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Who is afraid of contradictions?
A general introduction
to the debate between Severino and Priest

This paper is divided in two parts. In the first, I sketch the debate between Priest and Severino on the principle of non-contradiction (henceforth PNC) and its defence. I explain what the challenge to PNC amounts to, by distinguishing paraconsistency from dialetheism. Later I will dwell on Severino's broad conception of PNC integrating the laws of identity and of non-contradiction into a more basic law that can be dubbed the principle of ontic determinacy. A crucial point in the dispute is the conception of negation, that is, whether or not the PNC denier, while claiming a dialetheia, must avail herself of the exclusive negation, despite her intentions. If so, the charge is not so much of inconsistency but of holding a self-undermining position as any proposition affirming a dialetheia would be grounded on PNC itself.

In the second part, I propose a mild interpretation of dialetheisms. By considering some reasons supporting it, I suggest that it is motivated by the view that reality is over-determinate, rather than in-determinate (as it would happen, according to Aristotle and Severino, if PNC turned out to be false), and by the fact that the conceptual, linguistic expression of this over-determination leads to contradictions. A dialetheia is, as it were, a two-footed creature whose being simultaneously both true and false is grounded upon two (or more) different facts. These are mutually conflicting and thus play the roles of, respectively, verifying and falsifying the very same proposition. The existence of these facts, however, must be an univocal datum also for a dialetheia. If so, dialetheism does not jeopardize the view that reality, at least at its most fundamental level, is absolutely determined – just as Aristotle and Severino claim.

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In March 2018 in Brescia, Graham Priest took part in the final debate of a conference dedicated to the thought of the Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino. The discussion focused on the principle of non-contradiction (henceforth PNC), on its universality and on its defence, with particular reference to the position expressed by Severino in the essay *Returning to Parmenides*[1]. Priest is one of the leading figures of paraconsistent logic and of the philosophical current known as *dialetheism*. These two positions, one logic and the other more broadly philosophical, are peculiar because they are condescending to contradictions, albeit in a different way. That discussion therefore had as protagonists a staunch defender of PNC, on the one side, and a sophisticated critic of it, on the other. The debate could not have moved from more radically opposing theses and could hardly have involved more radical thinkers.

What follows is divided into two parts. In the first, I shall provide an overview of the issues discussed on that occasion and in this volume, as well as some interpretative clues for understanding the debate. First of all, I shall briefly indicate what Priest's criticism of PNC consists of, and what is the crucial point in the debate between him and Severino, as it emerges from the various contributions. Later I will dwell on what Severino considers to be the fundamental principle and its formulation, in order to avoid some misunderstandings. In this context, it will emerge how the discussion hinges upon the so-called *limited* negation of PNC, and upon the meaning of *negation*. In the second part, I shall propose a philosophical interpretation of dialetheism that might reduce the distances between it and Aristotle's and Severino's doctrines (at least with respect to some ontological aspects). My interpretation is based on the following remark. In Aristotle and in Severino PNC has an ontological val-

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1   *Returning to Parmenides* and the relative *Postscript* were originally published, respectively, in 1964 and 1965, and then reprinted in *The Essence of Nihilism* (1972), recently translated into English (E. Severino 2016).

ue and its negation is equivalent to thinking that things are radically *indeterminate* (*aorista*)[2]. However, the view that reality is totally indeterminate is not endorsed by Priest, who indeed rejects the so-called *trivialism*, i.e. the view that all contradictions are true, that everything is the case and not the case[3]. By considering some of the reasons supporting dialetheism, I shall suggest that it is motivated not by the view that reality is indeterminate, but rather that reality is *over-determinate*, and by the fact that the conceptual, linguistic expression of this over-determination inevitably leads to contradictions. From this point of view, I shall propose that, whether or not this overabundance gives rise to inconsistencies, there is room for an interpretation of dialetheism according to which reality, at its most fundamental level, is ontologically univocally determined. And this is not so far from Aristotle's and Severino's views. This idea is further developed in the paper co-authored by E. Boccardi and F. Pereda included in this volume.

Who is afraid of contradictions?

First of all, to better understand the debate, it is necessary to explain the peculiarities of Priest's position with respect to contradictions[4]. The reader already familiar with paraconsistency and dialetheism may skip this section. If in a reasoning starting from some premises one reaches a contradiction, it is generally assumed that one of them is false. Why? Because contradictions are unacceptable. But why are they so? Various answers can be given and Priest has the merit of having shown that none of them is obvious. Here I consider two of the most relevant ones. One can invoke, for example, the venerable PNC[5] which establishes, with a certain approximation, that no contradiction is true. This is an absolutely convincing and sufficient answer for many. There are, however, also other

2   See V. Politis (2004), ch. 6, §4.
3   See G. Priest (2005), ch. 3 'Trivialism'.
4   See G. Priest (2006), (2007).
5   The first formulation of PNC is found in Plato's *Euthidemus* (*Euth.* 293 d); others are present in other dialogs (*Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Parmenides*); the canonical formulation, however, is due to Aristotle, in the gamma book of *Metaphysics* (*Met.* IV, 3 1005 b 19-22).

options that can be explored. In the so-called classical logic (which, despite the name, is not so ancient, going back to Frege's and Russell's axiomatic formulations of logic), no contradiction is admissible: indeed, from the acceptance of even just one, anything can be deduced, with few logical steps. If a contradiction is true, then everything is true and also the opposite of everything. Clearly, one can no longer reason.

