Emanuele Severino and the Principle of Non-Contradiction

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1. Introduction

Emanuele Severino's philosophy is one of great breadth and profundity – and one that has been largely closed to those, such as myself, who cannot read Italian. Here, I aim to examine only one small part of it, though a part which is clearly central. Severino's thought revolves around the Neo-Parmenidean claim that there is no change; and so, in particular, if something exists it has always existed and will always exist. As he puts it, 'if Being were to become, it would not be – before its birth and after its corruption. Thus, *all* being is immutable: neither issuing from nor returning to nothingness, *Being* is eternal' (p. 86)[1]. He infers this as a corollary of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC). My interest here is not with change, but with the PNC itself, and in particular, Severino's defence of it[2].

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1   All quotations from Severino are from Severino (2016). All italics are original.
2   Though, for the record, I do not find Severino's arguments that change violates the PNC convincing. There may well be other arguments, however. See Priest (2016b), chs. 11, 12.

2. Background

We will come to Severino in the second part of this paper. In the first part, I will spell out a number of necessary background matters.

2.1 Dialetheism

First, let me explain why I am interested in this part of Severion's work. A *dialetheia* comprises a pair of statements of the form A and $\neg A$ such that both are true – or, assuming a relatively uncontentious view about the way that negation behaves, a statement, A, which is both true and false. *Dialetheism* is the view that there are some dialetheias: that is, *some* contradictions are true, and so may be accepted. It is very necessary to distinguish dialetheism from a distinct view: that *all* contradictions are true. This is *trivialism*, and a quite different matter. Clearly, that some *A*s are *B*s does not entail that all *A*s are *B*s.

Dialethesim clearly flies in the face of the PNC[3]. And it must be said that the PNC has been high orthodoxy in Western philosophy. (The situation in Eastern philosophy is another matter.) True, there have been some dialetheists. The most notable example is Hegel[4]. Still, these have been very lone voices – at least until recently. Modern developments in logic have shown how it is possible to keep contradictions under control. In particular, a paraconsistent logic is one in which contradictions do not imply everything. That is, the principle of *Explosion*, according to which a contradiction implies everything, is invalid[5]. Using a paraconsistent logic, contradictions in a theory can therefore occur as isolated "singularities". They do not generate triviality.

In the light of these deveoplments, we have seen a number of philosophers endorse contradictory theories of certain subjects. I am one of them. The most frequently cited subject in question is that of the paradoxes of self-reference, such as the liar paradox (*this sentence is false*). Reasoning about this sentence very quickly leads to a contradiction. Other

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3 At least, some versions of it. It may be formulated in many different ways. On this, see Grim (2004).
4 See Priest (1990).
5 The medieval name for the principle is *ex falso quodlibet sequitur*.

subjects include motion, the law, and the limits of thought[6]. The correctness of the PNC has now become, therefore, an important issue in the contemporary philosophy of logic.

Now, the canonical defence of the PNC is given by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*. We will come to this in a moment. Whether cogent or not, the passage was so influential that virtually no one since him in the history of western philosophy has felt the need to defend it in any substantial way (though many have been happy to appeal to the it). Severino has; so this makes his arguments exceptionally interesting.

2.2 Paraconsistent Logic

Next, by way of background, let me give some idea of how a paraconsistent logic works. As we will see, this has an intimate connection with what Severino has to say about the PNC.

Let us start with "classical" logic. This is not Aristotle's logic: it is the logic invented by Frege and others at the end of the 19th Century. However, it enshrines an account of negation that I think Severio would be happy with, since each of A and $\neg A$ rules the other out, or 'opposes' it, as Severino puts it.

In classical logic, every situation (interpretation) divides up the statements into those that are true, **T**, and those that are false, **F**, these zones being mutually exclusive and exhaustive. If a sentence, A, is in the **T** zone, its negation, $\neg A$, is in the **F** zone, and vice versa, thus:
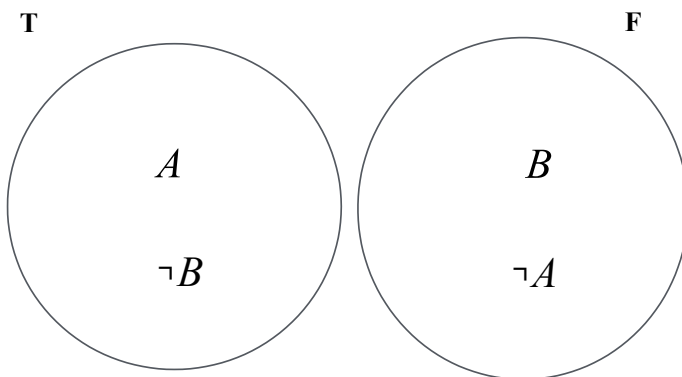
6   On all of this, see Priest (2007a), and Priest, Berto, and Weber (2018).

A conjunction, $A \wedge B$, is in the **T** zone if both A and B are in the **T** zone, and it is in the **F** zone if at least one is in the **F** zone. Dually, a disjunction, $A \vee B$, is in the **T** zone if at least one of A and B is in the **T** zone, and in the **F** zone if both are. Something is a logical truth ($\models$) if it is always in the **T** zone. Hence, it is easy to check that the following hold:

[α] $\models \neg(A \wedge \neg A)$
[β] $\models A \vee \neg A$

An inference is valid if, whenever the premises are in the **T** zone, so is the conclusion; or equivalently said, there is no situation in which the premises are in the **T** zone *and* the conclusion is not. Hence, Explosion, $C, \neg C \vdash B$, is valid, simply because there is not situation in which both premises are in the **T** zone.

