

Elena Ficara (ed.), *Contradictions. Logic, History, Actuality*, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2014, 222 pp. ISBN 9783110335743

The book collects the contributions to a conference held at the Technische Universität in Berlin during the summer of 2011, in which many international scholars of different philosophical traditions took part. Of course, the theme of contradiction has been much debated in philosophy, especially during the last decades, with the growing success of the so-called *dialetheism*. From this standpoint, *Contradictions* takes part in an international debate that appears quite rich – one could mention, for example, the work *In Contradiction* by Graham Priest, or the anthology *The Law of Non-Contradiction* edited by Priest himself, JC Beall and B. Armour-Garb. And yet, with respect to these works the book edited by Elena Ficara shows some peculiarities, as if it were animated by a slightly different spirit. It's not by chance, for example, that the title doesn't directly address the Law of Non-Contradiction, but contradictions (plural) considered under many different aspects.

Aside from the tripartition of the anthology, also recalled in the title, it seems that the proposal of the editor could be analysed on three different levels. First of all, the aim of the book is to underline once again the centrality of the problem of contradiction, both for philosophy itself but also with respect to contemporary world. On the one hand that means showing the problematic nature of the concept of contradiction itself, and on the other, showing its value in the philosophical debate concerning different fields, from logic to metaphysics, from Ethics to Biology through Philosophy of Art and Political Philosophy.

The second aim of the book, which is strongly synergical with the first, is precisely to use the theme of contradiction as a meeting point for different philosophical cultures and traditions. If it's true that the three sections of the work – *Logic*, *History* and *Actuality* – implicitly address three different approaches – analytic, historic and hermeneutic – it's also true that the book's whole point is to offer a unitary overview of the papers, thanks to which the peculiarity of every method can emerge and at the same time contribute to the whole discussion.

Lastly (yet most immediately), the anthology is also a – more or less exhaustive – catalogue of the main problems and the most interesting themes in the contemporary debate about contradiction. The single papers thus offer an advancement in singular fields that are

still open, whether from the historical or from a theoretical standpoint. And yet, without specifically considering the singular results proposed in every paper (an exhaustive summary is offered by the editor herself in the *Introduction*) and without trying to give individual judgements, it would maybe be more interesting to focus on the first two aspects I mentioned, i.e. the importance of contradiction for philosophy and the need for an interdisciplinary approach, and try to underline what can be seen as a common ground for the various texts.

The concept of contradiction is problematic, in the first place, because it has many meanings and is used in many different ways. As Luca Illetterati explicitly underlines in his paper with respect to Hegel's philosophy, we speak of contradiction in a technical (logical/metaphysical) but also in a metaphorical way, e.g. when we use it as a synonym for "conflict" or "struggle". If some contributors to the volume use the term in this last meaning – Gianni Vattimo, and somehow also Angelica Nuzzo and Federico Vercellone –, the first section of the book is precisely dedicated to giving a deeper account of the difficulties met when dealing with the concept of contradiction assumed in its technical meaning.

The main problem seems to be the relation between logic and metaphysics: how can we say that contradiction is something regarding not only thought or language, but also reality itself? Again, rather than attempting to "resolve" the issue, the papers try to go deeper in the analysis of the many problems related to the theme. The first two contributions, the ones by Graham Priest and JC Beall respectively, confront each other exactly on this field: Priest starts his paper by stating that some contradictions can't be reduced to the domain of language and concepts, but necessarily entail a certain relation to the world, and does that by using an example based on a very problematic, stipulative idea of negation, as also Varzi remarks in his paper. Later however, he himself recognizes how difficult it is to accept a "metaphysical dialetheism", since that would require one to accept the controversial notion of "negative fact". The short but intense paper of JC Beall addresses the much debated *Pinocchio's Paradox* in order to show how difficult the transition from semantic/linguistic contradictions to metaphysical ones actually is. Proposed by Veronique Eldridge-Smith as a metaphysical version of the *Liar's Paradox*, *Pinocchio's Paradox* assumes both that Pinocchio's nose grows if Pinocchio lies, but also that Pinocchio says his nose will grow: that implies that if Pinocchio's nose grows, then it doesn't grow (because Pinocchio told the truth), and if it doesn't grow, then it grows (since what Pinocchio said was false). Eldridge-Smith states that this formulation of the paradox entails a necessary reference to reality, and thus is

metaphysical and not just logical. According to Beall, the necessity to introduce the operator “according to the story” allows one to say that the paradox created by Eldridge-Smith isn’t even a paradox, since it’s based on fictional premises. The most interesting point of the paper is that we must distinguish between what is possible and what is fictional: if human creativity has no boundaries and depends on us, the domain of what is possible is independent from us and can’t be determined by our will.

