Letters to Beall and Priest

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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. 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.) 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

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1 Priest (2002).  
2 Priest (1997).
sometimes and sometimes not. A (draft?) paper by Daniel\(^3\) 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-believedly 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


\(^3\) Presumably Nolan (1997). \(^4\) i.e. dialetheism. \(^5\) The former.