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# The Law of Noncontradiction

One characteristic of many allegedly educated Americans is their rejection of such laws of logic as the law of noncontradiction. Not too long ago, enemies of the historic Christian faith attempted to ridicule that faith and its adherents by describing them as irrationalists who separate faith from reason, from science, and from evidence, as well as from sound principles of logical thinking. Today some representatives of Christianity attack other Christians as being too rational. Something much like this happened to me after I had delivered the first of many lectures in the old Soviet Union in 1991. After my presentation, a Soviet philosophy professor complimented me on much that I had said but complained that I and my message suffered from one fundamental fault: I was too rational. Whatever the Soviet professor's intentions, I took her complaint as a compliment. After all, when did being an irrationalist constitute grounds for a compliment?

In chapter 1, I noted the important role the law of noncontradiction plays in evaluating conflicting worldviews. Any worldview that fails the test of reason, that is logically incoherent, must be false. In the same chapter, I noted Kimberly Manning's description of the gender feminist ideology to which she had become captive as a haven for irrationalists. Anyone critical of their rejection of logic and objective truth was ridiculed as anal-retentive.

In this chapter, I want to explain what the law of noncontradiction is and why accepting it is a matter of necessity, not of choice. Striving for logical consistency is not an option. The law of noncontradiction is not a principle we may or may not observe. It is an unavoidable principle of thinking, communicating, and speaking. Several of the points I make in chapter 9 offer additional support for the indispensability and unavoidability of the law of noncontradiction. Much of the material in the current chapter lays groundwork for my critical analysis and evaluation of the increasingly widespread repudiation of objective truth (chap. 10).

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## Aristotle and the Law of Non- contradiction

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According to Aristotle, the laws of logic are not simply principles of human thinking. Because they are also laws of being, we may use them to grasp the logical structure of the world. The law of noncontradiction is a necessary principle of thought because it is first a necessary principle of being.

Perhaps the simplest definition of the law of noncontradiction is this: "A cannot be both  $B$  and non- $B$  at the same time and in the same sense."<sup>1</sup> In this formulation, the letters  $A$  and  $B$  are variables in the same way that  $x$  and  $y$  are variables in algebra. All we have to do to use the variables properly is to substitute for them consistently. When we do this properly, we end up with propositions like "An object ( $A$ ) cannot be both round ( $B$ ) and square (non- $B$ ) at the same time in the same sense" or "A proposition ( $A$ ) cannot be both true ( $B$ ) and false (non- $B$ ) at the same time in the same sense."

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## The Inescapable Distinction Between $B$ and Non- $B$

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One reason why so many people fail to see the necessity of the law of noncontradiction is their failure to grasp the inescapable distinction between  $B$  and non- $B$ . One helpful way to see this distinction is the following box in which I have located the terms  $B$  and non- $B$ .

