup>26</sup> Kroon, "Realism and Dialetheism," 252-3. Kroon is, of course, alluding to David Lewis's famous retort that opponents of modal realism do not have good reasons for rejecting modal realism – at best they offer an incredulous stare. See Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 133.

<sup>27</sup> Brennan, Deutsch, Lau, *Logic: Key Concepts in Philosophy*, 158.

Trivialism isn't the sort of philosophical view one would arrive at easily. In fact, until very recently, it's a view that hardly anyone would even take very seriously. An incredulous stare would seem enough to dispose of it.<sup>28</sup>

These sentiments toward trivialism are largely ubiquitous. Philosophers and logicians would seem to agree that nontrivialism is the only rational and live option when it comes to a choice between trivialism and nontrivialism.

## 2. The Pre-Socratics

It is not surprising that trivialism is the least advocated of worldviews. But there are some who have thought that there have existed trivialists in the past – as doubtful as this might be. Although he does not actually use the word 'trivialism', Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics* Γ, seems to have thought that Heraclitus and Anaxagoras both advocated trivialism – an interpretation which is, more likely than not, incorrect.<sup>29</sup> Certainly I know of no modern commentator who would agree with this view of either Heraclitus or Anaxagoras. Although, having said that, I can understand why Aristotle may have come to such a conclusion. Although I doubt that they are trivialists, there are aspects to their thought that suggest that at times they might be thinking in that direction – and this is especially so of Anaxagoras. According to Anaxagoras "All things were together."<sup>30</sup> Here is one account of just how inclusive Anaxagoras is being with the term 'all':

His own original mixture must contain, not only the traditional opposites (of which hot and cold are Anaximander's, the wet and the dry are also his or possibly added from Heraclitus, while the bright and the dark are presumably ... Pythagorean ...), nor only the Empedoclean elements (... exemplified by earth,

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<sup>28</sup> Bueno, "Troubles with Trivialism," 655.

<sup>29</sup> See Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, 107-8.

<sup>30</sup> Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 368.



... air and aither (or fire) ...); it must contain also 'innumerable seeds in no way like each other'.<sup>31</sup>

This last reference to the seeds is very suggestive of all contradictions being true of that which is the ultimate source of reality. But again, other than the fact that Aristotle interprets him in this manner, there is no independent reason to prefer this interpretation over an alternative – for example, that the various elements of reality are well mixed up, yet consistent.

The writings of Heraclitus are also in some ways suggestive of trivialism. The fragments that are most relevant for our purposes here are those that express what has come to be known as the doctrine of the unity of opposites. That this is to be understood as a belief, on the part of Heraclitus, in dialetheism (the claim that at least some contradictions are true) is controversial. Most commentators seem to hold that it is an expression of the organic unity of all things, rather than the belief in the truth of explicit contradictions.<sup>32</sup> However, it is at least possible to interpret the doctrine in this dialethic manner, and that it should be so interpreted receives additional support from the fact that Aristotle understood it in this way (he does after all formulate the Law of Non-Contradiction in *Metaphysics* Γ in response to thinkers such as Heraclitus). The following fragments are good examples:

Cold warms up, warm cools off, moist parches, dry dampens.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 369-70.

<sup>32</sup> Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, holds this position as does Kahn, *The Thought of Heraclitus*, 192 (nn. 249-50) and n. 349. But Kahn seems to contradict himself on this point – see the commentary (point (3)) on fragment CXVIII on pages 270-1.

<sup>33</sup> Kahn, *The Thought of Heraclitus*, 53.

One cannot step twice into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition, but it scatters and again gathers; it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs. *Or rather, not again nor later but at the same time it forms and dissolves, and approaches and departs.*<sup>34</sup>

It rests by changing.<sup>35</sup>

The way up and down is one and the same.<sup>36</sup>

Graspings: wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all.<sup>37</sup>

One can glean, I guess, from such fragments why someone like Aristotle would interpret Heraclitus as being trivialist or at least a dialetheist of an extreme sort. But again this is hardly decisive evidence.

Anaxagoras' predecessor Anaximander also says some things that might be interpreted as being a form of trivialism. If this interpretation is correct (and I am far from sure that it is) then this makes trivialism one of the first non-mythological accounts of reality.

Anaximander attempted to provide a theory of everything that possessed explanatory value and appealed to religious sensibilities.<sup>38</sup> Fleshing out the ideas of any thinker from this period in history is a difficult task, but a plausible account of Anaximander, pieced together by scholars from a range of sources, goes something like this.<sup>39</sup> There is an entity, referred to by Anaximander as the *apeiron*, which is the basis of all reality in the sense that all of reality is derived in some sense from it. The *apeiron* is characterized

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<sup>34</sup> Kahn, *The Thought of Heraclitus*, 168. Italics are mine and indicate a section of the fragment that Kahn holds to be inauthentic.

<sup>35</sup> Kahn, *The Thought of Heraclitus*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Kahn, *The Thought of Heraclitus*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Kahn, *The Thought of Heraclitus*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 142.

<sup>39</sup> A helpful introduction to the challenges faced in clarifying the ideas of the Pre-Socratic thinkers is Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2001), xxv-xxxii.

(indeed this is the translation of the word) as being indefinite and infinite. There is some controversy among both ancient and modern commentators concerning the sense in which it is indefinite and infinite.<sup>40</sup> However, a plausible reading is that *apeiron* is indefinite in kind, meaning that it is no single kind of thing, rather "... it resembled no one kind of matter in the developed world."<sup>41</sup>

Anaximander is therefore to be distinguished from his Milesian contemporary, Thales, who was of the opinion that water was the basis of all reality. Anaximander is therefore not a monist, as Thales and his successor Anaximenes (who claimed that air is the fundamental basis for all reality), or at least not in the same sense of the word (we can perhaps understand the *apeiron* as being a unity that happens to be all-inclusive). But is Anaximander a trivialist? Certain aspects to his thought are very suggestive in this regard. The idea that the *apeiron* is no single kind of thing might be interpreted as the *apeiron* being all things.<sup>42</sup> The inclusiveness of the *apeiron* supposedly extends to opposites<sup>43</sup>, and this is suggestive of a trivial entity. As with Anaxagoras and Heraclitus, none of this is at all conclusive reason for thinking that Anaximander is trivialist. At most one can say that the textual material is suggestive in this regard.

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<sup>40</sup> Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 108-10.

<sup>41</sup> Kirk & Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 109.

<sup>42</sup> Of course, another interpretation is that *aperion* is a kind of nothing, i.e. it has no properties as opposed to all properties.

<sup>43</sup> Freeman, *Companion to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, 56.

### 3. Nicholas of Cusa

Also of interest in a history of trivialism is the fifteenth century Cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa or Cusanus. Until now Cusanus was the thinker who came closest to advocating trivialism. He is on record as claiming, in his *De Docta Ignorantia*, that in God all contradictories coincide.<sup>44</sup> This has been taken by some to be equivalent to the claim that God is a trivial object i.e. that every predicate is true of God or God has every property.<sup>45</sup> If this interpretation of Cusanus is correct then this is sufficient for him to qualify as a trivialist: if there is a trivial being, then one of the things true of it is that it exists in a world in which trivialism is true. I am far from certain that this is what Cusanus intended to mean (even if it is logically entailed by his various commitments), and I know of no reputable Cusan scholar who would advocate such an interpretation.<sup>46</sup> I am unsure how to interpret him, as he makes little effort to clarify his views. Having noted that, it should be kept in mind that such scholars (i.e. those who reject that Cusanus is trivialist) should not cite as evidence for denying he was a trivialist the fact that Cusanus was an advocate of Aristotelian logic and the Law of Non-Contradiction.<sup>47</sup> This is because an advocacy of both Aristotelian logic and the law of Non-Contradiction are quite compatible with being a trivialist – the trivialist accepts the truth of all propositions, including the Law of Non-Contradiction and other laws of Aristotelian logic.

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<sup>44</sup> Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 23; and Littmann, "A Critique of Dialetheism," 3.

<sup>46</sup> Most Cusan Scholars place Nicholas in the Christian Neo-Platonic tradition – see, for example, Miller, *Reading Cusanus*, vii.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae*, 15.

It is possible that commentators resist an interpretation of Cusanus (and, indeed, Anaxagoras or Heraclitus) as making contradictory claims about reality because they take classical logic for granted.<sup>48</sup> The reasoning might go something like this: “a sensible thinker would not make contradictory claims about reality because contradictions are clearly false; now Cusanus or Anaxagoras or Heraclitus are clearly likely to be sensible sorts of fellows, so any passages of theirs that seem to be making contradictory claims need to be reinterpreted to say what a sensible fellow would say.” Clearly this kind of reasoning is question begging on at least two fronts: maybe Cusanus, Anaxagoras, and Heraclitus were not sensible fellows, or maybe contradictions can be true. But I think that this is a common way in which many modern philosophers have read the history of western philosophy. The dominance of the idea that the Law of Non-Contradiction is beyond dispute leads them to interpret this commitment into past thinkers who may have been straightforwardly dialetheist or even trivialist.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Spinoza

One might also wish to mention Spinoza in the construction of a history of trivialism. It might be tempting to argue that he is a trivialist given his commitment to the claim that there is only one substance (*Deus sive Natura*) and that this substance has infinitely many attributes (of which extension and thought are only two).<sup>50</sup> These attributes in turn

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<sup>48</sup> See Kirk & Raven 1957, 367-8 for a sound critique of this tendency.

<sup>49</sup> Such a reading of history is also driven by the assumption that all versions of the LNC are incompatible with dialetheism and trivialism. But this is arguably not the case. See Berto, “Material Exclusion,” and chapter 3 of this thesis for an account of why the LNC is not necessarily incompatible with dialetheism and trivialism.

<sup>50</sup> See *Ethics*, I. ‘Of God’.

exhibit various modes, which are the individual objects of our experience. Certain passages, such as Proposition 16 of Book 1, are suggestive of a trivialist worldview:

From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e. everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).<sup>51</sup>

Whether we can interpret Spinoza as a trivialist will depend, in part, on how we understand his claim that the one substance has infinitely many attributes. There is uncertainty over whether by 'infinite' he meant merely all possible attributes (and these are exhausted by thought and extension), or whether he meant that the number of attributes is greater than any finite number.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, one might object to this trivialist interpretation of Spinoza by pointing out that he had a strong commitment to the Law of Non-Contradiction. There are passages where he seems to dismiss the truth of sentences that are of the form 'p and it is not the case that p' (for example, see *Ethics* IP11, II/53). Three responses can be made to this point. First, it might very well be that Spinoza rules out the possibility of a true contradiction because of the notion of negation that he presupposes. It may very well have been that he was only familiar with a cancellation view of negation in which negating a sentence will cancel out the content of that sentence. If he had known of

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<sup>51</sup> Spinoza, *Ethics*, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Bennett, "Spinoza's metaphysics," 65-6. See also Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 75-9. Although Bennett seems to take it as a serious possibility that Spinoza thinks there is only two attributes, others take it as obvious that he thinks there are more than two – see for example Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 64-5, 154n17. It should be noted that Bennett, nor any other commentator, interprets Spinoza as trivialist even given the required reading of 'infinite'.

alternative theories such as paraconsistent and relevant notions of negation, then he may have been more sympathetic to the possibility that a contradiction can be true.<sup>53</sup>

Secondly, Spinoza makes it clear that there is far more to reality than we could ever hope to have access to. Of God or Nature's infinite attributes we have access to only two – thought and extension. It seems to me that with respect to at least some of these attributes (excluding thought and extension), contradictions might be true of them. The fact is that Spinoza holds that there is one-one correlation between ideas and objects. Given that there is an idea of a contradiction, it would follow that there is a contradictory object in some attribute of God. Of course, if Spinoza was committed to a cancellation view of negation, then he might not have thought that there is an idea of a contradiction (such a thing on the usual understanding of this view of negation has no content).

Thirdly, as with my comments concerning Cusanus on this same issue, it would appear that the truth of the Law of Non-Contradiction is quite compatible with the truth of trivialism (the trivialist, after all, accepts every proposition). Logically speaking, Spinoza's commitment to this law does not require an explanation given a trivialist reading of him, because the trivialist accepts everything.

Having said all that, it seems to me that Spinoza's concept of attribute is straightforwardly inconsistent anyway – and this is despite what Spinoza might think.

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<sup>53</sup> See Routley and Routley, "Negation and Contradiction" for a discussion of such alternative views of negation.

To hold that the infinite attributes of substance are distinct and yet each constitutes the essence of substance (*Ethics*, ID4) is a violation of the Law of Non-Contradiction if ever there was one. But, once again, at most one can say is that various claims of Spinoza are suggestive of trivialism. There is not a Spinozian scholar on the planet that would stand by such an interpretation, however. Indeed, most would not entertain a more restricted dialetheic interpretation either.

## 5. Hegel

Also of interest, and somewhat later in the history of western philosophy, is the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel is one of those philosophers who are so obscure that it is difficult to know exactly where he stands on an issue. My view is that if he is not a trivialist, then he certainly comes very close to being one. Take the following quote from his analysis of the notion of contradiction in his monumental work *Science of Logic*: "Everything is inherently contradictory."<sup>54</sup> This can be taken to mean that every proposition and its negation are true. Hegel saw contradictions everywhere in the world including (as he asserts in the same section as the above quote) the phenomenon of motion. So, at the very least, Hegel can be understood as a dialetheist of an extreme sort.<sup>55</sup>

But contradictions are not only at the surface in the phenomenal world. The contradictory nature of reality goes as deep as you care, according to Hegel. Even the

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<sup>54</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 439.

<sup>55</sup> See Priest & Routley, "An Outline of the History of (Logical) Dialectic," 85-78.



most fundamental of concepts, pure being, is inherently contradictory. Indeed, pure being is thought by Hegel to be identical to its negation, nothingness:

Being, the indeterminate immediate, is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than *nothing*.<sup>56</sup>

Thus Hegel begins his analysis of the world from the most fundamental of concepts to the most complex through a series of contradictory relations. This is not quite trivialism but it is, as I have already said, an extreme form of dialetheism.

## 6. Hua-Yen Buddhism

Also of interest in any history of trivialism are several Eastern philosophies. One such example is the Chinese Buddhist school of *Hua Yen*. According to the view expressed by this school of philosophy, each thing is identical to every other thing:

... the uniqueness of Hua-yen lies in its portrayal of a universe in which the distinct things that constitute it are fundamentally identical and exist only through a complex web of interdependency.<sup>57</sup>

Take, for example, the following verse from the *Hua-yen ching* (1-240):

The One is the Many.  
The Many is the One.  
In the word the meaning is to be found.  
In the meaning the word is to be understood.  
Non-being is Being. Being is Non-being.  
Formlessness is Form. Form is Formlessness.  
Non-being is Being. Being is Formlessness.<sup>58</sup>

The claim that everything is identical, (although not explicitly said) implies trivialism, as it entails that every proposition is identical to every other. As there is at least one true

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<sup>56</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> [www.akshin.net/philosophy/budphilavatamsaka.htm](http://www.akshin.net/philosophy/budphilavatamsaka.htm). Retrieved 9/5/2007

proposition, it follows that each and every other proposition is true. But it is certainly not clear that this is the meaning of the teachings of *Hua-yen* even if it is an implication of these teachings. In fact it is probably true to say that if one were to confront a practitioner of *Hua-yen* with an argument that their view entails trivialism, then they are likely to point out that you have misunderstood their teachings. I think that an advocate of *Hua-yen* is likely to deny that propositions are ‘things’, and therefore the claim ‘everything is identical to everything else’ is not applicable to propositions. Propositions are not identical to every other thing and so not identical to one another. Alternatively, the *Hua-yen* theorist might accuse me of misinterpreting their notion of identity, which is not to be understood in the manner western logicians are used to interpreting it. As with the thinkers examined above, there are difficulties in claiming that the *Hua-yen* worldview amounts to trivialism even if aspects of this worldview are suggestive of such an interpretation.

### **7. Azzouni: a modern advocate**

Although there might be real doubts about whether the above thinkers can be understood as trivialists and the above traditions can amount to trivialism, there is little doubt about one contemporary thinker – Jody Azzouni. Azzouni’s trivialism was first expressed in an article entitled “The Strengthened Liar, the Expressive Strength of Natural Languages, and Regimentation.”<sup>59</sup> According to Azzouni, natural language is trivial, that is to say, every sentence in natural language is true.<sup>60</sup> And, of course,

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<sup>59</sup> The view is also expressed and defended in *Tracking Reason*, and the article “The Inconsistency of Natural Languages.”

<sup>60</sup> Azzouni, “The Strengthened Liar,” 342.

trivialism follows straightforwardly from the triviality of natural language: after all, 'trivialism is true' is a sentence in natural language.

But why is natural language trivial? According to Azzouni, it is trivial because it is inconsistent, and, given that classical logic is the logic of natural language, it follows (by explosion) that any sentence is true in natural language.<sup>61</sup> Azzouni cites two reasons for thinking that natural language is inconsistent. The first is the existence of the liar sentence (the self-referential sentence, 'this sentence is false') and its various cousins such as the so-called strengthened liar. Arguably, such sentences entail a contradiction.<sup>62</sup> The second reason is of an empirical nature: natural language has developed "... piecemeal and under no central direction."<sup>63</sup> The development of (non-formal) language is anarchic, and so one should expect inconsistency and not consistency. I will examine these reasons for thinking that trivialism is true in chapter 2 of the thesis; suffice to say for now though, I think that it is straightforwardly fallacious.

Azzouni also undertakes to defend trivialism (or more specifically, the claim that natural language is trivial) from an important objection:

Many philosophers, perhaps most, believe that if ordinary languages did imply that every sentence is both true and false, then ordinary languages would be unusable.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 342-3.

<sup>62</sup> Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 330-40.

<sup>63</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 5; cited in Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 346.

<sup>64</sup> Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 343. See also Azzouni, "The Inconsistency of Natural Languages," 598-604.

I am not certain but I suspect that ‘unusable’ in this context means that we would be unable to distinguish true sentences from false sentences, which is presumably a propensity that is essential to the use of natural language.<sup>65</sup> Alternatively, he might mean that we cannot act in a manner that is non-discriminating (as we do when we buy a loaf of bread or arrange a meeting). Azzouni’s solution is to postulate that users of natural language practice ‘regimentation’, which amounts to this outcome:

... although natural languages *are* inconsistent, ordinary speakers *do not believe* that they are. In fact, as far as I can tell, almost *no one* believes that ordinary languages are inconsistent. And this is hardly surprising since the avoidance of contradiction is ... a norm of ordinary language; and *this* means that it is *rational* for ordinary speakers to believe that ordinary languages are not inconsistent – despite the presence of evidence (e.g. the liar’s paradoxes) to the contrary.<sup>66</sup>

There is no reason then for speakers to treat natural language as trivial even if as a matter of fact it is. The practices of the users of natural language are such that sentences are kept sufficiently isolated so as to prevent explicit contradiction from taking place.

Because of this, it is possible to practice regimentation:

... if the inferential practices of the users of a language are coherent, then, even if the implicit principles of that language trivially imply every sentence is true, users of the language will not act that way. And so, we can capture the coherence in their practices with natural languages, not by giving truth conditions for the sentences of those languages, but by supplying a (consistent) regimentation in that language. That is, we can engineer a (piece of) artificial language, which is consistent, and capture in the sentences of that language (and the inferential relations among them) a portion of ordinary language (that we want) with *its* sentential vehicles, and the inferential relations empirically established to hold between those ordinary language vehicles.<sup>67</sup>

Rather than attempt to work out *a priori* a formal consistent language that will make the use of natural language coherent, the trick is to empirically observe how actual language

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<sup>65</sup> Bueno, “Troubles with Trivialism,” 658.

<sup>66</sup> Azzouni, “The Strengthened Liar,” 348. Italics are original.

<sup>67</sup> Azzouni, “The Strengthened Liar,” 348-9.

users operate and build the regimented language around those observations. The resulting regimented language is both consistent and has adequate expressive power (after all, it is based on the actual practices of users). This consistent regimented language is presumably the way in which users of natural language achieve their coherent practices.

There has been an important objection made to this line of thinking by Bueno.<sup>68</sup> The objection is this: if Azzouni is right, then ordinary speakers are involved in a major mistake that is comparable to the one postulated by global skepticism – specifically, that all their beliefs are in fact false (even if these beliefs are also true). But it would seem, according to Bueno (following Davidson’s critique of global skepticism), that the notion of such a systematic and massive error is incoherent, the reason being that it is the nature of belief that most of these are true.<sup>69</sup> Now I do not want to get into a debate about whether Davidson’s arguments about this are sound, but let us assume that they are – does this show that the user of a natural language is guilty of the kind of massive error that Davidson says is not even possible? Well, I for one do not think so. After all, if natural language is trivial, then all of the beliefs of a natural language user are true. They are also false as well, but I do not think that this is relevant with respect to Davidson’s argument. I suspect that the notion of error relevant to Davidson’s argument is this: *a belief is in error if and only if it fails to be true*. But the beliefs of the natural language user do not fail to be true. Rather, they are all true (even if also false). If all the beliefs were

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<sup>68</sup> Bueno, “Troubles with Trivialism,” 659-61.

<sup>69</sup> Bueno, “Troubles with Trivialism,” 660-1.

false only, then the user of natural language would indeed be in a state of massive error. But this is not the case.

Bueno also points out that Azzouni fails to deal with the obvious phenomenological issues raised by trivialism.<sup>70</sup> I assume that what Bueno has in mind here is much like the detailed objection that Graham Priest raises against trivialism: that if trivialism were true, then we would expect that every observable state of affairs would be contradictory – but this is not the case.<sup>71</sup> Also of concern for me is Azzouni's argument that natural language is trivial. This conclusion relies on two premises: that there are inconsistencies (i.e. true contradictions) in natural language; and that the logic of natural language is classical. Now this is not likely to convince anyone except the trivialist. It seems to me that if there are true contradictions in natural language, then the logic of natural language cannot be classical, as classical logic sets the value of all contradictions to false by the Law of Non-Contradiction. Of course, until such issues are addressed, Azzouni's defense of trivialism is at best incomplete. Now, it is not my intention to respond to either Azzouni or Bueno in any detail in this section (I will deal with the issue of phenomenology in chapter 5 and Azzouni's argument for triviality in section 1 of chapter 2), but merely to briefly describe the work of a recent trivialist. It is clear, however, that not everyone shares the intuition that trivialism is outlandish and ridiculous, or a symptom of insanity.

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<sup>70</sup> Bueno, "Troubles with Trivialism," 657.

<sup>71</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions." I will deal with this objection in chapter 5.

As this brief attempt at a history of trivialism shows, other than myself I can be certain of the existence of only one other trivialist.<sup>72</sup> It is the rarest and, given the contemporary attitude, the most despised of worldviews. I hope in this thesis to convince the reader that the extreme aversion to trivialism is to be treated with suspicion, and that at the very least one should consider joining this tiny, but cozy, school of thought. It should be kept in mind that the writing of a history of trivialism itself adds to the coziness of trivialism. In other words, a history of this sort has apologetic value. It shows that there are respected and intelligent people who have advocated or do advocate views that at the very least either come close to being trivialism or are as much of a violation of commonsense as trivialism. This, of course, is not evidence that trivialism is true or that it is coherent or whatnot. But such considerations have a certain psychological force which is a necessary part of bringing someone to belief in a given claim.

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<sup>72</sup> See Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar."

## Chapter 2: Deductive Style Arguments for Trivialism

### 1. Introductory Comments

Are there any reasons for thinking that trivialism is true? I think that indeed there are, and such reasons would appear to be in plentiful supply. In this chapter I will comment briefly on five such arguments: the explosive liar; the Curry Paradox; the argument from the Characterization Principle; an argument from possibilism; and an argument from a trivial entity. I will argue that all but the first of these are sound. In fact I am willing to push the view that these arguments are as good as anything that you will find in philosophy. Every argument for any interesting position in philosophy will be based on premises and inferences that can be rejected without violating one's epistemic obligations. In that sense then one could always resist these arguments for trivialism by declining to accept central premises in the arguments. But having said that, the premises are not ridiculous in any straightforward manner (other than the fact that they entail trivialism), and indeed they are accepted by at least some contemporary philosophers in other dialectical contexts. One should not hold trivialism to a higher standard of proof than one is willing to hold other philosophical positions.

One final warning before I begin my analysis. I am not going to provide a thorough defense of every premise or every inference in every argument. To do so would quickly turn this from a thesis about trivialism to a thesis about the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or noneism, or possibilism, for example. Often I will merely summarize the work done by others in this regard as I do not make use of any premises or inferences that have not been defended by others elsewhere. The reader should expect to see an



outline of the argument with a succinct summary of the issues at stake in the argument, together with a summary of the attempts at a defense of the premises and inferences in question.

## 2. The Explosive Liar

Take the following argument for trivialism<sup>73</sup>:

- (1) L is true
- (2) It is not the case that L is true
- (3) Therefore, trivialism is true.

Here L is simply the self-referential liar sentence: 'L is false'. Note that one could substitute for L any so called dialetheia (i.e. sentence that is both true and false). The most obvious alternative is the Russell paradox generated by the naïve conception of set (i.e. the set of all sets that fail to have self-membership). One then could have as premise (1), 'R is a member of itself', and for (2), 'It is not the case that R is a member of itself'. I will not examine R as an alternative to L, as much of what I have to say about the latter applies to the former. The inference from (1) and (2) to (3) is traditionally known as *ex contradictione quodlibet*, and it takes the general form of  $p, \neg p \vdash q$ . More recently it has come to be referred to as explosion.<sup>74</sup> Note that the argument can be modified to prove

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<sup>73</sup> This is essentially the argument for the triviality of natural language proposed in Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar." Azzouni (drawing on Priest, *In Contradiction*, 5) also proposes empirical reasons for claiming that natural language is inconsistent. According to Azzouni, we should expect natural language to be inconsistent given that it has developed in a piecemeal and anarchic fashion. Only an ordered and coordinated development could guarantee consistency - see Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 346.

<sup>74</sup> It is interesting to note the kind of language used to describe triviality - words such as 'explosion' and 'collapse' are frequent. I have even heard Graham Priest use the Japanese word for goodbye, 'sayonara', to describe premises that entail everything. Presumably such terms are meant to convey the idea that trivialism amounts to logical chaos or breakdown. But this hardly

the truth of any arbitrary proposition,  $p$ . If sound, this argument would provide independent evidence for every belief held by the trivialist.

Is this argument sound? Well there are reasons to think that the premises are true and that inference is valid. Let's begin with the truth of the premises. The liar sentence in some form or another has been known for some time. It was supposedly discovered or first uttered by the Megaric philosopher Eubulides. Normally taken as a paradox that requires solution, it has more recently been argued that it is an instance of a *dialetheia* i.e. a true contradiction.<sup>75</sup> The argument for thinking that  $L$  is both true and false goes as follows. Either  $L$  is true or  $L$  is false (by the Law of Excluded Middle or LEM). If it is true, then what it says is the case and it says that it is false, so it is false. If it is false, then this is what it says it is, so it is true. Either way it is both true and false.

This argument is *prima facie* sound, but there has been no shortage of attempts to point out where it fails. There are essentially two approaches to making a critique of the so called liar paradox.<sup>76</sup> One attempt is to show that  $L$  itself is senseless or meaningless because of its self-referential nature. The assumption behind such a reply is that the English language has a structure that resembles some sort of hierarchy. This hierarchy is structured such that at any one level the predicate, 'is true' is made only of things in the levels below and never at the same level. Now this is a straightforwardly empirical claim

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amounts to a coherent denial of trivialism given the arguments I propose in chapter 3. But the point here is that opponents of trivialism have much to offer in the way of emotive language, but little to offer in the way of reasonable argument.

<sup>75</sup> The most sustained effort in recent times is to be found in Priest, *In Contradiction*. See also his *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*.

<sup>76</sup> Much of what I say here is drawn from Priest, *In Contradiction*, 10-27.

being made about the nature of the English language (and indeed any natural language). The question is whether this empirical claim is at all true or if there is any reason for thinking that it is true. It would seem that there is no reason for thinking that it is true and, indeed, there seems to be reason for thinking that it is false. To show that it is false, Priest, on page 19 of his study of dialetheism states that “All sentences on page 19 of the second edition of *In Contradiction* are true.”<sup>77</sup> Priest notes that the sentence is perfectly good English and that given that there is at least one false sentence on the page it has a truth-value that is determinate (i.e. false). As such it cannot be part of any supposed hierarchy of English as it assigns a truth-value to itself – something forbidden by the hierarchy account of natural language. But, on the contrary, this sentence would appear to be straightforward English. So it is clear that English (or any natural language) cannot be characterized by such a hierarchy. This is not to say, of course, that one cannot formulate a language that is characterized by such a hierarchy and so avoid paradoxes such as the liar sentence in such a language. But such a language will not be English (or any natural language). Such a language will be weaker in its expressive power than natural language, as it will not be able to express sentences such as the above one from page 19 of *In Contradiction* that are not in any sense paradoxical, let alone sentences that are paradoxical (such as the liar sentence).

