

The Law of Non-Contradiction

New Philosophical Essays

edited by

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and

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Letters to Beall and Priest

David Lewis[†]

Editorial Introduction: What follows are two brief comments on the Law of Non-Contradiction by David Lewis. The first is the content of a letter of 21 July 1999 to Beall and Priest in reply to their invitation to contribute to this volume. The second is an extract of a letter to Priest of 9 January 2001, commenting on a draft of Priest's critical study of Lewis's *Papers in Philosophical Logic, Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, and *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy*.¹ Both appear here for the first time. We are grateful to Steffi Lewis for permission to publish them. All italics are original; footnotes are Priest's.

1. LETTER 1

I'm sorry; I decline to contribute to your proposed book about the 'debate' over the law of non-contradiction. My feeling is that since this debate instantly reaches deadlock, there's really nothing much to say about it. To conduct a debate, one needs common ground; principles in dispute cannot of course fairly be used as common ground; and in this case, the principles *not* in dispute are so very much less certain than non-contradiction itself that it matters little whether or not a successful defence of non-contradiction could be based on them.

2. LETTER 2

Paraconsistency. I'm increasingly convinced that I can and do reason about impossible situations. ('Sylvan's Box' played a big part in persuading me.²) But I don't really understand how that works. Paraconsistent logic as developed by you and your allies is clear enough, but I find it a bit off the topic. For it allows (a limited amount of) reasoning about *blatantly* impossible situations. Whereas what I find myself doing is reasoning about *subtly* impossible situations, and rejecting suppositions that lead fairly to blatant impossibilities. In other words, I understand what it would be to do without rejection by *reductio ad contradictionem* altogether, but I don't understand what it is to be selective, using *reductio*

¹ Priest (2002).

² Priest (1997).

sometimes and sometimes not. A (draft?) paper by Daniel³ seems promising, but maybe it just repackages my problem about what's the right similarity metric on possibilities together with impossibilities.

Hard-line paraconsistency.⁴ It still seems to me that we have a complete stalemate, just as I said in the passage you quote, about whether our world might, as far as we know, be contradictory. (By the way, I keep forgetting whether you'd rather say that contradictions are possible, or that for all we know we live in an impossible world. Do you have a uniform policy?⁵) That doesn't stop me from sometimes making believe that impossibilities are possible, subtle ones at least. I agree with you about the many uses to which we could put make-believable possible impossibilities, if we are willing to use them. The trouble is that all these uses seem to require a distinction between the subtle ones and the blatant ones (very likely context-dependent, very likely a matter of degree) and that's just what I don't understand.

REFERENCES

- NOLAN, D. (1997), 'Impossible Worlds: A Modest Approach', *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 38: 535–72.
- PRIEST, G. (1997), 'Sylvan's Box', *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 38: 573–82.
- (2002), 'David Lewis: a View From Down Under', *Noûs*, 36: 351–8.

³ Presumably Nolan (1997).

⁴ i.e. dialetheism.

⁵ The former.