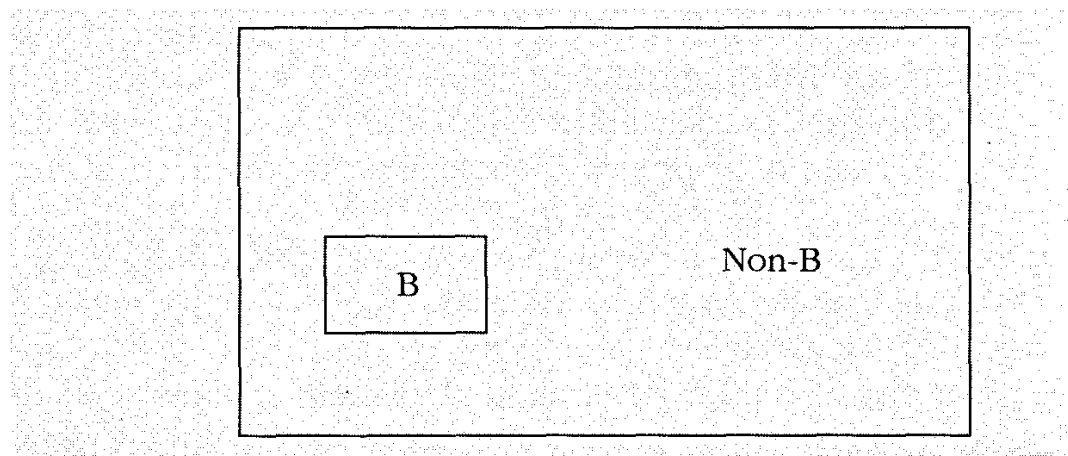


Figure 8.1

Let us suppose that the larger box (non- $B$ ) represents the entire universe in the sense that if anything (call it  $A$ ) exists, it exists inside the box. Our larger box contains a smaller box that I have called  $B$ . This smaller box represents some class or group or set of things that have something essential in common. Hence,  $B$  could represent the class of all dogs or all horses or all humans.

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1. Aristotle's way of saying this is worth noting. He writes that "the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect." In another passage, he put it this way: "It is impossible that contrary attributes should belong at the same time to the same subject." Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1005b 18 and 1005b 26, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1908), 18, 26. I use the standard pagination for Aristotle's writings.

Non-*B* (the bigger box) is what we call the complementary class of *B*. This means that if, for example, the box we have called *B* represents the class of all dogs, then non-*B* stands for everything else in the universe that is not a dog. The complementary class of non-*B* includes cats, fish, Socrates, Pontius Pilate, the Ohio River, Mount Everest, the moon—in short, anything in the universe that is something other than a dog. If *B* represented the class of all human beings, then non-*B* would include everything in the universe that is not a human.

All that the law of noncontradiction says is this: If anything (call it *A*) is a member of the class we have called *B*, then *A* cannot under any condition also (at the same time and in the same sense) be a member of the complementary class of non-*B*.

Consider an example: It is impossible for Socrates to be both man and nonman. Since the class of nonman is the complement of the class of man, the claim that Socrates is also a member of the class of non-*B* (nonman) is tantamount to saying that Socrates is not only a human but also everything else in the universe. Thus, anyone who claims that Socrates can be both man and nonman is saying that Socrates can be a dog, a star, and indeed everything else in the universe at the same time. Philosopher Gordon H. Clark outlines the implications of this:

If contradictory statements are true of the same subject at the same time, evidently all things will be the same thing. Socrates will be a ship, a house, as well as a man. But if precisely the same attributes attach to Crito that attach to Socrates it follows that Socrates is Crito. Not only so, but the ship in the harbor, since it has the same list of attributes too, will be identified with this Socrates-Crito person. In fact, everything will be the same thing. All differences among things will vanish and all will be one.<sup>2</sup>

There is no quicker way to become swallowed up in nonsense than to deny the distinction between *B* and non-*B*. I once heard of a young man who was called into his local office of the Internal Revenue Service for an audit. The reason for his trouble was his failure over several years to file a tax return. When asked by the IRS agent why he had failed to file, the youth replied that in college he had learned that the law of noncontradiction is an optional, nonnecessary principle. Once he had learned that there is no difference between *B* and non-*B*, it was only a matter of time before he realized that no difference exists between filing a tax return and not filing a tax return. "That's very interesting," said the tax agent. "I've never heard that one before. Since you believe that no difference exists between *B* and non-*B*, I'm sure you also believe that there is no difference between being in jail and not being in jail!"

2. Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 2d ed. (Unicoi, Tenn.: The Trinity Foundation, 1989), 103.

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## Can the Law of Noncontradiction Be Proven?

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Strictly speaking, the law of noncontradiction cannot be proven. This should not surprise us. Every argument must start by taking some things for granted. There are always some things that must be accepted without proof. In order for an ultimate principle like the law of noncontradiction to be proved, it would have to be deduced either from other principles (in which case the logical principle would no longer be ultimate) or from itself (in which case the supposed argument for the logical principle would be circular and not really a proof). Any so-called proof for the law of noncontradiction would have to presuppose the truth of the law and would thus beg the question and fail as a proof.