There are a number of paraconsistent logics[7]; but let me describe one of the most simple, LP[8]. This is *exactly* the same as classical logic with one change: the **T** zone and the **F** zone may overlap. In particular, negation works in exactly the same way, but now, something may be in both the **T** zone and the **F** zone, thus:

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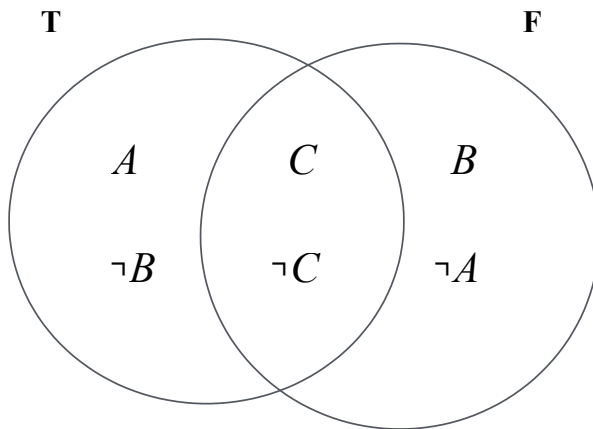
7   See Priest (2007a), and Priest, Tanaka, and Weber (2018).
8   For full technical details, see Priest (2008), ch. 7.

Unsurprisingly, the inference of Explosion now fails. (In the diagram, both C and $\neg C$ are in the true zone, but B is not). It is not difficult to check, perhaps more surprisingly, that both $[\alpha]$ and $[\beta]$ hold[9]. Note, then, that the logical truth of $\neg (C \wedge \neg C)$ does not rule out the truth of $C \wedge \neg C$, since this may yet be in the **T** zone.

2.3 Aristotle's Defence

The third matter of background is Aristotle's defence of the PNC in the *Metaphysics*, since Severino's defence of the PNC is clearly indebted to this. Aristotle's defence is tangled, and it is often not clear exactly what his argument is. His cogitations frequently seem to shoot off at tangents whose points are not clear. However, essentially the text seems to proceed as follows[10].

Aristotle starts by stating (a version of) the PNC ($5^b18\text{-}12$)[11]:

> For the same thing to hold good and not hold good of the same thing and in the same respect is impossible (given any further specifications which might be added against dialectical difficulties).

He then tells us that the PNC is so fundamental that it is not susceptible to demonstration ($5^b35\text{-}6^a10$). One can, however, give a proof by refutation (*elenchos*), 'if only the disputant will say something meaningful' (6^a12). Although not explicit in the text, it turns out that the disputant says *man*. Note that they do not say *that* something is the case. They merely say something meaningful – in this case, a simple common noun. In order to rule out simple ambiguities, Aristotle fixes its meaning as *two-footed animal*.

We then get the following argument ($6^b28\text{-}34$):

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9   Indeed, the logical truths of classical logic and *LP* are exactly the same – though their logical consequence relations are not.

10 For a full analysis of the text, see Priest (1998).

11 The translations of Aristotle are from Kirwan (1993).

It is accordingly necessary, if it is true to say of something that it is a man that it be a two-footed animal... and if that is necessary, it is not possible that the same thing should not be, at that time, a two-footed animal... Consequently it is not possible that it should be simultaneously true to say that the same thing is a man and not a man.

One might parse this argument in a couple of different ways, but the most natural is as follows, where Mx is 'x is a man', Tx is 'x is a two-footed animal', and a is any object one pleases. $\Box$ and $\Diamond$ are the usual modal operators: *it is necessary that*, and *it is possible that*, respectively:

$$\Box(Ma \rightarrow Ta)$$
$$\neg\Diamond(Ma \wedge \neg Ta)$$
$$\neg\Diamond(Ma \wedge \neg Ma)$$

Given the synonymy of M and T, this argument is perfectly sound. Its conclusion is, of course, only an *instance* of the PNC; but the thought, presumably, is that we could run essentially the same argument with any predicate in place of M.

It might be thought that Aristotle has succeeded in his prosecution of the dialetheist. He has not. It could yet be true that $Ma \wedge \neg Ma$. Of course, given standard principles of modal logic, it follows that this is then possible. That is, $\Diamond(Ma \wedge \neg Ma)$; and so we would have $\Diamond(Ma \wedge \neg Ma) \wedge \neg\Diamond(Ma \wedge \neg Ma)$[12]. That, of course, is a contradiction. But one can obviously not rule this out without begging the question. Let me highlight this fact, because it will play an important role when we come to Severino's argument. Accepting that $\neg(A \wedge \neg A)$, or the stronger $\neg \Diamond(A \wedge \neg A)$, does *not* rule out accepting $A \wedge \neg A$. Of course, to do so is a contradiction. But one cannot rule this out without supposing that one cannot accept a contradiction – which is exactly what is at issue in disputes with the dialetheist.

Returning to Aristotle's text, I note that there are some, such as Anscombe and Cresswell, who interpret its main argument somewhat differently[13]. For them, it is necessary that the noun uttered denote a sub-

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12 Indeed, in the modal extension of LP, for example, $\neg \Diamond (A \wedge \neg A)$ is a logical truth, even though $A \wedge \neg A$ can be true in an interpretation.
13 Anscombe and Geach (1961), p. 39 ff.; Cresswell (1987).

stance (that is, essence). They then appeal to some claims about essence to establish the same conclusion as above. I find this interpretation much less plausible. One reason for this is that this interpretation appeals to claims about essence that Aristotle would certainly not subscribe to. Another is that, at best, it establishes the PNC only where the predicate is an essence-predicate, contrary to the more general aim stated by Aristotle. But in any case, as an attempt to establish even the instances of the PNC for essential predication fails, since it is subject to exactly the same reply that I gave above to the more general interpretation: it does not rule out accepting a contradiction[14].