These few logical passages were invoked by Popper[6] who sanctioned the unreasonableness of the Hegelian and Marxian dialectical method which, according to Popper, purported to make a fruitful use of contradictions, passing unscathed trough them. Yet, so he objected, if one admits a contradiction, then anything goes. This kind of bankruptcy of reasoning is called nowadays *explosion*. Classical logic (the one taught everywhere in the basic logic courses) is *explosive* in the aforementioned sense. Interestingly, according to Priest's historical reconstruction, neither Aristotle's logic nor the logic of the Stoics were explosive[7]. Explosion, rather, derives from a certain conception of negation, so-called Scotian, regimented in modern times, such that anything follows from the false. This aspect is also recorded by some idiomatic expressions in many languages. In English, for instance, it is customary to say: 'Yes, and pigs might fly!' This and the equivalent expressions in other languages embody the view that if what is false is also true, then everything is true. The threat of explosion, therefore, is the main motivation of the classical rejection of contradictions.

Aristotle does not seem to have had these concerns about the contradictions: his logic, Priest has shown, is not explosive after all. Aristotle, in fact, seems to consider cases of syllogisms whose premises are inconsistent[8] without this entailing that everything can be deduced from them. Perhaps Aristotle did not even know the phenomenon of explosion, or perhaps his notion of negation does not imply it in a strict technical sense. This does not mean that Aristotle liked contradictions: quite the contrary! Indeed, for Aristotle, PNC is a principle of thinking and reasoning without which no sensible discourse would be possible; so, in a broader (though not technical) sense, Aristotle's logic is explosive after

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6 See K. Popper (1940).
7 See G. Priest (2007), pp. 120 and ff.
8 See G. Priest (2007), p. 120; Aristotle, *An. Pr.* 63b 31-64a 16.

all[9]. Be that as it may, and leaving aside the historical-exegetical aspects of the question, Aristotle rejects contradictions on the basis of PNC, which he considers undeniable and the firmest of all principles.

Now, if the explosion is the only logical problem with contradictions, then the news, for some decidedly good, is that there is a remedy: explosion can be defused. There are in fact some logical adjustments, concerning for instance negation (the extent and depth of which are questionable) thanks to which contradictions no longer imply everything. The mine is disarmed. This gives rise to the family of so-called paraconsistent logics[10], that is, to those systems working despite the presence of some contradictions. In other words, even if there is a contradiction one can still reason because the system does not explode. This can be very useful, as there are many circumstances in which in fact we implicitly or explicitly admit contradictions, without thereby believing that then everything is true. In fact, when we notice an inconsistency we think that there is something wrong in the premises; nevertheless we continue to reason, waiting to be able to amend the error. One can find some examples of this attitude in mathematics and science. The original formulations of the calculus contained inconsistencies concerning the very notion of infinitesimal (which is considered both zero and different from zero, as Berkley famously pointed out); they were amended only long after, when Cauchy and Weierstrass refounded analysis, banishing infinitesimals. But before that, nobody had seriously thought that, given the inconsistency of calculus, then everything had to be thrown overboard and everything could be claimed. Similarly, there is a notorious tension between general relativity and quantum mechanics. General relativity is basically a theory of gravity, which does not cease to be valid at a small scale. A serious problem arises, for example, with respect to the first moments of the universe, when this was so small

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9 Aristotle purports to claim that PNC is presupposed anytime someone says 'something meaningful'. So, if PNC were false, nothing (no word) would be meaningful and 'there would be no statement for such a person (the denier), either in response to himself or to anyone else' (*Met.* 6a 22). So it seems that for Aristotle PNC is at least a necessary condition for the possibility of thought and language about things. Of course, for him PNC is more than this; it is true of thing in themselves, of entities qua beings, i.e. without any further qualification, and not of things only inasmuch as they are object of thought or are captured and expressed by a language.

10 On this see, in addition to the various works of Priest, F. Berto (2007, part II, pp. 107 ff.).

and massive that in describing it one is forced to apply both general relativity and quantum mechanics, engendering contradictory predictions. Probably many, also for this reason, think that one or both theories will prove to be false, sooner or later; however, while waiting for a better theory replacing them, scientists accept them both, in fact also accepting their inconsistency. Yet, nobody thinks that from this acceptance in the meanwhile it follows that anything goes.

Even in everyday life we sometimes have contradictory beliefs, though not patently such. For example, one can be convinced (I have been) that, in a somewhat labyrinthine city a certain road is parallel to another and that a side street orthogonal to the first diagonally intersects the second. Now, if all these roads are straight, this is obviously contradictory. In general, it is possible, indeed very probable, that some contradictions may lie hidden in our belief network, and that this appears coherent just because and so long as we do not consider our beliefs and their implications all together simultaneously. In fact, in a discussion the ability of an opponent consists in uncovering a latent contradiction in the interlocutor's complex of beliefs. Nonetheless, it is not the presence of one or more latent contradictions in one's set of beliefs (and in some cases not even the manifest contradiction among any of them) which prevents one from reasoning and holding a certain position in a debate. Of course, a contradiction is a problem, but this does not make it impossible to rationally discuss. For this reason, paraconsistent logic seems to be the most suitable, or at least more suitable than the classical one, to shape our actual way of thinking and reasoning in everyday life as well as in science. But there is more than that, regarding the unacceptability of contradictions.

Let's also assume that we can adopt a paraconsistent logic and that we are thus able to reason in the presence of one or more contradictions, putting them, so to speak, in quarantine. Well! An Aristotelian at this point will tell us that the contradictions still remain unacceptable, even though their disruptive charge with respect to the implication has been defused. Why? We said it before: simply because PNC holds. The question that arises at this point is: but can one deny PNC, or is it a kind of absolutely inviolable *sancta sanctorum*?

