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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

On the virtues of neutrality

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Abstract

Jc Beall's *Divine Contradiction* proposes a bold response to the so-called 'logical' problems of the Trinity: we should admit without embarrassment that divine reality is flat-out contradictory. Beall defends his proposal against a wide range of objections and contends that it enjoys various philosophical and theological virtues, including the virtues of metaphysical and epistemological neutrality. While I agree that *ceteris paribus* these are desirable, I question whether the possession of these virtues really gives Beall's approach any advantage over its competitors when the chips are finally counted.

Keywords: paradox; contradiction; Christology; Trinity; neutrality

Jc Beall has accomplished something truly remarkable. With *The Contradictory Christ* (Beall 2021) and its much-anticipated sequel *Divine Contradiction* (Beall 2023a), Beall has expanded the menu of options for Christian theologians wrestling with the so-called 'logical' problems of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Previously it was near-universally assumed that contradictions in one's theological theory – whether of the one-person-in-two-natures doctrine of Christ or of the one-substance-in-three-persons doctrine of the triune God – should be avoided at any cost. The rationales for this desideratum varied, but perhaps the most common reasons were (1) that affirming a contradiction is irrational, (2) that true contradictions lead to logical absurdities (*ex contradictione quod-libet*), and (3) that contradictory beings are simply impossible, in just the way that square circles and liquid bulldozers are impossible. As Beall sees matters, these qualms are motivated all-too-often by a prejudicial attachment to classical logic, which rules out logical 'gluts' *a priori*. He argues perspicuously and persuasively that if one embraces a subclassical logic (specifically, the first-degree entailment (FDE) account of logical consequence) then one can accept true contradictions within one's theological theory without any undue (logical) consequences. In short, there are 'logical' problems with the Trinity and the Incarnation only if one assumes the *classical* account of logic (or a non-classical logic that validates the principle of explosion). Given Beall's favoured subclassical account, the orthodox doctrines are contradictory *and yet perfectly logical*.

Beall has addressed a number of philosophical and theological objections to his proposals.[1] Some of these are predictable and relatively superficial; Beall dispatches them without breaking a sweat. Other criticisms carry more weight and sophistication, but Beall nonetheless shows that none are decisive. Contradictory theology remains a live option. Furthermore, Beall contends that his solution to the 'logical' problems enjoys a range of

philosophical and theological *virtues*, such that, all things considered, it is at least as attractive, if not more so, than alternative solutions that pay deference to classical logic (Beall 2021, 36–48; Beall 2023a, 69–81). In this response article, I will examine two of these virtues – metaphysical neutrality and epistemological neutrality – and question whether the possession of these virtues really gives Beall's approach any advantage when the chips are finally counted.

Metaphysical neutrality

Start with *metaphysical* neutrality. In *The Contradictory Christ*, Beall writes:

> It strikes me as a very strong methodological principle that, in the absence of an officially revealed metaphysics, a metaphysically neutral solution to the fundamental 'problem' of christology – to the apparent contradiction of Christ – is better than one whose viability depends on the would-be truth of a specific metaphysical theory. . . . [I]t is better off being neutral with respect to whatever the ultimate true metaphysics happens to be. . . . Contradictory Christology, as I've advanced it, is metaphysically neutral to a degree that consistent christologies do not approach. (Beall 2021, 39)

Beall contrasts his proposal with what he considers 'a loaded metaphysical solution', namely, Timothy Pawl's (Pawl 2016) 'concretist account of the two natures of Christ'. It is deemed a mark *against* a solution to the 'logical' problem that it requires 'one particular metaphysical theory' (Beall 2021, 40).

In his more recent book, Beall touts the same virtue for his contradictory account of the Trinity:

> [P]ending an officially revealed or otherwise church-stamped metaphysics, a metaphysically neutral account of the apparent contradictions in trinitarian or divine-incarnate reality is prima facie better than a metaphysically heavy or metaphysics-driven account. . . . A strong virtue of the contradictory account is that it is metaphysically neutral in ways that few, if any, consistent accounts can be. (Beall 2023a, 76)

The lesson is clear. If we can simply embrace true contradictions without succumbing to debilitating logical problems, without resorting to semantic gymnastics, and without invoking a 'complicated metaphysical story' about substances, subsistences, natures, properties, material (or immaterial) constitution, and what-have-you, why *wouldn't* we?