An alternative approach is to deny a crucial assumption of the argument, specifically to deny that the LEM is true. As such one is unable to validly reason that ‘L is true iff L is false, therefore, L is both true and false’. This is because L might very well be neither

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<sup>77</sup> Priest 2006, 19.

true nor false. Now there are two ways in which one can respond to the claim that the LEM is false. The first is to provide argument in support of the truth of the LEM. One such argument is from Priest.<sup>78</sup> Those who deny the LEM do so because it is thought that there are sentences that are neither true nor false (L is often thought to be amongst them) – so called truth-value gaps. The reason usually given is that there is no fact about the world that makes such a sentence,  $\alpha$ , true, nor is there any fact in the world that makes its negation,  $\neg\alpha$ , true. As such  $\alpha$  is neither true nor false. But, as Priest points out, such reasoning fails to work, because

... if there is no Fact that makes  $\alpha$  true, there is a Fact that makes  $\neg\alpha$  true, viz, the Fact that there is no Fact that makes  $\alpha$  true. Less cryptically, the point is this. Suppose that  $\alpha$  is a sentence. And suppose that there is nothing in the world in virtue of which  $\alpha$  is true – no fact, no proof, no experimental test. Then this is the Fact in virtue of which  $\neg\alpha$  is true.<sup>79</sup>

A sentence simply cannot fail to have a truth-value, because the very failure to be made true is sufficient to provide it with a truth-value, namely a truth-value of false.

But even if it were the case that LEM is false and there were truth-value gaps (with L being amongst these), this will only shift the paradox of the liar to another level.<sup>80</sup> That is to say that we can reformulate the liar paradox in such a way that even with the falsity of the LEM there are sentences that are both true and false (and so can be used for our premises (1) and (2)). One such sentence is (M), which states: (M) is not true. What is the truth-value of (M)? If we allow for truth-value gaps, then it will either be true, false, or valueless. If it is true, then what it says is the case, which is that it is not true. If it is false

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<sup>78</sup> Priest 2006, 64-6.

<sup>79</sup> Priest 2006, 65-6.

<sup>80</sup> Priest 2006, 12-6.

or valueless (i.e. not true), then that is what it says it is, and so is true. Hence, no matter what the truth-value of the sentence, a contradiction will follow.

Of course, much more could be said about all these points. Replies and counter-replies can and have been made. But what this very brief summary shows is that a case can be made for the truth of premises (1) and (2), and so the truth of dialetheism in general.<sup>81</sup>

It turns out though that whether or not (1) and (2), and dialetheism in general, are true is irrelevant to the purposes at hand. The reason for this is that if premises (1) and (2) are true, then inference from (1) and (2) to (3) is invalid. The validity of the inference of explosion standardly relies on the fact that one of the premises will fail to be true in every evaluation i.e. it assumes the truth of the law of Non-Contradiction. That is to say, explosion is vacuously valid: the reason why there is no evaluation in which both premises are true and the conclusion false is because there is no evaluation in which both premises are true. As soon as we allow L to be both true and false, there are evaluations in which both of the premises are true and yet the conclusion is false. In other words, the inference is not truth preserving when we reject the LNC. We must choose between either true premises or a valid inference – but we cannot have both. Either way, the argument is unsound.

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<sup>81</sup> Indeed, a leading opponent of dialetheism admits that it is very difficult to refute the truth of dialetheism given the liar paradox – see Sainsbury, R.M. *Paradoxes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge University Press, 1995), ix.

### 3. The Curry Paradox

Recently it has become an industry to take some of the most intractable paradoxes and reinterpret them as sound arguments to controversial conclusions. The most well known example of this is the liar paradox, which is reinterpreted as a sound argument for dialetheism. Another is the Curry Paradox<sup>82</sup>, which I interpret here as a sound argument for trivialism. Take the following sentence,  $\delta$ : *If  $\delta$  is true, then trivialism.*

- |  |                            |
|--|----------------------------|
| (1) If $\delta$ is true, then if $\delta$ is true, then trivialism | [by T-schema]              |
| (2) If $\delta$ is true, then trivialism                           | [(1) by contraction]       |
| (3) $\delta$ is true   | [(2) by T-schema]          |
| (4) trivialism   | [(2), (4) by modus ponens] |

This is *prima facie* a sound argument for trivialism – the view that every sentence is true. Indeed, one can modify the argument to prove the truth of any proposition,  $p$ , by applying it to the sentence,  $\delta$ : *If  $\delta$  is true, then  $p$ .* This would provide the trivialist with independent evidence for each and every one of her beliefs.

Traditionally, this argument has been rejected as unsound, and this has been for the reason that its conclusion (that trivialism is true) is obviously false or absurd. But there has never been general agreement on where the argument fails to be sound.<sup>83</sup> One suggestion is that  $\delta$  fails to express a proposition or it expresses a proposition that is other than the self-referential one expressed above. Another suggestion is that the T-schema fails in this regard (perhaps because it cannot be used self-referentially). These

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<sup>82</sup> First articulated in Curry, “The Inconsistency of Certain Formal Systems,” 115-7 (although Curry does not defend the soundness of the paradox).

<sup>83</sup> Restall, *On Logics without Contraction*, vii.

are the kinds of solutions applied to the liar paradox discussed in the previous section. In addition, it has also been suggested that the inference of contraction (here used from (1) to (2)) is invalid. Making sense of a rejection of this inference is a costly affair in some ways and requires one to have to redevelop logic in a way that does not require such an inference – and this is not such an easy task.<sup>84</sup> Certainly contraction is valid given the material account of the conditional, but few logicians would believe that this account is the final word on conditionality. For instance, the inference fails for some relevant accounts of the conditional which make use of impossible worlds.<sup>85</sup>

But when this paradox is being interpreted as an argument for trivialism, then it is outright question-begging to claim that it fails to be sound because it results in trivialism. One can no longer reject the T-schema or claim that  $\delta$  does not express a proposition or reject the validity of contraction merely because they give rise to this paradox. There needs to be independent reason for making one of these moves. But it is difficult to see what these independent reasons could be. This, of course, is not to say that there might not be useful applications for contraction-free logics, for example. It is just that the motive for such logics cannot be because of the failure of trivialism, at least in the dialectical context of a debate with a trivialist.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Although there has been much success in achieving this end - see, for example, Restall, *On Logics without Contraction*. More recently there has been an attempt by Brady, *Universal Logic*. The advantage of Brady's logic  $DJ^d$  (at least according to him) is that it is a non-ad hoc solution to the Curry Paradox. The logic is motivated by independent reasons based on the meaning of entailment and negation. See also Brady, "Entailment, Negation and Paradox Solution," 113-35.

<sup>85</sup> See Priest, "Paraconsistent Logic," sect. 8.

<sup>86</sup> Restall, *On Logics without Contraction*, provides an account of some of these applications.

I conclude, tentatively at least, that the Curry Paradox might very well be a sound argument for the conclusion that trivialism is true. Its dialectic power resides in the fact that very little indeed has to be assumed in order for it to be convincing. All that is required is the T-schema, the inference of contraction, and *modus ponens*. Of course one could always reject one or all of these in order to avoid the conclusion that trivialism is true. But other than the fact that these give rise to a trivial conclusion, philosophers would not normally think that there was anything wrong with these. My own view is that this argument is as convincing as an argument for any philosophically interesting position, and so should be taken seriously. Trivialism should not be treated as a special case in this regard. Philosophers have committed to claims on the basis of a lot less.

#### 4. The Argument from the Characterization Principle

The Characterization Principle (CP) is simply the principle that “an object characterized as an, or the, object satisfying certain properties does indeed have those properties.”<sup>87</sup> An argument for trivialism can be constructed by making explicit use of the CP as follows: Take the property of being true and being the proposition ‘every proposition is true’. Now take the object characterized as both being true and being the proposition ‘every proposition is true’. Clearly, given the CP, trivialism is true. The argument can be developed in other ways that enable the trivialist to provide independent reason for each and every belief she has. As well showing that the proposition ‘every proposition is true’ is true using the CP, she can apply the CP to each and every distinct proposition. So, she can take the object characterized as being some arbitrary proposition  $p$  and

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<sup>87</sup> Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 59.



characterized as being true. It follows that  $p$  is true. On this variation, we have in addition to the proposition 'every proposition is true', each and every proposition being true. Moreover, the trivialist can use the CP to not only prove the truth of each and every proposition, but also to prove the existence of any arbitrary object. For any arbitrary object  $o$  she can prove that  $o$  exists in the following way:  $o$  is characterized as the object with the set of properties  $\{x,y,z,\dots\}$  and as existing. Given the CP,  $o$  has those properties and exists. For example, let a dragon be the object characterized as being reptilian, with the power to breathe fire, and existing. By the CP we can conclude that the creature so characterized exists.

But is the CP true? Well, traditionally the CP has been rejected because it leads to triviality. But in this context such an objection is clearly question-begging. What is required is a reason for rejecting the CP that is independent of the rejection of trivialism. But it is not clear what this could be. The CP seems to me to be intuitively true. It certainly explains how we can represent to ourselves a given object, whether it exists or not:

Thus, we represent Holmes as living in Baker Street, being a detective of acute powers of observation and inference etc.; we ... represent Vulcan ... as being a planet that has a sub-Mercurial orbit, and whose existence accounts for the precession of Mercury's orbit; and so on.<sup>88</sup>

The power of the CP in explaining our ability to represent objects to ourselves is therefore well and truly something in its favor.

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<sup>88</sup> Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, 83.

But it has been suggested that those who think that the CP is true are actually in some sort of cognitive confusion. Priest, for example, suggests that those who think that the CP is intuitive are confusing it with another logical principle, namely the principle:  $\forall x (Px \rightarrow Px)$ , i.e. everything is what it is.<sup>89</sup> Obviously this latter principle is true, but it certainly does not necessarily refer to an object, as the CP does. Of course, the suggestion that someone who finds the CP intuitive is really logically confused is insulting. I am not stupid – I know what I find to be intuitive, and it is the CP that I find to be intuitive. Enough said on this point then.<sup>90</sup>

However, in a later publication, Priest puts forward a different account or interpretation of the CP that he argues has all the logical advantages of the original version, and yet it avoids triviality.<sup>91</sup> Priest accepts the full generality of the CP but interprets it in terms of world semantics:

*Qua* object of thought, I said, an object characterized in a certain way has all the properties deployed in its characterization. This suggests an answer: Let  $A(x)$  be *any* condition: this characterizes an object,  $c_A$ . And  $c_A$  is true – maybe not at this world, but at other worlds.<sup>92</sup>

This, at least on the face of it, would solve the problems that supposedly plague the CP and yet keep all the benefits it engenders in the form of a plausible account of how we characterize objects. All characterizations are satisfied, but not necessarily satisfied in the actual world. For example, there is an object characterized as having the name of Sherlock Holmes and living on Baker Street etc., but this object clearly exists in worlds

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<sup>89</sup> Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 59.

<sup>90</sup> Although it is fair to say that before the advent of modern logic it was much easier to confuse the CP with this other principle. The use of a formal language has provided much clarity.

<sup>91</sup> Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, 82-5.

<sup>92</sup> Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, 84.

(there will be more than one given that the description is incomplete) other than the actual world.

There are two responses I wish to make to Priest's proposal. First, it is clear that his rejection of the CP in its original and pure form is question-begging in the current context. Rejecting the original CP because it leads to triviality is hardly an acceptable position in a debate with a trivialist. Secondly, although it is true that Priest's reading of the CP enables him to account for the fact that we can represent to ourselves a given object, it is not clear that it can do this as effectively as the CP as it was originally understood. It is clear that the original CP is a far simpler principle than the version favored by Priest, in as much as it does not require a conceptual apparatus of possible and impossible worlds (with the attendant and complex problems of interpreting what exactly a world is) in order to do the job of explaining how we represent objects to ourselves. Other things being equal, we should favor the simpler principle. After all, it is better able to explain why we feel it to be intuitive. Few people have intuitions about the ontological status of possible worlds, for example, and yet will find the CP intuitive nevertheless.

There are other objections to the CP. The most important is probably this: The CP presupposes noneism. Noneism or meinogianism is the view that some objects do not exist.<sup>93</sup> It is clear that the CP presupposes noneism. The question is whether this should

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<sup>93</sup> There are various versions of this view. Meinong held that there were alongside existent objects and non-existent objects a third category: objects that subsist: a category that includes abstract concepts and numbers. Routley held that there are only existent (concrete and temporally

count against the argument. That is to say, is there anything wrong with noneism? If noneism is false, then certainly the argument does fail. As such, this argument for trivialism will in no way persuade anyone who is resolute in their rejection of this ontology (or nontology?).

Whether noneism is true I cannot hope to settle in this chapter. However, what is certainly true is that noneism is not as implausible as has been made out by its opponents. Indeed, historically it is more prevalent than one would have suspected given the rhetoric of those who deny it.<sup>94</sup> Most of the objections to it are quite weak, with some of them being quite clearly question begging or straw-man arguments.<sup>95</sup> One objection is that the noneist has no intelligible way to express his view. The noneist is required to quantify over nonexistent objects. But this makes no sense, as quantification, as it is understood in the tradition represented by Frege, Russell, and Quine, is existentially loaded. Now noneists have responded to this by introducing a new quantifier into their logic, in addition to the old quantifiers. Alongside  $\exists$  and  $\forall$  (known

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present) and nonexistent objects (everything else including abstract concepts and numbers), and nothing else. Priest agrees, but includes in existent objects concrete objects of the past and future. Presumably Priest advocates some form of the B-theory of time whilst Routley advocates a form of presentism. For a different interpretation of Meinong see Perszyk, *Nonexistent Objects*. Perszyk argues that Meinong held that non-existent objects are sets of properties and not concrete individuals. This position certainly differs from the noneism of Priest, who claims that some objects are impossible worlds (which are themselves nonexistent objects) in which even abstract entities such as sets and numbers may be concrete individuals (e.g. some object is an impossible world and in that world I am the number 3). See Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, 135-7.

<sup>94</sup> See Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, for more.

<sup>95</sup> A good example is Russell's attempt at a refutation of Meinong's position. What Russell actually refutes is his own previously held position i.e. the claim that various impossible objects have some sort of logical being. But Meinong's position is that such objects have no being of any sort – they are nonexistent. See Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, 106-8. Meinong did, however, accept that abstract concepts such as numbers have subsistence – and so Russell's critique of this aspect of Meinong's theory is not a straw-man.

as inner quantifiers which are existentially loaded), there is, say,  $S$  and  $A$  (known as outer quantifiers which involve no commitment to the existence of the objects they quantify over). To say  $\exists x(x \text{ does not exist})$  would be incoherent – one is literally speaking in a self-contradictory manner. But what the noneist says is not that, but rather  $Sx(x \text{ does not exist})$ . That is to say, some object does not exist.

There are other objections or difficulties that have been raised against noneism, but I do not believe that these are as serious as the claim that it is incoherent or unintelligible. For example, some have wondered how noneism differs from Platonism. Others have asked how we could know about and refer to nonexistent objects (such as numbers and fictional characters), or how nonexistent abstract objects (such as numbers) could be used to model the physical world. A related objection raises the difficulty of how our knowledge of mathematical objects and fictional objects differ given that these objects are both nonexistent – is there really anything special about mathematical objects that makes them unique among nonexistent things? Then there are the usual objections against being able to reason with inconsistent objects, which occur in fiction (and arguably mathematics). I will not rehearse the various solutions to these difficulties here as this has been done elsewhere by others.<sup>96</sup>

Of course, not everyone agrees. Terry Horgan writes in response to Priest's defense of noneism:

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<sup>96</sup> The best known defenses are Priest, *Towards Non-Being*, especially Part II; and Routley, *Exploring Meinong's Jungle*.

By and large, I find Priest's replies to such objections quite persuasive, *given* the assumption that noneism is an intelligible position. But, like others who have written skeptically about noneism, I am very dubious about the intelligibility assumption. I find myself unable to shake the conviction that noneism – despite its surface air of intelligibility – is profoundly unintelligible. Priest's discussion does little to dispel my worries on this score, and I suspect that many other readers will react similarly.<sup>97</sup>

I find it unlikely that such a view can be changed, given that it is based on intuitions very different from those of the noneist. Presumably, Horgan thinks that the introduction of a new set of quantifiers into the language does nothing to solve the problem. I assume that he sees such quantifiers as *S* and *A* to be empty nonsense.<sup>98</sup> In addition, Horgan thinks that many of the problems that noneism is supposed to be able to solve (like explaining intentionality) can be solved with alternative methods. Clearly, the argument for trivialism defended in this section will be unconvincing to some. But I am content to rest my case with those who advocate noneism in some form or another. So this argument will only have dialectical success with those who accept the relevant premises.

But, as with the Curry Paradox above, philosophers have accepted various philosophical theses on a lot less than this. I implore the reader not to treat trivialism any differently in this regard. If you would have accepted the relevant premises before finding out that they lead to trivialism, then this latter implication should not in any way change this, and as such you should commit to believing the claim that trivialism is true.

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<sup>97</sup> Horgan, "Retreat from Non-Being," 616.

<sup>98</sup> This is also the view of Lewis, "Noneism or Allism?"

## 5. The Argument from Possibilism

The next argument for trivialism I wish to spell out can perhaps be dubbed a modal argument for trivialism and can be expressed as follows:

- (1) Possibilism is true [prem.]
- (2) If possibilism is true, then there is a world (either possible or impossible or both)<sup>99</sup>,  $w$ , in which trivialism is true [prem.]
- (3)  $w$  is a possible world [prem.]
- (4) It is true in  $w$  that  $w$  is identical to the actual world,  $A$  [(2)]
- (5) If it is true that there is a world,  $w$ , and  $w$  is a possible world, and it is true in  $w$  that  $w$  is identical to  $A$ , then trivialism is true [prem.]
- (6) Trivialism is true [(1)-(5)].

Is premise 1 true? *Possibilism* is the view that every proposition is possible and is to be contrasted with the view known as *necessitarianism*: the view that there is at least one impossible proposition. Possibilism has been seriously advocated by a number of philosophers in the last forty years or so.<sup>100</sup> The doctrine is said to have a number of advantages over its rival, necessitarianism. There seems a genuine sense in which so-called necessary truths could have been false. Mortenson, for example, points out that if we make use of a model-theoretic account of necessity (i.e. truth in all models, whether these be understood as possible worlds or what not), it is easy enough to show that one

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<sup>99</sup> By 'possible world' I mean a world which shares the same laws of logic as the actual world. By 'impossible world' I mean a world in which the laws of logic are different from the actual world. For example, the law of identity may fail to hold in an impossible world, but it will hold (by definition) in a possible world.

<sup>100</sup> The term was first coined and defended in Naess, *Pluralist and Possibilist*. It has been more recently defended in Mortenson, "Anything is Possible," and Mortenson, "It isn't so, But Could it Be?" The doctrine has also been proposed to solve certain problems concerning divine nature – see, for example, Plantinga, *Does God have a Nature?*

can construct models in which anything fails to be true – so called impossible worlds, for example, if you understand models in terms of world semantics.<sup>101</sup> In order for necessitarianism to hold true, one would need independent reason for restricting the relevant models.<sup>102</sup> But such reasons, according to Mortenson, are usually not forthcoming.

In addition, it has been claimed that possibilism has a range of epistemological advantages over necessitarianism. Mortenson sums this position up nicely in the following quote:

... possibilism has the virtue of the generality and economy of *epistemic monism*. This term ... refers to a wholly general method for establishing truths, namely the scientific method of empirical theory-choice using experiment and observation. There is no need to cater for the knowledge-base of an entirely distinctive set of necessary truths. The problem here is not that necessary truths could not be shown to be true by ordinary scientific means, for they obviously can. The problem is how one would come to know *that they are necessary* ...<sup>103</sup>

According to Mortenson, there is economy of epistemology in committing oneself to possibilism. Given that scientific methods can not establish the necessity of a truth (perhaps because postulating such necessity adds nothing to the explanatory power of the truth), one would require something in addition to scientific method to establish this. One's epistemology would thus lack the benefit of simplicity.

Premise 2 certainly seems to be true. If there are no necessary propositions, then the law of nontriviality, i.e. that some propositions fail to be true, is not necessary. As such, its

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<sup>101</sup> Mortenson, "It isn't so, But Could it Be?," 354. See also Mortenson, "Anything is Possible," 328-33.

<sup>102</sup> Mortenson, "It isn't so, But Could it Be?," 354.

<sup>103</sup> Mortenson, "It isn't so, But Could it Be?," 353.



negation is possible, i.e. that all propositions are true. And if it is possible, then there is some world in which it is true.<sup>104</sup> Now one might be tempted to respond to this premise in the following way: “Surely the truth of possibilism does not entail that there is a world in which all propositions are true. Rather, all it entails is that every proposition is true in some world, i.e. all propositions are true distributively and not collectively.”<sup>105</sup> I think though that this objection is rather weak and misses the mark. A possibilism that rules out a trivial world is really a watered down (‘Clayton’s’ if you will) version of possibilism. After all, such a version of possibilism still allows for one necessary proposition, namely the Law of Non-Triviality. The objection then assumes that there is no world in which every proposition is true – that is to say it is a necessary truth that not every proposition is true. But the support that full-blown possibilism receives from the arguments discussed above would not accrue to this watered-down version. Indeed, this alternative seems rather arbitrary – why is it that just this one proposition (the Law of Non-Triviality) is necessarily true and not some other proposition? Any answer to this question would seem rather contrived.

What of premise 3? It is certainly true, as everything is true in  $w$  given its triviality. It follows then that the laws of logic (in particular the law of identity) are true in  $w$ . Of course,  $w$  is also an impossible world, as the laws of logic also fail to be true there. The world  $w$  is therefore both a possible world and an impossible world. In particular then it is a possible world. Now one might raise an objection here that can be expressed

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<sup>104</sup> Mortenson, “It isn’t so, But Could it Be?,” 355. See also Mortenson, “Anything is Possible,” 331-3.

<sup>105</sup> This distinction is discussed in Mortenson, “It isn’t so But Could it Be?,” 355.

something like this: “Surely all that follows from the fact that trivialism is true in  $w$  is that it is true in  $w$  that  $w$  is a possible world, not that it is true simpliciter that  $w$  is a possible world.” Well, I do not think so. What makes  $w$  a possible world is simply that the laws of logic are true there. The only way that the ‘laws of logic’ could be true in  $w$  and yet it not be the case that it is true simpliciter that  $w$  is a possible world, is if we equivocate on what is meant by the term ‘laws of logic’. Everything is true in  $w$ , and that means that those things that we call the laws of logic are true in  $w$  – and so  $w$  is a possible world, by definition.

Proposition (4) is also true for the same reason – if  $w$  is trivial, then everything is true in  $w$  and so it is true in  $w$  that it is identical to the actual world.

The crucial work is done in premise (5). The law of identity is shared across possible worlds, including (by definition) the actual world. If two things are identical in some possible world that is not the actual world, then they are identical in the actual world itself. To deny this is to think that an object cannot be identical to itself, which is impossible (and so only true in an impossible world). Given then that  $w$  is a possible world and the actual world is identical to it in  $w$ , it follows that it is true in the actual world,  $A$ , that  $w$  is identical to  $A$ . That is to say, the actual world is trivial or, equivalently, trivialism is true.

Note that this argument does not assume any obscure inferential rules such as explosion or contraction. All it assumes is that possibilism is true. Now I think that this argument is sound – but not everyone would be keen on such a conclusion. Very few philosophers

espouse possibilism, and given that it leads to trivialism, the number of those advocating it is likely to get smaller. The reasons for possibilism are hardly conclusive. Take the above argument for possibilism from epistemic monism. Some at least are unlikely to see why epistemic monism should at all be considered a virtue. Indeed, if there are necessary propositions, then following epistemic monism would be disastrous, as one would never be able to work this out. Moreover, not everyone will see why scientific method (whatever this is) should be considered as having primacy in all circumstances. Indeed, Mortenson himself has the good sense to see that possibilism is deeply unintuitive and that this counts against it.<sup>106</sup>

But having said all that, it is clear that those who accept possibilism should accept trivialism given this argument. But even those who reject possibilism need to give reasons why they find the arguments for this position unpersuasive. Moreover, the admission that possibilism is unintuitive should not be given too much weight. Much that is unintuitive is given serious and widespread credence in philosophical circles because of the strength of argument. A case in point is the so-called B-theory of time. Nothing could be more unintuitive in a theory of time than the claim that the present has no privileged ontological status over and above the past and future. And yet many philosophers by-pass this unintuitiveness purely on the basis of philosophical argument. Once again, trivialism should be treated just like any philosophical theory and judged

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<sup>106</sup> Mortenson, "It isn't so, But Could it Be?," 354. See also Mortenson, "Anything is Possible," 333-4.

according to the same criteria. That it is most odd and unpopular is neither here nor there.

## 6. A Cosmological Argument for a Trivial Entity

Let us define a trivial entity as an entity that instantiates every predicate, i.e. an entity of which everything is true. One of the things true of a trivial entity is that it exists in a reality in which trivialism is true. Hence, if a trivial entity exists, then trivialism is true. But is it true that there exists a trivial entity? Here is an argument for thinking that it is true:

- 1) Every being (or entity or object) is either trivial or nontrivial
- 2) It is not the case that every being is nontrivial
- 3) Hence, there exists a trivial being<sup>107</sup>

By a nontrivial being I mean a being which instantiates some but not all predicates. Premise 1) exhausts the logical possibilities. But why think that premise 2) is true?

The reason why premise 2) is true follows directly from the truth of the PSR (the Principle of Sufficient Reason). According to the PSR "... nothing is, without sufficient reason why it is, rather than not; and why it is thus, rather than otherwise."<sup>108</sup> Or, to put it another way "... no fact can be true or existing and no statement truthful without a sufficient reason for its being so and not different ..."<sup>109</sup> Alternatively, it has been articulated as "Everything that is the case must have a reason why it is the case.

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<sup>107</sup> This argument is inspired by Samuel Clark's Cosmological Argument for an independent being – see Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*.

<sup>108</sup> Clarke & Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, 30.

<sup>109</sup> Leibniz, *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, 153.

Necessarily, every true proposition or at least every contingent true proposition has an explanation."<sup>110</sup> Now, if every object were nontrivial, then there would be a fact that would be unexplained, specifically the fact of nontriviality. That is to say, the nontriviality of nontrivial beings would be inexplicable. What I mean here is that one would need to explain why only some predicates are instantiated and not all predicates are instantiated. One could not cite the existence of another nontrivial being as the explanation for the nontriviality of other nontrivial beings, as this would be viciously circular. Likewise, one could not explain the nontriviality of a given being,  $B_1$ , by citing the existence of another nontrivial being,  $B_2$ , whose nontriviality is in turn explained by the existence of another nontrivial being,  $B_3$ , and so on in an infinite series of nontrivial beings. Now either the infinite series (of nontrivial entities) as a whole is trivial or it is nontrivial. If it is trivial, then there exists a trivial entity. If it is nontrivial, then the nontriviality of the series as a whole has not been explained. But this cannot be so because nontriviality requires an explanation given the truth of the PSR. It follows then that the series as a whole is trivial. Therefore, there exists a trivial entity (the series as a whole) and trivialism is true.

Of course, the only thing that will explain all this nontriviality is a trivial being. Any explanatory regress will cease in a satisfactory manner at the postulating of a trivial being. Such a being is not one way as opposed to another, that is to say there is no need to explain why only some predicates are true of it as opposed to others – all predicates are true of it. So, for example, it is not trivial as opposed to nontrivial, as its triviality also

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<sup>110</sup> Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*, 3.

entails its nontriviality. Moreover, its existence really does explain the existence of nontrivial beings. After all, one of the predicates true of a trivial being is that it exists in a world in which there are nontrivial beings.

Clearly the argument assumes the truth of the PSR. Given how crucial this principle is for the argument, and given how unpopular it is these days, it would be appropriate to say a few words in its defense. Much of what follows in this section is merely a summary of the work of others. Moreover, it is not supposed to be more than a summary. All I wish to indicate is that a commitment to the PSR is not an irrational act, despite the unpopularity of the principle among contemporary philosophers. My main aim in this section is to demonstrate that a commitment to the unrestricted application of the PSR will lead to trivialism, and that such an unrestricted application is not an implausible move to make.