At any rate, Aristotle is now done with his major argument, but he is not yet finished. In the rest of the text (7^b18-9^a6), he gives half a dozen very brief arguments. The most obvious thing about these is that the *elenchos* has disappeared entirely. The disputant is absent, and, contrary to what Aristotle says at the start, we just have straight arguments. More importantly for present purposes, the arguments do not target the PNC. Their conclusion is that it is not the case that *all* contradictions are true (which is of course compatible with *some* being true). We might dub this the *Principle of Non-Triviality*, PNT. Indeed, the argument at 8^b2-31 has the even weaker conclusion, that no one can *believe* all contradictions to be true[15].

In short, then, for all its influence, Aristotle's argument against the diaetheist is a failure. Note that this claim is by no means idiosyncratic. The point was already argued cogently and famously by Łukasiewicz in (1910), and it is argued more extensively by Dancy (1975).

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14 For a more thorough discussion of this interpretation, see Priest (1998), 1.10.
15 There is one exception, which does target the PNC: 'if whenever an assertion is true its denial is false, there can be no such thing as simultaneously asserting and denying the same thing truly. However, they [those who would violate the PNC] would doubtless assert that this is the question originally posed' (8^a34-8^b2). As Aristotle himself points out, the argument simply begs the question.

3. Severino

So much for the background. Let us now turn to Severino. It seems to me that his arguments – at least those I can read – are, in the end, no more successful than Aristotle's. Let us examine them in detail. These are to be found in Section 6 of 'Returning to Parmenides'[16].

3.1 Being and Not-Being

This Section starts by asking (p. 59):

> But why can't the identity of Being and not-Being be affirmed? We shall dwell on this question, since rarely has the non-contradictoriness of Being been dealt with at anything but a trivial level, whether by its defenders or its opponents.

It is not clear whether Severino is talking here about Being and not-Being as universals (properties) or as their extensions (the things which instantiate them). But whichever of these is intended, a dialetheist is *not* required to affirm that Being is identical to not-Being.

The mere fact that someone holds a contradiction of the form '*x* exists and *x* does not exist' to be true does not imply that Being and not-Being have the same extension: merely that the extension of these properties overlap. Even if some things exist and do not exist, it by no means follows that all do. *A fortiori*, a dialetheist is not required to hold that Being and not-Being have the same intension; that is, that 'Being' and 'not-Being' have the same meaning; that is, that *Being* and *not-Being* are the same properties. A similar point applies to any predicating of the form '*x* is *F*' and '*x* is not *F*'. That something is *F* and not *F* does not entail that either the universals *F*-ness and (not-*F*)-ness, or their extension, are identical.

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16 Severino (2016), pp. 59-83. I am not sure that I have always understood the text, but I have done my best. Since I cannot read Italian I do not know whether there are essentially different arguments in other texts.

3.2 The *Elenchos*

After these initial worlds, there are a few pages of stage-setting. The defence proper of the PNC then starts on p. 61, and carries on to p. 68. In what follows, I shall proceed by commenting on this text, paragraph by paragraph. I reproduce the whole English translation of this passage in an appendix to the paper. I label the paragraphs for reference. Those not familiar with the passage are advised to read each paragraph of the text in conjunction with my commentary on it

Let us start with paragraph [A]. This paragraph introduces a number of ideas that will be taken up as the text proceeds (opposition, negation, meaning), but the main thought here is an appeal to Aristotle's *elenchos*. What the dialetheist denies '*in actu signato*' is affirmed '*in acto exercito*'. In other words, what is denied explicitly is presupposed implicitly. Now, I note, first, that this is not really Aristotle's *elenchos*. For him, as we saw, a person who denies the PNC is not required to state (affirm or deny) *that* anything; they simply have to say a word that they take to be meaningful.

But set this aside. What is it that the person in question denies explicitly and affirmed implicitly? Perhaps the person might say something like:

[1] Socrates is not a man

Does this presuppose that he is a man? Obviously not. Perhaps, it might be argued, [1] entails 'Socrates is not', which many people (e.g., Plato in the *Sophist*) have taken to presuppose that Socrates does exists[17]. But this is just a confusion. The copula in English and most other European languages is ambiguous. It can be the *is* of existence, as in "Socrates is no loger", or the *is* of predication, as in 'Socrates is a man'. These are logically quite distinct[18].

Another thing whose denial might be at issue here is the PNC itself. Thus suppose I say:

[2] Socrates is and is not a man

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17 Again, just for the record, I do not think it does. See Priest (2016).
18 See Priest (2016), ch. 19.

This is clearly, in some sense, a denial of the PNC. But how does it presuppose the PNC? There is, as far as I can see, no explicit argument for this in this piece of text. However, the reference to Aristotle's *elenchos*, might suggest that one can simply rerun Aristotle's argument. The person has used *man* in a way that they take to be meaningful. So we can use Aristotle's argument to infer that it is not possible that Socrates is a man and not a man. However, as I noted when we discussed Aristotle's argument, even if uttering [2] presupposes this instance of the PNC, as an argument against its truth, this fails. The dialetheist can endorse the claim that Socrates is and is not a man *and* that he is not. To reject this endorsement is exactly to suppose that one cannot accept a contradiction, and begs the question.