While no direct demonstration of the principle of noncontradiction exists, there is a persuasive negative or indirect argument that assumes three forms, all pointing to logical consequences that follow a denial of the principle. The three forms of the argument look like this.

- (1) If the law of noncontradiction is denied, then significant thinking is impossible.
- (2) If the law of noncontradiction is denied, then significant human conduct is impossible.
- (3) If the law of noncontradiction is denied, then significant communication is impossible.

Each of the above carries with it several absurd consequences. Suppose we concentrate on one of them:

- (3\*) If significant human communication is impossible, then it is impossible to use language to refute the law of noncontradiction.

The type of reasoning being used here illustrates a simple and indisputable form of reasoning, known as *modus tollens*. According to *modus tollens*, if one proposition ( $p$ ) implies another proposition ( $q$ ) and  $q$  is false, then  $p$  must be false. As an example, consider the following:

- (4) If ( $p$ ) Ron Nash is a former winner of the Master's Golf Tournament, then ( $q$ ) Ron Nash has played golf on the Augusta National Golf Course.
- (5) But it is false that Ron Nash has played golf on the Augusta National Golf Course (not- $q$ ).
- (6) Therefore, it is false that Ron Nash is a former winner of the Master's Golf Tournament (not- $p$ ).

As stated, if  $p$  implies  $q$  and  $q$  is false, then  $p$  is false. The denial of the law of noncontradiction necessarily implies all kinds of absurd or false consequences, one of which is indicated in proposition (3\*). The falsity of the second proposition in the implication entails the falsity of the first

proposition, which in turn provides the indirect proof for the law of non-contradiction that we are seeking.

### Logic and Significant Human Communication

People who attack the law of noncontradiction are engaged in a self-defeating task since they must use the principle in every attempt to deny it. Underlying this argument is the inescapable distinction between *B* and non-*B*, both in language, thought, and being. Contrary meanings may not (if one is to speak or write intelligibly) be attributed to the same word at the same time and in the same sense. Since any refutation of the law of noncontradiction would have to be expressed in intelligible language and since significant speech presupposes the law, it is in principle impossible to use language to deny the law of noncontradiction. In order for a word to mean something (*B*), it must not mean something else (non-*B*). Obviously, any given word can have more than one meaning. As long as the possible meanings of a word are limited in number, we can always avoid the ambiguity by assigning a different set of symbols to each meaning.

Consider, for example, the proposition "Julius Caesar is a man." If "man" is ambiguous and has (let us say) five possible meanings, we may further specify by adding a number to each different sense of "man" such as "man-1," "man-2," and so on. But suppose the law of noncontradiction is denied. There would then be no difference in meaning between "man" and any substitutes for "nonman." Therefore, "man" and every other word in the dictionary would have thousands of meanings. And, if words have so many senses, intelligible speech becomes impossible. This is why the person who attempts to argue against the law of noncontradiction must use the very law he is trying to deny. If the law of noncontradiction is denied, nothing has meaning, including the sentences of people who think they are denying the law. If the laws of logic do not first mean what they say, nothing else can have meaning, including sentences that purport to deny the law.

This last point has considerable importance. If logic is indispensable to all human thought, speech, and action, it follows that the law of noncontradiction is not merely an arbitrary convention useful for constructing symbolic systems. "Three times three equals nine" is not true because humans say it is or stipulate it. That nine is the product of three times three is necessarily and objectively true.<sup>3</sup> The law of noncontradiction is

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3. One must not get confused at this point by specious reasoning about mathematical propositions not developed on a base ten system. In a base seven system, for example, there is no numeral for nine. So what happens to sums or products in a base seven system is that we use different symbols, but the meaning is the same. Some reportedly intelligent people have said some foolish things about the supposed relativity of mathematical truth on such specious grounds.

not stipulative or conventional; rather it is a necessary and indispensable law of being and of thought.