There have been various arguments raised against the PSR. It has been pointed out, for example, that it is incompatible with modern physics, in particular that it is incompatible with what our most successful physical theory (quantum mechanics) tells us about the nature of atomic scale events. The use of quantum theory in the argument against PSR is a popular move and dates back to mid-last century. Russell for example, cited it in his famous debate on the existence of God with Copleston.<sup>111</sup> The claim here is that many such events are indeterministic by nature and so have no causes, and therefore, no sufficient reason for why they occur.

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<sup>111</sup> Russell & Copleston, "The Existence of God."

It has also been pointed out that the principle is incompatible with the nature of human choice and action. The claim here is that human choice is characterized by a libertarian variety of freedom (an agent acts freely with respect to some choice if, and only if, it was within in the agents power to have done otherwise). On this account of freedom, a human act is ultimately uncaused if it is free. A good recent example of this response is the philosopher William Lane Craig who is a supporter of the libertarian account of freewill. Craig argues that

[t]hese latter-day Leibnizians want everything to be brought under the control of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, including facts concerning human free choices ... What libertarians are committed to is the brute ultimacy of free choices and so to their final inexplicity.<sup>112</sup>

It has also been argued that the principle is ultimately incompatible with the nature of contingency i.e. it is claimed that if the PSR is true, then everything is necessary. Indeed, this has also been a point conceded by some supporters of the PSR including, most famously, Spinoza (for example, *Ethics*, IP29; IIP35S).

Plausible replies have been made to all of these objections. For example, in response to the claim that quantum mechanics rules out the truth of the PSR it has been argued that there are deterministic interpretations of this physical theory that are empirically equivalent to the indeterministic interpretations. Two examples of such a deterministic interpretation come to mind. The first is David Bohm's version that seeks to specify the hidden variables that determine why one event (say the decay of a radium atom at a

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<sup>112</sup> Craig, "Ducking Friendly Fire," 165-6.

given point in time) occurs rather than it not occurring.<sup>113</sup> The second is the so-called Many Worlds Interpretation, which implies that both such events occur rather than one occurring as opposed to the other, albeit they occur in different ‘universes’ or ‘worlds’.<sup>114</sup> More interestingly, it has been suggested that even the indeterministic versions satisfy the PSR – indeterministic events have a cause, namely an indeterministic cause.<sup>115</sup>

As regards the claim that the libertarian account of freewill rules out the PSR, one could quite plausibly reply that humans do not have freewill or at least they do not have freewill of the libertarian variety. Indeed, the very notion of a distinct mental faculty corresponding to the will seems incoherent to many.<sup>116</sup> My own preference is for a version of compatibilism. But it has even been suggested that libertarian freedom is quite compatible with the PSR.<sup>117</sup> An early example of this seems to have been Samuel Clarke in his famous correspondence with Leibniz.<sup>118</sup> The idea here is that the sufficient reason for why a choice has been made is that it was freely chosen by an agent.

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<sup>113</sup> Bohm, “A Suggested Interpretation,” 180-93.

<sup>114</sup> A clearly written analysis of the Many-Worlds Interpretation can be found in Lewis, “How Many Lives Has Schrodinger’s Cat?” 3-22.

<sup>115</sup> Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*, 168-70. Also, there is a version of quantum theory that sees the explanation for why the atomic world is probabilistic in the fact that it is made up of individual entities that are intrinsically probabilistic. See Maxwell, *The Comprehensibility of the Universe*, Ch. 7. Maxwell refers to such a probabilistic entity as a propensiton – a propensiton being an entity that has as its essential properties propensities (a term and concept borrowed from Popper, “The Propensity Interpretation.”). Quentin Smith also seems to favor interpreting the PSR in a manner that encompasses probabilistic quantum causes – see Smith, “The Wave Function of a Godless Universe,” 326-37. Other supporters of indeterministic accounts of quantum mechanics, however, would resist the idea that the PSR can be interpreted so as to be compatible with such accounts – see for example Grünbaum, “The Poverty of Theistic Cosmology, 574-5; and Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, 38.

<sup>116</sup> For an analysis of this claim I find it difficult to go past Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, chapter III.

<sup>117</sup> Pruss 2006, chapter 7.

<sup>118</sup> Clarke & Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, 20-1.



Finally, in reply to the claim that the PSR is incompatible with contingency one could just take the view of Spinoza and deny that there is any real contingency in the world. Others have taken a different strategy to this objection, namely showing that they are compatible: the fact that supposedly has no explanation (specifically, the conjunction of all contingent facts) can surely be explained by the truth of each of the conjuncts together with the fact that the truth value of conjunction is determined solely by the truth values of the conjuncts.<sup>119</sup> Such an explanation seems straightforwardly compatible with contingency.

In addition, there are positive reasons in favor of the truth of the PSR.<sup>120</sup> Perhaps the most common approach has been to claim that the PSR is self-evident (I suspect Clarke and the seventeenth century rationalists thought as much). Moreover, it need not be self-evident to everyone for this to be a sensible position. For someone who finds the principle to be self-evident, attempts to justify it in any absolute sense might be impossible as there might not be any premises available that are more certain than the PSR. This, of course, does not prevent an advocate of the principle from putting forward an argument for the PSR based on premises that the opponent would accept as being more certain. *Ad hominum* arguments are quite acceptable in this regard.

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<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Craig, "Sobel's Acid Bath for Theism," 484.

<sup>120</sup> Many of these are rehearsed and defended in Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Part III.

Another alternative is to take the approach of David Lewis in his attempted defense of modal realism.<sup>121</sup> One might justify a commitment to the PSR because of its theoretical utility i.e. its propensity to solve philosophical problems. For example, the truth of the PSR would certainly help explain why the universe is so reasonable. That is to say, it would explain why so much of the time things are explicable, not just in everyday life, but whenever scientists look hard and long enough for a unified theory of phenomena that survives careful testing by observation and experiment.

In addition to rejecting the truth of the PSR one might wish to question the idea that the law of nontriviality requires a sufficient reason. After all, such a law is normally taken to be a necessary truth, and it is not clear that necessary truths require a sufficient reason. Recently Pruss has defended a version of the PSR that applies only to contingent truths. But this is not because he thinks there could not be a requirement here:

There might ... be a PSR for necessary propositions. However, investigating such a PSR will have to await an advance in our understanding of the concepts of mathematical and philosophical explanation.<sup>122</sup>

According to Pruss then, our understanding of mathematical and philosophical (and I assume this includes logical) explanation is much more poorly understood compared with our understanding of, for example, physical explanation. Until we have a better understanding, it is safer to limit our commitment to the PSR to contingent truths. Pruss does, however, have reasons for thinking that there is a PSR for necessary truths,

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<sup>121</sup> Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*. This also seems to have been one of the reasons provided for the PSR by Leibniz – see Blumenfeld, “Leibniz’s Ontological and Cosmological Arguments,” 375. Leibniz also holds that the PSR is a necessary presupposition of the practice of all the sciences – Blumenfeld, “Leibniz’s Ontological and Cosmological Arguments,” 375.

<sup>122</sup> Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*, 13.

specifically that mathematical and philosophical explanations would be rendered ad hoc if the PSR did not apply to them. Moreover, there are a number of propositions that one can point to that seem to be necessarily true and yet have reasons or explanations. In discussing this issue in another context, William Lane Craig points, among other examples, to the arithmetical truth that  $2+3=5$ . This is necessarily true, and yet it seems to be true because of the truth of the Peano axioms.<sup>123</sup>

Alternatively, one may wish to assume the truth of possibilism and reject the claim that there are any impossible propositions. Non-triviality then would require a sufficient reason for why it is true as opposed to false, simply because it being false is possible.

In concluding this brief summary of the attempts to defend the PSR, it must be said that there is probably more plausibility to this principle than many are willing to give it credit for. But I will concede that the argument for trivialism presented here will only be persuasive to the extent that someone is willing to countenance the PSR. However, anyone who did reject the PSR could not do so in this dialectical context because it leads to trivialism – that would be straightforwardly question-begging. Moreover, anyone that does reject the PSR would have to spell out why they find defenses of it and arguments for its truth to be unconvincing.

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<sup>123</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 178.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

There are *prima facie* good reasons for thinking that trivialism is true. By that I mean that one can construct arguments with premises that are arguably true and inferences that are arguably valid. Although it is true that one can produce counter arguments that attempt to show that the arguments for trivialism commit an error – either by using a false premise or invalid inference – this is true of the arguments for any interesting and controversial philosophical position. One should not hold the arguments for trivialism to a higher standard than one is willing to hold arguments for other philosophical positions.

In the next chapter I will further strengthen the case for trivialism. I will show that not only is trivialism rational (given the arguments cited in this chapter) but that it is more rational than nontrivialism, and indeed, that it is not even possible to be a nontrivialist (given the most philosophically interesting account of what constitutes a nontrivialist, i.e. one who denies trivialism). It would seem then, if the arguments of the next chapter are sound, that there is little motive to reject the premises and inferences of the arguments presented in this chapter.

## Chapter 3: On the Impossibility of the Denial of Trivialism

### 1. Introductory Comments

I am of the opinion that the results of the previous chapter provide one with sufficient reason for advocating trivialism – the Curry Paradox, the argument from possibilism, the argument from the CP, and the argument from the PSR all justify belief in trivialism. However, as I have already mentioned in chapter 2, as with many arguments in philosophy one could resist the dialectic force of these by disputing the premises or inferences upon which they are constructed. As such, I wish to supplement with this chapter further reason for asserting the truth of trivialism, not by providing direct reasons for believing the truth of trivialism, but rather by undermining the very possibility of denying trivialism.

To this end I shall begin, in the second section of this chapter, by developing what I believe is an intuitive account of what it means to deny a given view. After giving consideration to what might be termed the orthodox account of denial (an account of denial associated with the tradition of Frege and Quine and others), I argue that to deny a view is to assert an alternative view. I then begin to develop what is meant by an alternative view. Rather than construct an exhaustive theory in this regard, I spell out one of the necessary conditions for an alternative view of a special sort of proposition, specifically a conjunction. In particular, I show that an alternative proposition to a conjunction cannot be a conjunct of that conjunction. I only need to go so far in developing this theory of denial as I later show, in section 3 of the chapter, that trivialism can be understood as a special kind of conjunction (specifically, it is the

conjunction of all propositions) and that this particular necessary condition is not met in the case of trivialism, as there are no propositions that are not conjuncts of trivialism. As such there are no propositions that qualify as the alternative view to trivialism, and so nothing that one can assert that would result in performing the speech act of nontrivialism (which, to be clear, I define as the assertion of the alternative view to trivialism).

In section 4 of the chapter I spell out two of the most important implications of the fact that trivialism is undeniable. The first is that the denial of trivialism cannot be rationally sustained, because the conclusion to any argument cannot be an alternative to trivialism. The second is that the opponent of the trivialist, the nontrivialist, does not exist, as there is no such speech act as nontrivialism. So in the debate between the trivialist and the nontrivialist, the trivialist wins by default.

Of course, all of this assumes a particular account of the speech act of denial. In section 5 I introduce a recently developed account of denial that has been put forward by dialetheists such as Graham Priest. According to this account, denial is not reducible to a special kind of assertion but is rather a *sui generis* speech act. If this account of denial is sound, then it would seem to follow that it is possible to deny trivialism. After examining the main reasons proposed for this account of denial, I suggest reasons for thinking that it is not entirely satisfactory. I conclude the section by showing that even if this account is plausible it does little to alleviate the problems facing the nontrivialist. This is because it will still remain the case (even with this alternative account of denial) that there is no such assertion that amounts to nontrivialism, and no propositions that

one can believe that would make one a nontrivialist. The result of this would be that the rationality of nontrivialism is still seriously compromised.

### 1. What does it mean to deny something?

Denial is a speech act along with, but not limited to, other speech acts (or illocutionary acts) such as assertion, commanding, questioning, and accusing.<sup>124</sup> Like all speech acts, denial necessarily has two components – without both of these being present, there cannot be a speech act. First, it has a propositional content. Secondly, it has an illocutionary force with which the proposition is uttered. Searle refers in this regard to an ‘illocutionary force operator’ and a ‘propositional operator’:

... we can distinguish between two (not necessarily separate) elements in the syntactical structure of the sentence, which we might call the propositional operator and the illocutionary force indicator. The illocutionary force indicator shows how the proposition is to be taken, or to put it another way what illocutionary force the utterance is to have; that is, what illocutionary act the speaker is performing in the utterance of the sentence.<sup>125</sup>

A proposition on its own without illocutionary force plays no role in speech – it does nothing, so to speak. An illocutionary force without a proposition associated with it has no content and so says nothing. There is therefore no speech act without both of these components being present.

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<sup>124</sup> Sometimes the term ‘speech act’ is used synonymously with the term ‘illocutionary act’. Searle, for example, distinguishes between illocutionary acts with propositional content (such as an assertion or command) and illocutionary acts without a content (such as the utterance of ‘ouch’) – see Searle “What is a Speech Act,” 43. See also Searle, *Speech Acts*, 30. Others seem to use the term speech act to include only those things that Searle refers to as illocutionary speech acts with content. Those illocutionary acts without content are referred to as acts of speech (as opposed to ‘speech acts’) – see for example Green, “Speech Acts.” I will follow Green and take a speech act as having propositional content.

<sup>125</sup> Searle, *Speech Acts*, 30.

Also of relevance for the purposes of this chapter is the fact that one and the same proposition can be uttered with a different force to give rise to different speech acts. Take, for example, the proposition 'the cat sat on the mat'. This can be uttered with the illocutionary force of an assertion to give rise to the speech act, "the cat is sitting on the mat." Alternatively it can be uttered with the force of a question, giving rise to the speech act, "is the cat sitting on the mat?" Or the proposition could be uttered with the force of a command: "sit the cat on the mat!" It should also be noted that one can perform a speech act without actually uttering anything i.e. without actually using language. A command can be issued with the click of the fingers or a denial by stomping off in rage or tearing a piece of paper in half. Alternatively one can make an inquiry with the raising of the eyebrows. But even if one does not actually utter anything, it is still the case that such a speech act has the same dual nature of a proposition and an illocutionary force. It is just that sometimes, however, the propositional content is not actually spoken.

Denial, along with other speech acts, has the dual nature of propositional content and illocutionary force. To provide a sneak preview of what is to come: I will show that the denial of trivialism is impossible because necessarily one cannot meet the requirement of propositional content. Having said that, there are at least two accounts of denial on offer and they differ in how they characterize the illocutionary force of the speech act, one of which I will examine in this section and the other I will examine in section 5. The first of these, which is associated with the tradition of Frege and Geach, characterizes denial as



the assertion of the negation of some proposition.<sup>126</sup> Quine is certainly one of the champions of this position:

To deny a statement is to affirm another statement, known as the negation or the contradictory of the first.<sup>127</sup>

If I deny that the cat sat on the mat, I am asserting that it is not the case that the cat sat on the mat. That the denial of  $p$  is equivalent to the assertion of  $\neg p$  is really the orthodox view and, as can be seen from the names that have advocated it, has considerable authority behind it.

There are two main reasons for suspecting that the orthodox account of denial is not the correct account. First, it seems to be possible to perform a denial without uttering anything. For example, "... I can shake my head, say 'no' or even stomp off in rage."<sup>128</sup> Secondly, it seems that it is possible to assert a negation without performing the speech act of denial. It seems possible, for example, to assert dialetheism – that is to say it seems possible to assert that something is both the case and not the case. In such a situation one is asserting a negation but is not thereby denying the proposition that is negated. Most dialetheists will assert that the liar sentence ('this sentence is false') is true and assert that it is not the case that the liar sentence is true. They are not thereby denying the truth of the liar sentence. But aside from dialetheism there seem to be other cases where someone will want to assert the negation of some proposition without denying it. One such famous example involves the paradox of the preface.<sup>129</sup> The paradox involves a

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<sup>126</sup> Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 104.

<sup>127</sup> Quine, *Mathematical Logic*, 1.

<sup>128</sup> Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 104.

<sup>129</sup> See for example Rescher and Brandom, *The Logic of Inconsistency*, 47; and Olin, *Paradox*, 63-5.

scenario in which a person has good reasons for asserting some proposition,  $p$ , and good reasons for asserting the negation of this proposition,  $\neg p$ . One need not be a dialetheist by asserting these, as there might be no reason to assert (or indeed good reason to deny) the truth of the conjunction  $p \wedge \neg p$ . Finally, there might be situations in which one wants to assert the truth of trivialism – as is the case with this thesis. Since this involves asserting every proposition, it involves asserting the negation of every proposition. But in doing so, at least according to one of the definitions of a trivialist I am working with in this thesis, one is not necessarily denying every sentence.<sup>130</sup>

But the question that I must answer now is: If denial is not to be equated with the assertion of a negation, what exactly is it then? There is a view that is increasingly popular (especially among dialetheists) that suggests that denial is not an assertion at all, and I will examine this in more detail in section 5. However, the view that I prefer is that a denial of some proposition is the assertion of an *alternative* proposition. But what exactly does it mean to assert an alternative proposition? Well, to be honest, I am not sure that I can say anything very informative about this, as I believe that this is a fundamental concept that is difficult to develop in any substantial manner. We can all recognize an alternative view even if we cannot spell out all the necessary and sufficient conditions for such a thing. However, having said that, I do believe that I can say something about what an alternative view is with respect to one special class of

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<sup>130</sup> Although it is true that a trivialist will take herself as denying every proposition in addition to asserting every proposition – after all, she believes everything, and so she believes that she denies every proposition.

propositions: conjunctions. Specifically, I think it possible to spell out one of the necessary conditions for being an alternative to a given conjunction.<sup>131</sup>

What then is the necessary condition for being an alternative to a given conjunction? In order for some proposition to qualify as an alternative to a given conjunction it is a necessary condition that the proposition is *not* a conjunct of the conjunction. In other words, it is not possible to deny a conjunction by asserting one or more of its conjuncts; as such a conjunct is not an alternative to the conjunction. To see that you cannot deny a conjunction by asserting one of its conjuncts, take, for example, the conjunction 'the ball is red all over and spherical'. Asserting 'the ball is red all over' cannot constitute a performance of the denial of 'the ball is red all over and spherical'. Or, to cite an inconsistent example, one cannot deny the contradiction 'the ball is red all over and it is not the case that the ball is red all over' by claiming that 'it is not the case that the ball is red all over'.

That it is not possible to deny a conjunction by asserting one or more of its conjuncts is so obvious that it hardly requires an explanation. But if one were to offer an explanation for why this is so, one might offer the following. Let's say that x asserts 'A and B' and y asserts 'A'. It is clear that y has asserted something that is identical to a part of the content of x's assertion (when the conjunction is taken as a whole) or one of x's assertions (when the conjunct is taken in isolation), namely 'A'. But if it is identical to a

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<sup>131</sup> It turns out that this is all that is required for the purposes of this chapter. As I will show in the next section, trivialism can be understood as a certain conjunction and, moreover, it does not satisfy the condition I will spell out below.

part of x's assertion, then it *is* part of x's assertion (when this is taken as the conjunction as a whole) or *is* one of x's assertions (when we consider the conjunct in isolation). When y asserts 'A' it is as if x is repeating himself or as if he has a stutter. That is to say, what y has asserted is *not* something other than x's assertion or an alternative to it – it is one of the assertions of x. But that is just to say that y has not disagreed or disputed or denied what x has asserted.

Note also that the absence of the assertion of 'B' by y does not constitute a disagreement with x. To think that it does would be the same as thinking that silence demonstrates disagreement. Silence or the absence of an assertion cannot constitute a disagreement for the simple fact that silence and the absence of an assertion both lack propositional content and so are not speech acts (as one of the components required for a speech act is absent). To actually express a disagreement with x in this case, y would have to assert something like 'A only and nothing else'. But note that this is not a conjunct in the conjunction asserted by x (x is asserting 'A and B' and not asserting 'A only and B').

A necessary (but not sufficient) condition of a claim expressing a denial of a conjunction is for it to *not* be a conjunct of the conjunction. In the case of 'the ball is red all over and spherical' such a denial might be 'the ball is blue all over'. The proposition 'the ball is blue all over' is not a conjunct of the relevant conjunction and so satisfies this necessary condition. Likewise for 'the ball is red all over and it is not the case that the ball is red all over'. One might deny this conjunction by asserting the proposition 'the ball is red all over only and not any other color' or, alternatively, by asserting the proposition

'contradictions are impossible'. Neither of these is a conjunct of the relevant conjunction and so both of these also satisfy this necessary condition.

## 2. The Denial of Trivialism is Impossible

Having spelt out, to a certain extent at least, what constitutes the speech act of denial, we are now in the position to say what it means to deny trivialism. As with all denials, to deny trivialism is to assert an alternative view to trivialism. I will give the name '*altriv*' to whatever is the alternative view to trivialism. The denial of trivialism therefore is the assertion of *altriv*. Given this understanding of the denial of trivialism, the question that this chapter is seeking to answer is this: Is it possible to assert *altriv*? There can be a positive answer to this question only if there is such a proposition as *altriv*. But is there such a proposition? The answer is a straightforward, no. And because there is no such proposition as *altriv*, we can see why the speech act of nontrivialism is impossible: one of the necessary conditions for such a speech act fails to obtain.

To see this it is important to understand that the propositional content of trivialism is *total*. The content of trivialism is equivalent to the totality of the content of *all* propositions. That, after all, is why trivialism is thought to be so problematic by the majority of the philosophical community – the usual objection to trivialism is that the trivialist should avoid asserting certain kinds of propositions (false propositions or impossible propositions, for example), i.e. the trivialist supposedly asserts *too* much. And because the content of trivialism is total, its assertion amounts to the assertion of the conjunction of each and every proposition. The trivialist asserts that  $p_1$  and  $p_2$  and  $p_3$

etc, are all true. And this in turn is equivalent to the assertion of the conjunction of all propositions:  $p_1 \wedge p_2 \wedge p_3 \wedge \dots$

But given that it is a necessary condition for an assertion to be a denial of some conjunction that it is not a conjunct of the relevant conjunction, it follows that there are no assertions that can constitute a denial of trivialism. This is because each and every proposition is a conjunct in the conjunction that expresses trivialism. And so there is no proposition that can stand in for *altriv* – the alternative of trivialism. For example, one does not successfully deny trivialism by asserting ‘it is not the case that trivialism is true’ i.e. by asserting  $\neg \forall p T p$ .<sup>132</sup> Nor can one express a denial of it by claiming ‘trivialism is incoherent’. Nor can one express a denial of it by pointing out that trivialism is incompatible with our perceptual experiences.<sup>133</sup> All such claims are conjuncts in the conjunction that expresses trivialism, and so are not suitable candidates for playing the role of *altriv*. Each of these is identical to part of the content of trivialism or one of the assertions of the trivialist. One could only assert a disagreement with trivialism by asserting a proposition that is not part of the content of trivialism. But there are no such propositions, as the assertion of trivialism is the assertion of all possible propositions. At the risk of repeating myself, one cannot *assert* a position or view such that one has

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<sup>132</sup> Of course, that one does not necessarily succeed in denying trivialism by asserting the negation of trivialism is independently supported by the considerations mentioned in section 2, where I discuss reasons for rejecting the orthodox account of denial. Specifically, that one may wish to assert a negation of a statement without thereby denying it (as one does in the context of the paradox of the preface for instance).

<sup>133</sup> As is done in Priest, “Perceiving Contradictions.” I will examine this objection in more detail in chapter 5 of the thesis.

performed the speech act of nontrivialism. And again, this is because there is no such proposition as *altriv* that one can assert.

Can we Successfully Deny Trivialism using the concept of Material Exclusion?

One might also be tempted at this point to make use of a recent formulation of the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC) in order to express a denial of trivialism.<sup>134</sup> According to Berto, there are versions of the LNC that the dialetheist must accept "... without also accepting something inconsistent with *it*, on pain of *trivialism*."<sup>135</sup> Because the dialetheist accepts the possibility of a true contradiction, it would seem that they have no way of expressing that they are rejecting some particular contradiction. Berto proposes his formulation of the LNC in order to enable the dialetheist to overcome this problem. In effect, Berto is proposing a way in which one can successfully deny trivialism – that is to say, successfully perform the speech act of nontrivialism. Berto states his version of the LNC as follows:

For the same thing to hold good and NOT hold good simultaneously of the same thing and in the same respect is impossible.<sup>136</sup>

The logical particle NOT is defined as follows:  $\text{NOT } P_1(x) =_{\text{def}} \exists P_2(P_2(x) \wedge P_1 \perp P_2)$ , where  $\perp$  denotes the relation of material exclusion. The idea goes something like this: to say that something is NOT  $P_1$  is to say that it has some property  $P_2$  that is materially exclusive with respect to  $P_1$ .<sup>137</sup> Another way to put this, perhaps, is to say that something

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<sup>134</sup> Berto, "Material Exclusion." See also Berto, *How to Sell a Contradiction*, 288-316.

<sup>135</sup> Berto, "Material Exclusion," 166.

<sup>136</sup> Berto, "Material Exclusion," 187. Note also that Berto is of view that Aristotle had this in mind when formulating his version of the LNC in *Metaphysics* Γ.

<sup>137</sup> Berto, "Material Exclusion," 181.

has the property  $P_2$  *only* and not  $P_1$ . In other words, NOT functions as an ‘only’ clause.<sup>138</sup> According to Berto everyone has a basic intuition of content exclusion – the idea that some properties exclude others or that some properties are incompatible with others. The concept of material exclusion, which builds on this intuition, is more fundamental than such concepts as negation, contrariness, contradictoriness, truth and falsity. Indeed, these latter concepts may be defined in terms of material exclusion – if someone were so inclined. Alternatively, as with the dialetheist, they may wish to have the concept of material exclusion function independently from these in their logic. Material exclusion is a concept that emerges from our dealings with such things as,

... colour incompatibilities, such as *being (solidly) Red* and *being (solidly) Green*; concepts that express our categorization of physical objects in space and time, such as *x being here right now* and *x being way over there right now*, for a suitably small *x* ... *x being less than two inches long* and *x being more than three feet long* ... *x’s catching the bus* and *x’s missing the bus*.<sup>139</sup>

Our intuitive feel when dealing with such examples enshrines our sense that some things are just not possible, *period*. The examples listed in the above quote are supposed to appeal even to a dialetheist such as Graham Priest – presumably such a dialetheist would not admit, for example, that something could have a length of less than two inches and a length greater than two miles at the same time. Applied to the discussion at hand, the idea here would be that trivialism can be denied by asserting NOT  $P$ , where  $P$  can be any property or predicate. If successful, the making of such an assertion would be a denial of trivialism, as it would amount to asserting that something failed to be true,

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<sup>138</sup> Interpreted in this manner, Berto comes close to a proposal made by Littmann, “A Critique of Dialetheism,” 185-214. Berto also seems to be influenced in this regard by Grim, “What is a Contradiction,” 63-8. Grim makes use of the particle ‘ $\nexists$ ’ to denote something much like material exclusivity.

<sup>139</sup> Berto, “Material Exclusion,” 180.



namely the proposition 'property P is instantiated'. Can nontrivialists make use of Berto's notion of material exclusion to deny trivialism in this manner?

I wish to suggest that this will not be successful. This is simply because of the fact that the trivialist herself asserts 'NOT P'. As such, NOT P is one of the conjuncts of the trivial conjunction. As such, it will not successfully function as *altriv*, and so its assertion cannot amount to a disagreement with the trivialist. The trivialist, along with the nontrivialist, believes that there are properties that are materially exclusive of one another. Of course, she also believes that there are no such properties – that all other properties are compatible with one another. Indeed, for the trivialist, being incompatible and materially exclusive is just another property that is instantiated in the world. Take one of the examples cited by Berto in the above quote: an object being solidly red and blue at the same time. The trivialist believes that this is indeed possible, but she also believes that such a thing is impossible, as being solidly green and solidly red are materially exclusive properties. For the trivialist, such properties really do completely exclude each other (as well as not excluding each other).

Now, one might wish to reply here that the trivialist misunderstands what the notion of material exclusivity amounts to - that is to say, trivialism is incoherent as it is based on a faulty notion of material exclusivity. The trivialist only asserts that some things are materially exclusive because she fails to understand the notion of material exclusivity. If the trivialist really understood what the notion meant, she would not assert it. It is simply not the kind of thing that can be both instantiated and not instantiated.