3.3 Linguistic Meaning

Turning to paragraph [B], we find an argument to the effect that the *elenchos* shows that a denial of the PNC not only presupposes the PNC, but the PNC is actually the ground of it, in the sense that without the PNC the denial itself could have no meaning. The PNC 'is the ground, in the sense that it is *that without which* no thought and *no* discourse could constitute itself or exist'. In denying an instance of the PNC one 'denies that without which it would not *be* (or, which is the same thing, would not be *meaningful*)'. That is, the statement would have no (linguistic) meaning, i.e., no content. (As Severino puts it, its content would not be.) This is clearly something a dialetheist cannot accept.

Now, let me say, first, that I do not find this argument in the Aristotelian text[19]. But, in any case, why should one suppose this to be true?[20]

Severino's argument appeals to what one might call the *ruling out* theory of meaning, or as Spinoza famously put it quite generally: *omnis determinatio est negatio*. Let us see how this works. Take, as an example, the

19 At 7ᵃ20 there is a remark to the effect that somone against whom Aristotle is arguing 'entirely eliminates substance' (that is, essence). However meaning and essence are by no means the same thing. As far as I know, there is no contemporary account of meaning which takes meanings to presuppose Aristotelian essentialism.

20 I note that an argument for a similar conclusion, and with similar reasons, has also been endorsed by McTaggart (1922), p. 8, and Lear (1988).

claim that Socrates is a man. For this to be meaningful, so the argument goes, it must rule something out. The main thing it must rule out is *not being a man*. And if the PNC fails, it does not do this, so *man* is meaningless[21].

This argument is problematic for many reasons. For a start, the fact that:

[3] Socrates is a man

does not rule out 'Socrates is not a man' does not imply that it does not rule out other things. For example, it might rule out the claim that Socrates is a trireme. Next, the *ruling out* theory of meaning does not seem viable anyway. Thus, any tautology is true in every possible world, and so rules out no such world. And 'Everything is true' rules out nothing, since it entails everything. Yet sentences such as these are quite meaningful.

In fact, virtually no contemporary theory of meaning endorses the *ruling out* theory of meaning, just because it is all too clear that some statements rule out nothing. Since Frege, perhaps the most popular account of meaning in logic and the philosophy of language is a truth-conditional account. In this, the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth conditions. One can do this for negation is a quite straight forward way:

• '¬A' is true iff 'A' is false

note that these truth conditions hold equally for classical logic and a paraconsistent logic such as *LP*, as we saw in 2.2[22]. Moreover, these truth conditions hold even if, for some A, the situations where ¬A holds and A

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21 Severino often speaks of meaning as being determinate. As far as I can see, for the meaning of something to be determinate is simply for it to have a meaning. But as we shall see in due course, Severino also talks about objects being determinate. I am less clear what this is supposed to mean. I guess that it means that there is some object which it is not (identical to). Of course, as long as there are at least two things in the universe, this is true. Severino sometimes seems to suggest that this is the same as being a non-contradictory object. However, I fail to see why this follows, and I could find no argument for it in the text.

22 In the classical semantics for negation, *false* means the same as *not true*. However, in the semantics of a paraconsistent logic, it is *sui generis*.

holds overlap; indeed, even if A or $\neg A$ holds in all situations, and so rules out none.

3.4 Negation

Paragraphs [C], [D], and [E] raise the possibility of this overlap explicitly. Paragraph [F] then argues against this. The main claim of the paragraph is that if negation does not rule out the overlap it is not really negation (it 'fails to constitute itself', 'fails to live as negation'). That is, this is not the way that negation, properly so called, works. Again, it is claimed that the *elenchos* shows this. I fail to see how. But let us consider the claim on its own merits.

The behaviour of negation is a highly contentious matter historically. Some take a sentence and its negation to entail everything (e.g., as in "classical logic"). Some take it to entail nothing (e.g., Boethius, Abelard, Berkeley). And some take it to entail some things but not others (e.g., as in *LP* above, and even Aristotle, *An. Pr.* 63^{b}31-64^{a}16). Some take it to satisfy both [α] and [β] of see 2.2 (e.g., Aristotle). Some take it to satisfy [α], but not [β] (as in Intuitionist Logic). Some take it to satisfy [α], but not [β] (e.g., da Costa). And some take it to satisfy neither (e.g., Beall). Some take it to satisfy the Principle of Double Negation (A if and only if $\neg\neg A$) in both directions (e.g. classical logic, *LP*). Some take it to hold from left to right, but not vice versa (e.g., Intuitionist Logic). Some take it to hold from right to left, but not vice versa (e.g. da Costa)[23].

So why should one suppose that the correct account of negation rules out an overlap? In Severino's paragraph, I find essentially three arguments. The first is a claim to the effect that negation is 'universal', meaning simply that it rules out an overlap ('fails to free itself from that which it denies'). Clearly this begs the question.

The second is that if $\neg A$ is in the overlap, it 'becomes the very bearer' of A. I'm not entirely sure what this means. But if it means that $\neg A$ states that A, or entails that A, these claims are just false. It does neither. Even if $A \wedge \neg A$ is true, A means, in general, something different from $\neg A$. A

23 For Boethius, Abelard, and Berkeley, see Priest (1999). For Intuitionist Logic, see Priest (2008), ch. 6. For da Costa, see Priest (2007a), 4.3. For Beall, see Beall (2015).

and ¬*A* may not even be logically equivalent, let alone synonymous. Each may not even entail the other. And what if some sentence, such as *this sentence is false*, does mean the same as its negation? There is nothing problematic about this. (The meaning of the sentence is simply a "fixed-point" for negation). It certainly does not entail that, for every *A*, *A* and and ¬*A* mean the same thing.