### **Logic and Significant Human Action**

I have already provided several examples of how a denial of the law of noncontradiction makes significant human action impossible. If there is no difference between *B* and non-*B*, there is no difference between drinking milk and drinking poison or between driving on the right side of the median of an interstate highway or driving on the left side. People who behave as though there is no difference between *B* and non-*B* may quickly find themselves in embarrassing or dangerous situations. Consider a politician who denies the distinction between *B* and non-*B*. Such a person could, I suppose, use his rejection of the necessary difference between *B* and non-*B* as an excuse for an act of adultery. If there is no difference between *B* and non-*B*, our politician would then be unable to distinguish between his wife and a car, a building, a river, or a stop sign. And since this is so, he would also have difficulty distinguishing between his wife and a person who is not his wife. The regrettable implications of this kind of irrationalism are just as risky in religion as in marriage and politics. Supposedly religious people who think in this illogical way would lack any rational ground for distinguishing between God and the Devil.

### **Logic and Significant Human Thinking**

It should be obvious how the previous comments lead to another conclusion: If the denial of the law of noncontradiction precludes significant speech and behavior, significant human thinking also becomes impossible. When students find themselves taking a course, any course, taught by a professor who thinks in this illogical way, a consistent professor (note the implicit logical presence here) would have to admit there is no difference between a good exam and a bad one, between a good grade and a bad one. Unless such a professor cheats, it seems difficult to see how he could avoid giving all students the same grade.

### **Logic and God**

Surprisingly, many religious people believe that God is above this stuff about logic because he created the law of noncontradiction and thus operates according to a different or higher logic than do created beings like us. On such a view, humans are stuck with the law of noncontradiction, but God is not. When such individuals are asked to explain how significant thinking, communication, and action are possible for a God for whom no distinction between *B* and non-*B* obtains, these people take refuge in mystery. While I do not deny that some features of the Christian faith are above reason in the sense that we cannot presently understand them, it does not

follow that religious claims that we find difficult to comprehend are against reason in the sense of violating the law of noncontradiction.

It is helpful at this point to take note of several biblical accounts of things that God cannot do. For example, we are told that God cannot swear by a being greater than himself (Hebrews 6:13). This is true because there is no being greater than God. The reasoning clearly presupposes the application of the law of noncontradiction to God. The Bible also says that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). Behind this claim is the clear distinction between a true statement (*B*) and a lie (non-*B*). If God does operate according to a different logic, a higher logic in which *B* and non-*B* are indistinguishable, nothing would prevent God at the final judgment from announcing that there is no difference between believers and nonbelievers and between God's keeping and breaking his promises. But there is no need to get upset, because on such grounds there can also be no difference between heaven and hell. People who attempt to separate God from the laws of logic should consider the possibility that they are enemies of the faith they profess.

In a 1955 article titled "Mysticism and Human Reason," former Princeton University philosopher W. T. Stace wrote, "God is utterly and forever beyond the reach of the logical intellect or of any intellectual comprehension, and that in consequence when we try to comprehend his nature intellectually, contradictions appear in our thinking."<sup>4</sup> As Stace saw things, "any attempt to reach God through logic, through the conceptual, logical intellect, is doomed."<sup>5</sup> Then Stace moves to the more extreme position that religious believers should reject logic when dealing with God.

Stace, himself a mystic, ridicules other mystics for yielding to their rational impulses and seeking ways to eliminate contradictions in their thinking about God. The proper course, for Stace, is to glory in the contradictions. As Stace puts it,

My own belief is that all attempts to rationalize the paradox, to make it logically acceptable, are futile because the paradoxes of religion and of mysticism are irresolvable by the human intellect. My view is that they never have been, they never can be, and they never will be resolved, or made logical.<sup>6</sup>

One wonders where Stace's confidence comes from on these difficult points. He seems certain that the human mind can never have logically coherent knowledge about God. Does he arrive at this conclusion as a

4. W. T. Stace, "Mysticism and Human Reason," *University of Arizona Bulletin Series* 26 (1955): 19.

5. *Ibid.*, 20.