But note that asserting this objection will not amount to a denial of trivialism. After all, that trivialism is based on an incoherent notion of material exclusivity is part of the content of trivialism, i.e. the proposition, ‘trivialism is based on an incoherent notion of material exclusivity’ is a conjunct in the trivial conjunction. But in addition, the trivialist can cite independent argument for thinking that material exclusivity is inherently contradictory in the way she treats it.<sup>140</sup> To see this take the following self-referential sentence:  $\lambda$ :  $\lambda$  is NOT true. It would seem that  $\lambda$  is both true and NOT true. After all,  $\lambda$  has either the property of being true or some other property,  $P$ , which materially excludes its being true. If the former, then what it says must be the case and so it has  $P$ . If the latter, then that is what it says, and so it is true. So it has both the property  $P$  and the property of being true. That is to say, a property can be both materially exclusive of some other property and not so.

So long as NOT  $P$  is a genuine proposition, then it is asserted by the trivialist and so forms part of the content of trivialism. As such, NOT  $P$  fails to function as *altriv* or the alternative to trivialism. The assertion of NOT  $P$ , therefore, does not constitute a denial of trivialism.

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<sup>140</sup> Berto is aware that this diagonalization might be possible but does not give it the significance I do. Rather, he takes it as a possible *tu quoque* response by the classicist to the dialetheist – see Berto, “Material Exclusion,” 188 (n. 33). See also Littmann, “A Critique of Dialetheism,” 202-221; and Littmann & Simmons, “A Critique of Dialetheism,” 330-333, for a similar argument against dialetheism.

### Can we Successfully Deny Trivialism using the notion of Conversational Implicature?

I should also make clear at this point that I do not think that one can make use of some sort of Gricean conversational implicature in order to overcome this problem of being unable to express a disagreement with trivialism. To illustrate how such a conversational implicature functions consider this example from Priest:

Suppose you say to me 'How many siblings do you have' and I reply 'I have two brothers.' This may be true, but the answer is definitely misleading if the whole truth is that I have two brothers and one sister. In virtue of my answer, you may reasonably infer that I have no sisters.<sup>141</sup>

The idea here is that someone is entitled (by convention) to infer things simply from the fact that something has been said rather than merely from the content of what has been said. The idea is that people only provide the relevant information and provide all the relevant information. Now the question is whether this kind of a convention can be used to convey that one is denying trivialism by expressing a given proposition (say, the negation of trivialism, for example). For example, I ask you 'do you agree with trivialism?' and you reply 'trivialism is false'. Can the convention then enable me to legitimately infer that you do not also think that trivialism is true? The answer is that it cannot do this. Indeed, the convention breaks down when it comes to conversations concerning trivialism.

To see how this is so, consider the example given by Priest in the above quote. Although there is a miscommunication in this scenario (specifically the listener thinking that the speaker has no sisters), this is not really a problem. It would not take much for the misunderstanding to be cleared up. In such a situation more information can and often

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<sup>141</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 291.

is given to clarify what is being expressed. For example, one can always reply 'But do you have any more siblings?' or 'Are these the only siblings you have?' Answers can then be given to these questions that would express the required information. The convention works in part because there are available ways to fix any miscommunications if and when it does break down in this way. As such, people can afford to put their trust in the convention (indeed what makes it a convention is that it is trusted). But in the case of trivialism there are no propositions available that could be used to clear up any misunderstanding or misinformation. There are no propositions available that would express that someone is claiming that trivialism is false but not also true. And, once again, this is because all propositions form part of the content of trivialism. Nothing would be corrected for example if I was to say 'But trivialism is incoherent and senseless!' The content of this assertion does nothing to clarify that I am not also saying that I think trivialism is true. The convention literally breaks down in an absolute sense, as there is no way in principle to fix any misinformation. Gricean conversational implicature works in most contexts but not in conversations where trivialism is the topic.

### **3. The Consequences of the Impossibility of the Denial of Trivialism**

There are two consequences of the fact that the denial of trivialism (the assertion of *altriv*) is impossible: that nontrivialism is irrational; and that there is no opponent for the trivialist to respond to or justify her position to. I say a little more about each of these in turn.

Given that there is no such speech act as nontrivialism, one wonders what sense can be given to the idea of there being arguments justifying the speech act of nontrivialism. This would require having an argument for *altriv*, the alternative view to trivialism. Such an argument for *altriv* would be invalid, as it would have, at best, true premises leading to a conclusion that failed to be true, as it is contentless. After all, there is no such proposition as *altriv*. Once again, rather than trivialism being an odd and unintuitive view, it is *altriv* or the alternative view to trivialism that is the odd (and non-existent) man out among philosophical theories.

It also follows from this that there is no such thing as an objection to trivialism i.e. a reason for rejecting trivialism or an argument against trivialism. After all, an objection is a denial of sorts. There have been a number of objections raised against trivialism in both the literature and in more informal discussion. Some of these I have already mentioned in the above section. Take, for example, the following objection cited by Azzouni:

Many philosophers, perhaps most, believe that if ordinary languages did imply that every sentence is both true and false, then ordinary languages would be unusable.<sup>142</sup>

It is not clear here what 'usable' is supposed to mean. But whatever one means by 'usable', the argument can perhaps be expressed as follows<sup>143</sup>:

1. If trivialism were true, then natural language would be unusable.

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<sup>142</sup> Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 343.

<sup>143</sup> It is not clear to me that this is the correct way to interpret this so called argument against trivialism. The point being raised by Azzouni may not even be an objection to the *truth* of trivialism. Rather, it might be better interpreted as an argument against the possibility of believing in trivialism, regardless of its truth. I will be dealing with this issue, and so this interpretation of Azzouni, in chapter 4 of the thesis.

2. But natural language is usable
3. Therefore, it is not the case that trivialism is true.

But the fact is that the assertion of propositions 1-3 cannot constitute a denial of trivialism. By citing such propositions one simply has not succeeded in expressing a denial of trivialism. Those who put forward these propositions as an argument against trivialism have thought that they have succeeded in performing such a linguistic act – but they are mistaken. They have failed simply because of the fact that 1-3 are all conjuncts in the trivial conjunction that is trivialism, and so not alternatives to trivialism. They are part of the content of trivialism. The speech act that advocates of 1-3 succeed at is not the denial of trivialism – it is, rather, the assertion of part of the content of trivialism.

All of the supposed arguments against trivialism are constructed from propositions that are conjuncts in the trivial conjunction and so cannot be objections to trivialism in the sense of denials of trivialism. Upon hearing them it is not proper for the trivialist to try and reply to them by showing where these have committed some error of fact or reasoning. For example, Azzouni attempts to reply to the above argument by suggesting that users of the natural language avoid the triviality by instituting a regimentation procedure in which inconsistent propositions are isolated off from one another.<sup>144</sup> Whatever the merits of such a proposal, it seems to display a lack of appreciation for the logic of debate in this dialectical context. There is no problem to be solved here by the trivialist. No one has succeeded in expressing a denial of trivialism by asserting 1-3. This

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<sup>144</sup> Azzouni, “The Strengthened Liar,” 343-347.

applies to all arguments against trivialism: trivialism is to be rejected because it entails its own incoherence; trivialism is to be rejected because it entails impossible propositions; trivialism is to be rejected because it entails that the observable world is inconsistent. None of these assertions express a denial of trivialism, and so there is nothing for the trivialist to respond to.<sup>145</sup>

So much for the first implication – what though of the second implication? In his paper “Could Everything Be True?” Priest, after noting the peculiarities of the debate with the trivialist, attempts to articulate a dialectical setting in which trivialism can be successfully debated. Rather than attempting to debate directly with a trivialist (which he concludes is pointless because the trivialist will agree with everything you say), he makes the following suggestion

It makes more sense to ask how one would justify one’s view to some independent third party, an arbiter. The third party may be supposed to be neutral on the issue, at least initially. The job for each of the first two parties is to persuade them. The arbiter will listen to arguments from each side, and, if convinced by either party, will judge in their favour.<sup>146</sup>

Priest claims the nontrivialist can win the argument in such a dialectical setting. The nontrivialist does this by showing the neutral arbiter that the trivialist does not even exist. I will examine Priest’s arguments for this conclusion in chapter 4, and give reasons for thinking that they are less than convincing. But in this section I wish to flesh out

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<sup>145</sup> This is not to say that these arguments fail to express a denial of something. The last of these I think expresses a denial of the claim that the observable world is inconsistent. I will be analyzing this argument given this interpretation of it in chapter 5. But, as I hope to show, there are reasons to think it fails to be convincing even in such a dialectical context.

<sup>146</sup> Priest, “Could Everything Be True?,” 190.

some of the consequences of the fact that nontrivialism is impossible for the dialectical context set up by Priest.

There are in fact two consequences. First, it would appear that the arbiter should conclude that trivialism is the rational view and *altriv* (the view being asserted by the nontrivialist) the irrational view. This is because, as I have already pointed out above, *altriv* fails to have content, and so any arguments for it are in fact invalid – the premises will lead to a conclusion that fails to be true (as it lacks content and so lacks true content). On the other hand there are, as I have shown in the previous chapter, arguably sound arguments in favor of the truth of trivialism. The arbiter should therefore declare the trivialist the winner of the debate.

In addition, the arbiter should declare the trivialist the winner of the debate *by default*. Why is this so? Well, *altriv* fails to have any propositional content. As such, it is not something that can be believed, for what would it be that one is assenting to? It has no content to which one can assent to! And if it cannot be believed in, then there is no one that believes it. In the courtroom of the debate between the trivialist and the nontrivialist, the nontrivialist has failed to even appear. Indeed, it is impossible for him to appear. There is literally no such thing as a nontrivialist – he does not exist. The arbiter is therefore compelled to rule the trivialist the winner of the debate, because the trivialist has no opponent. Those who claim to be the opponent of the trivialist are simply mistaken. They have failed to understand that the content of trivialism is total. When one asserts trivialism, there is literally nothing else to assert that is *other* than



trivialism. All such a person can do is continue citing the never-ending litany of the content of trivialism. All they can do is help themselves to the assertions of the trivialist.

#### 4. What if denial is a *sui generis* speech act?

There is an alternative account of denial to the orthodox account and the one I favor in this chapter. This alternative account of denial rejects the claim that denial can be reduced to an assertion of some sort – whether this is the assertion of a negation (on the orthodox account) or the assertion of an ‘alternative’ view (as with my account). On this account, denial is a *sui generis* speech act.<sup>147</sup> To deny something then is to apply an illocutionary force directly to a proposition, without this force being assertive. Take, for example, the proposition, ‘Australia should be a republic’. On this account of denial, to deny this is to apply the force of denial directly to the proposition ‘Australia should be a republic’. Although it should be noted that, on this account, it is also possible to deny this proposition by uttering the negation of this proposition – i.e. by uttering ‘it is not the case that Australia should be a republic’. It is just that on this account it is not necessary to utter the negation of a proposition in order to deny a proposition.

Applied to the context at hand, the nontrivialist may wish to take the position that the denial of trivialism is quite possible given this account of denial. The problem is that trivialism can be defined as the conjunction of all propositions, and it is *this* fact that prevents one from denying trivialism by asserting something – there is no proposition, *altriv*, left over to assert. But on this account of denial, one does not assert anything

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<sup>147</sup> Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 105-106.

when denying trivialism. Rather, one is applying the *sui generis* illocutionary force of denial to the proposition that is the conjunction of all propositions (i.e. trivialism itself). In this section, I will make two responses to this account of the denial of trivialism. First, I will give reason for thinking that it is not the case that denial is a *sui generis* speech act that cannot be reduced to an assertion. Secondly, I will argue that even if we grant that this is an acceptable account of denial and that it enables one to deny trivialism, the victory of the nontrivialist will be rather limited. It will still be the case that there is nothing that one can assert that will result in the performance of the speech act of nontrivialism, nor any proposition that one can believe in that would make one a nontrivialist.

#### Is Denial a *Sui Generis* Speech Act?

But what of this alternative account of denial – should we accept that denial is a *sui generis* speech act? I am inclined to side with orthodoxy on this matter and say that it is not. Of course, I agree that a denial of a proposition is not necessarily the assertion of the negation of that proposition, but I do think that it is the assertion of something – the assertion of an alternative view or proposition or position. What then are the main reasons for claiming that denial is a *sui generis* speech act? The main reason would seem to be this: it would seem that we can perform the speech act of denial without uttering anything, and so if we do not utter anything, it must be the case that nothing has been asserted. Priest provides three examples of this in the above quote in section 2: shaking one's head, saying 'no', and stomping off in a rage. Supposedly, such examples show us that denial is a speech act that is not reducible to an assertion – presumably because they do not involve the utterance of anything.

Now I am inclined to think (and this is by no means a conclusive reason) that such cases *either* do involve an assertion of something *or* they do not even constitute speech acts at all (as they have no propositional content). Recall that a speech act does not necessarily involve actually uttering anything explicitly. I suspect that this is often so with the examples of this sort cited by Priest. In such cases, the person is actually asserting something but they are merely failing to explicitly say so. For example, take a scenario in which my employer points out to me that I was late for work this morning (work begins at 8.30 a.m.), and I respond with the shake of the head and at the same time I am thinking something like, "I turned up before 8 a.m." Here we have an assertion but it remains hidden within my thoughts. Another example: My wife constantly nags me about not spending enough time with the kids, and I eventually stomp off in rage, thinking very loudly in my head, "I was with them all last week!" Again we have an assertion but it remains hidden within my thoughts.

But when such acts do not involve the person having hidden thoughts of the sort that I am describing, it seems to me that such acts cannot be considered *bona fide* speech acts. This is because they may not involve any propositional content at all, and having propositional content is a necessary condition for an act to qualify as a speech act. Such responses might plausibly involve scenarios in which the person is reacting in a more or less instinctive manner to highly emotive and stress-inducing accusations. We can all recall situations in which we have reacted in such a manner – in what appears to be a denial – but later reflect on the situation and cannot say exactly what we were thinking.

In such situations we have a misfired or aborted speech act – what might have been a denial if we indeed had asserted something.

In addition to these considerations, I also think that it is very difficult to make sense of the idea that one can deny a given proposition by uttering its negation, given the claim that denial is *sui generis*. If I utter “it is not the case that the cat sat on the mat,” then this has all the appearances of an assertion. After all, the one who utters “it is not the case that the cat sat on the mat” presumably believes that this is true. But in that case it must be something that they are asserting, as they have made an utterance the content of which is something they assert to. Moreover, this utterance will cause the listener to think that the one uttering this is asserting this content. It would appear in this case then that the denial is achieved by an assertion – the assertion of a negation. But if denial is really *sui generis*, then it is an entirely different kind of speech act from assertion. If they really are different from one another, then how can one be performed by performing the other? Other speech acts are also *sui generis* with respect to assertion and yet one cannot perform these by issuing an assertion. Take, for example, the speech act of commanding. It does not seem possible to issue a command by performing an assertion. If I assert “the cat sat on the mat” I am not thereby commanding anything, nor could I. In virtue of being an assertion such a thing fails to be a command. And yet if I assert “it is not the case that the cat sat on the mat” I can thereby quite successfully deny that the cat is sitting on the mat. But this possibility is difficult to make sense of given the claim that denial is a different kind of speech act to assertion, i.e. that it is *sui generis*. Hence, I think that a denial of a proposition is an assertion of something.

Now I am aware that the objections I have raised against the *sui generis* account are hardly conclusive. The advocate of this account will probably respond by insisting that it just seems to them, on the basis of introspection, that when they deny something they are applying an illocutionary force to some proposition that does not amount to assertion – they are, for example, saying “no” to a specific proposition, and not asserting anything. So, for example, the denial of trivialism will have as its propositional content trivialism itself, and that nothing is thereby asserted in denying trivialism. I accept that one cannot just dismiss a response of this sort. But even if this is a plausible account of denial *per se*, it is far from clear that this will be of much comfort to the nontrivialist.

#### Is this much of a Victory for the Nontrivialist?

But let us grant that denial is a *sui generis* speech act. Does it follow that the nontrivialist can rest contented with the thought that they have won a victory against the trivialist in this regard?

I wish to suggest that it would not. This is because on such an account of denial, nontrivialism will only ever amount to a *mere* denial. That is to say, one cannot *assert* a position that amounts to the performance of the speech act of nontrivialism. Again, to labor the point, there is no content to such an assertion for the reasons cited in section 3, specifically every proposition forms part of the content of trivialism. But this makes the denial of trivialism very queer. Assuming that denial is *sui generis*, it still seems that we should be able to utter some position or view or proposition that amounts to a denial even if this is not necessary. Take for example the denial of the proposition, ‘the cat sat on the mat’. According to the view at hand, we deny this by applying the illocutionary

force of denial to that very proposition. For example, if someone says to us “the cat sat on the mat” we can deny this by responding with “no”. However, it seems that it is possible to deny this by uttering, “it is not the case that the cat sat on the mat,” or by uttering, “cats never sit on mats they only walk by them.” For the denial of any other proposition, we seem to be able to utter some other proposition or view that will be an alternative to, and so a denial of, that proposition. But this is not the case for the denial of trivialism. We can never utter any view or proposition that will qualify as having performed the speech act of nontrivialism. That is to say, we cannot ever assert anything such that this assertion functions as a denial of trivialism. On the *sui generis* view, the nontrivialist is merely someone who keeps shaking his head or uttering “no” when confronted with trivialism – there is nothing more he can say. But I think that this is good reason to treat the denial of trivialism with deep suspicion. Such a speech act can hardly constitute a viable and sophisticated philosophical position. Indeed, it is not a position at all, as nothing has been asserted.

What though of the issue of the debate between the trivialist and the nontrivialist? Will the arbiter declare the trivialist winner? If denial is a *sui generis* speech act, then it seems that it is not the case that the trivialist will *necessarily* be declared the winner of the debate by the arbiter, and this is so for two reasons. First, on this account of denial, the trivialist cannot win by default – a denial of trivialism is quite possible, and so the nontrivialist does appear at the table of debate. Secondly, if denial is *sui generis*, then it seems quite possible that such a speech act could be rational. Indeed, there are reasons that have been proposed for denying trivialism that are quite compatible with this account of denial. Such arguments attempt to show that belief in trivialism is not

possible, as it is incompatible with discriminating and purposeful behavior. It certainly seems to me that if such arguments are sound, then they might be good reason for denying trivialism (again assuming that one can make sense of denial as *sui generis*) – although I suspect that at most they will only show that trivialism cannot be asserted, and not that it is rational to deny trivialism. Now I will devote the next chapter (chapter 4) of the thesis to examining these arguments, and I will conclude that it is less than clear that they are sound. As such, it would seem that they will not render the denial of trivialism rational, and so although the trivialist will *not* win the debate by default, she will win on points if not a knockout.

But having said this, even if these arguments of the nontrivialist are sound, thus making a *sui generis* denial of trivialism rational, it is still the case that the nontrivialist will not be able to justify a theory or position or worldview or whatnot that amounts to *altriv* or the alternative of trivialism. Again, nontrivialism will amount to a *mere* denial even if this is rational. I wish to suggest that the arbiter would be very reluctant to award a victory to the nontrivialist given that the nontrivialist cannot propose an account of reality that differs, in the sense of being an alternative account, from that of the trivialist. Any worldview he attempts to develop in order to spell out his rational denial of trivialism will be parasitic on the worldview of the trivialist – just part of what the trivialist claims and not an alternative to it.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In summary: trivialism is the claim that all propositions are true. Nontrivialism is the denial of trivialism. Because the content of trivialism is total, the alternative of trivialism

is contentless, i.e. it has null content. And so there is no such speech act as the assertion of an alternative view to trivialism, and so no such speech act as the denial of trivialism. This seems to me to be sufficient reason to accept and assert trivialism. Not only is it rational (given the arguments defended in chapter 2) but *altriv* (the alternative of trivialism) is irrational and unbelievable. There cannot be reasons for something that lacks propositional content, nor can one believe such a thing. In an argument with the nontrivialist, the trivialist wins by default – she can have no such opponent. In addition, the trivialist has little to fear from the view that denial is a *sui generis* speech act. Even if such a view were a plausible account of denial, and there are reasons to even doubt this much, there is still no view that amounts to the alternative of trivialism and there can be no justification for something that cannot be asserted (again putting aside for now the arguments that will be addressed in the next chapter).

Before moving to the next chapter it is important to mention that there are available other accounts of what it is to be a nontrivialist beside the one examined in this chapter. This chapter has shown that it is not possible to be a nontrivialist in the sense of someone who performs the speech act of denying trivialism. But one could be a nontrivialist in a ‘quietist’ sense. Specifically, one could be a nontrivialist in the sense of believing or asserting some propositions as opposed to all propositions. But it is not possible to understand this quietist sense of being a nontrivialist as somehow in opposition to the trivialist. After all, such a person only asserts and believes things that the trivialist asserts and believes. As such there is no sense in which they have been successful at disputing what the trivialist claims about the world. But this is the best that a nontrivialist can do in distinguishing himself from the trivialist.





## Chapter 4: Is it Possible to Believe in Trivialism?

### 1. Is it Possible to Believe in Trivialism?

The previous two chapters argued that not only should we not attempt to deny trivialism (because such a speech act is impossible), but that we should assert it as well. That is to say, we should believe that trivialism is true. But the denial of trivialism has also been defended on the grounds that even if trivialism were true, it would be psychologically impossible to believe that it is true. That it is unbelievable has been defended by at least two arguments from the history of philosophy. The first, and a very ancient argument, is from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ. The second is a more contemporary argument based on the phenomenology of choice, proposed by Graham Priest. In this chapter I put forward three possible responses to these arguments. These responses are quite independent of one another and I do not favor one over the others. My aim is merely to show how one might begin to build a plausible response to both Aristotle and Priest, and thus show that it is possible to believe in trivialism.

In the first response to Aristotle I will defend and develop a proposal made by Priest. According to Priest we can account for the discriminating action of the trivialist by the fact that she has been conditioned to act in certain ways but not in others. The idea here is that belief is not enough to account for action – desire also plays a role. But it is quite compatible with the definition of a trivialist that she has only some desires and not others.

On the other hand my first response to Priest's argument is to make two suggestions. First, I argue that, contra Priest, it is possible for the trivialist to form the intent and desire to bring about some state of affairs she already believes obtains. Secondly, I argue that one can account for the purposeful action of a trivialist by diverging somewhat from the orthodox account of action in terms of belief and desire. I essentially make a suggestion as to how we might be able to account for the actions of the trivialist purely in terms of the beliefs of the trivialist regardless of the fact that she has no desires or intentions.

In the second response to Aristotle and Priest I put forward an alternative understanding of what it is to be a trivialist – one that seems to avoid the problems cited by Priest and Aristotle, and yet is still philosophically interesting.<sup>148</sup> I suggest that there is a straightforward sense of what it is to be a trivialist that does not even require one to believe each and every proposition. An obvious objection that might be raised against this response is this: surely this position would entail that the trivialist is irrational, as there are beliefs she does not have and yet should have given that they are straightforwardly entailed by her trivialism. I show why this objection is mistaken in as much as it has a distorted view of rationality.

In the final response I take up a suggestion from Hume in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* that belief is merely a matter of a relatively stronger affection toward a certain object of thought. This allows that even if one believed every proposition there might be enough

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<sup>148</sup> And, of course, this means that I would be willing to modify my definition of a trivialist as articulated in section 1 of chapter 1.

differentiation between these beliefs, as a result of a differentiation of affection, to enable discrimination and purposeful behavior. Of course, this response relies on one taking a view of the nature of belief relevantly similar to that proposed by Hume, but, as I suggest, this is not overly controversial.

In the conclusion to the chapter I discuss the implications for belief in trivialism given that we accept that the arguments of Priest and Aristotle are sound. Among other suggestions, I forward the idea that even if it is not possible to literally believe each and every proposition (on pain of extinguishing ones existence as a personal agent), belief in trivialism could represent some sort of spiritual goal for the trivialist.

Before spelling out in more detail the arguments of Priest and Aristotle, I wish to say a little about another difficulty someone may have with the possibility of belief in trivialism. It might be thought that belief in trivialism is not compatible with all theories of the nature of belief. For example, if one were to hold that beliefs were actual mental states that exist in a 'belief box' somewhere in the mind, and that the mind (perhaps because it is grounded in a finite physical brain) can only have a finite number of beliefs in this box, then it would appear that belief in trivialism is not possible. On this account of belief, belief in trivialism would require a belief box with an infinite number of beliefs, which mere humans could not possibly have.

I have two things to say in response to these concerns. First, even if this account of belief is true, then it still will not follow that no one can believe in trivialism. Certainly, if humans were purely physical creatures with a brain of finite processing capabilities

(analogous to a computer of some sort), then belief in trivialism would be impossible. But physicalism of this sort might not be a true account of the human mind. There are available in the market place of ideas accounts of the human mind that will allow for belief in trivialism – certain versions of substance dualism (such as is found in Jainism) and monistic idealism (such as is found perhaps in Hegel or Advaita Vedanta). Secondly, and more importantly, it is not clear to me that the ‘box’ theory of beliefs is correct anyway. I myself prefer a dispositional account of belief. On this account, to have a belief is just to have the disposition to behave in a certain manner. For example, to believe that chocolate is delicious is just to be disposed to answer ‘yes’ to the question ‘do you think that chocolate is delicious?’ when this is asked of oneself. On this account one does not actually need an infinite information processing capacity in order to believe in trivialism. Rather, it just requires one to have the right sorts of dispositions.

## 2. Is Belief in Trivialism Compatible with Discriminating Behavior?

*Metaphysics* Γ contains the most sustained attack on trivialism ever written.<sup>149</sup> There are a number of arguments presented in this book but it is not implausible to say that the most convincing is an argument that is directed at the possibility of belief in trivialism based on the actions of the one who purports to believe in trivialism (unlike Aristotle’s other arguments which are directed at the question of either the truth of trivialism or the truth of dialetheism). The argument makes the important observation that those who

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<sup>149</sup> Although most of the arguments presented by Aristotle are directed against a denial of the Law of Nontriviality, Aristotle and subsequent defenders of the arguments seem to treat them as arguments opposing a denial of the Law of Non-Contradiction. In other words, such arguments are mistakenly interpreted as being arguments against the belief in true contradictions *simpliciter* rather than arguments opposing the belief that all contradictions are true. See Priest, “What’s so Bad about Contradictions?” 29.

claim to be trivialists are very careful about what they do. Their behavior is deliberate and purposeful and discriminating. As Aristotle points out in a most colorful manner:

For why does anyone walk to Megara rather than stay where he is, when he considers that he should walk there? Why does he not proceed one morning straight into a well or over a precipice, if there is one about: instead of evidently taking care to avoid doing so, as one who does not consider that falling in is equally a good thing and not a good thing? It is consequently plain that he believes that one thing is better, another not better. And if so, he must also believe that one thing is a man and another not a man, one thing sweet and another not sweet. For he neither seeks nor believes everything indifferently when, considering that it is better to drink water and see a man, he thereupon seeks to do so; and yet he ought to, if the same thing were equally a man and not a man. But just as we said, there is nobody who does not evidently take care to avoid some things and not others; so that it seems that everyone holds some beliefs boldly, if not about everything then about what is better and worse.<sup>150</sup>

When we observe the behavior of the trivialist (Aristotle is of the, probably mistaken, opinion that both Heraclitus and Anaxagoras are trivialists) it is clear that, like everyone else, they behave in a rather discriminating and purposeful manner. But behaving in such a manner is not compatible with being a trivialist. Hence, such a person does not really believe in trivialism, nor could they given that it is impossible for a person to avoid acting in a discriminating manner (an assumption I question below).

This argument has usually been taken to be a convincing refutation of the believability of trivialism. There are two distinct premises in this argument. First, the trivialist behaves in a discriminating and purposeful manner. Secondly, that such discriminating and purposeful behavior is incompatible with being a trivialist. As it stands this argument is actually ambiguous. Aristotle could be making one of two claims when he indicates that the so-called trivialist behaves in a discriminating and purposeful manner.

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<sup>150</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Books *Γ*, *Δ*, and *E*, 15.

First, he could be saying that a person chooses *something* and has this as the purpose of their act, and it is this choosing of *something* that is incompatible with being trivialist. In other words, having a purpose at all is incompatible with believing everything. Alternatively he could be indicating that a person chooses *one course of action over another* and this is incompatible with being trivialist. Or in other words, preferring one purpose to another is incompatible with believing everything.

I will assume in this section that it is the latter of these interpretations that is correct. I will examine the former in the next section when I critique Priest's argument against belief in trivialism. What do we make of the latter interpretation of Aristotle's argument? Is it the case that the trivialist cannot account for the fact that we are all discriminating in our choices, that by preferring one course of action to another, we could not possibly be trivialists? Given the option of eating bread and eating glass, the trivialist cannot account for why they choose one option over the other, in the sense that they have no reason that justifies why they have chosen one option over the other – they can have no motive for performing one act over another.