The third argument is the most interesting. This is to the effect that negation is a contradictory-forming operator ('for the negation intends to posit itself precisely as the affirmation of a contradiction'), and such an operator rules out an overlap (by definition?). The definition of negation as a contradictory-forming operator is, though contentious (as we have just seen), a venerable one, being Aristotle's (*De Int.*, chs 6, 7). However, most significantly, even if this is correct, it does not rule out an overlap[24]. To say that negation is a contradictory-forming operator is to say that, for any *A*, one must have one or other of *A* and ¬*A*, but not both. That is, for any *A*, $A \vee \neg A$ and $\neg(A \wedge \neg A)$. However, as we saw in 2.2, the negation of *LP* satisfies both of these, and also allows for overlaps. Certainly, the overlap gives rise to what one might call 'secondary contradictions' of the form $(A \wedge \neg A) \wedge \neg(A \wedge \neg A)$. But to reject this is obviously to beg the question in this context[25].

Of course, none of this shows that an account of negation that allows an overlap (such as that of *LP*) is correct. However, that is not the point here. The point was whether Severino's arguments succed in ruling out dialetheism, and this one does not.

3.5 The Overlap

Paragraph [G] then discusses the possibility of an overlap between truth and falsity further. Severino asks us to consider the following diagram:

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24 For further discussion, see Priest (2007b).
25 It might be suggested that I have mis-characterised what it is to be a contradictory-forming operator. Rather, for negation to be a contradictory-forming operator is for one of *A* and ¬*A* *to be true*, but not both. But this does not help. Suppose that this definition is correct. Then if, *A* and ¬*A* are true, then both are true and not both are true. A contradiction, for sure. But it remains the case that one can rule this out only by begging the question.

T   F

C1   C2   C1
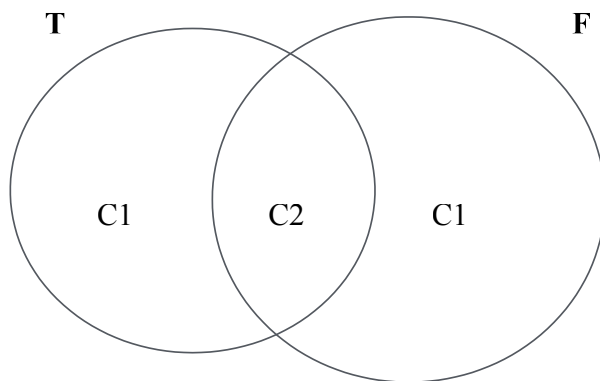
    The left hand circle contains those statements that are true; the right hand circle contains those that are false (i.e., whose negations are true). The area of overlap is C2, which contains things that are true and false. The rest is C1. In the left part of this, things are true but not false; in the right, they are false but not true. In either case the 'opposition' between truth and falsity is maintained.

    Severino argues that this account of negation attempts to maintain non-contradictoriness ('wants to be noncontradictory'), but falls into contradiction anyway, since C2 is itself contradictory (that is, has contradictory properties)[26]. It is contradictory for:

> since C2 is the negative of C1 and vice versa, it is said (when the non-contradictoriness of C1 is to be preserved) that C1 is opposed to C2, and (when the contradictoriness of C2 is to be posited) that C1 is not opposed to C2.

Now, C2 is certainly the complement of C1. So nothing is in both C1 and C2. But the other half of the argument appears fallacious. If something is in C2 is is certainly true and false, and so contradictory. Howev-

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26 Severino also claims that it is arbitray to suppose that only *some* things are non-contradictory (i.e., in C1). Not at all, no more so than it is to claim that only some things are true. One would not expect the picture itself to say which sentences are in which zones. That is determined by quite different considerations: the reasons we have for supposing something to be true or to be false. And, as I have noted, there are good reasons for supposing that the Liar sentence, for example, is both true and false. There would appear to be no cogent reasons for supposing that everything is, however. See Priest (2006a), ch. 3.

er, this does not make C2 itself contradictory. In particular it does not follow that there is something in C1 and C2[27].

But in any case, the argument suffers from a now familiar objection. Even if C2 is itself contradictory, one cannot reject this picture on this ground without begging the question. Indeed, dialetheism, and an account of negation which this deploys, does not 'want to be noncontradictory'. After all, the members of C2 *are* contradictory. The point of dialetheism is not to eliminate contradictions, but to accept some, and show how these can be managed sensibly.

3.6 Identity

Paragraph [H] now turns its attention to the members of C2[28]. Severino gives as examples 'man is a trireme', 'red is green'. One might add, more realistically, the example 'the liar sentence is true'. Severino notes, correctly, that even though the members of C2 are contradictory, there is nothing that requires them to contradict one another ('but it does not *seem* necessary for the determination of C2 (i.e., *x*, *y*, *z*) to be opposed to one another').

But then Severino goes on in Paragraph [I] to worry about identity statements, such 'red is green', arguing that these, at least, must be consistent.

> For the opposition [between red and green] to be effectively denied, it is requisite that the difference – the opposition – between red and green should be known and affirmed, so that red, known as opposed to green, be denied as opposed to green.

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27 The question of whether the distinction between statements that are consistent and statements that are inconsistent can be be consistently maintained is an important issue in the dialetheist literature. Leaving self-reference aside, there is no reason to suppose that it cannot be. Self-reference complicates matters, since it naturally behaves as a mechanism that tears through semantic boundaries. For some discussion, see Priest (2006b), 20.3, and Priest (2017), 7.3.