6. *Ibid.*

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## An Example of Religious Irrationalism

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result of rational thinking, or does some kind of irrational gut feeling produce this confidence? Given the depths of his own irrationalism, the first option hardly seems possible. If his pious irrationalism is itself the result of irrationalism, why should anyone give it credence? But Stace continues. "When you say that God is incomprehensible, one thing you mean is just that these contradictions break out in our intellect and cannot be resolved, no matter how clever or how good a logician you may be."<sup>7</sup>

Stace is especially critical of certain Buddhist monks who attempt to remove contradictions in their system by postulating two Brahmins, a higher and lower. "One may be quite sure," Stace advises, "that this is the wrong solution because the religious intuition is preemptory that God is one and not two."<sup>8</sup> Notice the oddness of Stace's thesis. He is convinced that God is unknowable. But then he dogmatically informs us that his irrational intuitions give him at least one piece of knowledge about this unknowable God, namely, that God is one and not two. Is Stace contradicting himself? Of course he is.

For Stace, logic does not apply in religion. Stace is not merely saying that religion could be unreasonable in the sense that it discusses things that are above human reason. For Stace, religion is against logic. "Should we say that there is contradiction in the nature of God himself, in the ultimate being? Well, if we were to say that, I think that we shouldn't be saying anything very unusual or very shocking."<sup>9</sup> Stace is much too cautious. I find his claims not only unusual and shocking but also nonsense.

At first Stace sounds like someone who thinks that God is above the laws of reason. But let us observe the problems that his irrationalism creates for him. If Stace were correct and logic has no relevance to the kind of mysticism he represented, it is difficult to understand most of what he wrote. For example, why, given his repudiation of logic, did he criticize Buddhists who rejected the unity of God in favor of two Brahmins? Once logic is disavowed, God can be both one and two (or two thousand) at the same time and in the same sense. If a distinction can be drawn between a monistic God and a dualistic or a pluralistic deity, then logic must have some relevance. Once logic is denied, inconsistency becomes a virtue.

Irrationalism has also found a home in nonreligious areas of contemporary university life. Several years ago, a graduate student at a well-known university in New England told me the following story. One day her professor issued a lengthy diatribe against logic. This professor urged all of her graduate students to join her in a crusade against logic. In her world, logic was too confining; things were either black or white, valid

7. Ibid., 17.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 18-19.

or invalid, true or false, either *B* or non-*B*. She preferred things that were cuddly, soft, and fuzzy, such as feelings and intuitions. She believed that people interested in logical and analytical thinking are anal-retentive. This professorial enemy of reason and logic was also quite critical of the historic Christian faith.

After class, the student asked the professor if she could pose three questions. "Since you reject all use of logic," the student began, "don't you realize this means you can never prove that any of your anti-Christian beliefs are true?" After all, proving something does seem to include an appeal to laws of rational inference. The student reported her shock that her professor had never realized this fact before hearing the question.

"What's your second question?" the professor asked. "Well," the student continued, "don't you realize that when you repudiate logic, you cannot prove that any of my Christian beliefs are false?" This point had also escaped the attention of the professor.

"And your third question?" "Since you've admitted that you cannot prove that your anti-Christian beliefs are true and that you cannot prove that my Christian beliefs are false, why don't you become a Christian?" This put the professor in a difficult position. She could not justify her rejection of the Christian faith with an argument; when she rejected logic, that became impossible. After several painful moments, the only reason she gave for her rejection of Christianity was the fact that she did not like the student's religion, effectively equating her atheism with someone's dislike of broccoli. At the end of the twentieth century, it appears that the real irrationalists in the world include many enemies of religion.

