



BOOK REVIEWS

Contradictions and emptiness all the way down?

MARKUS GABRIEL and GRAHAM PRIEST, **Everything and Nothing**, Polity Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-509-53747-1.

Abstract. Markus Gabriel’s pluralism and Graham Priest’s monism can be considered new forms of skepticism in contemporary philosophy. Gabriel considers ‘emptiness’ and Priest ‘nothingness’ as safe havens for logic and philosophy. In the same way, traditional skeptics also considered nothing secure. Furthermore, we observe in this book that whilst both Priest and Gabriel present rather eloquent theories, they nevertheless lack more substantial proofs, much like many important theories in philosophy, such as Leibniz’s monadology.

Keywords: Gabriel; Priest; monism; pluralism; everything; nothingness

Introduction

For many decades, Priest has been challenging deterministic logicians by asserting that there is no solution to Russell’s paradox and that we will have to live with a few contradictions. It is from such perspective on paradoxes that we can more easily understand why Priest questions if it’s possible for reality as a whole to be part of itself in ([Gabriel and Priest, 2022](#)). That is, for him, paradoxes like Russell’s would test deterministic conceptions of reality in such a way that deterministic boundaries would be exceeded by reality. Therefore, we would always have to distinguish when indeterminacy is the case and when it is not.

To address contradictions, some contemporary logicians resort to paraconsistency. Paraconsistent models allow logical operations to oscillate between conflicting outcomes while remaining dynamically consistent (or paraconsistent). These models are designed to handle contradictions by finding possible non-contradictory ways within themselves. However, Priest argues that paraconsistent models are insufficient to defuse all types of contradictions. Priest genuinely believes that “true contradictions are a part of the fabric of the world” (Başkent and Ferguson, 2019, p. 2) and that they do not always need to be avoided.

But why or how? In (Gabriel and Priest, 2022), Priest presents detailed explanations of how true contradictions are part of the fabric of the world. There he states that nothingness and contradiction would be relatively common to everything that exists since everything that exists can be conceived as something that “stands out of nothingness.” This “monist philosophy of nothingness” is inspired, he says, by Zen Buddhism, which also venerates nothingness as a way to overcome illusions. Thus, whereas Zeno of Elea sought to show that movement is an illusion, Priest, on the other hand, seeks to show that anything that denies contradictions and nothingness would be an illusion.

In other words, Priest argues that at the foundation of everything lies an absolute nothingness, which is “something that is,” contradicting Parmenides, who states that nothing is nothing. In this sense, indeed, Priest can be considered a monist of nothingness, while the other author of the book, Markus Gabriel, thinks differently. Gabriel employs the concept of “fields of sense,” where objects are comparable to each other within each field of sense but not necessarily between different fields of sense. That is, Gabriel appeals to the concept of fields and to a pluralism of different fields. And both, in (Gabriel and Priest, 2022), compare and comment on each other’s ideas, resulting ultimately, as we will see later, in the victory of Priest’s dialetheism, Gabriel’s emptiness, and also in the victory, I would say, of skepticism.

Priest’s monism

Priest argues that nothingness and everything give rise to paradoxes, and indeed they do. Cantor’s paradox, which involves the power set of the set of all sets, deprives us of any determination about the feasibility of a set of all sets. Stimulated by that, five researchers went even further and concluded in (Usó-Doménech et al., 2019) that sets of all (1) truths, (2)

facts, (3) maximally consistent propositions, (4) essences, (5) entities, and even the set of all (6) universals, along with other kinds of sets, wouldn't be feasible. It is in the face of this paradigm which suspends the possibility of the set of everything that many philosophers and logicians prefer not to deal with the concepts of everything and nothing. As an alternative, they resort to axioms to ensure that set theoretical paradoxes do not occur. Nonetheless, unlike Zermelo (who resorted to axioms), Priest says that there is no problem in encountering paradoxes.

For Priest, the set of everything “is the mereological sum [or the comparison]¹ of all objects” (Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 26). So that

if one takes the fusion [or comparison between; *note added by me*] of a bunch of objects of which there is only one, x , this is x itself.

(Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 26)

In other words: if we sum various objects, or draw comparisons between several objects describing a single object, then we are successfully describing a single object. Likewise, in Priest's dialetheism, if the sum of the characteristics of a paradox makes it a paradox, then the paradox exists (it is inevitable). For illustration purposes, “the book that lists all books that do not reference themselves” can only exist in two forms: containing itself or not containing itself, even though in both forms it is contradictory. According to Priest, there is nothing we can do to prevent contradictions like this from happening. But here, in the context of (Gabriel and Priest, 2022), Priest is trying to elucidate a similar but slightly more complex reasoning. In this book, he is trying to convey to us that “if the sum of the differences of all things, or the comparison between all things, describes everything, then we have as fundamental the differences of everything.” Thus we would have two concepts, “everything” and “difference,” even if in a contradictory manner. The contradiction perhaps becomes more explicit when put as follows: “what would be common to all things is that they are different when we compare all of them simultaneously;” or, put another way, “nothing is what all things have in common.” But of course, Priest goes deeper and states that “what it is to be an object is to ‘stand out’ against the background of nothingness” (Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 35).

¹ Note added by me. By interpreting “comparisons” as relationships between objects, and even as the sum or fusion of them, I believe I can aid in understanding the text without compromising its precise comprehension.

It's indeed a remarkable conclusion, yet, what we should also note here is that Priest still needs to prove that his interpretation is necessary, not just viable, both regarding paradoxes in set theory and also the idea that nothingness is what is common among all things.

Nevertheless, it is clear that it's due to his sympathy towards paradoxes and nothingness that he claims standard mereology to be consistent. Unfortunately, however, he does not explain what he means by "consistent" in (Gabriel and Priest, 2022), which may complicate the reading of the book for a layman. According to Priest

No paradox besets standard mereology [comparisons between whole and parts; *note added by me*], simply because one can prove that it [mereology; *note added by me*] is consistent.

(Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 26)

Only someone more acquainted with Priest's philosophy knows that (1) Priest believes that the set of everything can indeed be an object, even if it is contradictory, much like the "book that lists all books that do not reference themselves" can also be an object, and that, unlike Priest, (2) more traditional logicians refrain from considering contradictory sets as valid objects by arbitrarily censoring paradoxes

Gabriel's pluralism

But not all logicians express paradoxophobia so crudely. According to Priest, Markus Gabriel does it elegantly. Priest states:

A philosopher who rejects e [the set of everything; *note added by me*] for much more sophisticated reasons is Markus Gabriel. Gabriel argues that any object can be what it is only by being a part of what he calls a "field of sense." Thus, the opera *Madam Butterfly* can be what it is only because it is in a network of relations to music, composers, singers, audiences, and so on. And an electron can be what it is only because it is in a network of relations to subatomic particles, electrical charges, electroscopes, etc. This is a view with which I have a great deal of sympathy.

(Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 27)

In other words, while Priest is dealing with the problem of the set of everything, Gabriel has built a system to address the problem of identity. The problem of identity can be summarized as follows:

- What models can we use to prove that a thing is a thing and only that thing is that thing? Will we always deal with the possibility of error?

What structure, what language can we call secure for identifying things?

To address these questions, Gabriel's system points to a network of relations within different fields of senses. This vocabulary of Gabriel's responds well to the challenges of mereology by establishing limits for comparisons. Priest, however, manages to force a contradiction in Gabriel's vocabulary by suggesting that Gabriel does not clearly distinguish between what constitutes a field and what constitutes an object, nor whether one can contain the other (and vice versa), or which is more general (the field or the object). This contradiction, of course, is not something bad in Priest's eyes. With it, Priest exposes a challenge which highlights that dialetheism (or Priest's sympathy for paradoxes) might also be important for Gabriel. To support this claim Priest cites examples of mereologists whom, like himself, accept contradictory objects: Cotnoir and Bacon.