Dialetheism is a position that not only embraces paraconsistency, but that also affirms that some contradictions are true. Here a clarification is in order: *some* contradictions are true, but not all of them are. Here the challenge is posed to PNC, to its proclaimed undeniability. Today there are various formulations of PNC, not always equivalent, which have

been characterized as syntactic, semantic, pragmatic or psychological[11]. Moreover, also in Aristotle there are various formulations, with some interesting differences[12]. However, let's consider the best-known version[13], which could be so rephrased: "for any object x and any property F, it is not possibly the case that x is both F and non-F"[14], in the same sense and at the same time. Here there is a double quantification: *for any* object and *for any* property, and a modal operator. Therefore, according to the so-called square of opposition, applied in succession to the two quantifiers, there are various negations of that statement (not to mention the modal operator and the relative opposition square). There is no need here to weigh down the discussion with unnecessary details; it is sufficient to keep in mind that the position *contrary* to the law of non-contradiction is that for "any object x and any property F, it is the case that x is both F and non-F", i.e. everything has and does not have every property. In other words: the world turns out to be totally indeterminate, and all contradictions are true. A crazy position, obviously (more on this later). But this is precisely the *contrary* position, not the *contradictory* one, of the principle. The contradictory denial of the principle merely states that *some* contradictions are true, that is, there are some things that both possess and do not possess certain properties.

One may wonder who exactly are Aristotle's opponents; this is a question of a historical nature, but not only. In fact the criticism, also moved by Priest[15], is that Aristotle confuses or even conflates two very different negations of PNC, that is, respectively the *contrary* negation and the *contradictory* one. In this way, Aristotle's defence of PNC seems insufficient in refuting his opponents, because only the contrary position, to which the contradictory would be surreptitiously assimilated, is clearly unsustainable. Priest's criticism, on closer inspection, does not seem to be fully correct, since "Aristotle is clearly aware of the distinction between the view that some things are both F and not-F and the view that all things are both F and not-F (see especially 1008a7–12)"[16], when he takes into

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11 See J. Łukasiewicz (1910), S. Haack (1978), p. 244, P. Grim (2004).
12 See V. Raspa (1999), pp. 33-61, W. Cavini (2007-8).
13 See note 5.
14 See V. Politis (2004), p. 122.
15 See G. Priest (1998).
16 V. Politis (2004), p. 140.

consideration those (Anaxagoras, Democritus, see *Met.* 1009 a 22f) who countenance inconsistencies only in the special case of changing things (it is true, however, that most of Aristotle's arguments seem to be directed against the extreme denier of PNC). Severino is also well aware of the different quantifications: he distinguishes two negations of what he calls the principle universal opposition (which he considers equivalent to PNC): the general and the limited one. Now, regardless of exegetical problems with the Aristotelian text, it is clear that the dialetheist challenges only the universal validity of PNC.

On the un-deniability of the principle of non-contradiction

Dialetheism challenges the alleged indisputability of PNC. But how would this indisputability be supported? This is a thorny question but there are some fixed points. Clearly any argument in favor of the undeniability cannot be demonstrative in nature: as PNC is a principle, it is not demonstrable. But there is more in the Aristotelian context (and also outside of it); PNC cannot be proved for two reasons: because it is a principle, and because it is more specifically a 'principle of reasoning' (*sillogistike arké Met.* 1005 b 7). That is to say, in contemporary terms: all deductive reasoning are based on the notion of logical consequence the usual definition of which (most likely accepted also by Aristotle) is that it is impossible that if the premises of a deductive reasoning are true, its conclusion is false. *Impossible* here means: contradictory. Thus, if the validity of a deduction presupposes that PNC holds, the latter cannot be proved by deduction, a fortiori.

Therefore, any argument in defense of the PNC cannot be deductive, much less a *reductio ad absurdum* which also presupposes that no contradiction can be true. Indeed Aristotle never charges his opponent of inconsistency: he perfectly knows that the disputant is prepared to accept contradictions; so they cannot be refuted in this usual way. So how does Aristotle's defense of PNC work? In this regard there are some interpretative problems, and the literature on this topic is wide. Of course, Aristotle provides arguments centered on the thesis that whoever denies the principle does so only in words, because in the linguistic act of giving meaning to his words he implicitly makes use of PNC and so presupposes its validity. This is the famous *elenchos* which can be considered a kind

of performative, transcendental argument[17]. This argument, mind you, does not *ground* the principle: it is not a *reason* for the *truth* of the principle which has none (if *reason* means something that grounds the truth of the principle); rather, the *elenchos* is a reason to *believe* the principle is true. After Aristotle, however, not much else seems to have been done in defense of the principle[18].

In Severino's thought PNC, duly reformulated, has a central role, above all for the consequences with regard to ontology. Severino maintains a position that could be considered, referring to the contemporary debate in the philosophy of the time, as a form of (dynamic) eternalism (in some way similar to the so-called moving spotlight view), precisely because, according to him, presentism (or any other ontology which admits absolute becoming) implies contradictions concerning existential propositions[19]. Indeed, to say that something no longer exists implies, for Severino, to have a singular proposition about a thing, which denies the existence of that very thing. Now, if singular propositions have the entities themselves as constituents and so are existence-entailing, it is clear that every negative existential singular proposition turns out to be false. Severino's argument in its fundamental features runs similarly to Williamson's argument in favor of the necessity of the existence of every entity[20]. PNC, therefore, precisely because of its ontological significance, plays a fundamental role. Severino considers it undeniable and dubs it the "destiny of truth", that is, that whose denial is self-undermining.

However, the discussion between Severino and Priest does not focus on ontology or on whether everything is eternal or not; rather, it revolves around logic and the defense of PNC. Priest already analyzed Aristotle's defense, judging it negatively[21]: According to him, Aristotle's arguments are not compelling (Priest's criticism is somehow akin to Łukasiewicz's one). In more recent times, Priest had the opportunity to read Severino's defense of PNC formulated in *Returning to Parmenides* and he considers it no more convincing than the Aristotelian one; he recognized, however,

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17 See A. Bardon (2005).
18 See E. Tugendhat, U. Wolf (1989), ch. 4.
19 See F. Perelda (2016), (2017).
20 See T. Williamson (2002).
21 See G. Priest (1998).

that it is the most tenacious defense of PNC ever undertaken from the time of Aristotle onwards.