An important application of the principle of noncontradiction is the discovery of positions that suffer from self-referential absurdity. This condition exists whenever the application of a theory to itself involves one in a necessary falsehood or logical nonsense.

### **Skepticism as an Example**

One of the better examples of a logically self-defeating position is skepticism. Skepticism can be defined in two ways. To make my point clearer, I will isolate each of these two theses of skepticism in the center of the line. Here is the first.

(1) No one can know anything.

Look carefully at this claim. Then imagine yourself asking the proponent of (1) a simple question: "Do you know that no one can know anything?"

Consider the two and only two possible answers. If the skeptic answers yes, thereby asserting that he knows that no one can know anything, the self-defeating nature of his position becomes obvious. But our

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### **The Notion of Self-Referential Absurdity**

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skeptic has another possible answer to our question. If his reply is no, the skeptic is admitting that he doesn't know what he's talking about.

Consider now the other way of formulating skepticism:

(2) No proposition is true.

Once again the strategy is to ask a simple question: "Is your proposition (2) true?" Suppose I allow you to do the rest. What is our skeptic's problem if he answers yes and then if he answers no?

Not too long ago, someone sent me via e-mail the following story that he had taken off the Internet. A philosophy professor was attacking the existence of God in a class full of timid and compliant students. The professor began with the following question: "Is there anyone in the room who has seen God?" No student responded. "All right," he continued, "have any of you touched God?" Again, there was no response. "Has anyone here heard God?" After another round of silence, the professor smiled triumphantly and said, "Therefore, there is no God."

At that point, one of the students rose and asked if he might speak. The professor nodded his approval. The student looked at the other students and asked, "Has anyone in this room seen our professor's brain?" No reply. "Has anyone touched our professor's brain?" Again, silence. "Has anyone heard our professor's brain?" After another bout of silence, the student smiled and said, "Then using our professor's logic, our professor has no brain."

While the story ended by stating that the student received an A for the course, attempting this maneuver with some professors might result in a different outcome. Of course, I would like to think that the professor's horrible logic was an attempt to provoke someone in the class, anyone in the class, to say something.

### **Logical Positivism**

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Strangers to philosophy are often surprised to discover how many self-referentially absurd positions one can find in the history of philosophy. One example of such a system is the logical positivism that was popular in Great Britain and the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. The book that came to be regarded as the most influential statement of logical positivism was A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*.<sup>10</sup> For the record, Ayer abandoned logical positivism during his later years.

The touchstone proposition of logical positivism was something called the verification principle. Logical positivists thought they had discovered a criterion of meaningfulness that would exclude all kinds of claims they found distasteful. Only two kinds of propositions can have

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10. (London: Gollancz, 1936).

meaning, the positivists argued: those that are true because of the meaning of their constituent terms (called analytic statements)<sup>11</sup> and those that are verifiable by sense experience (called synthetic statements). Positivists delighted in showing, or so they thought, that theological, metaphysical, and ethical statements failed to meet either criterion of meaningfulness. And because such statements were neither analytic (true or false by virtue of the meanings of their words) nor synthetic (true or false because they were verifiable by experience), they were discarded as meaningless. This meant that statements like "God exists" were neither true nor false; they were meaningless. What a clean and convenient way to eliminate theology, metaphysics, and ethics from the arena of responsible discourse and thought, or so the logical positivists thought.

The positivists used their verification principle like a sledgehammer, smashing a great many of the traditional positions in philosophy, including beliefs about God, the soul, and morality. At least they did so until people began to ask about the cognitive status of the positivists' verification principle. What kind of statement is it? The positivists' criterion of meaning showed itself to be meaningless because it could be classified as neither an analytic nor a synthetic statement. Efforts to rescue the verification principle failed.<sup>12</sup> So it is difficult to find any philosopher who is willing to admit adherence to logical positivism. The movement is dead, a result fitting for any logically self-defeating theory.