But what would be wrong if the trivialist gave the following reason for choosing the bread over the glass: "If I eat the bread, I will obtain nutrition and live. However, I might make myself very ill indeed if I eat the glass?" Presumably the problem with answering in this way goes as follows. The trivialist believes that one can actually receive just as much nutrition from eating glass as eating bread. Indeed, the trivialist believes that eating bread is just as damaging to one's health as eating glass. So, the trivialist can have no reason for preferring one to the other. In other words, there is no

basis for the trivialist to be discriminating. One cannot choose  $x$  over  $y$  *because of*  $z$ , as  $z$  will be satisfied by either  $x$  or  $y$  (for the trivialist that is). The implication of this is that the trivialist would be suspended between  $x$  and  $y$  and be unable to choose either. The trivialist is therefore, according to this objection, the ultimate Buridan's ass who died of starvation between two bails of hay because he could not discriminate between them, and so could not choose one over the other.

Before spelling out my response to Aristotle's argument against belief in trivialism, it is worth mentioning an alternative interpretation of an argument mentioned in section 4 of chapter 3. It seems to me that Aristotle's objection provides us with another interpretation of the objection to trivialism mentioned by Azzouni:

Many philosophers, perhaps most, believe that if ordinary languages did imply that every sentence is both true and false, then ordinary languages would be unusable.<sup>151</sup>

It is not clear what 'usable' means in this passage but one suggestion emerges from Bueno:

But how can the trivialist explain why it is that it simply doesn't seem as though English (among other natural languages) is trivial? In other words, why is it that not every sentence of English seems to be true? What is the reason why we seem to be able to distinguish so clearly true sentences from false ones (except perhaps in cases of vagueness and semantically defective sentences)?<sup>152</sup>

'Usable' then would seem to mean the practice of being able to distinguish true sentences from false ones. But one can make an even stronger point than Bueno does here. For the trivialist, not only is every proposition in natural language both true and false, but every proposition is of identical content to every other proposition. The point

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<sup>151</sup> Azzouni, "The Strengthened Liar," 343. See note 32 in chapter 1.

<sup>152</sup> Bueno, "Troubles with Trivialism," 658.



then given Aristotle's argument is that because all propositions are identical (both in content and truth value) for the trivialist, she cannot practice actions such as choosing some propositions over others. They are all the same for the trivialist and so indistinguishable. For example, the trivialist would be unable to communicate an instruction to someone. This is because the trivialist believes that any set of words will do for such an act of communication (they do after all have identical meanings) and so could not have a reason for choosing one set over another. I will, however, argue below that it is possible for natural language to be usable in the relevant sense given belief in trivialism. The trivialist can act in a manner that is discriminating.

### 3. First Response to Aristotle

Graham Priest points out that Aristotle's argument can be easily dealt with in a manner that is parallel to the responses given by skeptics to similar objections to their own views:

[The trivialist] ... may claim that when they reach for the bread, it is not because they do not believe that glass would be just as good. It is simply because they have been trained to do so.<sup>153</sup>

The trivialist chooses one thing over another because they are conditioned to do so, not because they have reasons that discriminate one course of action over the other. The trivialist then will eat the bread simply because she is well trained. It is out of habit that she makes such a choice. It should not be thought, however, that it is necessarily the case that this habit be formed through a process of acculturation (such as education or propaganda or some other social force). Many of our acts can be understood as

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<sup>153</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 193-4.

stemming from the nature of the wider world including our biological constitution. One can think of a Darwinian explanation in this regard – humans in the past (whether they were trivialists or not) who had a tendency to eat glass died out, but those who tended to avoid this survived and went on to reproduce and pass on such tendencies to their offspring. The reason then why trivialists favor some courses of action over others is to be explained much in the same way we explain this in other humans.<sup>154</sup>

I think that this response does indeed show that a trivialist can choose one course of action over another without there being reasons on behalf of the trivialist for doing so. Thus choosing one course of action over another is compatible with being a trivialist. The trivialist can account for why they choose, although this will not be in terms of a justifying reason according to Priest. The point being made by Priest is that there are factors other than belief that determine acts of discrimination (such as desires or neurological structures or cultural and social forces), and that these factors will serve as discriminators even when belief will not. Note also that this reply to Aristotle's argument is quite compatible with a trivialist citing reasons for why she has chosen one course of action over another. After all, she may simply be unaware of the actual causes behind the discrimination that has taken place. Indeed, this is probably true of most humans whether they be trivialists or not. Often we are unaware of the actual causes of our behavior.

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<sup>154</sup> Note also that one need not understand the habits of the trivialist in terms of having stemmed from some desire or another. It might be true that enculturation or biological constitution explain the discriminating actions of the trivialist via the concept of desire. On this view the trivialist has been acculturated or biologically programmed to have desires for certain ends and not for others. But the habits need not be explained at that level at all. They may be explained at a purely neurological level without reference to desire – a sort of reflex action, so to speak, caused by the firing of certain nerves.

Although Priest has offered the above reply as a solution to Aristotle's argument, he suspects that Aristotle has not located the real difficulty here for the trivialist, and that there is a far more fundamental issue at stake. To see what this is I will now turn to Priest's argument against the possibility of belief in trivialism. According to Priest, the problem is not so much that a trivialist cannot act with discrimination, but rather that a trivialist cannot even form an intention or desire required in order to perform an act.

#### **4. Is Belief in Trivialism Compatible with Purposeful Behavior?**

Graham Priest has developed the alternative interpretation of Aristotle's critique that belief in trivialism is incompatible with having any purpose, with his own argument based on the phenomenology of human choice. That we know that the trivialist is acting in a purposeful manner follows directly from considerations of what it is to be a being that can choose. That acting in such a manner is incompatible with being a trivialist follows from considerations concerning the relationship between belief and choice. As with the previous argument from Aristotle there is an assumption that in order to be a trivialist one has to believe the truth of every possible individual claim or proposition implied by 'everything is true'.

The first step in Priest's argument involves establishing that it is not possible for the trivialist to act purposefully. The reason for this is that it is not possible to intend to bring about a state of affairs if one believes that this state of affairs is already the case:

One cannot intend to act in such a way as to bring about some state of affairs, *s*, if one believes *s* to already hold. Conversely, if one acts with the purpose of

bringing *s* about, one cannot believe that *s* already obtains. Hence, if one believes that everything is true, one cannot act purposefully.<sup>155</sup>

And of course, the trivialist believes that every state of affairs obtains. But, claims Priest, it is clear that we all act with purpose. We know this because it follows directly from the phenomenology of consciousness: "... as long as a person is conscious, they make a choice ... having to choose is something phenomenologically unavoidable".<sup>156</sup> And to choose is to have a purpose of some sort, "... to (try to) bring about *this* rather than *that*".<sup>157</sup> The so-called trivialist, because she is conscious, acts with purpose, and because acting with purpose is incompatible with believing everything, she is not really a trivialist at all. Priest concludes: "... it is quite possible that everything is the case, but not for me – or for any other person".<sup>158</sup>

There might be a number of ways that one could respond to Priest's argument. One such way is to insist that human choice is not motivated by any purpose at all. Rather, it is completely spontaneous and groundless. This, of course, is quite a radical way out of Priest's objection and not one that I recommend. After all, some choices might be spontaneous and groundless in this sense but it is difficult to imagine that all of them could be like this. Certainly, the phenomenology of our choices tells strongly against this position – it just seems to be, when we examine our acts of choice, that they are based on motivating purposes.

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<sup>155</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 194.

<sup>156</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 194.

<sup>157</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 194.

<sup>158</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 194.

## 5. First Response to Priest

To see how one might begin to build a response to Priest it is worth focusing on that part of his argument in which he claims that one cannot intend to act so as to bring about some state of affairs if one believes that this state of affairs already obtains. This raises the obvious question as to why exactly one could not do this. Indeed, during the development of his argument, Priest raises what might be thought to be an obvious objection to this claim:

It might be retorted if one believes that everything is the case, one believes that  $s$  is *not* the case, and so one *can* intend to bring it about.<sup>159</sup>

But Priest replies in the following way:

Normally, it is true, someone who believes  $\neg s$  does not believe  $s$ ; and so believing  $\neg s$  allows one to have the intention of bringing  $s$  about. But for the trivialist,  $\neg s$  does not rule out  $s$ ; hence these considerations do not apply. The trivialist cannot aim to bring about  $s$ , because it is simply *part* of a situation that (they think) already obtains, viz.,  $s \wedge \neg s$ .<sup>160</sup>

The core idea here is that it does not even seem intelligible to say that the agent in question can have the intention to bring  $s$  about if they believe that  $s$  obtains. Perhaps another way to put this is to say that one can not make sense of the agent having a desire to bring  $s$  about if they believe that  $s$  already obtains. Presumably it is thought that it is a necessary condition for intending or desiring to bring about some state of affairs that one does not believe that the state of affairs already obtains. The idea here is that the

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<sup>159</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 194.

<sup>160</sup> Priest, "Could Everything be True," 194.

desire or intention has already been satisfied, so to speak, and so the conditions for the performing the act are absent. And, of course, the trivialist does believe that the state of affairs already obtains. So she cannot have the required intention or desire, and so it makes no sense to say that she can act to bring about that state of affairs in question.

How then can we make intelligible the idea of an agent bringing about *s* even though she believes that *s* obtains? What is required here is *either* to find a way of showing that a trivialist can desire or intend some state of affairs despite believing that the state of affairs in question obtains (contrary to Priest's intuitions), *or* to show that the trivialist has something that takes the place of an intention or desire that functions to make such an act intelligible. I will now examine each of these possibilities in turn.

With respect to the first of these, can we find an intelligible account of how a trivialist can form the intention or desire to bring *s* about even though she already believes that *s* obtains? I wish to suggest the following possible scenario, involving the fictional characters Jenny and Bret, to show that such a thing is indeed intelligible. The scenario is as follows. Jenny believes that Bret does not love her. However, she desires and intends to bring it about that Bret loves her. In the process of courting Bret over a period of time, and as a result of the fact that she so desperately desires Bret to love her, Jenny comes to believe, through a process of self-deception and wishful thinking, that it is indeed the case that Bret loves her. Of course, in addition she also believes that Bret does not love her – that is, she has contradictory beliefs.

Now it seems to me that this is a perfectly possible situation. Moreover, in this situation we have an agent, Jenny, who believes that some situation obtains (that Bret loves her), and yet intends and desires to bring it about that this very same situation obtains. It would seem then that it is indeed possible for an agent to believe that *s* obtains and yet intend and desire to bring it about that *s* obtains. As such, it would appear that it is possible for the trivialist to intend or desire to bring about some state of affairs, even though she believes that this already obtains. The key in this possible scenario is that the intention and desire (that Bret love Jenny) is prior to the formulation of the belief in question (that Bret does indeed love Jenny). Indeed, the intention and desire in question contributes to bringing about the belief in question (via a complex process of self-deception). It is possible that there is a similar structure and history among the desires and beliefs of the trivialist. One can envisage a scenario in which someone begins her life as a nontrivialist (i.e. believing some things and not others), but over a long period of time, through complex paths of self-deception, accumulates other beliefs, with the completely unintended and accidental result of becoming a trivialist. I suspect that Priest has only envisaged a scenario in which an agent comes to live her life already being a trivialist. But of course, it is possible that someone's trivialism occurs quite accidentally as the end result of a life involving similar paths of belief and desire formation as exhibited in the story of Bret and Jenny. Note also that it is highly unlikely that such a situation would obtain. But its possibility is enough to undermine Priest's argument, which seeks to show that it is impossible for the trivialist to act with purpose. Moreover, that such a scenario is improbable fits excellently with the empirical evidence that trivialism is very rare among humans. I conclude then that it is intelligible to think

that a trivialist *could* believe that *s* obtains and yet intend to bring *s* about (although I admit that this is highly unlikely).

With respect to the second of these possible responses (that there is a suitable substitute for belief and desire that will explain an act of a trivialist), I wish to make the following suggestion. We can make sense of such an act to bring *s* about if it is the case that the agent in question *believes* that she desires or intends to bring *s* about, and it is the case that she believes that *s* does not obtain. So long as these conditions obtain, then even if the agent believes that *s* obtains, it is quite intelligible to say that the agent can act to bring *s* about. The key idea here is that the agent *believes* that she intends or desires to bring *s* about – whether or not it is actually true that she desires or intends this.

The assumption being made here is that it is *not* a necessary condition for acting to bring *s* about that one intend or desire to bring *s* about. Rather, the necessary condition is the disjunction ‘either an agent intends or desires to bring *s* about or the agent believes she intends or desires to bring *s* about’. In other words, the belief that one intends or desires to bring about *s* plays the role that an actual desire or intent would have played (if it had been present) in making such an act intelligible. That the trivialist really believes that she desires to do this (even if it is not really true that she does), is sufficient to make the act intelligible. Of course, this amounts to a modification of the orthodox theory that we explain action by citing relevant desires and beliefs. The modification amounts to the idea that we can explain an act purely in terms of an agent’s beliefs – provided that they are the right kinds of beliefs, i.e. beliefs about one’s own desires and intentions. I take



this to be a rather minor modification to the orthodox position and one that is not without its intuitiveness. But given that this is so, we can see immediately that the trivialist can act with purpose. The trivialist has *all* beliefs, and so *a fortiori*, she has the belief that she intends or desires to bring about some situation *s*. Moreover, she believes that *s* does not obtain (even if she believes that it does obtain as well). So it is quite intelligible to say that she can act to bring *s* about. The trivialist can, it seems, act with a purpose even if she has none of the relevant intentions.<sup>161</sup>

In summary it can be seen that there are available two responses to Priest's argument. The first is to show that it is intelligible to think that a trivialist could intend and desire to bring about any given situation even though she believes that these already obtain. The second assumes that Priest is correct in thinking that the trivialist could have no intentions and attempts to provide a substitute that can explain the acts of the trivialist. Both of these responses have at least some plausibility to them. I conclude that Priest's argument against the possibility of belief in trivialism is, arguably, unsound.

## **6. Response 2: Need the Trivialist Believe Everything Entailed by Trivialism?**

Now, those philosophers who have actually bothered to explore trivialism with any seriousness usually characterize the trivialist as explicitly committing her to everything

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<sup>161</sup> Of course, it might be objected at this point that because the trivialist believes she desires and intends each and every desire and intention, she would be unable to act in a discriminatory manner. In response I direct the reader to the conclusions reached in section 3 where I point out that the habits of the trivialist can be accounted for in terms of factors that are not accessible to the trivialist, such as reflexes and deep neurological structures - just as some of the habits of any human might be accounted for. The solution I propose here is only designed to answer Priest's objection and not that of Aristotle.

that is implied by the claim 'everything is true'. In other words, in addition to believing the claim 'everything is true' the trivialist also believes each and every individual claim about reality. Some examples include 'it is raining', 'Australia is a republic', 'humans have three heads', and so on. In addition, the trivialist, according to this account, believes the negation of each of these claims. It is this account of what it takes to be a trivialist that is thought to be incompatible with the nature of human action and choice. And indeed, this is the definition of trivialist that I have taken for granted throughout the thesis up to this point. The above two arguments from Aristotle and Priest both hold to the claim that believing each and every sentence to be true is sufficient to qualify as a trivialist. In my view there is nothing wrong with defining the notion of trivialist in this manner. But I believe that there are philosophically interesting notions of what it is to be a trivialist that do not require that the trivialist believe each and every proposition – and so notions of what it is to be a trivialist that avoid the difficulties cited by Aristotle and Priest. Even if trivialism entails every proposition, it is not clear to me that the beliefs of the trivialist need be closed under this entailment (and, indeed, nor should they be). With this in mind, I wish to explore in this section of the thesis a different notion of what it is to be a trivialist to the one I have so far stipulated.

To see this, consider the following. In general, to be meaningfully characterized as an *Xist* one need not believe each and every claim entailed by *X*. For example, to be a theist one is expected to believe that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being, who is also the creator of the world. However, one is not expected to believe everything entailed by such a claim. For example, it is not normally expected of a theist that among his beliefs is the explicit belief that my pet Chihuahua,

Basil, is sustained in existence through the powers of an omnipotent being. This is despite the fact that this is clearly entailed by the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being, and who is the creator of the world (combined, of course, with the fact that Basil exists). Of course, once a theist has heard about the existence of Basil, it is appropriate, even mandatory, for the theist to then have as an explicit belief that Basil is kept in existence by God. Indeed, the theist will explicitly believe many of the implications of the existence of the theistic deity, and indeed would be required to. If a person only believed in the existence of a theistic deity but nothing that is entailed by this, then it would not be appropriate, perhaps not even meaningful, to refer to them as a theist. This would simply be because part of what it means to hold a belief is to see the implications of this belief for ones other beliefs. Beliefs necessarily form part of a larger network.

Now I think that this straightforwardly applies to the trivialist. Although the trivialist is required to be committed to the claim 'everything is true' along with many of the claims entailed by this, she need not believe every claim entailed by 'everything is true'. And this would be for reasons similar to why we would not expect the theist to explicitly believe every claim entailed by the existence of the God of theism. For example, just as a theist may not have given consideration to Basil and his status as a creation of God (perhaps because she did not know that Basil existed, for example), the trivialist may not have given any consideration to a whole host of things. For example, it is certainly true that 'everything is true' entails 'Basil exists' but the trivialist may have no opinion at all as to what Basil is, whether there is even a proposition 'Basil exists' or what not – it has never crossed her mind. Of course, having given it consideration (perhaps as a result of

having personally met Basil) it would be expected that she then form the belief 'Basil exists' and also believe this on the basis that it is implied by 'everything is true'. In other words, it would be required to add this to her belief network – to see the connections between her various beliefs.

So, if it is not necessary for a trivialist to believe everything that is entailed by 'everything is true' in order to be a trivialist, what exactly is required? To see what might be required consider the following. If you came across a person, who believed in the truths of the Catholic faith, and they believed many things entailed by these truths, and they did not believe anything incompatible with Catholicism, then this person would rightly be described as a Catholic. That they do not believe everything implied by the truths of the Catholic faith is not relevant. But the same would seem to apply to the trivialist. If they believed the truth of the sentence 'everything is true', and they believed many things that were entailed by this, and they did not believe anything incompatible with this sentence, then this person is a trivialist. That they do not believe everything entailed by the definition of trivialism is neither here nor there.

But it follows that one does not have to believe each and every sentence in order for one to believe in trivialism. So, one can believe in trivialism and act in a discriminating manner i.e. they choose one option over another in order to fulfill some purpose. They can choose to eat bread over glass because bread is more nutritious. Their believing that the bread is more nutritious than the glass does not rule out their being trivialist, as this claim is entailed by trivialism.

Likewise, a trivialist can form a purpose and act on that purpose. They might believe that they require nutrition and so eat bread in order to achieve that nutrition. For this to be possible all they need to believe is that their being nourished fails to be true. And, of course, believing that it fails to be true that they are nourished is entailed by trivialism. So, their believing that they are unnourished (without also being nourished) does not rule out their being trivialist.

But because trivialism entails anything at all, it is impossible for someone to have beliefs that are incompatible with trivialism. So long as a person believes the truth of the sentence 'every sentence is true', then they can believe literally anything else (and indeed nothing else) and qualify as a trivialist. Indeed, they can believe that reality is nontrivial and qualify as a trivialist, as the non-triviality of the world is entailed by trivialism. Such a person is a genuine trivialist. There is nothing that the nontrivialist can point to in the beliefs of such a person that entitle the nontrivialist to say, 'ah ha! I knew you were not a trivialist, because you believe X'. The nontrivialist would only be entitled to do this if there were an X that is incompatible with trivialism or maybe not implied by trivialism, but there is no such X. Indeed, for every X it is entailed by trivialism and it is compatible with trivialism. The trivialist cannot believe something that is not implied or compatible with her belief in trivialism.

We can conclude then that at most the arguments from Aristotle and Priest show us that one cannot be a trivialist in the sense that one believes each and every proposition, i.e. there is not a person  $j$ , a proposition  $p$ , and a relation  $B$  ('believes that') such that  $\forall p jBp$ . But they do not demonstrate that one cannot be a trivialist in another meaningful and

straightforward sense, i.e. there can be a person  $j$  such that  $jB(\forall pTp)$ . It should be emphasized here that I am not saying that Priest and Aristotle have made a mistake in understanding a trivialist to be a person who believes each and every proposition. After all, the meaning of 'trivialist' is a matter of stipulation and not a matter of fact. My only point is that the notion of a trivialist offered in this section is as philosophically interesting as the one offered by Priest and Aristotle and yet it avoids the problems they have cited.

Now it might be thought in reply to this response that there is something irrational about not believing each and every sentence entailed by trivialism given that one is a trivialist. But this retort presupposes that the trivialist already believes certain things about the nature of rationality, inference, and truth. For example, as Priest points out, the trivialist would have to accept "... universal instantiation, the *T*-schema, [and] *modus ponens*."<sup>162</sup> It might be, for example, that the trivialist holds certain epistemic criterion (such as 'only believe what you can see') to have higher epistemic status than these three principles. As such, she will not allow her beliefs to be closed under entailment in this manner. Indeed, she might reject anything that makes her believe in things that are not accessible to her in the part of triviality that she perceives. Clearly not everything is true for her. As such, she will refrain from believing everything.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 65n.

<sup>163</sup> I will examine the sense in which someone might not have perceptual access to the entirety of a reality that is deeply contradictory in the next chapter.

But, in addition, it would seem that the very arguments of Priest and Aristotle (assuming that they are sound) provide the trivialist with sufficient reason *not* to believe each and every proposition. That is to say, both arguments would render the trivialists refusal to believe each and every proposition quite rational. In reply then to the claim that her avoiding belief in all propositions is irrational, she can simply say that she is justified in doing this because if she did not, then it would be impossible for her to behave in a discriminating and purposeful manner. Destruction of the acting self is hardly rational given many worldviews (there are, of course, exceptions - Hinduism and Buddhism, for example). For such a worldview, a rational agent avoids anything that would result in her existence being compromised, including believing things that prevent her from existing (something that would be deeply compromised if an agent were to believe each and every proposition to be true). The trivialist justifies the limitedness of her beliefs in terms of her desire to continue existing as a rational agent.

It would appear then that not only is it possible to believe in trivialism but it is a relatively easy belief to take on. All that one presumably requires is good reason for thinking that it is true. Once one has found such reason and has taken to believing the sentence 'everything is true', one need not make any further revisions to ones belief system. Everything that one already believes is not only compatible with this sentence but it is entailed by it. Trivialism then is the least controversial and simplest metaphysical theory ever devised. In a sense, everyone is already a trivialist waiting to happen. All that is required is a little incentive in the right direction – perhaps in the form of an argument for trivialism (for which there are plenty as I have discussed in chapters 2 and 3).

### 7. Response 3: Have Priest and Aristotle Misunderstood the Nature of Belief?<sup>164</sup>

A third possible response is available to the trivialist: Might it be that Aristotle and Priest misunderstand the nature of belief? It would appear that the arguments of both philosophers make specific assumptions about the nature of belief. To see that this is so, consider the following.

Let's begin with Aristotle's position. According to this, the trivialist cannot choose to eat bread over glass for the reason that bread is better for her, as she believes that bread and glass are equally good for one another. But note that this assumes that there is nothing more to a belief than its propositional content. If it were the case that belief was characterized by some additional quality (to its propositional content) that could vary in degree, then this conclusion does not necessarily follow. For instance, the trivialist believes that bread is very nutritious and she also believes that glass is equally nutritious, but the latter belief might not possess this additional quality to the same degree as the former. As such, she is compelled to act (assuming that this extra quality determines behavior) on the former as opposed to the latter.

Likewise for Priest's argument: the claim is that the trivialist cannot act to bring it about that she is going for a walk, as she already believes that she is going for a walk. But again, might it not be the case that her belief that she is already going on a walk be characterized as failing to have to the same degree this extra quality as her belief that she

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<sup>164</sup> This response was first suggested to me by Mark Ressler of the University of Melbourne, Australia.



is *not* going for a walk? As such, it is the former that is the basis for her purposeful act of going for a walk, rather than the latter.

That belief may differ according to more than just its content is suggested in the reflections of David Hume. In his *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume puts the question: "Werein consists the difference betwixt incredulity and belief?"<sup>165</sup> Hume argues that the difference cannot consist simply in content, as an imagining has the same content as a belief. For example, I can entertain the possibility of God's existence without actually believing that he does exist. But this thought does not differ in content to the thought that expresses my belief that there is a God. As such, the difference must consist in a quality other than content:

I conclude, by an induction that seems to me very evident, that an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the *manner* of its being conceiv'd.<sup>166</sup>

And for Hume this manner is largely an affection or feeling of the mind that can differ in "... *force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness.*"<sup>167</sup> It is this higher degree of feeling that explains why beliefs determine our behavior whilst imaginings do not.

But if this is correct, then this account of belief will help us to answer the arguments of Aristotle and Priest. Now I wish to extend Hume's account of belief and postulate that such feeling or affection can come in degrees, i.e. it is possible for different beliefs to differ from each other in the degree of the manner of its being conceived. So, it is not

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<sup>165</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 143.

<sup>166</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 146.

<sup>167</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 146.

only that belief can differ from imaginings in this manner, but also that beliefs can differ from one another in this manner. People believe things more or less – belief in something is not then an all or nothing affair.

Although I do not wish to defend Hume's particular account in this thesis and my extension of it, it would seem that it is very much in line both with common sense and the modern philosophical idea that a belief is a propositional *attitude*. It would seem to be not implausible that there is more to a belief than its propositional content. There is, in addition, the attitude that a mind has toward that content. And it is not at all difficult to believe that this attitude can differ in its strength or degree or magnitude. What this attitude consists in I would not like to say, and indeed I agree with Hume that it is probably basic and that it cannot be analyzed into anything more basic:

I confess, that 'tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is *belief*, which is a term which everyone sufficiently understands in common life.<sup>168</sup>

But if this is at all a plausible account of belief, then it would seem that the conclusions of Aristotle and Priest do not obviously follow. To show that belief in trivialism is incompatible with discriminating and purposeful behavior, they would need to show that there is no differentiation in manner or attitude across the beliefs of the trivialist. But given that it seems natural that a human being would have beliefs that differ in this dimension, it seems implausible to think that the trivialist would be any different in this regard.

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<sup>168</sup> Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 146.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

So much then for the arguments presented by Aristotle and Priest that it is impossible to believe in trivialism. The arguments make an important assumption that belief is an all or nothing affair. As I have shown (in section 7), there is reason to believe that this assumption is questionable. There are available accounts of belief that allow for degrees of belief. But even if we grant this assumption, it would seem that we can stipulate philosophically interesting notions of what it is to be a trivialist that avoid a trivialist believing each and every proposition (section 6). And finally, it seems that there is reason for thinking that even given the account of belief assumed by Aristotle and Priest, and given their preferred notion of what it is to be a trivialist, the trivialist can act in a discriminating and purposeful manner (sections 3 and 5). I conclude then that it has not been shown that the denial of trivialism is justified because trivialism is unbelievable.

There is, of course, an obvious alternative way that one could respond to the two arguments from Priest and Aristotle. One could agree that they are sound but respond with a resounding 'so what?' Perhaps trivialism is impossible to believe, and so one could never be a trivialist. But one could still think that it is possible that trivialism be true. Indeed, one could even think that there are good reasons for thinking that it is true and indeed that its denial is impossible. It is just that one could not take the final step and believe that everything is actually true. The trivialist can respond then to these arguments by taking on a similar attitude to the one of David Hume toward his own skepticism. Whilst in his study he is a skeptic, but once he leaves the confines of his study he has to go about living much in the same way as everyone else – as someone

who is not a skeptic. But Hume was still convinced within the confines of his study that he was right about our beliefs and the epistemic status of these.

Now one might think that trivialism is a rather useless view philosophically speaking if it is not possible to believe that it is true. But this response betrays a narrowly and culturally defined notion of the aims of philosophy. In some philosophical traditions (I have in mind here Buddhism and Hinduism, among others) the aim of philosophy is not so much to justify certain beliefs, but rather to bring about a state of salvation or liberation. Indeed, in traditions such as Buddhism and certain forms of Hinduism, the state of liberation is one that involves the dissolution of the self, and this fits comfortably with the conclusions reached by Priest and Aristotle. Perhaps the aim of the trivialist should be the dissolution of the self. On this account of what it is to be a trivialist, the trivialist would accept that trivialism is an undeniable truth about reality. She would believe, at the very least, the proposition,  $\forall pTp$ . But she would recognize, along with Priest and Aristotle, that true unity with the triviality of reality involves dissolution of the self (in the sense of an agent that can act). The religious impulse is, at least in part, characterized by a desire to become one with ultimate reality in some sense, and so she aims to extinguish herself and become one with a trivial reality by believing everything, and thus making it impossible to act - and thus impossible to live as an agent. Certainly, if trivialism is true, this might be construed as the ultimate aim in life, much in the same way that the dissolution of the self is considered the ultimate aim in life given the truths of Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta. I will have more to say about the existential prospects of trivialism in the conclusion of the thesis.