Although Beall has his eye here on metaphysical theories specifically about the Incarnation (i.e. how to understand the one 'person' and two 'natures' of Jesus Christ) and the Trinity (i.e. how to understand the one 'substance' and three 'persons' of the triune God) his point presumably extends to metaphysical theories more broadly. It is a virtue to be neutral with respect to metaphysical theories *in general* (theories of time, theories of substance, mereological theories, etc.) and not merely with respect to theologically flavoured ones.

So, what's the problem? I'm happy to concede that *ceteris paribus* metaphysical neutrality is a theoretical virtue, and that Beall's proposals exhibit said virtue. Sooner or later, however, the metaphysical bills will need to be paid, and one has to ask whether in the long run Beall's contradictory theories will come out in the black. Seldom are philosophers (especially religious ones) content to defer metaphysical questions indefinitely. Curiosities beg to be satisfied. And once we start filling in our metaphysics, that can introduce new challenges for our favoured theories, including Beall's contradictory theologies.

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Allow me to sketch out – very sketchily – one way in which this might happen, specifically with respect to the metaphysics of truth and truth-bearers. I presume we can all agree that there are things that are *true*, that bear the property of *truth*: sentences, statements, assertions, beliefs, thoughts, and suchlike. A 'truth', then, is simply something that is true. We can also see that different truth-bearers can express *one and the same truth*; for example, the sentences 'The sky is blue' and 'Le ciel est blue' are two different expressions of one truth. In addition to writing those sentences, I can (and do) entertain the *thought* that the sky is blue. That thought has the same 'truth-content' as the earlier sentences. Following convention, we'll use the term 'proposition' to refer to this kind of truth-bearing content. A proposition can be defined as a *primary bearer of truth-value*. Sentences, thoughts, beliefs, and so forth, bear truth-values derivatively, in virtue of the propositions they express or contain. Propositions, however, are those things that bear truth-values (truth and falsehood) *non-derivatively*.

Do propositions really exist? There are good arguments from ordinary language and ontological indispensability for realism about propositions.[2] Moreover, it seems that propositions characteristically play a *representational* role. A proposition is true if it accurately represents how things are. A proposition is false if it misrepresents (i.e. fails to accurately represent) how things are. If this relatively modest metaphysical theory is correct so far – the theory that says propositions are real entities with representational features or capacities such that they can bear truth-values – then it already seems bizarre that a proposition could be *both true and false*, as Beall's proposal entails (Beall 2023a, 41). How could a proposition both *accurately represent how things are* yet also *misrepresent how things are*?

When logic is considered in purely formal terms, as a system of symbols and syntactical rules, 'contradictory' or 'glutty' formulae don't seem so troublesome. According to Beall's favoured account (FDE), there are four logical possibilities for any well-formed sentence: true-and-not-false, false-and-not-true, both-true-and-false, and neither-true-nor-false (Beall 2021, 10; Beall 2023a, 20–21).[3] Now, from a purely syntactical perspective, the symbols 'foo' and 'bar' will serve just as well as 'true' and 'false'; it's irrelevant to the system itself what tokens are used to denote the 'values' of 'sentences'. Who would object to a formal system which stipulates that something can be *both* 'foo' *and* 'bar'? But the moment we start to think of 'true' and 'false' in terms of the representative role of propositions – to put metaphysical meat on the logical bones, as it were – gluts start to look more objectionable.