The main differences between Priest and Gabriel

Both Priest and Gabriel recognize that they fundamentally disagree on one point: for Gabriel, "world" and "everything" are absurd (or imprecise, I would say) concepts, whereas for Priest, they are not. These concepts are absurd for Gabriel because they create confusion about what belongs to what, about what is common to what, and that is why, for Gabriel, there is no set of everything. Consequently, the statement "the world does not exist" becomes true because it denies something false (or imprecise), or contradictory. However, for Priest, Gabriel's reasoning is "exaggerated" because it implies that if the world is false, then everything is false (and vice versa). And indeed, it seems exaggerated, although not absurd, since five other researchers carefully concluded the same in (Usó-Doménech et al., 2019).

Well, if everything is false, what remains for Gabriel? He admits atomic sentences, such as proper names, which generate an arbitrary identity. He considers them false or empty and applies rules to these constructions so that the rules make sense only within fields of sense. Thus, even to the question "what remains epistemic in this system?" Gabriel would say that what remains is a game of comparisons, all false but secure, as they refer to a field (or context, which I assume is for him finite or countable and therefore supposedly more secure). In other words, Gabriel is uniting objects and fields that he admits to be *de dicto*

(merely representational), and this is sufficient for him. However, it is not enough to show the viability of this system. It is especially important to demonstrate that this system is also necessary. But I admit that many systems in philosophy are merely viable, such as Leibniz's monadology, and even Priest, as we have seen, does the same.

The skepticism of both Priest and Gabriel

Both Priest and Gabriel seem to arrive at a very similar denominator: nothingness, or emptiness. According to Gabriel, he and Priest "are both noneists, though very different ones" (Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 289). This makes sense because Priest, as we have seen, tends towards monism by arguing that everything has a fundamental relationship with nothingness (an idea inspired by Buddhism, Hegelianism, and Heraclitus), while for Gabriel, everything is false, or merely representational. In other words, the paths constructed by both lead to a very similar end in semantic terms: emptiness and nothingness. In Gabriel's case, emptiness is secure and present everywhere, while for Priest, nothingness is contradictory but also secure and relates to everything (since nothing is what all things have in common, and things exist because they differ from nothing, or because they "stand out of nothing").

So we can conclude that both have reached a result very close to classical skepticism. Gabriel avoids paradoxes with his "fields of sense" and arrives at emptiness, while Priest accepts these paradoxes and arrives at nothingness. Similarly, skeptics deny or suspend everything (like Gabriel), considering, therefore, the possibility of everything being false or empty, and as a consequence they consider it safe to affirm nothing, or paradoxically, just like Priest, they consider "nothing as safe."

What remains besides contradictions and emptiness? Is emptiness sufficient?

For Gabriel, the terms "everything" and "nothing" are imprecise terms, almost like proper names with empty meaning. It's as if, by being too general, they become too imprecise, and for this reason, they are disregarded by him. Therefore, Gabriel considers only emptiness as secure, and it is with this that he constructs, it seems, an epistemology that creatively but arbitrarily avoids epistemological problems.


Priest, in turn, responded to Gabriel's resistance to such general concepts as follows:

[Gabriel] worries about how one can think of such an object [the set of everything; *note added by me*] if there are parts of it that can be referred to only *de dicto*. The answer is that I can think of it simply by using the name “*e*,” in the same way that I can think of Markus Gabriel by using the name “Markus Gabriel.” (Gabriel and Priest, 2022, p. 76)

That is, it seems that Priest wins the debate by pointing out that we can indeed refer to “everything” easily, despite the imprecisions involved in doing so. But there is no final word. As mentioned earlier, neither Priest proves the necessity of nothingness as the nature of everything, nor does Gabriel prove the necessity of “fields of sense.” As a matter of fact, we can imagine other possibilities as well for what nothing is. For example: absolute nothingness may not require a referent, just as numbers don't require a referent. That is, nothingness might be a comparison between things, but this does not mean it is something false, since a comparison is also a thing.

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