But even in the narrow academic environment of western philosophy, trivialism might still have philosophical value – as I have already suggested in the introduction of the thesis. Despite the best of efforts in showing that one cannot be a trivialist, there is still the shocking possibility that trivialism could very well be true. One could imagine that there will come a time when introductory philosophy courses at various universities are conducted not around the topic of skepticism, but around the topic of trivialism – it is an interesting possibility that no one could actually believe, but it is so difficult to refute that it is a useful way of sharpening the philosophical skills of a student, as well as testing the worth of a philosophical theory.

To conclude it must be emphasized that even if the arguments from Priest and Aristotle were sound and trivialism is unbelievable (and so there is no such thing as a trivialist) this would not solve the problems for those who seek to deny trivialism. As I argued in chapter 3, nontrivialism is unbelievable and so there is no such thing as the nontrivialist. As such, the one should not overestimate the victory of those who argue for the unbelievability of trivialism, even assuming that their arguments are sound.

## Chapter 5: Is it Possible to Observe a Contradictory State of Affairs?<sup>169</sup>

### 1. The Argument

In his paper “Perceiving Contradictions” Priest argues that the observable world is consistent:

Consider the observable world, i.e. all that is observably the case. If there were inconsistencies in this, it would follow ... that we would perceive them. But apart from the odd visual illusion, we do not: our perceptions of the world are entirely consistent. Hence, the observable world is consistent.<sup>170</sup>

I will refer to this as the argument from perception. Priest has interpreted his argument from perception as an *a posteriori* argument against trivialism.<sup>171</sup> But as discussed in chapter 3, one can immediately dismiss an argument of this sort by pointing out that even if it is sound, all it shows is that trivialism cannot be true. But so what? This in no way amounts to the performance of the denial of trivialism, as nothing amounts to a denial of trivialism. All that such an argument does is map out some of the content of trivialism, among which is that our perceptions are largely consistent and that not everything is true of the observable world. As an argument for rejecting trivialism it fails. But as an expression of the denial that the observable world is contradictory, the argument is quite meaningful. But even in this dialectical context I believe that the argument fails, and I will articulate these reasons in due course.

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<sup>169</sup> Most of this chapter has been published as Kabay, “When Seeing is not Believing.”

<sup>170</sup> Priest, “Perceiving Contradictions,” 463.

<sup>171</sup> Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 57.

In this chapter I will give two reasons for thinking that this argument is unsound given this dialectical context: First, that Priest has failed to show us what a contradictory state of affairs would look like, such that we know that we are not seeing such things; and secondly, there are good reasons for thinking that a contradictory state of affairs would appear consistent – reasons that are intrinsic to the nature of a contradictory state of affairs. Ironically, although my analysis of Priest’s argument will show it to be unsound, it will also imply that there can be no observable or empirical evidence for trivialism or for the extreme form of dialetheism argued for in the final chapter of the thesis. Dialetheism will remain a philosophical/metaphysical thesis that will never have direct contact with empirical science.<sup>172</sup>

That the observable world appears to be consistent is obviously true. When we look around us we see that things appear consistent. The desk in front of me appears to be in the location that it is and nowhere else – it does not appear both at that location and not at that location. The colors of the wall appear white and white only – the wall does not appear both white and black for instance. Likewise, the coffee cup on the desk appears to be at rest, period – it does not appear to be both at rest and in motion. And, to raise an example that will feature in the final chapter of the thesis, we observe bodies in motion to be making progress in a certain direction and not also regressing in that direction. No

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<sup>172</sup> This may not be a view shared by other dialetheists. Priest (*Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 162-4) seems to think that it is possible that future science may make observations that are best explained by being caused by contradictory physical states of affairs. The analysis I present here casts some doubt on that. Although I should add that the example that Priest provides does not involve inferring a contradictory state of affairs from the fact that the content of a perception was contradictory. As such, it is not clear that the conclusions drawn in this chapter apply to the point Priest is illustrating.

matter where we look the world appears to be straightforwardly consistent. The question is whether this appearance of consistency is good reason for thinking that the observable world is consistent.

Priest thinks so and the reason he gives is that if it were otherwise, if it were contradictory, then it would appear to be contradictory i.e. we would have contradictory perceptions. But what is it for something to appear to be contradictory? Priest provides an answer to this question as well. He gives three examples of contradictory perceptions i.e. perceptions the contents of which are contradictory: a Penrose Figure, the 'waterfall' effect, and a specific example of a 'fill in' effect.

Priest describes the Penrose Figure (figure 1) as follows:

If one takes a corner, say the nearest one, one can see that, traveling continuously counter-clockwise, one can ascend to arrive back at the same place. The point, then, is higher than itself (but obviously, it is not higher than itself, as well). Moreover, one can take the whole figure in ... all in one go. This is a case where we can see a contradictory situation.<sup>173</sup>

For an example of this see <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/PenroseStairway.html>

*Fig. 1*

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<sup>173</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 440-1.



The lesson that Priest draws from the Penrose Figure is that it is ‘... quite possible to perceive a contradictory situation’<sup>174</sup>. Given the Penrose Figure we know what it is like to see something that is both higher than itself and not higher than itself.

The second example of a contradictory perception provided by Priest is the so-called ‘water-fall’ effect.<sup>175</sup> This effect arises in a number of contexts and can be generated when a continuous motion of some sort conditions the visual field. When the viewer then looks at a stationary scene this appears to move in the opposite direction to the original motion. Despite this, any one point in the visual field does not change its position. Priest refers to the commonly experienced ‘spinning room’ effect that a person perceives when they lay down on a bed whilst intoxicated: the room appears to spin and yet no point in the room is changing position. Another version involves figure 2 below.<sup>176</sup>

For an example of this see <http://www.youramazingbrain.org/supersenses/disc.htm>

*Fig. 2*

By shifting the figure back and forth, the concentric circles of rhombi are seen to rotate in opposite directions despite the fact that each rhombus remains in the same position on the page. In such perceptual experiences the image is both in motion and not in motion. The lesson Priest draws from this is once again that it is possible to perceive a

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<sup>174</sup> Priest, “Perceiving Contradictions,” 442.

<sup>175</sup> Priest, “Perceiving Contradictions,” 441-2.

<sup>176</sup> This particular example is not used by Priest but it illustrates the effect well enough.

contradictory situation, specifically the contradictory situation of seeing something that is both moving and not moving.

The third example used by Priest involves a type of 'fill in' effect.<sup>177</sup> In certain experiments involving a visual field that is half red and half green with a black line down the middle, when the black line is removed the brain is forced to fill in the resulting gap. Some subjects report seeing the boundary being colored both red and green. Priest also reports a similar experience with the use of 3-D glasses. Upon putting on such glasses he reports seeing the scene, before vision settles, to be colored both red and green, although at different depths of the visual field. Again Priest draws the conclusion that it is possible to perceive a contradictory situation, specifically the contradictory perception of a visual field being both red all over and not red all over.

So, for Priest, such examples "...show that we may have perceptual experiences the contents of which are contradictory"<sup>178</sup>. From this we are entitled to infer that because we do not have such experiences outside of these rare examples, that the observable world is not contradictory. In other words, the observable world is consistent.

## 2. Various Objections

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<sup>177</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 442.

<sup>178</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 443.

There have been various objections made to the argument from perception, some being more successful than others. Priest himself raises the following point:

Might it not be the case, though, that our cognitive functioning makes it impossible to see certain conjoined states of affairs? Specifically, it might be suggested that our perceptual mechanisms impose a 'consistency filter' on what we see.<sup>179</sup>

According to this Kantian style argument, the human mind is structured such that it has the power to impose a consistent order upon an otherwise contradictory world. As such we should expect the observable world to appear consistent even if it were not. But as Priest points out there is no independent evidence that we have such 'consistency filters' and indeed from the fact that we can cite examples of contradictory perceptions, there is good reason to think that we do not have them.<sup>180</sup>

Other criticisms of the argument have more plausibility, however. For example, Doris Olin has pointed out that Priest is not entitled to claim that we know what it is to have contradictory perceptions, as at most he has shown that we know what it is for only some perceptions to be contradictory.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, Priest gives only three examples of contradictory perceptions. Olin also gives reason for doubting that we know what it is to perceive a particular contradictory state of affairs on the basis that we know what it is to have a particular contradictory perception. According to Olin this assumes that

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<sup>179</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 444.

<sup>180</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 444.

<sup>181</sup> Olin, *Paradox*, 31. Priest responds to this in *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 63. He basically denies the premise of Olin's objection: "But we *do* know what contradictions look like." What is Priest's basis for this claim? Simply, the examples of illusions he provides.

There is only one way that a thing can appear to be both, say, at rest and in motion: the way his example illustrates. The fact that things do not look *that way* is the reason I can supposedly see that the cup is not both at rest and in motion. But perhaps there is another way, one that I do not know, that things might look if this particular contradiction were true. Clearly, the argument does not establish that for any observable  $\alpha$ ,  $\alpha \& \sim \alpha$  can be perceived not to obtain.<sup>182</sup>

J.C. Beall also points out that at most Priest has shown that we *could* observe contradictory states of affairs and not that we *would*.<sup>183</sup> To drive home this point Beall entertains the idea that a contradiction might appear exactly like one of its conjuncts does. This can certainly be the case for consistent conjunctions (Beall gives the example of ‘Greg is at the piano *and* there is an opaque shield surrounding the piano’), so why not for contradictions? That being so, many of our observations of contradictions might involve straightforwardly consistent perceptions.

In addition, one might also add that it is not clear that Priest has provided us with examples of perceptions with contradictory contents. It is possible to re-describe all the examples in question such that the contents are consistent and yet the strangeness of the perceptual experience is preserved. The Penrose figure can be understood as being a staircase in a space that is non-Euclidean (there is only a contradiction in ascending and returning to the same point if the space is Euclidean).<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Olin, *Paradox*, 31.

<sup>183</sup> Beall, “Is the Observable World Consistent,” 114. Priest responds to this in *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 63n15: “I am not sure I see the force of this objection. Would if what? If it can be seen then we will see it if we look in the right direction, have our eyes open, etc.”

<sup>184</sup> I must confess that I do not know if there could be any sort of space in which it is possible to ascend and end up at the same point. It would depend I imagine on how one can construe the notions of ‘ascending’ and ‘descending’. The space that has the closest resemblance to this kind of

Likewise, the 'water-fall' effect can be understood as a figure or body being in motion and not being in motion in two different senses – not being in motion in the sense that they do not change position and being in motion in the sense that our sensory apparatus are disoriented. Also, it is not clear in this particular example that there has been a perception of the points on the moving body remaining stationary. It seems to me that they appear to be moving, period, when we shift the page back and forth. The claim that they are also stationary is inferred from our memory of what the rhombi do when we keep the page at a constant distant.

Similarly the 'fill in' effect can be understood not as being both green and red but as being an entirely new color altogether. Now whether any of these re-descriptions are more plausible than those offered by Priest is a point worth debating. I think that there is a good case for the first (assuming that there is such a space and that there are relevant notions of ascending and descending in such a space) and third, a less plausible case for the second.

Finally, one might wish to add that Priest's argument misses the strongest reason for thinking that the observable world is consistent, namely that it is *a priori* impossible for contradictions to obtain. This is, of course, the kind of reason that would be given by a classical logician or an Aristotelian, or anyone who holds the Law of Non-Contradiction

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thing that I can think of is a spherical space (which possibly describes the structure of our universe).

to be an *a priori* truth. Of course, this line of argument is not at all convincing for a dialetheist. But regardless of the outcome of the debate between the monotheist (monotheism being the view that all propositions have at most one truth value) and the dialetheist, it remains the case that Priest's argument is really just an *a posteriori* version of this line of reasoning, and as such it is one that is just as acceptable to the Aristotelian or the classical logician as it is to the dialetheist (and the trivialist for that matter). Priest's argument then has a sort of apologetic superiority to the *a priori* version in that it does not beg important logical and philosophical questions.

### 3. Contradictory Perceptions as Non-Veridical: The Case of Escher's Belvedere

The examples of contradictory perceptions provided by Priest are illusions, or to put it in more technical language, they are non-veridical. What this means is that although these figures and experiences appear to be contradictory, this is no reason for thinking that they actually are. Priest does not think that this matters for the argument from perception:

Of course, the examples are not veridical; they are illusions: but they fulfill the required function none the less. They show that we may have perceptual experiences the contents of which are contradictory.<sup>185</sup>

In this section I will assume that the examples that Priest has provided of contradictory perceptions are indeed contradictory. But even if we do grant this much, the argument from perception can be doubted on other grounds. The argument from perception relies on the claim that if we are having contradictory perceptions, then we are entitled to

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<sup>185</sup> Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 443.

conclude that we are having perceptions of contradictions. The assumption here is that an observable state of affairs that is contradictory would give rise to a perception the contents of which are contradictory. The question is whether we are entitled to conclude that this is true on the basis that we have contradictory perceptions. I believe that we are not so entitled, and the reason revolves around the fact that all the examples of contradictory perceptions we have are illusory. So, the fact that when we look around and see that we do not have perceptions of the sort discussed by Priest is not sufficient reason for us to conclude that there are no observable contradictions – it is not clear that observable contradictions would appear contradictory.

The admission that the examples at hand are illusory or non-veridical is an admission that the contradictory perceptual experiences are caused by consistent states of affairs. In other words, these examples show us what certain consistent states of affairs would look like, not what certain contradictory states of affairs would look like. What Priest has shown is that particular consistent states of affairs appear to be contradictory. He has shed no light on what a contradictory state of affairs would look like, which is what he would need to do in order for the argument from perception to work.

The key to seeing that this is the case centers on the fact that we often know why the examples in question are non-veridical or illusory.<sup>186</sup> We know that the fact that these

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<sup>186</sup> That we know they are illusory is because we can see they are not compatible with what others perceive. Nor are they compatible with the information supplied by our other senses (Priest, "Perceiving Contradictions," 444-5).

appear contradictory is no reason for thinking that the states of affairs in question actually are contradictory because we know the real reason for why they appear the way they do – and it is not because they are contradictory. To illustrate what I mean here I will make use of the example of Escher’s famous lithograph, *Belvedere* (figure 3).

For an example of this see <http://www.mescher.com/>. Follow the prompts to the section ‘1955-1972’.

*Fig. 3*

I use this example for two reasons. First, Escher cites this as an example of a contradictory perception. Secondly he provides expert commentary (he is after all a superb artist) on the reason why it appears this way. It is worth quoting Escher’s commentary on this piece in full:

In the lower left foreground there lies a piece of paper on which the edges of a cube are drawn. Two small circles mark the places where edges cross each other. Which edge comes at the front and which at the back? In a three dimensional world simultaneous front and back is an impossibility and so cannot be illustrated. Yet it is quite possible to draw an object which displays a different reality when looked at from above and from below. The lad sitting on the bench has got just such a cube-like absurdity in his hands. He gazes thoughtfully at this incomprehensible object and seems oblivious to the fact that the belvedere behind has been built in the same impossible style. On the floor of the lower platform, that is to say indoors, stands a ladder which two people are busy climbing. But as soon as they arrive a floor higher they are back in the open air and have to re-enter the building. Is it any wonder that nobody in the company can be bothered about the fate of the prisoner in the dungeon who sticks his head through the bars and bemoans his fate?<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Escher, *Escher*, 15.



According to Esher the contradictory state of affairs depicted in the scene is that of the parts of the building structure (and the cube-like absurdity) being simultaneously located at the front and the back of the structure. In addition, the characters in the scene are perceptually aware of the contradiction. The boy on the seat 'gazes thoughtfully' at the paradoxical cube in his hands. The folk using the ladder find themselves beginning their climb on the inside of the building but finishing it on the outside. All of them are so distracted by the perceptual experience of this contradictory arrangement that they are unaware of the plight of the poor prisoner.

Although the perceptual experience of the picture is supposedly contradictory, Esher makes it clear that in actual fact there is nothing in the lithograph that is contradictory. Indeed, there are elements in the lithograph that function to show us how the paradoxical nature of the belvedere and the cube-like structure is generated. This is the function of the cube drawn on the piece of paper in front of the boy. On the diagram the points of intersection of the sides are marked with a circle. The curious thing about the sides is that there is no clear answer as to which of them is supposed to come at the back and which at the front. The cube can be consistently interpreted in two different ways each corresponding to a different front-back arrangement for the sides. Now the reason why the sides cannot be interpreted unambiguously in this manner is because this is a figure on a two-dimensional surface. In other words there is no front and back that can determine unambiguously which of the interpretations is correct. As such, the brain has no visual cue to determine which interpretation is correct and so jumps between the two interpretations. This is exactly what happens for the cube-like structure and the

belvedere itself. These are actually two-dimensional structures and so there is no front and back to unambiguously determine which of the sides or pillars is at the front and which is at the back. The brain is left to jump between the two interpretations. Either way we have a perfectly consistent state of affairs that is the cause of the inconsistent perception.

In order to judge if the observable world is consistent we need to find out what an actual contradiction looks like. It is not relevant what some consistent state of affairs looks like. It is not relevant what the belvedere in the lithograph looks like to *us*. The relevant issue is what the belvedere looks like to the *characters* in the lithograph. After all, they are supposed to be in a three-dimensional world in which the sides of cubes and the pillars of the belvedere are simultaneously front and back. We can say for sure that it will look nothing like it looks to us observing the lithograph as we do. How it looks to us is what a consistent state of affairs looks like. So, an actual structure that has sides that are simultaneously at the front and back will not look like that.

The same for the examples used by Priest. We are not interested in what it is to see illusory examples of such contradictory perceptions, as that is what consistent states of affairs look like. We want to know what it would be like to actually live in a world where the stairs are simultaneously higher and not higher than themselves. We want to know what it is to live in a world where things both are and are not in motion. We want to know what it is like to live in a world in which there are things that are both red and green.

So, all the cases of contradictory perceptions are actually caused by consistent states of affairs. In other words, we really only know what certain bizarre consistent states of affairs look like – they appear contradictory. So, we are not entitled to conclude from these examples that an observable state of affairs that is contradictory would give rise to a perception that is contradictory. One is not entitled to think, on the basis of the examples given, that the conditional ‘If the world is contradictory, it appears contradictory’ is true. Now one may reply to this in the following way: It is certainly true that things are not always as they appear, i.e. reasoning on the basis of appearance is defeasible; however, unless we have positive reasons to the contrary, it is quite reasonable to infer the reality from the fact that things appear that way; and as such we are entitled to believe that if the world were contradictory, it would appear contradictory – as there are no reasons to think that a contradiction would not appear contradictory.

In the next section I will give reasons for thinking that a contradictory state of affairs would not appear contradictory. But that aside for now, I do not think that we are entitled in this instance to the principle that things are as they appear. In my view it is not enough that there is an absence of positive reasons to the contrary. Whenever we use this epistemic rule in everyday life we do so against a background of at least some positive reasons in support of this claim. For example, if we see a shimmering body of water out in the distance, it is reasonable to conclude that there is a shimmering body of water out in the distance in the absence of reasons to the contrary. But this is only

reasonable because we have at least some cases in which we have seen actual bodies of water, and these appear as shimmering when seen from a distance. But in the case at hand, we have no actual contradictions that we know the appearance of. All we have are illusory contradictions. We would not be entitled to conclude that the appearance of a shimmering body of water is a body of water if all we had were the experiences of mirages.

#### **4. The Inconsistent Observer**

What then does an observable contradiction look like? In this section I will show that an observable contradiction will appear consistent. As such, the fact that the observable world appears consistent is no evidence that it is actually consistent. The world may very well be replete with observable contradictions and we would be none the wiser if we were relying solely on observation. I will show that this is the case in two steps. First, I will give a possible explanation for why we might perceive a contradictory state of affairs as consistent. Secondly, I will perform a series of thought experiments that will show why this account must be so. That is to say, I will show that it is impossible to have a contradictory perceptual experience that is due to an observable contradiction.<sup>188</sup>

All observable contradictions result in consistent perceptual experiences.

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<sup>188</sup> There might be some confusion about my use of the term 'observable' in this context. When I refer to an observable contradiction I mean that the contradiction describes things that would otherwise be observable, i.e. macro-sized objects. That is to say, other things being equal we would observe such a thing. But, of course, the point of my argument in this chapter is that other things are not equal.

Why might it be the case that observable contradictions look consistent? How might it be possible for the observable world to be deeply inconsistent and yet appear straightforwardly consistent? To see how this might be so I want to introduce a couple of analogies that will help illustrate the idea. Think for a moment how someone who is cross-eyed might nonetheless see the world as if it were in clear focus. One way to achieve this is to provide this person with a pair of lenses that then corrects the incoming light rays so that the image itself takes on a cross-eyed appearance. But to this person it will look to be in perfect focus.

Another way to ensure that a cross-eyed person will see the world as if it were in perfect focus would be to change the physical properties of the world itself such that the world actually exists in a cross-eyed state i.e. the world naturally appears as out of focus to someone with normal eye sight. Such a person would see a perfectly focused world. Now we can change the story around a little to make it more applicable to our purposes. If the physics of the world were such that naturally the world appeared as out of focus, then this out of focused state would be unobservable, in the sense that it appeared focused, if all observers had their visionary apparatus in a cross-eyed state.

Now for the second analogy. According to quantum mechanics, physical states can exist in a superposition. David Lewis, in his succinct exposition of the concept of superposition, illustrates the idea using the example of a Benzene molecule.<sup>189</sup> Such a molecule can exist in a state that can be described as being a halfway state between

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<sup>189</sup> Lewis, "How Many Lives Has Schrodinger's Cat?" 3-22.

having one arrangement of parts and an alternative arrangement of these parts. Lewis describes the superposition state as follows:

The molecule reacts sometimes as if it had one structure, sometimes as if it had the other. Yet we do not think that a population of molecules is a mixture of the two structures. Neither do we think that each molecule oscillates rapidly between one structure and the other. Neither do we think that each molecule has a betwixt-and-between structure – there is no such thing as a bond midway between double and single. Rather, we think that each molecule is in a superposition: a state objectively indeterminate between the two structures.<sup>190</sup>

Lewis suggests that we “[p]icture the molecule as a double image, as if we drew the two structures on two transparencies and laid them one over the other”.<sup>191</sup> A superposition is made up of branches, where each branch corresponds to one of the indeterminate states of the superposition. States of superposition evolve over time. Indeed, they become entangled with other physical states that interact with them, even states that are of a macro-observable scale. For example, if there is a device that attempts to measure the structure of a benzene molecule that is in a state of superposition, the device itself will go into a state of superposition one branch of which corresponds to a measurement of one branch of the benzene superposition and another branch corresponding to a measurement of the other branch.<sup>192</sup> Any other physical entity that interacts with this measuring device will also go into a corresponding state of superposition.

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<sup>190</sup> Lewis, “How Many Lives Has Schrodinger’s Cat?” 4.

<sup>191</sup> Lewis, “How Many Lives Has Schrodinger’s Cat?” 5.

<sup>192</sup> Although it is important to add here that according to some versions of the orthodox or Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, the measuring device does not go into a superposition. Rather, the device causes the superposition of the molecule to ‘collapse’ and transform into one of the branches.

Why don't we observe these states of superposition?<sup>193</sup> According to one interpretation of quantum mechanics, known as the 'Many-Worlds' interpretation or the 'non-collapse' hypothesis, it is because the observer also goes into a state of superposition as a result of interacting with the superposition of, say, the device measuring the benzene superposition. Each branch of the superposition of the observer has the observer observing one branch of the device measuring one branch of the benzene superposition. Because the observer is in a state of superposition, the states of superposition cannot in turn be observed. This in turn is because there is no branch that corresponds to the observer observing both branches.

Now to the task at hand. I want to suggest that the reason why we might perceive a contradiction as consistent is because we too are in a contradictory state, just as the cross-eyed person observes an outer focused world as focused and an observer in state of superposition observes only a state that is not in superposition. Take for example a staircase in which any given step is both higher than itself and not higher than itself. A possible reason why I observe this as consistent is because I am in a state of contradiction. Specifically the contradiction is that I observe the stair as being at a specific height and I do not observe the stair as being at that height (perhaps, for example, because I observe it at another height). In each of the conjuncts there is a consistent observation of a consistent state of affairs. However, there is not a conjunct in which I am observing both of these. Similarly for a state of affairs in which something

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<sup>193</sup> Again this question only makes sense if you reject those interpretations of quantum mechanics in which there is a collapse of the superposition prior to observation e.g. some versions of the Copenhagen interpretation.

both is moving and not moving. A possible reason why I might observe this as consistent is because I too am in a contradictory state of observing body x in motion and not observing body x in motion. Whilst there is a conjunct for each of the consistent alternative observations there is no conjunct in which I am observing both. Again the same considerations apply to a state of affairs in which something is both red and green. A possible explanation for why I observe this as consistent is because I too am in a contradictory state: I am observing body x as red and I am not observing body x as red (perhaps, for example, because I am observing it as green). Again whilst there is a conjunct for each of these consistent alternative observations there is no conjunct in which I observe both.

Now these are possible explanations for why I observe a contradictory state of affairs as being consistent. But is there any reason for thinking that this explanation is actually true? Is there any reason for thinking that in the event that I observe a contradictory state of affairs that I will be in a contradictory state thus rendering the contents of my perception consistent? Indeed there is. In fact I think that there is good reason for thinking that a contradictory state of affairs can only be perceived as consistent.

To see how this is so, think for a moment about what it is for any consistent state of affairs to be perceived. Take a concrete example: a particular body in a particular place - the pen on my desk, for instance. This is a straightforwardly consistent state of affairs. To perceive it is to be in a causal relationship with this state of affairs. The pen on the desk causes some effect in me the observer, or more accurately a series and cluster of



effects, such as photons colliding with my eye, electrical transmissions through my nervous system to the brain, and so on. All this results in my having a perceptual experience with a specific content – I actually see my pen on the desk. The perception of the state of affairs in question causes certain changes in me. Perception is not a detached affair. Rather, it results in the observer being effected in some way or another.

But these considerations apply equally to the negation of any state of affairs – in the case at hand, my pen not being on the desk. This also is a straightforwardly consistent state of affairs. Moreover, to perceive this state of affairs is to be in a complex causal relationship with the absence of my pen on the desk. This results in my seeing that my pen is not on the desk. As an observer I am effected in an intimate manner by the state of affairs in question.

Now a contradictory state of affairs is merely the conjunction of two or more contrary, but consistent in themselves, states of affairs – some state of affairs and a negation of this. What applies to the contraries singularly, applies to them in conjunction. Just as a state of affairs reaches out and causes change in the observer, and so does the contrary of this state of affairs, in isolation, so too does this happen when these are conjoined. In other words, each of these reaches out to effect the corresponding changes in the observer. Except that in such a case the changes in the observer will be contradictory and this in turn implies the observer will be in a contradictory state. But the conjuncts of the contradictory state of the observer will each be consistent. The reason basically comes down to this: when we have instances in which contradictory states of affairs are

perceived, the observer too is put into contradictory states such that the perceptual contents of each state is consistent.

Take the example at hand. What happens when I observe the contradictory state of affairs of my pen being on the desk and my pen not being on the desk? Well, because my pen is on the desk the usual causal chain that takes place to result in me seeing the pen on the desk will occur. Likewise, because the pen is not on the desk the usual causal chain that takes place to result in me seeing that the pen is not on the desk will also occur. In other words, I will both see the pen on the desk and I will not see the pen on the desk. In other words, I too will be in a state of contradiction, the conjuncts of which will consist of me seeing the pen on the desk and me not seeing the pen on the desk. But each of these entails me seeing only one of these states of affairs. There is no conjunct of me seeing both the pen on the desk and not the pen on the desk. There is only a conjunct of me seeing the pen on the desk and another conjunct of me not seeing the pen on the desk. In other words, I only ever see a consistent state of affairs despite the fact that it is actually a contradictory state of affairs. The principle at work here is something like this: a contradictory state of affairs is merely the conjunction of two consistent states of affairs.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Of course, it is possible for a state of affairs to have contradictory conjuncts: for example,  $(A \& \neg A) \& (B \& \neg B)$ . My point is that these can be resolved down to constituents that are themselves consistent.