Let's push the metaphysics of propositions a little further. Suppose you think that propositions not only exist, but must exist independently of human mental activity, because (1) there are countless truths that no human mind has entertained (or ever will entertain), (2) there are simply too many truths to be entertained by human minds, either individually or collectively, and (3) there would have been some truths even if humans had never existed. Suppose further that you think that propositions must exist necessarily if they exist at all, because at least some propositions are necessarily true; they are true in every possible world and therefore they exist in every possible world.[4] In that case, propositions cannot be reduced to, or grounded in, contingent entities such as inscriptions, utterances, or neural structures. Such thinking will incline you towards a *platonist* account of propositions, which takes propositions to be immaterial abstract entities.

If, however, you also take seriously the representational role of propositions and you're persuaded that representation must be grounded in mental activity – that it is fundamentally *minds* that have the capacity to represent things beyond themselves – then you will also be sympathetic towards a *conceptualist* account of propositions, according to which propositions are mental in nature.[5] On this view, propositions are essentially *thoughts*. But whose thoughts could they be? We've already noted some reasons why propositions couldn't be human thoughts. But what if they were divine thoughts? A *theistic*

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conceptualist account of propositions arguably provides the best of both worlds: it accounts for those features of propositions that push us towards platonism (and away from *non-theistic* conceptualism) as well as those features that push us towards conceptualism.

Of course, a serious case for theistic conceptualism about propositions demands much more detail and rigour than I have provided here.[6] Still, suppose you're a theist who has reflected deeply on the metaphysics of propositions and has embraced theistic conceptualism. If you also accept Beall's contradictory theologies, you must hold that there are some propositions (about Christ and God) that are both true and false, in which case there are *divine thoughts* that are both true and false. Indeed, there are divine thoughts that not only *accurately represent how things are* but also *misrepresent how things are*. It's not merely that God has some thoughts that accurately represent how things are (the *true* propositions) and other thoughts that accurately represent how things are not (the *false* propositions). That wouldn't be problematic. Rather, God has thoughts that *both* accurately represent *and* misrepresent how things really are. This seems less than fitting for a perfect cognitive agent. There appears to be a *prima facie* tension between theistic conceptualism and the affirmation of true contradictions.[7]

Lest the reader misunderstand: my claim is not that Beall (or anyone else) ought to embrace theistic conceptualism (or any competing account of propositions). I have no idea whether Beall has any strong or settled views on the metaphysics of truth and truth-bearers. I suspect that a theological glut theorist would be inclined to avoid boarding the ontological train in the first place by adopting an anti-realist view of propositions, perhaps assisted by a deflationary theory of truth. If so, that only underscores my concern. For anti-realism is no less a metaphysical stance than realism (of whatever variety). If contradictory theologies are more comfortable with anti-realism about propositions than with realism, it looks as though the virtue of metaphysical neutrality is only skin-deep.

Epistemological neutrality

Let's turn now to *epistemological* neutrality. In *The Contradictory Christ*, Beall compared his Contradictory Christology to a number of alternative approaches, including the 'epistemic-mystery strategy' that I have developed and defended (Anderson 2007, 2018). According to the epistemic-mystery strategy, theological paradoxes such as the Incarnation and the Trinity are merely apparent contradictions resulting from unarticulated equivocations in the component claims of the doctrines in question (Anderson 2007, 220–232). On this view, we cannot see *how* to resolve the apparent contradictions (due to present cognitive limitations) but we are nonetheless rationally justified in believing *that there are resolutions* (i.e. that the contradictions are merely apparent rather than genuine). In other words, we are rationally justified in believing there are metaphysical distinctions such that, if we *were* able to grasp them, we would be able to understand and articulate the doctrines without any apparent contradiction. A key component of this strategy involves explaining how the component claims of the doctrines are epistemically warranted to a high degree, and to that end I leveraged Alvin Plantinga's proper-function account of warranted Christian beliefs.

Beall suggests that his contradictory account has the edge over the epistemic-mystery account when it comes to the virtues of simplicity and epistemic neutrality:

> In comparison with the contradictory account of Christ advanced in this book, any epistemic-mystery account is bound to be vastly more complicated in general, and significantly less neutral on epistemology or theory of cognition. (Beall 2021, 146)

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Epistemic-mystery strategies are hindered by 'the elaborate epistemological story' they have to tell, by 'the epistemic stake' they need to put down (Beall 2021, 145, 147). In contrast, Beall's Contradictory Christology is 'neutral with respect to the true epistemology, or at least far closer to neutrality than any epistemic-mystery strategy can sustain' (Beall 2021, 147).