28 There is an infelicity the text here, since, when introduced, the values of the variables (*x*, *y*, *z*) are member of C2, that it, statements. But when examples are given, the variables are used for subjects and predicates. I take it that this is just a slip.

Thus, for 'red is green' to be meaningful, red and green must be distinct, undercutting the very claim.

Several points are relevant here. The first is that dialetheists are not, as such, committed to things of the form:

[4] Red is green

'The liar sentence is true' is a much more plusible example. But if *red* and *green* are at issue, they might simply say that there is something that is red and green. And as I emphasied in 3.1, this requires *red* and *green* to have neither the same meaning nor the same extension.

Next, and in any case, the meaningfulness of a claim of the form:

[5] a is (identical to) b

presupposes nothing about the senses of the terms '*a*' and '*b*'. Thus, *red*, and *green* do not mean the same thing. But 'red is green' is meaningful; as, then, is its negation. Conversely, in English, the colour terms *slate* and *dark bluish grey* mean much the same thing. But 'slate is dark bluish grey' is meaningful; as, then, is its negation.

Nor does the meaningfulness of a claim of the form [5] presuppose anything about the denotations of the terms '*a*' and '*b*'. Thus 'George Elliot' and 'Mary Anne Evans' refer to the same person. 'George Eliot is Mary Anne Evans' is meaningful, as is its negation. Conversely 'Gottlob Frege' and 'Julius Caesar' refer to different persons. But 'Gottlob Frege is Julius Caeser' is meaningful, as is its negation.

And finally – a now familiar point – even if the truth of [5] were to entail its falsity, one cannot reject it on this ground without presupposing that contradictions cannot be accepted, and so begging the question. Indeed, that *A* is both true and false is *exactly* what one is supposing when one supposes that *A* is in C2.

3.7 Back to the Elenchos

Paragraph [J] reiterates the claims that Aristotle's *elenchos* shows that for *A* to be meaningful, it cannot be the case true that $A \wedge \neg A$; and for '*a = b*' to be meaningful, *a* must be distinct from *b*. Whether or not Aristotle's *elenchos* itself (as opposed to what Severino claims about it) is supposed to establish this, I have already dealt with these points. In general, *A* and

¬*A* mean something different, even if *A*∧¬*A* is true (3.4). And the meaningfulness of '*a* = *b*' does not entail that '*a*' and '*b*' have different meanings or referents (3.6).

Finally, paragraph [K] reiterates the claims that the *elenchos* works even if we suppose that there is an area of overlap between truth and falsity, since it still lapses into inconsistency, and 'we are dealing with a discourse that wants to be non-contradictory (i.e., determinate), but which is superseded simply by showing it to be self-contradictory'. As I noted though (3.5), this argument fails since it begs the question. The dialetheist does not 'want to be noncontradictory'. The very claim that it makes is that it is possible to accept some contradictions as true, and that this does not lead to disaster (for accounts of negation, truth, meaning, rationality)[29].

4. Summary and Conclusion

The pages that follow the paragraphs analysed in Section 3 add no new arguments against dialetheism, as far as I can see. So we need pursue Severino's text no further.

By way of concluding, let me summarise the crucial points established in Section 3.

- A dialetheist (that is, someone who endorses a claim of the form *A* and ¬*A*) is not required to say that *being* and *non-being* are identical in either sense or extension (reference). [3.1]
- The fact that ¬◊(A ∧¬A) does not rule out ◊(A ∧¬A) – or at least, one can claim so only by begging the question. [3.2]
- The fact that *A* ∧¬*A* is true does not render *A* or ¬*A* meaningless. The argument for this is flawed. [3.3]
- Even if negation is a contradictory-forming operator, this does not rule out *A* ∧¬*A* being true. It just means that (A ∧¬A) ∧ ¬(A ∧¬A) is also true. [3.4]
- The fact that some contradictions are true does not necessarily entail that the distinction between being contradictory and non-contradictory is itself contradictory. And even if it were to do so, this is not a fact that need worry a dialetheist. [3.5]

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29 All these points are discussed at greater length in Priest (2006a).

- The meaningfulness of a statement of the form '*a* is *b*' presupposes nothing about either the sense of the reference of '*a*' and '*b*'. [3.6]
- Dialetheism does not try to eliminate contradiction. It accepts some contradictions, and shows how to manage them. [3.7]

These points serve to refute all of Severino's arguments against dialetheism. I conclude, therefore, that his arguments against dialethism are no more successful than Aristotle's[30].

5. Textual Appendix

This appendix reproduces the text analysed in 3.1 to 3.7. I omit footnotes. The letters in square brackets are my references. The numbers in angle brackets are page numbers.

> [A] How, then, must the opposition of Being and not-Being be thought, so that it may be seen in its truth? By thinking its *value*; which means, on the one hand, that the opposition is *per se notum* – i.e., that the predicate (the negation of not-Being) belongs *per se* or immediately to the subject (Being) (so that the negation of opposition is negated, because it denies that which is *per se notum*, i.e., that which is the ground of its being affirmed); and, on the other hand, that the opposition is undeniable, because the negation can live as negation only if, in its way, it affirms the opposition. *This* is the formidable contribution made by the Aristotelian *elenchos*. If the opposition is, in *any* way, denied and the negation is to *be* negation – is to hold fast as negation (i.e., as that specific negation which it is) and intends to deny in earnest and not be indifferent to its ranking as negation rather than as not-negation – then the negation is *opposed* to its negative; that is, it holds firm in that meaning for the sake of which it is negation, and differentiates this meaning from all other meaning: its positivity, its being meaningful as negation and as that specific negation which it is, consists in its differentiating itself from, and opposing itself to, its ⟨62⟩ negative (i.e., from and to all other meaning). In denying that Being is not not-Being, one must therefore *think* that the Being in

30 For very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay, many thanks go to Franz Berto.

which this negation consists is not not-Being (i.e., is not everything that is other than this negation). The negation is explicit, *in actu signato*, whereas the thought is implicit, *in actu exercito*: but it is a thought that one really *thinks*, a thought that must be realized, if one wants the negation to have that determinate meaning of negation which is proper to it and if one is not to remain indifferent to its having some other meaning.