That the observer falls into a contradictory state when the percepts are contradictory, with the observer having consistent perceptions, is supported by our experiences of change and modality. Change involves the transition from some state of affairs to its contradictory. This is a fundamental aspect of our temporal experience. At some point in time I perceive the pen on the desk and at a later time I see that the pen is not on the desk. In general, at time  $t_n$ ,  $\alpha$  is the case and at a later time  $t_{n+k}$ ,  $\neg\alpha$  is the case. When we perceive  $\alpha$  at  $t_n$  the perception is in a specific state  $p$ . When we perceive  $\neg\alpha$  at  $t_{n+k}$  the perception is in some other state that is  $\neg p$ . What we see is that when the state of affairs is contradictory the observer goes into contradictory states. The result of this is that the observer only ever has perceptions with consistent contents.

Our experience of modality also furnishes us with reasons for thinking that the perception of a contradictory state of affairs results in the observer being contradictory which in turn results in there being perceptions with consistent contents. When we perceive some state of affairs, say the pen on the desk, we know that it is possible that the pen not be on the desk. We also seem to know how this possibility would make a difference to the world at large if it were so. Indeed, we know that it will make a difference to the observer itself and that this will be different from our perception of the state of affairs of the pen being on the desk. That it is possible for it to be some other way implies that in contrary circumstances it is some other way – the observer is in some contrary state. Yet in each of these contradictory circumstances the actual contents of the perception are consistent.

Before raising an important objection to the above analysis I wish to raise a more minor point about how to correctly describe the state in which the observer finds itself according to the account I have presented. I have chosen to say that the observer is in a contradictory state. But might it not be more appropriate to say that the perception of the contradiction actually results in the duplication of the observer (i.e. the splitting of the observer into two different observers)? The issue at stake here is how observers should be individuated. Now I am inclined to think that the resulting product of perceiving a contradiction is a single observer in a contradictory state. However, even if it were the case that the product of perceiving a contradiction is the duplication of the observer this will not undermine my position. This is because it will still be the case that each of these resulting observers will only perceive a consistent state of affairs (each corresponding to a perception of one of the conjuncts of the contradiction) despite the fact that the perception is of a contradictory state of affairs. In other words, the contradictory will still look consistent.

##### **5. Do the Conjuncts of a Contradiction Act Independently?**

Now I wish to raise an important objection to the argument in the above section. In this analysis I assume that the conjuncts of the contradiction act independently of one another on the observer. As such, the observer only ever sees what he would if he were looking at a straight forwardly consistent state of affairs, much like what happens when experiencing change and modality. But might it not be the case that the conjuncts of a contradiction interact with one another and combine forces, so to speak, and give a unified causal impact on the observer. The observer would thereby not be forced into a

contradictory state and would see something quite distinct compared to a straightforwardly consistent state of affairs. For example, if observing a section of a staircase that is both higher than itself and not higher than itself, the conjuncts of the contradictory state of affairs interact and produce in the observer a perception that has the contents of the Penrose figure – quite distinct compared to the perception of a staircase that behaves consistently. Or if one were observing a body that is both in motion and not in motion, the conjuncts of the contradiction interact to produce in the observer the visionary experience of the ‘waterfall’ effect.<sup>195</sup> Again this is recognizably different from a perception of a body that is either moving or not moving. As such we would be able to recognize an inconsistent state of affairs. In other words, the fact that contradictory percepts cause the observer to be in contradictory states across time and possible worlds is not a conclusive reason for thinking that they will do so when they relate to one another as an explicit contradiction.

It might be thought at this point that there are positive reasons for thinking that indeed the conjuncts of a contradiction do not act independently but instead interact with one another. After all if they can interact with the observer, then why can they not interact with one another? What is required here is a reason that explains why the conjuncts of a contradiction cannot interact with each other, that at the same time explains why the conjuncts can interact with the observer.

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<sup>195</sup> Although for both such visual experiences the having of them does not imply that a contradiction is being observed as they can, as was argued in the previous section, be generated by consistent states of affairs.

It is tempting here to refer to the behavior of a range of common conjunctions as positive reason for thinking that conjuncts do interact with each other. An example that has been raised in the literature is the state of affairs: “Greg is at the piano and there is an opaque shield surrounding the piano”.<sup>196</sup> It is clear in this example that the conjuncts interact with one another in such a manner that they issue forth in a unified causal impact on the observer. In this case the unified impact looks exactly like one of the conjuncts – specifically ‘there is an opaque shield surrounding the piano’. So, from this example (indeed many examples of this sort) we can see that the conjuncts interact to provide a unified impact on the observer that does not result in a contradictory observer. The question is whether conjunctions of this sort are good reason for believing that contradictions behave in a similar manner.

I think that there are reasons for thinking that such conjuncts will not show this. First, it is clear that such cases end up producing a perception with consistent contents anyway (as with the case of Greg at the piano surrounded by an opaque wall). As such they will not do for the purposes of Priest’s argument from perception. The argument from perception requires examples where a contradiction produces a perception the contents of which are contradictory. Secondly, cases of this sort are consistent states of affairs and so there is no reason to think that the lessons we can draw from these will apply to conjunctions that are contradictory. After all, presumably the reason for why the conjuncts of a contradiction fail to interact is because they are contradictory and not because the state of affairs can be correctly expressed as a conjunction.

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<sup>196</sup> Beall, “Is the Observable World Consistent,” 115.

But more importantly I think that there are positive reasons for thinking that the conjuncts of a contradictory state of affairs will not interact, but rather will act on the surrounding world in a manner that is independent, just as they would if taken on their own outside of a contradiction. There are at least two reasons why situations or things may fail to interact with one another. First, they may fail to interact because they are too isolated from one another in the sense of being too far away or there being a too great a distance between them, in some sense. This is the reason behind why contradictory states of affairs that are at different points in time or space may fail to interact. But another reason why they may fail to interact is because they are too close to one another. In other words they miss each other because they are 'right under each other's nose', or 'too close to home', so to speak (for example, we tend to lack perceptual experiences of our own eyes). It is this latter reason that I will show is the explanation for why the conjuncts of a contradiction do not interact with one another. In this regard I think that it is easy to be misled by the formalism in which contradictions are expressed. To see this it is useful to compare contradictions with other sorts of states of affairs that can be expressed as a conjunction. The two sorts of states of affairs I have in mind here are those that can be expressed as the conjunctions  $\alpha \wedge \beta$  and  $\alpha \wedge \alpha$ .

Let's begin with a comparison with the former of these types. Contradictions are expressed most often in the form of a conjunction:  $\alpha \wedge \neg \alpha$ . It is easy for this formalism to generate the picture of a contradiction being a unity of two distinct parts. This sort of state of affairs can be expressed as  $\alpha \wedge \beta$ . It seems that for many conjunctive states of

affairs this is the correct way to characterize them. Indeed, for the example at hand (Greg is at the piano and an opaque shield surrounds the piano) this is how the state of affairs is structured. In such a situation we have a unity that has distinct parts. Moreover it is the fact that they are distinct parts that enables them to interact, affect one another, and then act in a unified manner upon the observer. The notion of causal interaction presupposes two distinct entities between which the interaction can take place.

But it is this kind of distinction that is not the case for that particular type of conjunction known as the contradiction. To be guided by the superficial appearance of the formalism in this case is to be led astray. To understand a contradiction to be anything like a unified structure with distinct parts is incorrect. The fact is that the conjunction  $\alpha \wedge \neg \alpha$  is just not like the conjunction  $\alpha \wedge \beta$ . What then is a contradiction like? I suggest that it is more accurately compared to conjunctions of the form  $\alpha \wedge \alpha$ . In other words, contradictions are more like single whole entities. Indeed, they are single whole entities – albeit inconsistent entities. Just as it is nonsense to ask how the conjuncts of the conjunction ‘the pen is on the desk and the pen is on the desk’ interact it is nonsense to ask how the conjuncts of the conjunction ‘the pen is on the desk and it is not the case that the pen is on the desk’ interact. The conjuncts of the former are not distinct entities that can interact. There is not the metaphysical space between them – they are the same in every respect - one and the same entity. Likewise for the latter – the conjuncts are not two distinct entities. Rather, they are one and the same entity. There is not the metaphysical space between them to interact - they are one and the same in every respect. The difference between the two types of conjunction is often expressed in saying



that  $\alpha \wedge \alpha$  involves an identity whilst  $\alpha \wedge \neg \alpha$  involves a contradiction. However, I do not think that it is misleading to say that they both involve an identity, although the latter case is a contradictory identity.

It is this fact that was understood by the two great metaphysicians of contradiction, namely Aristotle and Hegel. Despite the fact that these two philosophers disagreed about whether the world did or indeed could contain contradictions, they both agreed on the nature of such an entity. Take Aristotle's classic statement of the impossibility of contradictions:

... this ... principle is the most secure of all principles ... 'It is impossible for the same thing at the same time both to be-in and not to be-in the same thing in the same respect'.<sup>197</sup>

The importance of this formulation of the law of non-contradiction is that it suggests that for a contradiction there is no room for separating out the conjuncts. In all aspects they come together. They are of the same space, same time, and the same respect. They are not distinct parts of a larger unified whole in any relevant sense. Hegel also insists on such an understanding of contradiction. Take his famous formulation of becoming as the contradictory state of being and nothingness:

Both are the same, becoming, and although they differ so in direction they interpenetrate and paralyse each other. The one is ceasing-to-be: being passes over into nothing, but nothing is equally the opposite of itself, transition into being, coming-to-be. This coming-to-be is the other direction: nothing passes over into being, but being equally sublates itself and is rather transition into nothing, is ceasing-to-be. They are not reciprocally sublated – the one does not

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<sup>197</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 88.

sublate the other externally – but each sublates itself in itself and is in its own self the opposite of itself.<sup>198</sup>

For Hegel becoming is not a unified structure with the parts of being and nothing. Being does not interact with nothing to bring it about that it is being, and vice versa (i.e. they do not sublata externally). Rather, it is being in as much as it is nothing and nothing in as much as it is being (i.e. the sublation is internal to the conjunct). Their distinction is the result of their identity and vice versa. Being is nothing and nothing is being. They are the same in all respects and by being the same in all respects they are distinct. Although it is sometimes useful to picture a contradiction as two parts of a unified whole (as Lewis suggests we picture superposition – two transparencies laid one on top of the other), this is strictly incorrect. To say that the pen is on the desk and that the pen is not on the desk is to say that in as much as the pen is on the desk it is not on the desk. It fails to be on the desk in virtue of being on the desk and vice versa. There is no separation metaphysically speaking between the conjuncts. But that being the case one wonders what basis there could be for the conjuncts to causally interact in the relevant sense. They do not seem to be two distinct entities in the required sense. One is the other already, so to speak.<sup>199</sup>

So, we have before us then a reason that explains both why the conjuncts of a contradiction cannot interact with one another and why the conjuncts can interact with

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<sup>198</sup> Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 106. Hegel's use of the word *Aufhebung* (here translated using the word 'sublate') further highlights the point being made here. Hegel intends the word to mean that the thing that sublata is simultaneously canceling, raising, and preserving – these being one and the same act of sublation.

<sup>199</sup> Clearly I am rejecting the idea that something can be self-causing. I think that this idea is metaphysical absurd. Whereas I can make sense of the idea of a necessary being, i.e. a being that exists necessarily, I cannot make sense of a being that is self-causing. I hold that it is part of the meaning of causation that the two entities interacting are distinct from one another.

the observer. They cannot interact with each other because they are one and the same entity and so are not distinct entities in the relevant sense. The conjunction that describes the contradictory state of affairs is more like  $\alpha\wedge\alpha$ . As such there is no sense in which they can interact – interaction of the relevant sort presupposes two distinct entities. They can interact with the observer because there is here the requisite distinction between the entities involved. The conjunction that describes the conjunct of the contradiction and the state of the observer is of the form  $\alpha\wedge\beta$ .

As such, the conjuncts of the contradiction act in a way that is analogous to the way in which they would act if they occurred at different times or in alternate possible worlds. In other words, they act independently of each other – as if the other were not present. And of course we know how contradictories do behave from our experiences of change and modality. They act to cause the observer to go into states that are contradictory such that each of these states of the observer perceives a consistent state of affairs each of which corresponds to one of these contradictories.

Now it might be thought at this point that understanding contradictory states of affairs to be single whole entities in this manner will raise a difficulty for my solution to the problem of perception. Consider this: surely I have made it inexplicable as to why a contradictory state of affairs cannot enter into the single consciousness of an observer and be registered as contradictory state of affairs as opposed to a consistent state of affairs. If a contradiction is a single whole entity, then why is this not possible? The answer to this question lies in realizing that perception of the contradictory state of

affairs does enter into the single consciousness of the observer. It is just that the observer is in a contradictory state as well, and so, the single whole consciousness of the observer is also in a contradictory state of being conscious of a contradiction and not being conscious of this. The consciousness is a single whole entity but like the state of affairs being perceived, it is contradictory too.

Now one might wish to press this objection as follows: how is it that a unified state of affairs produces a disunified state of perception? My reply: why describe the state of perception as disunified? Presumably it is described this way because it is contradictory. But I see no reason to describe a contradictory state of affairs as being disunified. Indeed, my point throughout this section of the chapter has been that it is its unity that makes the state of affairs contradictory. There is no breaking up of the consciousness of the observer into parts. Rather, the consciousness of the observer is rendered contradictory. There is an important distinction to be made between disunity and inconsistency.

Let us conclude this section by applying the above analysis to the specific examples cited by Priest and depicted by Escher.<sup>200</sup> The above analysis shows that an observable contradiction will always appear consistent – that the perceptual contents of an observation of a contradiction will be identical to the perceptual contents of an

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<sup>200</sup> I have argued above in section 3 that as a matter of fact the examples cited by Priest are illusory and so not actual contradictory states of affairs. My point below is that on the condition that they were contradictory (contrary to the facts), then this is how we should think of them.

observation of one of the conjuncts. This follows from the fact that contradictions are infectious. They entangle with everything they interact with by passing on their contradictory nature. To observe a staircase with each stair being both higher than itself and not higher than itself results in the observer going into a contradictory state which in each conjunct the observer sees a consistent state of affairs: one with the observer seeing a given stair at a given height; the other with the observer seeing that stair at a different height. The same applies to the other examples cited by Priest: for an object moving and not moving there is the contradictory state of affairs of an observer seeing the object moving and the observer not seeing the object moving; for an object that is both red and green there is the contradictory state of affairs of the observer seeing the object red and the observer seeing the object green. But each of the conjuncts in which a perception is taking place is perfectly consistent.

All this shows us that the commentary Esher has made on his lithograph, *Belvedere*, is incorrect. He has misinterpreted his own piece of art. Whatever the reason for the distracted and puzzled demeanor of the characters in the lithograph it is not because of the contradictory nature of their world. What they would see is perfectly consistent and no different than if there were no contradictions in their world. Perhaps the boy is just very interested in cubes and so the prisoner makes no impression on him (which would make him a somewhat insensitive lad). Perhaps the man on the ladder is taken in by the great scenery and this is what distracts him from the prisoner. Perhaps the people in this world are indifferent to the plight of those who suffer – who knows?

We may conclude then that the argument from perception is unsound. One is not entitled to conclude that the world is consistent on the basis that it appears consistent. This is for similar reasons why we are not entitled to conclude that the biological world has been designed on the basis that it appears designed: just as there are alternative explanations as to why an organism might appear to be designed other than the fact that it is (natural selection, for example), there are alternative explanations to why the world appears to be consistent other than the fact that it is consistent, specifically that it is inconsistent. As such, we have further reason for thinking that there is no good reason for rejecting the claim that reality is trivial in addition to the insights gained in chapter 3.

## Chapter 6: Zeno's Arrow Paradox and the Contradictory Nature of the World

### 1. Introduction

This chapter has two purposes. First, this chapter is a continuation of the previous chapter. In the previous chapter I argued that appearance of consistency does not entitle us to conclude that the observable world is consistent, as a contradictory state of affairs will appear consistent. In this chapter I give positive reasons for actually believing that the empirical world at an observable scale is in fact contradictory. Secondly, the argument presented in this chapter can perhaps be interpreted as contributing to the case for trivialism. The argument itself falls far short of trivialism – at most it demonstrates that every physical state of affairs is contradictory, and so it represents a defense of what might be termed near trivialism or physical trivialism.<sup>201</sup> But given that trivialism entails many things that we are surprised about (such as the proposition that every physical state of affairs is contradictory), having independent reason for the truth of such things obviously contributes to the case for the general plausibility of trivialism.

I begin the argument by outlining a recent dialetheic analysis of Zeno's Paradox of the Arrow. I show that this needs to be extended in order for it to overcome further

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<sup>201</sup> There are other arguments that one can construct defending a sort of 'near or physical trivialism' (as opposed to trivialism proper). Graham Priest suggests using the Sorites Paradox in this way (*Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, 67). Given how prolific vague predicates are, one can use this paradox to provide further independent evidence for the truth of a great many of the assertions of the trivialist. For example, one could argue that an elephant is a chair in the following way. Take any elephant. If I take a single molecule of the elephant and replace it with a single molecule from a chair, then it is still an elephant. Do this sufficiently many times and we have a chair (observation will confirm this). But given the validity of modus ponens and the fact that sufficiently small changes do not transform an elephant into a chair (both plausible assumptions), the chair must also be an elephant.

difficulties. In particular, I show that this dialethic solution to the Arrow Paradox generates its own version of the Arrow Paradox. I argue that the only way to avoid this new version of the Arrow Paradox involves postulating that motion is deeply contradictory. How contradictory? Well for a body moving from point A to point B, the body is located at every point in the interval at every instant of the journey. This obviously sounds ridiculous, but I will show that it follows neatly from some seemingly plausible premises.

## 2. The Orthodox Account of Motion

In his *In Contradiction* Priest begins his dialethic analysis of motion by raising some problems for what he refers to as the orthodox account of motion. The orthodox account of motion is simply this: “motion consists *merely* in the occupation of different places at different times.”<sup>202</sup> Stated most clearly by Bertrand Russell, Priest refers to this as the orthodox account of motion, not because it is found to be absolutely uncontroversial and free of any conceptual difficulties, but because it is considered the received view. Priest quotes Russell in order to clarify the orthodox account, and it is worth repeating here:

Motion consists in the fact that, by the occupation of a place at a time, a correlation is established between places and times; when different times, throughout any period however short, are correlated with different places, there is motion; when different times throughout some period however short, are all correlated with the same place, there is rest.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 173. Italics are Priest’s. Priest also presents an analysis of motion in Priest, “Inconsistencies in Motion,” 339-46.

<sup>203</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 173.



Priest sums this up nicely when he states "... for something to be in motion at an instant is simply that it is found at different places at arbitrarily close instants."<sup>204</sup>

### 3. Zeno's Paradox of the Arrow

Priest raises a couple of objections to the orthodox account of motion. The first is that the orthodox account of motion entails that there is no instantaneous state of motion. Rather, motion is a relational phenomenon between the positions of a body at different instants of time. On the orthodox account there is no difference between a body at rest at some instant and a body in motion at some instant – they are both located at a single position. I will not examine Priest's discussion of this problem here, mainly because I believe that his solution is more than adequate given the assumption that contradictions are possible.<sup>205</sup> The second objection Priest raises to the orthodox account of motion, what I refer to as the problem of progression, is derived from one of Zeno's paradoxes of motion, specifically the arrow paradox.<sup>206</sup> Priest invites the reader to imagine the point of an arrow that is in motion from point  $x$  to point  $y$ . At any instant, say  $t_0$ , the arrow does not advance at all on its journey from  $x$  to  $y$ . It is at one point in space and one point only. The progress made at this instant in time is zero. But the temporal interval of the journey between  $x$  and  $y$  is just made up of the aggregate of such instants. Since no progress can be made at any instant of the journey, it seems that no progress can be made over the whole temporal interval from  $x$  to  $y$ . Priest puts it nicely when he asks

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<sup>204</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 173.

<sup>205</sup> For a critique of this aspect of Priest's dialethic analysis of motion and change see Littmann, "A Critique of Dialetheism," 59-100.

<sup>206</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 174-5.

“How can a going somewhere be composed of an aggregate of going nowhere?”<sup>207</sup> It would appear that it cannot, and so the orthodox account of motion seems inadequate. There must be more to motion than just being at different places at different times.

Now for some initial objections. To begin with, there are many who do not find Russell’s orthodox account of motion at all unintuitive. That motion is merely the occupation of different places at different times is felt by such a person to be intuitively acceptable. This account, of course, denies that there is such a thing as an instantaneous state of motion. Motion is merely a relational concept, i.e. a relation between points in space and points in time. It is clear that the Paradox of the Arrow assumes that there is such a thing as an instantaneous state of motion. Without such an assumption the paradox could not get off the ground. The problem is generated because we note that a body is not making any progress at an instant. The obvious response to this is to say that the reason why it is not making progress at that instant is because it is not moving at that instant. But this is not to say that it is stationary at this instant. At that instant it is neither moving nor not moving, and this is because motion is not defined at an instant but across intervals of time. For a supporter of the orthodox account, the motion is to be found across time and not at a single instant. Unless someone finds the notion that an instantaneous state of motion is required to render a theory of motion intuitive, it is clear that the arguments proposed by Priest and myself will have no force at all. I take it as an assumption that there is such a thing as an instantaneous state of motion, and that the task of the philosopher is to analyze what this is.

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<sup>207</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 175.

It might also be thought that the kind of objection expressed by the Arrow Paradox involves an instance of the fallacy of composition – the fallacy that a whole has to have the same properties as its parts. As such, this retort to Priest’s analysis would go something as follows. Just because the parts (i.e. instants) that make up the temporal interval have the property of the particle in motion not making progress, it does not follow that the whole interval (i.e. the aggregate of the instants or the interval) also has this property.

It is undoubtedly true that reasoning that the whole interval has the property of no-progression, because the individual instants that make it up have this property, fails to be a deductively valid inference. However, this is not how Priest is reasoning. All he is saying is that it is *inexplicable* how progress could be made over the entire interval when no progress is made at any of its parts. This is certainly not a knockdown argument, but it does undermine the orthodox account of motion to the extent that it is unable to account for how a moving body can be in different places at different times.

With regards to solving the problem of progression Priest warns against turning to mathematical analysis.<sup>208</sup> It is tempting with regard to this objection to refer to contemporary understanding of the length of a set of points in terms of a measure function. It is no doubt true that a finite number or even a countably infinite number of

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<sup>208</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 175.

points on the real line will give a measure function of zero, while if the points form an interval on the continuum, say  $[x,y]$ , then the measure function will be equal to  $y-x$ . That one can prove this mathematically does not remove the philosophical perplexity generated by the problem. The question remains: How is this possible? The mathematics only shows that it is possible – not how it is possible. It does not illuminate the mechanism behind this.

Now there are some obvious responses of a methodological nature to this point that really need to be mentioned – although I do not intend to answer them in any definitive sense in this thesis. Take, for example, a thinker such as Adolf Grünbaum.<sup>209</sup> I suspect that Grünbaum would consider this question (i.e. the question, ‘How is progress possible given that all there is to motion is being in one place at one time?’) to be a kind of pseudo-question that is generated by false presuppositions. This is a common strategy of Grünbaum’s in his analyses of various philosophical issues raised by scientific theories. As an example of a pseudo question he gives the following: ‘When did you stop beating your wife?’<sup>210</sup> Under some circumstances this is quite a sensible question, but when it is asked of a man who has never beaten his wife, it is a pseudo-question, as it is based on an assumption that does not apply in the circumstances (specifically, that there was a time when he did beat his wife). Another example is an issue raised by Descartes in his *Meditation III* (and indeed more recently by thinkers such as

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<sup>209</sup> See Grünbaum, *Modern Science and Zeno’s Paradoxes*, 133. See also Grünbaum, *Philosophical Problems of Space and Time*.

<sup>210</sup> Grünbaum, “The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology,” 102.

Swinburne<sup>211</sup>) with regard to the persistence of material objects through time.<sup>212</sup> Theists such as Descartes have thought that an external cause (God) is required in order to answer the question ‘Why do physical objects not disappear into nothingness?’ Grünbaum points out that the question is a pseudo-question because it is based on the empirically false presupposition that the natural state of things is nothingness, and so any deviations from this state of nothingness require explanation. But, according to Grünbaum, our most empirically well-confirmed scientific theories take matter and energy conservation to be the natural state of things. For Grünbaum, the question of what constitutes a natural state of affairs is a purely empirical issue and not one to be determined by *a priori* means.<sup>213</sup>

Grünbaum might very well take the question of this section to be a pseudo-question for similar reasons. Priest has generated a pseudo-problem based on the mistaken presupposition that motion *cannot* be a certain way if progress on a journey is to occur. But for Grünbaum, the properties that motion must have in order for progress to occur, is something to be discovered by actually studying the empirical world of moving objects. Our best account shows that these are not required – as far as we can tell, bodies move in the way our theories describe, and there are no empirical reasons to think otherwise.

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<sup>211</sup> Swinburne, *Is there a God?*, 48-55.

<sup>212</sup> Grünbaum, “The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology,” 101-2.

<sup>213</sup> Grünbaum, “The Poverty of Theistic Cosmology,” 586-90.

I am not going to settle this subtle methodological issue in this thesis, suffice to say that if Grünbaum is right then a whole slab of traditional methods of philosophy have to be tossed out. Grünbaum belongs to that relatively new tradition that was dubbed 'scientific philosophy' by Reichenbach.<sup>214</sup> Reichenbach and Grünbaum might be right, but for now I will side with the predominant historical tradition and assume that *a priori* philosophizing is legitimate in this context.

#### 4. Priest's Hegelean Solution to the Paradox of the Arrow

Given the problems that the orthodox account faces, Priest considers an alternative account that was formulated by Hegel.<sup>215</sup> Hegel describes his account of motion as follows:

[Motion] itself is contradiction's immediate existence. Something moves not because at one moment of time it is here and at another there, but because at one and the same moment it is here and not here ...<sup>216</sup>

The state of motion is a state of contradictory positions at any one instant. The reason Hegel gives for thinking that motion is a contradictory state is that it is impossible to localize a moving body.<sup>217</sup> Hegel thinks that it is impossible to localize a moving body because of the peculiar nature of the continuum. Distinct points in space and time merge into one another. In addition, space and time are a contradictory blend of the continuous and the discrete.<sup>218</sup> But whatever the reason for why a moving body is in a contradictory

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<sup>214</sup> Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*.

<sup>215</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 175-9.

<sup>216</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 175. See Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 440.

<sup>217</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 176-7.

<sup>218</sup> I have some sympathy with the Hegelean explanation for the contradictory nature of motion (assuming, of course, that there is an intrinsic state of motion). See Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Section

state, Priest argues that by hypothesizing that this is the case, one is able propose a theory of motion that is not vulnerable to the objection just considered. In other words, the Hegelean account of motion can explain how a body makes progress on a journey i.e. it can explain how a moving body can be at different places at different times.

Priest proposes what he calls the 'spread hypothesis' to describe the Hegelean state of motion:

A body cannot be localised to a point it is occupying at an instant of time, but only to those points it occupies in a small neighbourhood of that time.<sup>219</sup>

Priest gives a more rigorous formulation of the spread hypothesis mainly so that he can show how the Hegelean account of motion relates to the canonical idea that motion can be represented by functional equations i.e. the idea that motion is a change of place with time ( $x = f(t)$ ). I will not go into this more precise formulation, as it is not crucial to the points that I wish to argue. But the central idea of the spread hypothesis is this: A point particle in motion at time  $t$  occupies a certain point  $x$ . But at an instant very close to  $t$ , say  $t'$ , it occupies a point  $x'$  (where  $x \neq x'$ ). According to the spread hypothesis it is impossible to localize a body over very small intervals of time between, say,  $t$  and  $t'$ . The location of the particle at time  $t$  is  $x$ , but it is equally located at time  $t$  at the position it is in at  $t'$ . As such, the particle at  $t$  is equally at  $x$  and at  $x'$ , equally at  $x$  and somewhere else

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2, Chapter 1. The way I see it, the individual points of the continuum are contradictory objects. Specifically they have contradictory extensions. Postulating this makes sense, for example, of that property of the continuum referred to as density. That a point has contradictory extensions explains why there is no next point in a continuum, or that between any two points there is an infinity of others. This is because such a point has no unique beginning or end boundary to mark it off from the next point - they blend together, so to speak.

<sup>219</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 177.

i.e. not at  $x$ . It is important to emphasize that the spread of contradictory positions of which Priest envisages motion to consist will be over a very small region of space and over a very small interval of time. These regions and intervals are hypothesized by Priest to be on the scale of Planck's Constant (a scale of  $10^{-43}$ ) and so it is physically impossible to observe them.