The text in which Priest expound his critical considerations is contained in this volume; Severino prepared a rejoinder, partly exposed at the conference; then he enriched it with other passages in view of this publication. The reader can get an idea for himself. However, in what follows I want to emphasize that the pivotal point of the dispute is the very notion of *negation*. I would like to dwell briefly on it and on Severino's formulation of the principle, first of all to dispel certain misunderstandings.

Against trivialism

A point already briefly discussed, which however deserves to be explored further, is the difference between trivialism (all contradictions are true) and dialetheism (only some contradictions are true). It is not without interest to compare Priest's and Severino's attitudes towards trivialism. In this regard, Priest acknowledges that the dialetheist and the 'classic' thinker are together in opposing trivialism. Yet, it can be noted that the dialetheist seems to have more difficulties than the classical thinker. The dialetheist, indeed, has or could have the enemy at home, as it were, since trivialism, since trivialism in a system like *Logic of Paradox* (henceforth LP) is a logically admissible scenario (one for which all the statements are both true and false). So let me sketch how Severino and Priest reject trivialism[22].

According to Severino the elenchos has two formulations, or steps, having partly different argumentative structures, addressing different opponents and thus aiming at proving different theses. The first figure addresses trivialism, while the second concerns dialetheism. As far as the former is concerned, Severino maintains that every position, including the extreme denial of PNC, must be a determinate position in order to mean what it means, to be what it is, i.e. that certain negation it is and nothing else (the negation of PNC is not a fried egg, to begin with). In other words, the negation, the speech act of denying any validity of PNC presupposes (at least in this limited case) the structure of determinacy, i.e. identity and difference, the opposition between being and not-being.

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22 Priest deals specifically with trivialism in G. Priest (2006), ch. 3.

Thus (a proposition claiming) trivialism is *grounded* in what it denies, being a determinate being or meaning. This circumstance generates a performative contradiction which renders trivialism a self-refuting position. Obviously, the charge addressed against trivialism is not that of being inconsistent, as the trivialist is prepared to accept inconsistencies (as already seen in the case of the Aristotelian defence), but that of presupposing as true what is denied. The first figure of the elenchos is, in other words, a transcendental argument, whose upshot is what Priest dubs the Law of non-Triviality (henceforth LNT).

Priest seems more lenient than Severino towards trivialism. On the one side he marshals against trivialism a transcendental argument based on phenomenology concerning the act of choosing[23]; but he also believes that there are no knockout arguments against it. In particular, Priest does not consider binding the argument, which can be traced in Aristotle's *Met. gamma*, according to which if trivialism were true the language would be meaningless[24]. One can object to Priest that he is even too condescending towards trivialism, because also the trivialist must take a stand against his opponent in a discussion, after all: otherwise there is no dissent and no rational discussion takes place, not even that concerning trivialism. This circumstance seems to imply a performative contradiction, which is not far from what Severino's first figure of elenchos unveils. In such a vein, some authors, such as Karl-Otto Apel[25], have acknowledged a legitimacy to PNC inasmuch as it belongs to the transcendental-pragmatic conditions of communication and rational discussion. Indeed, the trivialist may utter whatever he wishes, of course: she can both assent to and reject what her interlocutor says; she may agree with whatever her interlocutor says. Anything goes. Yet, if she wants take part to a rational discussion, she is to make her position clear playing the 'language game of argumentation'. This game has its own rules, just as chess does. If a trivialist wants to play chess she must accept some rules: otherwise she does not play chess. Maybe she does something else, but of course, whatever she does, he does not play chess. The same goes for communicative praxis. The rules of the 'communicative game' are its pragmatic-transcendental conditions, among which a version, perhaps limited, of PNC.

23 See G. Priest (2006), pp. 69-71.
24 Ivi, p. 68.
25 See K.-O. Apel (1972).

This, of course, does not turn PNC conceived of as a pragmatic condition into a metaphysical principle, but still it makes it a necessary requirement for interlocutors being able to discuss and disagree. In any case, in the discussion between Severino and Priest, what is at stake are not the different ways how both reject trivialism, but, once this is done, whether or not some contradictions ca be true or not.

Negation and ontic determinacy

Severino conceives of negation as an *exclusion*, just like classical logic does; but he interestingly applies it not only to sentences, propositions or judgements (meaning it as a logical constant), but also and above all to entities, terms: for him, every difference even simply numerical among entities is or implies *negation*. This explains Severino's peculiar formulation of PNC, which assimilates it to the low of identity: "Being is not not-Being", "the positive is not the negative". In other contexts, Severino speaks of the 'undeniable being-itself of being', i.e. of any entity. These formulations seem pretty different from both Arisototle's and the contemporary formulations of both PNC and the law of identity. All this can lead to misunderstandings. But there is a reason to support Severino's formulation, which purports to grasp the common root of both the law of identity and PNC. Severino's basic principle could be called *the principle of ontic determinacy*. Let me explain it in some steps.