The same theme is of the greatest importance in the papers by Franca D’Agostini and Achille C. Varzi. Even if she rejects the above mentioned objection by JC Beall, D’Agostini also holds that the Eldridge-Smith Paradox is valid only from a semantic point of view, and that at a metaphysical level it’s not even a paradox. This is the case since in reality the relation of mutual implication between contradictories (“Pinocchio’s nose grows” entails “Pinocchio’s nose doesn’t grow” and vice versa) doesn’t entail a contradiction as a conjunction of a proposition and its negation (“Pinocchio’s nose grows and doesn’t grow”). In her paper, though, starting from a clarification about the notion of contradiction itself and offering a distinction between paradoxes from epistemic, semantic and metaphysical perspectives, D’Agostini remarks that the main problem in the discussion about the possibility of a metaphysical paradox seems to be in the very notions of “fact”. In short, what does it mean to say that a contradiction is *real*? The possibility to state the existence of metaphysical contradictions is introduced by accepting a view called “alethic realism”, which offers an extended notion of “fact” that is not limited to an empirical or naturalistic interpretation of reality.

Varzi's paper focuses instead on the notion of “ontological neutrality”, asking whether the Law of Non-Contradiction is ontologically “pure” or if instead it always necessarily implies some unjustified metaphysical assumption. The main point of Varzi's argument is that there is an asymmetrical relation between the Principle of Contravalece (semantic) and the Law of Non-Contradiction (ontological): if the first necessarily entails the second, the second doesn't necessarily entail the first. That means that, if every counterexample to the Law of Non-Contradiction is at the same time a counterexample to the Principle of Contravalece, it's not necessary that a violation to the semantic principle is at the same time a violation to the (onto)logical principle. That creates the need for new criteria, which are able to individuate contradictions *de re* and so to demonstrate that the Law of Non-Contradiction is an invalid metaphysical prejudice of logic.

The value and interest of the theme of contradiction from a philosophical standpoint is underlined many times in the book, and in different ways. If it's true, as Vattimo writes, that philosophy “never tolerated contradictions”, all the authors seem to share the idea that contradiction, being a fundamental object for philosophical thought and at the same time a crucial element of human life, deserves a certain dignity. Wolfgang Welsch defends the traditional standpoint according to which contradiction is a duty for thought, something that has to be solved and overcome: as a being structured according to certain biological principles, part of a system requiring a fundamental consistency, man requires coherence as an ontological need. The same spirit can be found in Enrico Berti's paper, one that focuses on the relationship between the rejection of the Law of Non-Contradiction and the possibility of refutation. Berti defends the necessity of the Law for any discussion. He states that since, if the law is rejected, we no longer have a way to distinguish truth from falseness, then it becomes impossible to refute any philosophical argument. Hence, for Berto as for Varzi, the rejection of the Law constitutes “a big deal”.

For others contradiction is not a problem to solve, but rather an unavoidable element of the human condition. This appears already in Priest's text, where he argues that it's impossible to eliminate contradictions on a linguistic/conceptual level. The same view seems to be shared by Francesco Berto, who defends the representability of contradiction as a necessary element in the foundation of a theory that gives account of the finite nature of our knowledge, without idealizing it and falling in a sort of “logical omniscience”. Finally, contradiction can also be seen as a requirement of humanity. This is, for example, Gianni Vattimo's standpoint. In fact, Vattimo recognizes a lack of contradiction – of political and theoretic struggle – in the present era and sees this lack as a great danger for thought and for society; in contrast he celebrates the value of the hermeneutic approach as a proper “ontology of conflict”.

A very similar position can be found in Angelica Nuzzo's paper about the relation between logical and historical advancement in Hegel's thought. The German philosopher is not only the explicit object of three papers, but appears in almost every essay of the anthology, emerging as an essential reference in the contemporary debate about contradiction. The editor herself is a Hegel scholar, presently engaged in the attempt to use Hegel's philosophy as a theoretical reference for some contemporary problems related to logic and metaphysics, but also as a possible meeting point between analytic and continental thought.