The same song is sung in *Divine Contradiction* regarding Beall's account of the Trinity:

> What is true of metaphysically neutral accounts is equally true of epistemologically neutral accounts. Indeed, this virtue is simply that of [the preceding section on metaphysical neutrality], mutatis mutandis with respect to 'epistemology'. (Beall 2023a, 76)
>
> Whatever explains knowledge of divine reality and knowledge of human reality and, in short, reality in general is what explains the knowledge of divine contradiction. Theology doesn't demand some peculiar epistemology to resolve the apparent contradictions of divine reality. (Beall 2023a, 76–77)

In sum:

> A virtue of the contradictory account is that it is epistemologically neutral in ways that few, if any, consistent accounts can be. (Beall 2023a, 77)

The claim, then, is that Beall's contradictory account does not depend on a 'sophisticated epistemological theory' (Beall 2021, 150) or indeed on *any* epistemological theory. That virtue is not shared by the epistemic-mystery account (whatever other virtues the latter might have).

As with metaphysical neutrality, I am happy to grant that *ceteris paribus* epistemological neutrality is a virtue. It seems to me, however, that our competing accounts are not being judged on a level playing field. In *Paradox in Christian Theology*, I sought to answer two questions: (1) Are some essential Christian doctrines paradoxical? (Answer: yes, the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.) (2) Can it be rational to believe those paradoxical Christian doctrines? (Answer: yes, according to the epistemological model I defended.) To answer the second question with any degree of adequacy, it was necessary to get into the epistemological weeds. Whether one thinks certain theological beliefs are rationally justified or epistemically warranted will depend crucially on one's epistemology. Hence the need to put down an 'epistemic stake'. An 'epistemic-mystery' account that sidesteps the 'epistemics' hardly deserves to be taken seriously.

Beall, on the other hand, appears content to do just that: to sidestep the epistemological questions that his proposal inevitably invites. In the opening chapter of *Divine Contradiction*, he declares four 'guiding constraints' of his account: (1) contradictions true of Christ; (2) theology bound by logic; (3) the Athanasian Creed; and (4) robust monotheism. These are all adopted as *unargued premises* of the account. Beall thus assumes at the outset, first, that true contradictions are possible (indeed, actual), and second, that the statements expressed in the Athanasian Creed are true. He also takes for granted what he takes to be 'the correct account of logical consequence', namely, FDE.

There's nothing wrong with this *per se*. Every philosophical or theological theory has to make some initial assumptions, and if they're explicitly declared, so much the better. But questions about the warrant for those assumptions cannot be forever postponed, particularly when some of those assumptions look quite disputable. The Athanasian Creed, for all its historical pedigree, makes some pretty strong theological statements. Why should anyone affirm those statements in the first place? What epistemic grounds are

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there for taking those credal statements to be *true*? As best I can tell, Beall has little if anything to say on that point.

Furthermore, why *should* we accept that true contradictions are possible? I suspect that for most ordinary people – and, more relevantly, for most ordinary Christians – it seems obviously, even self-evidently, false that reality could both *be a certain way* and also *not be that very same way*. Of course, intuitions – even strong ones – can be mistaken. So-called common-sense beliefs are fallible and defeasible. But surely it will require something with considerable epistemic weight to defeat our pre-philosophical intuitions about contradictory states-of-affairs. Beall avers that there is 'no strong argument' for holding to classical logic and that the standard view is 'under-motivated' (Beall 2023a, 8, 35).[8] I counter that we don't *need* strong arguments to support our basic logical intuitions. We do, however, need a reasonably strong argument to support the contention that those intuitions are mistaken.[9] Beall occasionally suggests that the contradictions of Christ give us reason to think that there *are* true contradictions (Beall 2021, 31–32; Beall 2023a, 21). But that would be so only if we had good reasons (or more broadly, good epistemic grounds) for taking the contradictory credal statements about Christ to be *true*. And that forces us to face the epistemological questions raised in the preceding paragraph.