First of all: there are many things, different from each other; they are determined. So, one can say: "Everything is what it is, and not another thing" (as Bishop Butler said, as quoted by Wittgenstein)[26]. For example: this table is not this computer. Anyone familiar with the rudiments of the philosophy of language may notice that, while in the canonical formulation of PNC the verb 'to be' has *predicative* meaning, here instead it expresses *identity*. Now, identity and difference are opposite concepts, so that if two things are different, then they are not identical, and vice versa. But for Severino there is more: simple ontic determination is not conceivable without negation. The mere notion of being (of pure Being, as Hegel said) in Severino (as in Hegel) is not sufficient to think about the

26 See L. Wittgenstein (1969), p. 84-84e, 15.10.1916.

plurality of entities: the non-being, negation is also needed. In fact, for Severino, the only genuine ontological deep innovation after Parmenides is the so-called philosophical parricide of Parmenides carried out by Plato in the *Sophist* (241 d3), that is, the introduction of the sense of non-being as being different[27]. Put in set-theoretic terms, one can think of a singleton and its complement: they relate negatively to each other, because they are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. Yet, for Severino negation precedes set theory, because it must be applied to everything: objects, sets, concepts, universals and whatever else there may be. This ontological conception of negation is not an invention of Severino: it aligns with a metaphysical tradition that conceives negation as something that concerns not only sentences, but also entities. In this way negation is not so much opposed to the affirmation, but to reality, to positivity, to being, to perfection (using the metaphysical jargon of Aquinas, Scotus, Suarez, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, etc.). According to scholars, this conception of negation has its origin in Aristotle's notion of privation (*steresis*) and then has been developed by the Scolastics and later in the metaphysics of the moderns[28]. That notion is still present in Hegel when he praised Spinoza's claim that every determination is negation[29]. Severino fully agrees with this, and finds the essence of it precisely in Aristotele's *elenchos*.

Ruling out theory of meaning

Priest notices in this regard that Severino seems to endorse a form of ruling out theory of meaning (henceforth ROTM), that can be traced back to Spinoza's dictum 'omnis determinatio est negatio'. According to ROTM to be meaningful or to be a meaning implies to rule out something. Priest's criticism is that ROTM, besides being a somewhat bizarre

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27 "[T]he Platonic 'parricide' […] was the only deepening of the meaning of Being to be achieved by metaphysics after Parmenides", E. Severino (2016), p. 45.

28 See J. Ritter, K. Gründer (eds.) (1984), the entries: *Negation*, *Negation der Negation*, columns 671-692.

29 "That determinateness is negation posited as affirmative is Spinoza's proposition: omnis determinatio est negatio, a proposition of infinite importance", G.W.F. Hegel (2010), p. 87.

theory far from the mainstream, seems to be incorrect as there are meanings that do not rule out anything (the meaning of 'being nameable', for instance)[30]. To this remark one can reply that even though this theory is not common (since the mainstream are the truth-condition theories of meaning), there are some exceptions interestingly interlaced with the point at issue. For instance, some aspects of Robert Brandom's theory of meaning (partly inspired by Hegel) seem to be akin to ROTM. The core of Brandom's view is that meanings are not only different from each other, but also in some relevant cases mutually incompatible (he talks, referring to Hegel, about a 'modal robust exclusion' between meanings), as for example 'round' and 'square'[31]. To grasp a meaning amounts to grasp also some contents incompatible with it. So, if Priest's objection is that ROTM is untenable because there are meanings that apply to anything, one can reply in light of Brandom's (or, better: Hegel's-Brandom's) ROTM, by distinguishing two versions of it, depending on whether the incompatibility concerns the *sense* or the *reference* of concepts. Priest's criticism is a problem for the reference-depending version of ROTM; but it seems to fail in the case of the modal robust exclusion among concepts. In other words: given ROTM, a door could be both open and not open but not both round and square; otherwise this would jeopardize the intelligibility of the very concepts themselves.

Anyway, it is true that Severino endorses a generalized version of ROTM even to the extent that his view recalls Leibniz's monadism: what a thing is not, its negative, contributes to define what that thing is, to individuate it. So, to really grasp what a thing is implies, just as in Leibniz, to grasp the whole to which the thing is inherently connected. This has remarkable consequences within Severino's thought (as in Leibniz); at any rate, however, these are not relevant for the point at issue.

Principle of ontic determinacy

Now, even conceding all this, what does this ontological notion of negation have to do with PNC? Of course, identity and difference are (rela-

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30 For more details, see G. Priest (1998, § 1.12).
31 See R. Brandom (2001).

tional) predications, so that a denial of the law of identity can be formulated as a contradiction. But the point is another. Negation, applied to an (atomic) statement P generates $-P$. What does $-P$ mean? This is not a simple issue, since there are many accounts of negation; it seems not possible, however, to explain what a negative statement means, if not by resorting to negation[32]. Let me assume, for explanatory purposes, the framework of Wittgensteins's *Tractatus* (which is debatable in itself, as well as pretty inhospitable to dialetheism)[33]. He maintained that "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true"[34]. One can take the test with a proposition P as "the table is white", and then with $-P$: "the table is not white". According to Wittgenstein, in the first case there must exist something in the world, a certain state of affairs which verifies that proposition; in the second case, that state of affairs must not exist[35], where "a state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things)" (1961 § 2.01). Aristotle seems not far from this view: he claimed that while the affirmation (*kataphasis*) indicates the connection between what is referred by the subject and what is referred by the predicate, the denial (*apophasis*) indicates their separation[36].

Now, Severino's view is that entities are self-identical not only in their numerical identity, but also in their configurations or characteristics or ways of being. Or, to put it another way: not only are entities self-identical, but so are also states of affairs. Therefore Severino's principle of ontic determinacy is a generalized version of the law of identity, focusing on

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32 Also Priest agree on this, see. G. Priest (2006), p. 64 where he notices that there is a circularity between truth, falsity and negation: "A legitimate question […] is what negation is. If we are searching for a definition, I confess I have none to offer. Negation is that sentential function which turns a true sentence into a false one, and vice versa. This is true enough, though as a definition entirely circular. Alternatively, we could use these clauses to define negation, but then our definition of falsity would become circular. It would seem that falsity and negation can be defined in terms of each other, but neither can be defined without the other. (Nor would it help, obviously, if we were to define a false sentence as one which is *not* true)".