[B] But the Aristotelian *elenchos* must be more closely examined. First, it should be noted that the *elenchos* consists not simply in ascertaining that the negation of the opposition is also affirmation of the opposition, but rather in the ascertainment of the opposition, i.e., the opposition, is the *ground* of any saying, and so *also* of that saying which is the negation of the opposition. In all discourse and in all thought, the meaning that emerges in the saying and in the thinking is held fast in its difference from any other meaning, i.e., in its opposition to its own negative. If this opposition is not thought, no thought can constitute itself, not even the thought which consists in the negation of the opposition. In manifesting itself, that is, Being submits itself to the law of opposing it to not-Being, in *any* manifestation of Being, be it truth or untruth – and so in that paramount form of untruth, which is the explicit denial of truth. The opposition is the ground, in the sense that it is *that without which no* thought and no discourse would constitute itself or exist. It grounds its own negation as well: not, however, in the sense of making it valid or grounding its value, but rather in the sense that if the negation did not base itself upon the opposition (that is, did not oppose its own meaningful positivity to all other meaning), it would not even exist. It exists only if it affirms that which it denies. Indeed, denying, it denies its own ground, it denies that without which it would not *be* (or, which is the same thing, would not be *meaningful*): it denies itself. The negation of the opposition effectively includes the declaration of its non-existence, it supersedes itself by itself; it says, "I am not here," "I am meaningless"; and if saying has any meaning, it is only because, despite the explicit negation of the opposition (which is equivalent to the self-supersession of the negation), the opposition is held fast. The *elenchos* is precisely the ascertainment of this self-supersession of the negation; ⟨63⟩ i.e., it is the ascertainment that the negation does not exist as *pure* negation – as negation that, in order to constitute itself, has no need to affirm that which it denies. Saying that the opposition "cannot" be denied thus

means ascertaining that, precisely because the ground of negation is that which it denies, the negation consists in the negation of itself, in its superseding itself as discourse.

[C] But a more thorough investigation into the meaning of the *elenchos* leads to the following series of considerations.

[D] The assertion "Being is not not-Being is the opposition *qua universal* – in the aforesaid sense of the term (i.e., it is the opposition between Being as transcendental and not-Being as transcendental, where "Being" means any positive, be it the totality of the positive or any moment of that totality). The assertion "this Being is not its not-Being" is an *individuation* of that universality. The *elenchos* shows that the negation of the universal opposition is (*in actu exercito*) affirmation of an individual of the universal opposition. Such individuation consists in affirming that this Being (this meaningful positivity), in which the negation of the universal opposition consists, is not its not-Being. The denial of the universal opposition can be realized only if it implies, i.e., only if it bases itself upon, the affirmation of an individuated opposition between Being and not-Being (that is, only if it implies the affirmation that a certain positive is opposed to all its negative). The *elenchos* so understood does not show that the negation of the universal opposition implies and is grounded upon the affirmation of the universal opposition.

[E] It seems, then, that whereas the *elenchos* is capable of showing that the negation of the opposition fails to be universal, precisely because there is a region in which the negation does affirm the opposition (and it is this region that the negation holds fast as negation), it does *not* seem able to prevent the negation – insofar as it renounces its claim to be universal – from presenting itself as negation of the opposition with respect to everything that lies beyond that region. It would seem, that is, that the *elenchos* fails to prevent the negation of the opposition from re-presenting itself in the following way: "Beyond the region that is constituted by the negation and by its semantic implications, the positive is not opposed to the negative"; or to put it another way: "Only in a limited region is the positive opposed to the negative, whereas beyond ⟨64⟩ this region it is not so opposed. Such a region is constituted by the very discourse that denies the opposition of the positive and negative in the residual region." In this way, the negation

would no longer be grounded on that which it denies, because that on which the negation is grounded, i.e., that upon which its constitution depends, is the *individuated* opposition, which is now no longer denied by the opposition with respect to the area not occupied by the ground of negation.

[F] Yet this conclusion rests on a misunderstanding. This approach, in fact, fails to keep in mind that when the negation of the opposition, i.e., the affirmation of the contradictoriness of Being, renounces its claim to be universal, it does so *not* because it intends to supersede itself, but rather because it intends to posit itself in earnest, and thus as *non*contradictory, banishing contradictoriness from itself. Accordingly, we are faced here with something radically different from the universal negation of the opposition of Being and non-Being (or negation of the universal opposition). The Aristotelian *elenchos* effectively shows that such universal negation fails to constitute itself: for the very reason that it can constitute itself *only if* it is affirmation of the opposition (albeit of the opposition between a particular positive and its negative); and thus it denies both its own ground and itself. The *elenchos*, be it noted, does not say that the negation of contradictoriness is inadmissible because it is contradictory (since in that case, it would presuppose the very thing whose value it has to show: namely noncontradictoriness); but rather that such a negation fails to live as negation, because in the act in which it constitutes itself as negation it is at once also affirmation. And so it is, most definitely, contradictory: but the negation is not superseded insofar as it is formally ascertained that it fails to posit itself as negation, unless it grounds itself on that which it denies, and so only if it denies itself. The negation, failing to free itself from that which it denies, becomes its very bearer; not only does it fail to tear what it denies off its back, so that it can then hold it at arm's length and condemn it, but what it thinks it has before it and has condemned, actually stands behind it and directs all its thoughts, including the thought that announces the condemnation. The law of Being is the destiny of thought, and thought is always witness to this ⟨65⟩ law, always affirming it, even when ignorant of it or when denying it. The supersession of the negation is not, therefore, brought about by the negation's being shown to be contradictory (for the negation intends to posit itself precisely as the affirmation of contradictoriness), but rather by showing that the negation fails to live as pure negation (that is, as negation not grounded upon that