Now, Beall's defence might be that he writes as a Christian believer to fellow Christian believers, and therefore is justified in simply taking the creeds as a starting point. His project is one pursued within the house of faith, exploring the viability of contradictory theological theories based on the acceptance of a subclassical logic. The project might be framed thus: 'Suppose we assume the FDE account of logical consequence and also accept a simple, flat-footed reading of the credal statements, such that they are truly contradictory. What would be so wrong with that?' That's a worthy project, and fine as far as it goes.

But how far *does* it go? Beall's hammering home the point that the credal statements are (apparently) contradictory is bound to prompt some epistemological reflection on the part of Christian readers. Sure, it could be that true contradictions are possible after all. But if we have strong intuitions to the contrary, perhaps the more rational response will be for Christians to revise or even relinquish some of their beliefs about Christ and God.[10] Then again, perhaps the all-things-considered rational response is to adopt a 'mysterian' stance. It all depends on what we take to be the epistemic status of the various propositions vying for our acceptance – and that means getting our hands dirty with some epistemological theorizing. Elsewhere I have proffered some thoughts on what conclusions might be delivered by two prominent accounts of epistemic justification (Anderson 2023). Whether or not those thoughts have any merit, the point is this: Beall seemingly wants to bracket out the epistemological questions as part of his project. Eventually, though, the questions must be squarely faced; at that point, neutrality will probably be unsustainable, because different epistemologies will deliver varying conclusions about what we ought to believe.

Here's the nub of the matter, as I see it: for Beall's proposal to be viable 'out in the wild' (as opposed to the controlled laboratory conditions of *The Contradictory Christ* and *Divine Contradiction*) it needs the support of a plausible epistemic theory according to which all of the following hold: (1) Christians are warranted in believing the claims expressed in the relevant Christian creeds; (2) Christians are warranted in believing that those claims are contradictory; (3) Christians are warranted in believing that there can be true contradictions; and (4) any intuitions or 'seemings' they have regarding the impossibility of contradictions do not constitute defeaters for any of the beliefs in (1)–(3). Consider this, then, a friendly invitation to fill in the blanks. Whether that requires an 'elaborate epistemological story' remains to be seen.

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If metaphysical and epistemological neutrality are indeed virtues, they are relatively shallow ones. No doubt it's appealing for a theory to have a low price of entry, philosophically speaking. All else being equal, the fewer boxes one has to tick before signing on to the theory the better. Still, metaphysical and epistemological questions cannot be deferred indefinitely. We might not go looking for them, but they will come looking for us. Will the answers be friendly or hostile to our theories? We can't know unless we grapple with the questions. A safe neutrality can be maintained only at the cost of a suppressed curiosity.

Notes

1. See also Beall 2023b.
2. By 'realism' I simply mean the thesis that propositions *exist* – a thesis that makes no claims about the *nature* of propositions.
3. These correspond to 'just-true', 'just-false', 'glut', and 'gap'.
4. This follows from the plausible metaphysical principle that, necessarily, only existent things can bear properties, such as the property of truth.
5. Of course, physical objects like paintings can represent things, but only in virtue of the prior activity of a mind.
6. For a more rigorous case: Welty (2006); Welty (2014); Welty (2021).
7. John Waldrop suggests (in correspondence) that this theological objection can be mounted independently of any metaphysical theory of propositions.
8. It's worth pointing out that one can accept FDE as the correct account of *logical consequence* while also holding (on extra-logical grounds) that there cannot be true contradictions – either in general, or more specifically in theology – as a matter of *metaphysical* principle. See Tahko (2009).
9. Perhaps those intuitions are not universal. Still, those of us who *do* have those intuitions will need some hefty reasons to dismiss them.
10. Such is the conclusion reached by Dale Tuggy, for example: Tuggy (2003); Tuggy (2011).

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