33 See G. Priest (2006), p. 51.

34 L. Wittgenstein (1961), § 4.024.

35 "If an elementary proposition is true, the state of affairs exists: if an elementary proposition is false, the state of affairs does not exist", L. Wittengstein (1961, § 4.25). Here is assumed that the falsity of a proposition implies the truth of the negation of that proposition.

36 *De Int*. 17a 25-6.

the self-identity of both things and their arrangements (so including both the principle of identity and PNC). It can be so reformulated: "everything is what it is and it is how it is, and it is neither another thing, nor it is different from how it is".

For Severino a contradiction violates ontic determinacy, that is, the self-identity of a given state of affairs. If the proposition *a is P* is true, a certain state of affairs exists; if it is false, *a is not P* is true; thus that state of affairs does not exist; but if that proposition is both true and false, that state of affairs must both exist and not exist. Apart from the difficulty in understanding a contradiction concerning the existence of something, Severino's view can be explained also in these terms: given an object *a* and a predicate *P*, the object *a* has only a logical space, a *logical slot* that can host what it can be the case with respect to *P*. The logical slot is one, but the possible cases are two. So, if they both occur, they occupy the very same logical slot; they coincide giving rise to a *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is the reason why Severino thinks that a contradiction amounts to a conflation of the positive and the negative, of being and non-being, where *being* means indifferently the predication of P or the existence of that state of affairs making the proposition *a is P* true, and *non-being* (the negative) means the privation of P or the non-existence (absence) of that state of affairs. The coinciding or conflating, in one and the same logical slot, of those different terms that are being and non-being is the reason why Severino assimilates a contradiction to the identification of two differents terms, as red and green, or as a man and a trireme etc. Put another way, Severino maintains, on the basis of his principle of ontic determinacy, that a contradiction amounts to considering identical a state of affairs with its absence, whence the semantic collapse[37].

Priest denies that there is a semantic collapse in the case of a dialetheia. More precisely, he denies that when a dialetheia such as 'Socrates both is and is not a musician' is affirmed, being a musician is identified with non-being a musician: "Even if A & –A is true A means, in general, something different from –A". More in general "that some-

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37 See E. Severino (2005), p. 33, 66-69 where he responds to Łukasiewicz's book-length critique of Aristotle on the Law of Non Contradiction. Severino refers to Łukasiewicz's book, whose Italian translation appeared in year 2003 and whose text is different from the more famous but much shorter article on the same topic, translated into various languages.

thing is F and non F does not entail that either the universals F-ness and (not-F)-ness, or their extension, are identical" (Priest, in this volume p. 49). Severino can reply that it is not the sameness of the abstract universals which is at stake, but the sameness of the state of affairs making true the proposition that a certain thing is F. And it is precisely on this point that Severino leverages to show that the denier of PNC makes use of it. Indeed, so Severino argues, if a contradiction identifies different terms (in the sense that has been specified), he who claims a contradiction must first presuppose, recognize and maintain them as different. Yet, the denial of the diversity of the differents terms is a self-falsifying proposition. Analogously, it is impossible for a liar to really believe what she says, because the act of lying presupposes knowledge of the truth, and that the truth is other than what is said. If what is said is not known to be different from the truth, then you are not lying. The question is whether a dialetheist accepts such a transcendental argument or not.

In any case, it does not seem that Priest, with respect to concrete reality (that is to say the reality constituted by facts or states of affairs or whatnot) asserts that a part of it both exists and does not exist, so infringing the principle of ontic determinacy. I will return to this in the final part, but here I can anticipate what follows: for Priest at the most there are facts that relate negatively to each other, so as to give rise to contradictions. But the existence of each of them is an absolute datum. In other words, there do not seem to be existential dialetheias about the existence or not of the facts[38].

On the negation

However, there is another aspect to consider with respect to negation. Priest (but also Filippo Costantini) claims that Aristotle's and Severino's defenses of PNC are not persuasive. Why? Something is to be explained, otherwise one may miss the point of contention. Priest claims that there

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38 See G. Priest (2006), p. 53 where he confirms the "obvious truth that everything that exists *is*"; for Priest there are both positive and negative facts; but negative facts are not the non-existence of the positive ones; rather, they are 'simply' other facts, which "*are* in exactly the same way that all existent things are, viz. they are part of reality" (ib.).

are various possible conceptions of negation. That which he prefers reverses the truth value of the propositions it is applied to, just as classical negation does, but, unlike classical negation, it is such that both affirmation and negation can be true (and false). Thus the crucial point is which conception of negation is admissible, whether the classical or the dialetheistic one. In light of the above, it is clear that, whatever the *elenchos* proves, it is expected that it proves that negation is always exclusive, even for those who purport to maintain the opposite view. On the contrary, according to Priest and Costantini, the *elenchos* fails, because it is probative only by presupposing that the negation is exclusive by nature. Severino and Goggi provide arguments, in our contributions, to show that the defense of PNC is not a circular. E. Boccardi and I argue in favor of the distinction between the principle of ontic determination and the principle of coherence of reality, which is usually (but perhaps also surreptitiously) expressed by PNC; while the former appears undeniable, the latter is questionable. The reader will be able to make his own opinion.

There is a point, however, that must be kept in mind in order not to run into misunderstandings. The logical system adopted by Priest (LP) accepts the formal validity of PNC: for Priest PNC is true. Yet, it is also, in some cases, false. In a certain sense, the dialetheist does not deny what the opponent claims: for him it is true both that there are no true contradictions, and that there are true contradictions. This circumstance is only a more complicated form of true (and false) contradiction, that is, a second level contradiction.