### **Scientific Positivism**

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Even though logical positivism has been put to rest, a different version of positivism continues to appeal to students and professors. The touchstone proposition of scientific positivism goes like this: "It is wrong to believe any proposition not verified by the scientific method." Please note that I have no quarrel with either science or the scientific method. The relevant issue is the assumption that science and its methodology are competent to bring us into the presence of all that is true. This is the point at which any thinking person must object. For example, at least one important proposition cannot be verified by the scientific method, namely, the touchstone proposition of the positivist position. What scientific experiment could possibly verify the claim that it is wrong to believe any proposition

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11. Examples of analytic statements include tautologies like "Some bachelors are unmarried men" (which are necessarily true) and contradictions like "Some bachelors are married men" (which are necessarily false). An example of a synthetic statement would be "Some bachelors drive American-made cars."

12. One could spend years reading nothing but criticisms of logical positivism. Two critiques of the verification principle from different perspectives are Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967) and Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1962).

not verified by the scientific method? The answer is that there is none. Therefore, if it is wrong to believe any proposition so described and the touchstone proposition of scientific positivism fails its own test, it follows that it is wrong to believe in that touchstone proposition. Scientific positivism is a logically self-defeating position.

### **Evidentialism**

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The list of self-referentially absurd positions keeps growing. The touchstone proposition of what I here call *evidentialism* was expressed by a nineteenth-century thinker named W. K. Clifford, who wrote: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>13</sup> As Clifford saw it, people have duties and responsibilities with respect to their acts of believing. This is especially so, Clifford thought, in the case of religious beliefs. According to Clifford, there is never sufficient evidence or proof to support religious belief. Consequently, anyone who accepts a religious belief (such as the belief that God exists) is guilty of acting immorally, irresponsibly, and irrationally.

There is a rather hefty body of literature that takes this kind of evidentialism apart.<sup>14</sup> To save time, I will look at only one counterargument: evidentialism is a logically self-defeating position. As we have seen, the evidentialist believes that it is immoral to believe anything without sufficient proof. But where is the proof for his own claim? The fact is that he provides no evidence; nor could he. Therefore, the real immorality in these matters is believing the touchstone proposition of evidentialism.

### **Deconstructionism**

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The touchstone proposition of deconstructionism is this: "It is impossible ever to know the meaning of any written text." This happens to be a popular view in certain academic circles, especially in English departments that used to introduce students to literary classics. The prevailing view among many contemporary scholars is that all meaning is subjective; a text means whatever it means to the reader.

I must admit to being a little jealous when I encounter college students who studied literature under a deconstructionist professor. When I studied literature, it was a tough course. Today, writing an exam for such a professor is a snap. Without reading the book, without studying any critical essays, all one has to do is dream up an interpretation, any inter-

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13. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246. Clifford's essay was published in his *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879) and has been reprinted in countless anthologies.

14. See Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), chaps. 5 and 6.

pretation, explain it without messing up syntax and spelling, and get an A. A student of such a professor told me that her professor announced the final exam would require an essay about Moby Dick. All of my readers remember that Moby was the white elephant that swam around the Pacific . . . or was it the white whale that swam around the Atlantic? If there's no difference between *B* and non-*B*, it doesn't matter, does it? This young woman began her final exam by writing this sentence: "Moby Dick is the Republic of Ireland." For the next ninety minutes, she pursued this preposterous thesis to its end. When she got back her exam, her grade was an A, followed by the professor's words, "What a creative essay." Of course it was creative—it had nothing to do with the novel.

One advantage of such a theory is that it must be hard to get a bad grade in such a course. One disadvantage of such a theory is that it is difficult to learn anything in such a course.

If it is impossible to know the meaning of any written text, how can one know what the teacher or his textbooks mean?<sup>15</sup> Things get interesting when deconstructionists teach their paradigm in educational institutions that are supported by conservative church members who take the Bible seriously. If it is impossible to know the meaning of any written text, then it follows that it is impossible to know the meaning of the Bible. Public disclosure of the fact an allegedly religious college engages in this kind of teaching might make student recruitment and retention more difficult, at least among members of the college's religious constituency.