which it denies); the negation is superseded insofar as it is shown to be self-supersession.

[G] Now, when the negation, recognizing that it cannot live as pure negation, foregoes positing itself as universal negation and presents itself as limited negation of noncontradictoriness (i.e., as the affirmation that everything, except the positive consisting in the affirmation that some positive is not opposed to its negative, is not-opposed to its negative), then it, too, becomes a discourse that, not wanting to deny that upon which it is grounded, wants to be noncontradictory; the noncontradictoriness here being the very determinateness of the discourse. At this point, then it is no longer a matter of showing the value of noncontradictoryness (i.e., of the opposition of the positive and the negative), but rather of seeing whether this way of understanding noncontradictoriness is effectively noncontradictory; of seeing, that is, whether this new type of negation, having set out to hold fast to its determinateness, manages to do so. We are no longer faced with an opponent of the principle of noncontradiction, but 〈66〉 rather of someone who affirms in a certain way; namely as having a limited range. Thus, in order to eliminate this limited affirmation we have to show that it is contradictory, i.e., that it fails to be what it sets out to be. And this is so in several respects. Apart from the arbitrariness of attributing noncontradictoriness to that particular region of the whole which is itself nothing other than a partial affirmation of noncontradictoriness, we have only to observe that this affirmation divides the whole into two fields, in one of which (let this be C1), the positive is opposed to its negative, while in the other (C2) the positive is not opposed to the negative. Consequently, since C2 is the negative of C1 and vice versa, it is said (when the noncontradictoriness of C1 is to be preserved) that C1 is opposed to C2, and (when the contradictoriness of C2 is to be posited) that C1 is not opposed to C2. The limited affirmation of noncontradictoriness is self-contradictory.

[H] It is, however, possible for this limited affirmation to further limit itself, so as to avoid being self-contradictory in the aforementioned manner. If *x, y, z* is the content of C2, it *is* necessary, in order to maintain the determinateness of C1, that C2 should also be determinate – i.e., that it be opposed to C1, precisely because C1 is held fast in its determinateness, i.e., in its being opposed to C2 – but it does not *seem* necessary for the determinacy

of C2 (i.e., *x*, *y*, *z*) to be opposed *to one another* : for the determinateness of C1, the determinateness of C2 with respect to C1 is requisite, but the determinateness of the terms that make up the content of C2 is not. If we give a concrete value to the variables *x*, *y*, *z*, it seems that judgments such as "man is a trireme" (*x* is *y*), "red is green", etc., are not superseded by the *elenchos*, at least in the way it has hitherto been formulated. The negation of the opposition, now, not only renounces the claim to be universal, but consists in nothing other than the ascertainment that the determinateness of a particular field (whose confines have yet to be determined) can be exempted from the law of opposition (which would consequently no longer be a universal law).

[I] And yet the *elenchos*, in order to attain its self-supersession also of these self-contradictory propositions, need not alter its structure. If, in affirming that "red is green", one is in a situation where, effectively, no difference between red an green is known, present, or ⟨67⟩ intended, then the law of opposites would be denied if one were to say that red is not green, and not by saying that red is green. For the opposition to be effectively denied, it is requisite that the difference – the opposition – between red and green should be known and affirmed, so that red, known as opposed to green, be denied as opposed to green. Here, then, the affirmation is the ground of the negation of the opposition, so that the negation denies that without which it would not be negation, and so denies itself.

[J] The *elenchos* is the ascertainment of the *determinateness* of the negation of the opposition (where "determinateness" means nothing other than the positive's property of being opposed to the negative). This determinateness is proper *both* to the negation, considered as a semantic unity with respect to everything other than the negation, *and* to the single terms that make up the negation. If the negation does not remain distinct from its other, there is no longer negation: if each term of the negation is not distinct from each other term (as occurs when no difference is posited between red and green, i.e., when red is affirmed to be green), again, there is no negation (for if the terms are not seen to be different, positing a difference between them would be a negation of the opposition). In order for there to be negation, the negation must be determinate, both with respect to its other, and in ⟨68⟩ the terms that constitute it; and therefore it presupposes and is grounded on that which it denies.

[K] From what has been said, it is clear that the *elenchos* works not only on the just-mentioned type of the negation of the opposition, but also on the aforementioned type of limited negation, in which the opposition is affirmed in C1, and, at the same time, denied in C2. In this case, it is true that we are dealing with a discourse that wants to be non-contradictory (i.e., determinate), but which is superseded simply by showing it to be self-contradictory; but it is also true that the *elenchos* works on this type of discourse as well: and it does so by ascertaining that the denial of the positive's being opposed to the negative in C2 presupposes the affirmation of the opposition (for the same reasons as that for which the denial of red's being opposed to green presupposes the affirmation of this opposition). In what follows, this will be considered in a context of greater theoretical scope.

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