But it is also true that the dialetheist must distance himself from classical logic and from Aristotle's and Severino's approach to negation, otherwise he would have made only much ado about nothing. That is, a dialetheist must avail herself of some form of exclusion inasmuch as she must contest the statement "every contradiction is not true", in which the 'not' has to be understood exclusively. Standard negation, however, is not a good candidate to express this exclusion (because it is not exclusive). What else is available? In order to express exclusion, Priest resorts to the opposition between two cognitive states, *acceptance* and *rejection*, which are expressed by the linguistic acts of *asserting* and *denying*. So, a sentence can be logically affirmative or negative; it can also be pragmatically asserted or denied, which shows if the speaker intends to accept rather than to reject the content of the statement. The point is that, according to Priest, if P is a proposition, P cannot be both accepted and rejected by someone (although she can accept and assert both P and $-P$).

Therefore, Priest rather than denying classical logic, *rejects* it. A discussion of these aspects would take us away from the purposes of this introduction. Yet, the point, with respect to what is discussed in this volume, is the following: the *elenchos* should not simply induce the dialetheist to *deny* contradictions (because for him denial is compatible with the affirmation); rather the *elenchos* should induce him to recognize that there are good reasons to believe that contradictions cannot be (also) true, so that he *accepts* this view.

Moreover, with respect to acceptance and rejection, some[39] have rightly pointed out that their relationship of mutual exclusion mimics or equates the exclusivity of Aristotelian and classical negation[40]. Classical negation, however, has been rejected by the dialetheist among other reasons mainly because of the logical paradoxes. What would happen, however, if similar paradoxes resurfaced? In fact, it has been argued, *pace* Priest, that refuting (or rejecting) is subject in turn to the paradox that something (the proposition *R*: *R is refutable*) can be both asserted and refuted, giving rise to a so-called rational dilemma. Priest's view on rational dilemmas is that they should simply be accepted[41]; but this is not, however, a solution to that paradox. The situation then appears to be the following. Dialetheism abandoned classical negation because with it there is no way out of paradoxes. On the other hand, dialetheism, in turn, not only must resort to a form of exclusion but it seems also affected by paradoxes. Then, the alleged advantages of dialetheism vanish, and the classic notion of negation may be retained. In other words, you may as well stick with classical logic and with its unsolved dilemmas.

Towards a mild dialetheism

After this introductory overview, I would like to propose a possible philosophical interpretation of dialetheism that reduces its distance from the classic perspective. In doing this, I once again make use of the notions of states of affairs (or facts), and of the correspondence theory of truth[42].

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39 M. Carrara, E. Martino (2017).
40 See in particular F. Berto (2007), ch. 14.
41 G. Priest (2006), p. 111.
42 Priest claims that dialetheism, however, is not per se committed to any specific theory of truth; see G. Priest (2006), ch. 2.

Both these notions and theories should be clarified, but for reasons of space I rely on an intuitive idea of both. The question is: why should a dialetheia be admitted? According to Priest there are logical and philosophical reasons. One of these are the logical-linguistic paradoxes, such as the liar paradox, Russell's paradox and many others. For a long time logicians and philosophers have struggled to solve them, without achieving any satisfactory solution. These paradoxes are certainly relevant, but they do not seem to imply that there are *contradictory things* in the world; rather, they concern entities of linguistic nature, whose impact on reality is questionable. Russell himself doubted that classes belong to the ultimate furniture of the world[43]. Let us ask ourselves: in which cases would there be a dialetheia concerning the concrete world?

Priest here gives some interesting examples concerning e.g. the instant of change, which, from Plato's *Parmenides*, raises serious problems[44]. Briefly: while leaving a room, is there a moment when I am neither inside nor outside? And where would I be at that moment? According to Priest, at that moment I am both inside and outside (not inside) and this is a viable explanation. Yet, Priest excludes that I can both win and lose a game, or that I can both get on and not get on the train. In principle, the reason for these exclusions are not very clear: why can I be both inside and not inside of a room, while I cannot get on and not get on the train? Be that as it may, in general Priest claims that good reasons are needed to assert a dialetheia. One might say that no proposition is a dialetheia, until proven otherwise.

Another interesting case concerns motion and the reconsideration of Zeno's paradox of the arrow. Priest endorses Zeno's arguments and allows that it is impossible for the arrow to move during a lapse of time, if for all the instants of this interval the arrow does not go anywhere. A sum, albeit infinite, of displacements of zero measure is zero. Priest's solution is to admit that if an arrow moves and reaches its target, at every instant during its journey it is moving, that is, it occupies more than one position. Of course, the arrow is in the position assigned to it by the equation of motion $x=f(t)$, but it is also in the positions that the function returns for a neighborhood of the considered instant. The arrow is, we could say, both here and a little further back, at one and same instant. Priest calls this the

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43 See B. Russell (1919), 182.
44 On this see N. Strobach (1998) who also discusses Priest's position.

spread hypothesis, "A [moving] body cannot be localized to a point it is occupying at an instant of time, but only to those points it occupies in a small neighborhood of that time"[45]. This is contradictory, of course, because at one and a same (durationless) instant the arrow is both in a certain position and elsewhere (though in the closest vicinity). It is precisely thanks to this kind of contradictions that motion is explained[46]. I omit here a whole series of historical and theoretical considerations (Zeno's paradox of the arrow has given us a hard time for millennia, and it certainly has not been dissolved by the calculus nor by its coherentisation).