Given the Hegelean account of motion it is now possible to see how a body can make progress on a journey. At each instant the body does make progress. This is because at each instant it occupies a spread of points – it both is at a particular point and not at that particular point i.e. it is at another point. Now if it makes progress at a single instant, it makes progress during the aggregate of instants. It is important to make it clear here that Priest is not denying that motion involves being in different places at different times. That motion involves this is patently obvious. All he is saying is that this is not sufficient in order for motion to occur, that something more is required. Priest is providing an explanation for how a moving body can be in different places at different times. For Priest, you achieve different places at different times by being at different places at the same time.

And so the Hegelean account of motion, at least for Priest, has distinct advantages over the orthodox account.<sup>220</sup> It would seem that this analysis can be applied to other forms of

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<sup>220</sup> Of course, it would be quite acceptable to take an agnostic position here and conclude that motion is ultimately mysterious. That a person finds the orthodox account of motion unacceptable, and for the reasons given by Priest, does not imply that they should accept the



change besides motion, which themselves are of a continuous nature. Changes of this sort seem to require the existence of contradictory states of affairs.<sup>221</sup>

### 5. A New Version of the Paradox of the Arrow

For the rest of this chapter I will assume that the critique Priest offers of the orthodox account of motion is sound and that he is correct in claiming that in order to solve the problem of progression one is required to hypothesize, along with Hegel, that the state of motion is a contradictory one. However, it is not clear to me that Priest can avoid isolating the contradictions inherent in motion to unobservable levels on the scale of Planck's Constant. To see why this is so, it is important to realize that Priest's version of the Hegelean account of motion suffers from its own problems. Indeed, it seems that this problem can be understood as an alternative interpretation of the Arrow Paradox of Zeno.

To see this consider the following. Priest draws an inference from,

(A) Advance is made at an instant,

to

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Hegelean account. If a person were committed to the law of non-contradiction (i.e. that contradictions are false), then the Hegelean account would be at least as unacceptable as the orthodox account. It must be understood however that the success of the Hegelean account of motion in solving the problem of progression is part of the cumulative case for dialetheism. There are also alternative accounts of motion on offer. One example is Tooley, "In Defence of the Existence of States of Motion," 225-54. According to Tooley a state of motion is an instantaneous theoretical (i.e. unobservable) property of a moving object. Priest, rejects Tooley's account, among other reasons, because it fails to solve the arrow paradox – i.e. it cannot explain how a body makes progress at an instant (see Priest, *In contradiction*, 297).

<sup>221</sup> Priest also provides a dialethic account of temporal change – see *In Contradiction*, 213-20.

(B) Advance is made at the aggregate of instants.

Even if (A) is true given the spread hypothesis, I do not think that this entails (B). It is possible to reformulate the problem of progression so that it affects the Hegelean account of motion defended by Priest. To see why this is so consider the following. Take again a point object, say the tip of an arrow, in motion from point  $x$  to point  $y$ . Assume that the distance from  $x$  to  $y$  is some observable distance (and for observable objects such as the tip of an arrow this is the normal state of affairs). According to the spread hypothesis, at each instant this object occupies a spread of points. Moreover, this spread is going to be much smaller (given that it is comparable to Planks constant in magnitude) than the total distance between  $x$  and  $y$ . Indeed the entire journey from  $x$  to  $y$  will be made up of these very small spreads of contradictory positions. At each instant, as the point object journeys from  $x$  to  $y$ , its location is spread over a different series of points as each instant passes. There is a series of different spreads as the point object makes its way over the much larger distance from  $x$  to  $y$ . Now given Priest's definition of motion as being both at the same point and not the same point at the same time; and given his analysis of this in terms of the spread hypothesis; and that observable journey's are much larger than the spreads hypothesized by Priest, observable motion amounts to this: *different spreads at different times*.

Notice that this understanding of observable motion (i.e. motion is different spreads at different times) is not relevantly different from the orthodox definition of motion (i.e. motion is different places at different times) in the sense that it is structurally identical. The only difference is that in the account offered by Priest, 'places' means spreads (i.e.

contradictory points), whereas by 'places' the orthodox account means points. Given this, the problem with Priest's analysis of the motion of the point object is that one can construct a new problem with its progression that has some similarities with one implied by the orthodox account of motion: *how does the point object progress from one spread at one instant to another spread at a later instant?* After all, at each instant the point object only occupies the points in this spread and no other points. So, at this instant it does not make any progress on the journey. At each instant a point object is at a specific spread of points and only at that spread of points. There is nothing more to the motion of the point object than the contradictory spread of points. But if there is no advance at any particular instant, how can the object be at another spread of points at a later instant? The temporal interval of the entire journey from x to y is just the aggregate of these instants of no progression. How can a series of no progressions add up to a progression?

Notice that this version of the Arrow Paradox is different from the one that Priest seeks to solve with his Hegelean account of motion and the spread hypothesis. The problem he seeks to solve is 'How does the point object make any progress at all'. The answer he provides is that it makes progress *simpliciter* by being at different points at the same time. The problem I am raising for Priest's account is slightly different: 'How does the point object make progress from one given point/spread to another given point/spread?' This is a new version of the Arrow Paradox. Whether this was what Zeno intended we will never know (perhaps he was drawing our attention to both forms of the paradox).

As with the orthodox version of the problem, it is no solution to the Hegelean version to turn to mathematics. It is tempting to say that the rules of arithmetic explain how the aggregate of spreads add up to the whole journey. All we do is sum the length of the spread at each instant and this will give the entire length of the journey from  $x$  to  $y$ . But this arithmetical procedure does not so much explain how the progression occurs as it encodes the idea of the progression occurring. The mystery still remains – how does the progression occur?

And again, the fallacy of composition has not been committed in the above explication of this paradox – it might be that the whole journey can occur despite its parts not being equal to it in length. It is just that it is inexplicable how this occurs, and this inexplicability counts against Priest's analysis of the Hegelean account of motion.

## **6. The Arrow Paradox and the Ontology of Points**

Before proposing a solution to the Hegelean version of the problem of progression, I wish to reflect on the implications of this version of the arrow paradox for an obvious solution to the original version. For those who hope to resist the move to a Hegelean account of motion, it may be tempting to reject what is thought to be a key premise in the arrow paradox. The crucial premise at stake is that space and time are composed of points of zero size.

It is clear that as the paradox is usually formulated, it is taken for granted that space and time are composed of points of zero size. The paradox asks us to consider the state of a moving point object (an object of zero size) at an instant (a time point of zero size). According to the orthodox account, this point object is at one point in space (a structure of zero size). And of course, since the size of this point is zero, the progress made at that instant is zero.

Now it should be emphasized that the assumption that space and time are composed of points of zero size is hardly an arbitrary assumption. There are good reasons to think that this is actually the case. Priest, for example, accepts the ontology of points partly because he thinks that much of our best science appears to presuppose this in its use of the real number line to model physical reality.<sup>222</sup> Of course, many will dispute the use of scientific theories to support the claim that the continuum is a real entity on the grounds that it demands, unreasonably, that we are ontologically committed to all the items in our theories.<sup>223</sup> Of course, it is possible to mount a case for thinking that this is required. However, what I wish to show now is that the arrow paradox does not rely on the assumption that space and time are composed of points of zero size. On the contrary, even if space and time were composed of intervals, or spatial atoms, or chronons, some version of the arrow paradox can be generated if the orthodox account of motion is adhered to.

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<sup>222</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 162. Priest also accepts the ontology of points because he thinks that the alternative, that space and time are composed of intervals, has undesirable philosophical consequences, specifically that it seems to imply that there are no states of change.

<sup>223</sup> William Lane Craig, for instance, argues that non-realist accounts of mathematical and scientific theories and their use of the continuum are to be preferred given the counter-intuitive behavior of really instantiated infinite collections – see Craig, “Graham Oppy on Infinity,” 224-7.

This conclusion follows directly from the analysis of the spread hypothesis above. As shown, this hypothesis suffers from its own version of the arrow paradox. A spread, as Priest defines it, is simply an interval of contradictory positions at any instant. As such, a spread is not relevantly different from an interval or chronon or any other sort of non-degenerate object. And so a version of the orthodox account of motion that presupposes that space and time are structured in such a manner will also suffer from a version of the arrow paradox. To see this consider the following thought experiment. Take an interval-sized object that is in motion at some interval of time. According to the orthodox account of motion (given our new assumptions this will be different spatial intervals/atoms at different time intervals/chronons) at any one interval/chronon of time an object is at one interval/atom of space only. And so the object makes no progress at that interval/chronon of time – it is just where it is located and nowhere else. But then how can the object be at other intervals/atoms of space at later intervals/chronons of time? The entire time taken for a journey is merely the sum of all its sub-intervals. But if the progress made at each of these is zero, then it seems that the aggregate of these non-progressions should also be zero.

What follows from this brief analysis is that the arrow paradox is not generated because of any assumptions made about the composition of space and time. Rather, the paradox is intrinsic to the orthodox account of motion. What generates the paradox is that motion is treated in a discrete or atomistic manner i.e. motion occurs one 'unit' of space for

every 'unit' of time. Whether these units are of zero size or not (or whether or not the interval is a consistent collection or not) is beside the point.

### **7. A Solution to the New Paradox of the Arrow**

That issue aside, I will now return to the version of the arrow paradox that undermines the spread hypothesis. The obvious and simplest solution to this problem is to hypothesize that the spread of the point object, that is its state of motion, is equal to the interval from  $x$  to  $y$  of the entire journey. This is very much an extension of the way in which Priest solves the problem of progression as it relates to the orthodox account of motion: achieve progression by having the point object located at more than a single point. But it is not enough to have the location of the object at a small spread of contradictory positions if the journey is much larger. Rather, it must be the case that the point object is located in a spread of contradictory points that make up the whole journey – from beginning to end. As soon as you admit that in order for there to be motion there has to be contradictory location, you are going to have to go all the way.

So, the point object makes progress over the journey because it is located at each point in the journey. In the case of the tip of the arrow, it both is and is not located at each point in the journey from  $x$  to  $y$  and that is how it gets from  $x$  to  $y$  – it both is and is not at  $x$  and it both is and is not at  $y$ , and every point in between. The lesson here is that it is not possible to limit the contradictory states to small unobservable intervals of space. The contradictory states that constitute motion are over arbitrarily large intervals of space,

the size of which depends on the journey the object is taking. In conclusion: motion is the contradictory spread of an object over the entirety its journey.

## 8. Various Objections

What are we to make of this account of motion? There are obviously some issues that need to be addressed before we judge its plausibility. First of all, it might be thought that I have missed the real problem with Priest's analysis of the Hegelean account of motion and so my own solution merely repeats this mistake: If a body in motion is at every point either in a small interval of the journey (as Priest suggests) or of the whole journey (as I suggest), then why think that there is any progress being made over the interval or journey? Why is the body not regressing rather than progressing? If it is at every point from A to B why not say it is regressing from B to A rather than progressing from A to B?

My reply to this point is as follows: The body in motion is indeed both progressing from A to B *and* regressing from B to A given the account I have proposed. But this will not undermine this account as a solution to the problem of progression. This is because regardless of what else such a body in motion does, it does achieve progress (even if it regresses as well). To think that this undermines my analysis as a solution to the problem of progression is to assume that the regression cancels out the progression. But this is to assume what has been referred to as the cancellation account of negation and this clearly is not the relevant notion of negation in this context given that it is being assumed that some contradictions are true. In this context we have to assume a



paraconsistent notion of negation ( $\neg p$  is true iff  $p$  is false) – or at least some account of negation in which contradictions possess content. Hegel certainly rejected the cancellation notion of negation with his concept of *Aufhebung* – a notion of negation in which something is not cancelled out but raised to a new level.<sup>224</sup> Whether one espouses a classical, paraconsistent or relevant logic, contradictions are understood as having at least some content (and a contradiction has total content given the validity of explosion). But on the cancellation account a contradiction has no content at all. But contradictions would seem to have content. To say otherwise is to imply that all contradictions have the same content – i.e. no content at all.<sup>225</sup> But the contradictory sentence the liar sentence ('this sentence is false') would seem to have a different content to the contradiction, 'it is both raining and not raining'. It would seem then that there are good reasons to reject the cancellation account of negation and so little motivation to accept that the assertion of the negation of some sentence is equivalent to denying that proposition.

Of course, this raises the additional problem of why it is we do not observe the body both progressing and regressing. This problem has already been dealt with in the previous chapter. A body that is both progressing and regressing would split the observer into a contradictory state of observing a progression and not observing a progression – there is a conjunct in which each of these are observed but no conjunct in

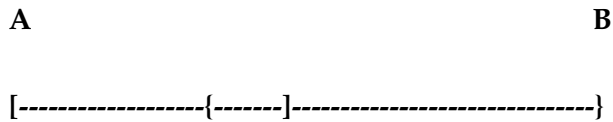
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<sup>224</sup> See Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, Vol. 1, Bk. 1, Sect. 1, Ch. 1, C.3. For a good account of the different types of negation see Routley and Routley, "Negation and Contradiction."

<sup>225</sup> This objection is cited in Routley and Routley, "Negation and Contradiction," 212.

which both are observed. So there are versions of the observer which do in fact observe the body regressing from B to A.

A second point that can be raised in response to my specific critique of Priest's version of the Hegelean account of motion is this: It might be thought that the extended version of the arrow paradox can be avoided by having the spread of an object at a particular instant overlap with its spread at a later instant. As such, the object can make progress over more than a single instant. The body would make progress over the whole journey without being located at every point in the journey. This solution can perhaps be expressed in the following diagram (fig. 4)



**Fig. 4**

A point particle,  $p$ , makes its way from point A to point B by occupying two spreads,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ , at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  respectively. The spread  $S_1$  is contained within the area enclosed by [ - - ] and the spread  $S_2$  is contained within the area enclosed by { --- }. As per Priest's version of the Hegelean account,  $p$  occupies each and every point in the relevant spread at that instant. According to this solution, because the spreads overlap,  $p$  is at more than one spread at that instant. As such it makes progress over the sum of instants. But, according to this response, it does this without being at every point in the journey.

I do not think that this way of avoiding the extended version of the paradox is going to work. The reason is as follows. Either  $p$  is located at every point in  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  at  $t_1$  or it is only located at every point in  $S_1$  at that time. If the former of these, then this solution reduces to my version of the Hegelean account of motion, as the point is located at every point of the entire journey at that instant. If it is the latter of these, then the paradox has not been avoided, as it is still at one spread and one spread only. Now one might respond to this last claim by pointing out that  $p$  is located at more than one spread simply in virtue of the spreads overlapping – by being at  $S_1$  it is also at  $S_2$  because these overlap. However, it is not the case that the particle is located at  $S_2$  at that instant. Rather the particle is located at a proper part of  $S_2$ . There is still an entire section of  $S_2$  at which  $p$  is not located at that instant. As such, given the reasons spelt out in the extended paradox,  $p$  cannot be located in this extra part of  $S_2$  at a later instant. In order for a body to make progress on a journey it must be at every point in the journey at every instant of the journey.

A further concern can be raised that can be expressed as follows.<sup>226</sup> If a particle is at all points of motion at all times of the journey, then it is in exactly the same state at all times. Therefore, there is no change and so no motion. In other words, this account of motion amounts to a denial of motion.

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<sup>226</sup> This objection was raised by Priest in correspondence and is analogous to one of the reasons why he rejects accounts of change that deny that space and time are composed of points of zero size.

There are a few things that can be said in response to this concern. First, Priest's own version of the Hegelean account is also vulnerable to it, at least to an extent. On this version a particle is at all points of its motion over a spread, then it is exactly the same state over that spread, and so is not in motion over that spread. If there is no motion at the spread, then there is no motion over the entire journey!

Secondly, it is not clear that it follows that just because a body is in the same state at all times that there can be no change and so no motion. What is required here is for a theory of motion to distinguish clearly between what it is for a body to be in motion and what it is for a body to be at rest. It is not clear that this requires of a theory of motion that it avoid understanding motion in terms of being in the same state. Indeed, to expect that it avoid such a thing is to beg the question in favor of the orthodox account of motion, i.e. motion is different states at different times. If the arguments developed by Priest and rehearsed in this chapter are sound, then understanding motion in this way is somewhat problematic. But the fact is, both my own version of the Hegelean account and that of Priest do clearly distinguish between a body at rest and a body in motion; it's just that the distinction is not in terms of different states at different times. Rather, the distinction is in terms of consistent and contradictory positions: a body in motion is in contradictory positions and a body at rest is in consistent positions.

Finally, it seems to me that the real concern lurking behind this objection is something like the following: how does this account of motion relate to our perceptual experiences

of motion? To say that a theory of motion must be able to take seriously the idea that motion involves states of change is to think that this is essential to motion. This can only be because we perceive that things in motion change their state of position. It would appear that these perceptual experiences seem to be of a body at different states at different times. Motion seems to be perceived as being constituted by changes in position rather than being perceived as contradictory positions. It is this problem that I will address in the next section.

### **9. Is this Really an Improvement for the Hegelean Theory of Motion? The Problem of Perception**

An important feature of Priest's analysis is that he suggests that the contradictory states hold over very small intervals – indeed intervals that are of a much smaller than subatomic level i.e. in order of Planck's Constant ( $\approx 10^{-43}$ ). Insisting on this has at least two advantages as far as I can make out. First, it enables Priest to link the Hegelean account of motion with one of the more successful physical theories currently available, namely quantum mechanics. Priest speculates that quantum indeterminacy may be the result of the contradictions inherent in motion and other forms of change.<sup>227</sup> If there is something in this speculation, then this makes the Hegelean account of motion a foundation for quantum mechanics. Any empirical evidence in favor of the truth of

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<sup>227</sup> Priest, *In Contradiction*, 180.

quantum mechanics (and such evidence is in plentiful supply) can be construed as evidence in favor of Priest's version of the Hegelean account of motion.<sup>228</sup>

Secondly, and more importantly, by isolating the contradictory states to very small unobservable scales, Priest extracts what may be seen as unintuitive elements in this theory of motion. Many perhaps reject the idea that change is inherently contradictory because they cannot even imagine what it would mean for this to be so. This in turn may be because they cannot imagine what it would be to observe such a thing. So, perhaps by taking away the possibility of observing such contradictions, the Hegelean theory is rendered more palatable.

However, these advantages are not available to the version of the Hegelean account that I have proposed. If these contradictory states are arbitrarily large, then it seems implausible to say they are unobservable. Observable objects such as arrows are made up of point objects (or at least this is what Priest would concede) and so the contradictory spread of locations of these point parts applies to the observable object as a whole. But this would seem to entail that observable objects are in contradictory states when in motion and that the contradictory states should be observable. For some this may be the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* of the above analysis. Armour-Garb and Beall probably speak for most when they state that:

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<sup>228</sup> Although this will not be much of a victory as it will equally constitute evidence for alternative, yet consistent, interpretations of quantum mechanics.

Our hunch is that the difficulty in seeing how a state of affairs could both obtain and fail to do so involves the mistake of trying to imagine observable states of affairs both obtaining and failing to do so – e.g. the journal’s being here in front of you and its not being here in front of you. For what it is worth, we cannot imagine such states of affairs both obtaining and failing to obtain, either.<sup>229</sup>

In the absence of any evidence of these contradictory observations, this could undermine the Hegelean account of motion. But given the conclusions reached in the previous chapter, we do have an explanation for why we do not observe such contradictory states of affairs. That we do not observe them therefore does not constitute evidence for thinking that they do not obtain.

In conclusion: given that motion is so deeply contradictory, many physical contradictions obtain. This is given the fact that many if not most (and even perhaps all) physical phenomena can be reduced to motion of some sort. Here we have what might be called a physical trivialism or a near trivialism. That we can arrive at such a radical dialetheism with relatively straight forward claims about the nature of motion does take the sting out of trivialism itself. Again though (to emphasize a point I made at the beginning of the chapter) this is not going to work on any one who does not share similar intuitions concerning the idea of a state of motion (and I think that it is safe to say that many do not share such an intuition). But however unintuitive the notion of an instantaneous state of motion is, it is not as unintuitive as the idea of nontrivialism (understood as the speech act of the denial of trivialism) – a view, as I have shown in chapter 3, which is literally unbelievable. In addition, it should be kept in mind that

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<sup>229</sup> Armour-Garb & Beall, “Further Remarks on Truth and Contradiction,” Italics are Armour-Garb and Beall’s.

claims that the physical world is deeply contradictory are not without precedent in modern physical cosmology. The Big Bang model entails that the universe began as a singularity. The singularity is characterized by physical quantities (such as density) that have the form  $n/0$  (because the singularity is a zero dimensional point). Given that dialetheism is true, this would entail that certain physical quantities take on all values, because any finite real number divided by zero results in every value being equal to every other value. Now most I think would reject the physical reality of the singularity because it would have such properties if it existed.<sup>230</sup> Such a response, however, assumes that dialetheism is false. Arguably, dialetheism is true. But the point I am making here is that modern physical cosmology suggests facts about the nature of the universe that are comparable to the claims I am arguing for in this chapter in terms of lack of intuitiveness.

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<sup>230</sup> See for example Smith, "Kalam Cosmological," 185; Grünbaum, "The Pseudo-Problem of Creation in Physical Cosmology," 113-5; Grünbaum, "Some Comments on William Craig's 'Creation and Big Bang Cosmology'"; and Craig, "Theism and Big Bang Cosmology," 224-30. However, others have no problem with the reality of the singularity but deny that it has contradictory properties - see Smith, "Atheism, Theism, and Big Bang Cosmology," 207-12.



## Conclusion: Summary and Existential Implications

### Summary

There we have it – trivialism is true and it is both possible and reasonable to believe that it is true. I have reached this conclusion in the following way. First, as I argued in chapter 3, the consensus view on trivialism – that trivialism should be denied – is not sustainable in the sense that it is literally impossible. This is for two reasons. First, trivialism is the conjunction of every proposition. Secondly, it is not possible to express a denial of a conjunction by asserting one or more of its conjuncts. It follows that nontrivialism cannot be performed or expressed – there is no such speech act. As such, the nontrivialist does not exist and there is nothing that one can believe that would enable one to be a nontrivialist. In the dialectic between the trivialist and the nontrivialist, the trivialist wins by default, as there is no such thing as the nontrivialist. But even if we assume a different account of denial that enables one to successfully deny trivialism (one in which denial does not involve asserting something asserted by the trivialist, as it does not involve asserting anything at all), it still remains the case that there is nothing that one can assert that results in the performance of the speech act of nontrivialism and so nothing that one can believe that would make one a nontrivialist. But, as I have pointed out, there are reasons for thinking that such alternative accounts of denial are not entirely satisfactory.

Secondly, one should assert trivialism. This is because there are available a whole host of arguments for the truth of trivialism. These included an argument based on the Curry

Paradox, a modal argument from the philosophical thesis of possibilism, an argument based upon the Characterization Principle, a cosmological style argument from the existence of a trivial entity, and an argument for near trivialism based on Zeno's paradox of the arrow. All of them are based on premises that are arguably true and inferences that are arguably valid (in either a deductive or non-deductive sense). Although all these arguments can be disputed at various points, this is true of the arguments for any interesting philosophical position. But, other things being equal (such as the prospects of providing plausible answers to the objections to trivialism), we should not judge trivialism with harsher standards than we would other philosophical theories. But given the conclusion of chapter 3, there is really little motive for rejecting such arguments. Trivialism is the rational view of reality.

Moreover, arguments against the possibility of being able to believe in trivialism fail to be convincing, on several fronts. The idea that one cannot believe that each and every sentence is true if one is to act in a discriminating manner does not seem to be true. Moreover, even if this is a necessary condition for acting in a purposeful and discriminating manner, it is not clear that one has to believe each and every sentence if one is to qualify as a trivialist and for trivialism to play a role in the philosophical community. One can act in a discriminating and purposeful manner if one is a trivialist.

Finally, because it is not possible for a proposition or set of propositions to express a denial of trivialism, there is no such thing as a reason for rejecting trivialism. Arguments that are supposedly against the truth of trivialism can only be understood as denials of

some other position such as an extreme form of dialetheism. But, as I have shown, even in such a dialectic context, these arguments are less than convincing. Trivialism might very well be deeply unpopular, but this unpopularity is undeserved. It is not trivialism that is the odd man out. Rather, as I have argued, it is nontrivialism (the denial of trivialism) that is most unusual and, given the conclusion of chapter 3, rather unintuitive – it is nontrivialism that deserves the unpopularity.

### Existential Implications of Trivialism?

I concluded chapter 4 by suggesting that trivialism might play an important role in a system of salvation or liberation or at least a system with existential implications. I would like to conclude the thesis by saying a little more about this. After all, I think that if this thesis is to make a contribution to human flourishing (in some sense at least), it will be along such lines. Although it is not the aim of this thesis to explicate and defend the existential implications of trivialism, saying at least something in this regard may help us to imagine why anyone would take on such a view of reality.

One way in which trivialism may have existential implications centers on the ancient Greek idea of *ataraxia*. Roughly translatable as ‘tranquility’ or ‘freedom from trouble or anxiety,’ the achievement of this state was seen as the primary goal of many of the Greek schools of philosophy – among them Epicureanism, Stoicism, and various versions of skepticism. All such schools made suggestions as to how one could best achieve *ataraxia* and there is some reason for thinking that trivialism can make its own contribution toward this most valued goal in life. If trivialism were true, then every state of affairs

obtains – good or bad. Moreover, they obtain without any effort on my part. The trivialist then may offer the following wisdom to those burdened by the weight of the world:

*Why be worried? Because of the misfortune that befalls you? You regret not having taken a different course of action? But necessarily all things obtain – including everything that is bad for you. There was nothing you could have done to prevent this. So why regret your past actions? Instead, be happy and relaxed. And besides, everything good obtains too – you have missed out on nothing. The conditions for a peaceful, tranquil, and meaningful life are here to enjoy. And there is nothing you need to do in order to ensure that this remains so. Stop your worry, and be happy – and do whatever pleases you.*

A conversion to trivialism then may very well bring me to a life of tranquility because of its totalizing content. Anything bad could not have been prevented, and everything good obtains regardless of my efforts. It might be objected, however, that the truth of trivialism entails that I am in a state of anxiety and that there is nothing I can do about this. This, of course, is correct, but it will do little to undermine the plausibility of this program as a cure for anxiety. This is so for two reasons. First, trivialism just as surely entails that we are in a state of *ataraxia* and that nothing will disturb this state (even if the opposite of this is also true). Secondly, that there is nothing I can do about my state of anxiety should lead me to release my anxiousness about this state of affairs: I should not be anxious about my inevitable anxiety. Rather I should be at peace about it – and this might very well release me from any anxiety entirely.

Such a trivialist program of course has certain similarities with the approach of Pyrrhonist skepticism. For the pyrrhonist (at least on some readings of this ancient wisdom) there is no good reason to believe that some state of affairs obtains as opposed to some other. As such, we should merely go with the appearances of things and not worry about whether we are taking the right course of action. There is no point fretting over such issues; as such fretting presupposes that we have justification for our beliefs concerning the true nature of things. And because we do not have such justification, we should not have such beliefs. For the pyrrhonist it is a paucity of belief that will free us from anxiety. But for the trivialist it is an abundance of belief that will free us from anxiety. In that sense then, the trivialist and the skeptic are polar opposites.<sup>231</sup>

Now I am not saying that I advocate such an approach to life. But what I am saying is that it is possible to imagine how trivialism might contribute to the good life as it has been traditionally conceived since ancient times. It might contribute in an analogous way that the Pyrrhonist skeptic thought was possible with respect to that view of reality – by removing the causes of anxiety. We have then some inkling of why a person might be motivated to commit themselves to trivialism.

### Trivialism as a Catalyst to Philosophical Development

It is difficult to know how to conclude a project of this sort. But perhaps the best way to do so is to return to one of the motivations for this project mentioned in the introduction.

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<sup>231</sup> A point that has already been noted in Priest, “Could Everything be True?”, 189-90.

Even if no one is persuaded by the arguments presented throughout this thesis, I do hope that these arguments can stimulate philosophical discussion to the level of beauty and sophistication that the phenomenon of skepticism has stimulated throughout the history of philosophy. The function of radical positions in the philosophical community is to act as the catalyst for the creative and intellectual activity of others. If anything I would be happy for other philosophers to receive this thesis as an act of service that is in the interests of our community at large rather than as an attempt to undermine what we take to be most precious to us. We can only grow as a result of our reflections on the concept of triviality.

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