Hegel's works, however, are of particular interest because in them the theme of contradiction is not only crucial, but is also shown in its whole extension: it's not by chance that the papers of the book dedicated to Hegel address metaphysical and logical questions as well as political and ethical ones, underlining the practical value of contradiction along with the theoretical. More precisely, it's not a simple juxtaposition, but rather the recognition of a deep interrelation between different dimensions of thought. The papers by Klaus Vieweg and Angelica Nuzzo, for example, investigate the logical foundations of Hegelian ethical-political discourse. If Vieweg focuses on a question internal to Hegel's practical philosophy, showing what role is played by contradiction in the section of the *Outlines of Philosophy of Right* dedicated to morality, Angelica Nuzzo is much more interested in the actuality of Hegel's thought and of his understanding of history. If it's true, as Vieweg also underlines, that contradiction determines the transition from abstract Kantian morality to the ethical world, it's also true that contradiction – widely understood as conflict, struggle, unrest and change – is at the core of *Sittlichkeit* itself, becoming the most important element of a conception of history that is not grounded on an absolute origin or an ultimate theological/metaphysical goal. The transition (puzzling for many) from the ethical world to the apparent chaos of history is founded through a secular, pragmatic notion of justice, that rejects any external tribunal and can instead be identified with the philosophy of Heraclitus, who (in opposition to Pythagoras and Anaximander) recognized conflict as the only true and necessary law of reality.

Luca Illetterati's paper takes part in the well known debate about the problem of contradiction in Hegel's philosophy. After a review of the different "coherentist" views about Hegelian thought – according to which he didn't mean to reject the Law of Non-Contradiction, but rather tried either to radicalize the Law itself, by accepting contradiction as a feature of our thought but not of reality, or used the notion of contradiction in a vague or metaphorical way – Illetterati holds that all these interpretations have a certain grasp on Hegel's philosophy, but fail to give a full, exhaustive account of it. Hegel in fact recognized finite being (with particular reference to the notion of "limit") as the element of reality that necessarily entails a *real* contradiction. Endorsing a classical position of the school of Padua, Illetterati suggests that Hegel's thought offers a non-contradictory discourse about the contradictory nature of reality; according to him, accepting contradiction does not necessarily require one to reject the Law of Non-Contradiction on a logical/linguistic level. By stating this, Illetterati seems to agree with Berto and Priest about the fundamental role played by contradiction in human life

from an ontological point of view: contradiction is what determines our specific nature in opposition to divine or absolute being.

To conclude, the book edited by Elena Ficara tries to offer an overview of the most recent debates about contradiction, but also attempts to build a philosophical dialogue and to show the synergy between the different approaches rather than their incompatibility. The experiment appears to be successful: aside from the (remarkable) interest of the individual papers, the deeper unity of the themes and of the results beyond the variety of traditions and methods shows that it's possible to conjugate the thematic unity with the multiplicity of the standpoints, the solidity of the answers and a deeper insight in the problematic nature of the questions. If it's true that interdisciplinarity is not only a problem regarding the relation between philosophy and other sciences, but rather a problem internal to philosophy itself, then *Contradictions* manages to show that dialogue is possible, and even necessary, in order to grasp every philosophical question in its full extension and richness, and at the same time to find answers that are not one-sided and incomplete.

List of contributors and papers:

E. Ficara – Introduction; G. Priest – Contradictory Concepts; JC Beall – Rapunzel Shaves Pinocchio's Beard; F. D'Agostini – Paradoxes and the Reality of Contradiction; A. C. Varzi – Logic, Ontological Neutrality, and the Law of Non-Contradiction; F. Berto – Representing the Contradictory; E. Berti – Objections to Aristotle's Defence of the Principle of Non-Contradiction; A. Nuzzo – The Justice of Contradiction. Logical Advancement and Historical Transformations; K. Vieweg – Zur Logik moralischer Urteile; G. Vattimo – Insuperable Contradictions; F. Vercellone – A Disenchanted Reenchantment. Hermeneutics and Morphology; W. Welsch – Wie wir auf Konsistenz aus sind – und warum.

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