Now, on closer inspection, how does the world look like when the contradiction of motions occurs? For Aristotle, if the deniers of PNC were right, the world would be *indeterminate*. But this is not the case according to dialetheism. Let's see why. Suppose that the arrow A is in motion, and consider the instant t, belonging to the lapse of time of the journey. Where is A at t? The usual equation of motion $x = f(t)$ tells us where: at the instant t, A is in position s_1. Let P_1 be the proposition 'A is in s_1'. Can we say at time t that P_1 is true? Sure! Why? Because in the world, at the instant t, it is the case that the A is in s_1. Let's call this fact or state of affairs F_1. At t , F_1, the verifier of the proposition P_1, exists. That's all? No. Indeed, for a dialetheist, thanks to the spread-hypothesis, A at t is also in the vicinity of s_1 including, let's say, the position s_2 (close but distinct from s_1). Let P_2 be the proposition 'A is in s_2'. Can we say at time t that P_2 is true? Sure! Why? Because at instant t it also is the case that A is in s_2. Let's call this fact F_2. F_2 is the verifier of proposition P_2. But isn't it true that at the instant t A is both in s_1 and in s_2? And isn't it true that if A is at one place then it is not at the other? It really seems so (and this seems to be a kind of a priori truth about space). Now, the proposition P_1 is true because its verifier exists; yet, if the arrow is also found in s_2, does not this fact, F_2, falsify P_1? It seems so. And does the same, *mutatis mutandis*, not happen for P_2 with respect to the fact F_1? That is, a certain fact, F_1 both verifies P_1 and falsifies P_2, while the other fact F_2 verifies both P_2 and falsifies P_1. Thus, the propositions P_1 and P_2 are both true and false, even if these two truth values, taken individually, depend on different truth-makers.

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45 G. Priest (2006), p. 177.
46 See G. Priest (2006), ch. 12.

The question is: given the spread hypothesis, what makes a proposition both true and false? Is it some kind of ontic indeterminacy? Is it the circumstance that one and the same fact both exists and does not exist? It really seems not. Rather, a dialetheia derives from a kind of ontic *over-determination*, that is, from the circumstance that there are facts which, although different and ontologically independent from each other, interfere with each other in grounding the truth values of certain propositions, giving rise to contradictions. Thus, in the world there is no indeterminacy, but rather its opposite: an over-determination.

This seems like a plausible account of what a dialetheia might be compared with respect to the concrete world. (More on this, in the essay by E. Boccardi and F. Perelda, in this volume). Yet, one may reason as follows. Consider reality at the basic level – that is, as regards the existence or non-existence of states of affairs, of facts: which logical principles should be adopt to describe it? The world is over-determined in such a manner that certain facts are negative compared to others, and therefore can be considered *negative* facts. Many philosophers have questioned whether it is necessary to admit them and what exactly they are. Be that as it may, once they have been admitted into the world as Priest seems to do, they "are in exactly the same way that all existent things are, viz. they are part of reality" (G. Priest 2006, p. 53). In other words, it seems that the dialetheist must concede that any fact, such as F1 or F2, must either univocally either exist or not exist and cannot simultaneously exist and not exist, entirely regardless of whether it is a negative or positive fact.

It seems then that at this basic level, if a fact either exists or does not exist but not both, then something like the Aristotelian principles of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle hold true. That it is impossible for a certain thing to have and not have a certain property means that it is impossible for a certain state of affairs both to exist and not to exist (provided that a state of affairs is, as Wittgenstein claimed, a combination of objects: things, properties). This impossibility does not seem to be denied by the dialetheist. Rather, he thinks that the (non-existential) description of the world gives rise to contradictions for the reasons mentioned above, that is that different facts conflict with each other in grounding the truth values of the propositions referring to them, in such a way as to make each proposition not only true, thanks to one fact, but also false, by virtue of the other fact. It could be said that in a certain sense Priest sharps Kant's *real opposition* transforming it into a *logical* opposition. Indeed, Kant distinguishes the *logical* opposition from the *real*

one. The former "consists in the fact that something is simultaneously affirmed and denied of the very same thing"[47]. For example "being dark and not dark at the same time and in the same sense is a contradiction in the same subject" (ib.). In this case, despite the superficial logical form, what is opposed is a positivity (*realitas*) to its negation conceived of as the absence of something. The positivity is the clarity, the absence of it is the darkness. So a positivity is canceled by its negation and the result is "*nothing at all (nihil negativum irrepraesentabile)*" (ib.). In the case of the "real repugnancy" (ib., 212), however, "that which is affirmed by […] [a predicate] is not negated by the other […]. It is rather the case that both predicates […] are affirmative" (ib.) The two predicates conflict with each other without giving rise to any contradiction, according to Kant. Yet, the result of this conflict can be also "nothing, but nothing in another sense to that in which it occurs in a contradiction (*nihil privativum, repraesentabile*)" (ib., 211). An example of real opposition is tug of war, where two forces (each of which is something, is a positive) apply in opposite directions neutralizing each other's effects.

Now, there are both analogies and disanalolgies between real opposition and a dialetheia. The analogy lies in the fact that both involve two positive elements of reality (e.g. being here of the arrow, and being there of the arrow), and that they are in conflict with each other. The disanalogy lies in the fact that the conflictual relationship is not logical in the case of real opposition, while it is in the case of a dialetheia which, from this point of view, is instead akin to the Kantian logical opposition. The two or more facts that are the truthmakers of a dialetheia, although they all exist in an absolute sense, are negative with respect to each other and thus they give rise to an *alethic* opposition.

What I have just sketched is an interpretation of dialetheism, perhaps attenuated. It shows that the basic level of reality is, even for the dialetheist, absolutely determined and governed by PNC (or, better, by the principle of ontic determinacy) and by the principle of the excluded middle. Dissent comes later, when the determinately existing reality gets not simply inventoried but described. In this regard there are two options. It could be thought that the Aristotelian approach and the tradition derived from it are limited to affirming the determinacy of what exists, but

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47 I Kant (1763), p. 211.

they do not pronounce on the internal coherence of reality. In this case, dialetheism starts where Aristotelian view ends, and expresses through contradiction the conflict among the items of furniture of the world. The alternative is that the Aristotelian approach, in addition to ensuring the determinacy of what exists, extends to affirming the internal coherence of it. In this case dialetheism is not complementary but in conflict with traditional thought, even though both agree in thinking the absolute determinacy of the existence of what is the case.

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