I will return to this subject in chapter 10. For now, all that is necessary is to remember that deconstructionism is the paradigm of a logically self-defeating theory.

**H**ow might some critic respond to my objections to positivism, evidentialism, misology (the hatred of logic), deconstructionism, and the rest? Once or twice in my life, I have heard the allegation that the arguments in this section are oversimplified. There are two possible ways to respond to this charge of oversimplification. (1) I could frolic in deconstructionism and interpret the criticisms as endorsements of my position. And why not? Since all meaning is subjective, what prevents me from interpreting them any way I please? (2) Or I could assume the critic means that each of my arguments represents the position being criticized as a universal claim, a statement that allows no exceptions. The critic may believe that the apparent defeat of such positions as positivism, evidentialism, and deconstructionism is a cheap victory won unfairly by oversimplifying the positions being criticized. While it is true that I present

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### **The Charge of Oversimplifi- cation**

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15. I have met students who press their deconstructionist professors to write their claims on the blackboard, thus turning their oral statements into written texts.

the positions as universal claims, it is not true that I am guilty of misrepresenting or oversimplifying the theories. Consider the following pairs of propositions:

- (1a) All propositions not verified by the scientific method are false.
- (1b) Some propositions not verified by the scientific method are false.
  
- (2a) All statements that are neither analytic nor synthetic are meaningless.
- (2b) Some statements that are neither analytic nor synthetic are meaningless.
  
- (3a) All acts of believing propositions not supported by sufficient evidence are immoral.
- (3b) Some acts of believing propositions unsupported by sufficient evidence are immoral.
  
- (4a) All texts are meaningless.
- (4b) Some texts are meaningless.

I can only assume that the critic wants everyone to believe that the (b) propositions represent more fairly the views of the positivist, evidentialist, and deconstructionist. And since the (b) propositions are obviously true, any attempt to reject positions stated in the (b) or qualified versions is unfair and simplistic.

The attempt to defeat my arguments in this way fails for two reasons. First, even though the (b) propositions are true, they are trivial in the sense that no informed person doubts them. It is difficult to interpret *some* texts. But the ambiguity of two or two thousand texts has nothing to do with deconstructionism. If all deconstructionists want to limit their position to proposition (4b), no one will object. But neither would anyone care. It would be like someone saying that during a 162-game season, every major-league baseball team is going to lose at least one game; to which one appropriate response is "So what?" Any attempt to defend evidentialism, positivism, and the other self-defeating positions by watering them down in the way I have indicated has the strongly negative effect of trivializing those positions.

My second reply is that proponents of these views do assert the universal claim. I have no problem admitting there are lots of texts in libraries around the world that are difficult to interpret. But believing that *some* texts are difficult to interpret does not make me a deconstructionist. Consider someone who introduces himself as a skeptic and then defines his position by saying that some propositions are not true (as opposed to saying no propositions are true). As far as skepticism is concerned, this person is a fraud.

## THE LAW OF NONCONTRADICTION

And so the critic who charges me of oversimplification either is not thinking clearly or is playing a game. I have formulated these positions in the way their proponents advance them and in the only significant (that is, nontrivial) form they can have. The charge of oversimplification is a canard. There is no oversimplification, and the positions that have been critiqued truly are self-referentially absurd.

The law of noncontradiction cannot be ignored, avoided, or dismissed as mere convention. It is a true, universal, and necessary principle of human thinking, acting, and communicating. It is also a principle that functions in the mind of God. It is nonsense to suggest that God operates according to a different or higher logic than the law of noncontradiction. If God does not or might not recognize the difference between *B* and *non-B*, there is no difference between good and evil; there is no difference between God and the Devil. Such is the nonsense to which pious irrationalism would drive us.

For all of its importance, however, logical consistency can never be the only criterion by which we evaluate worldviews. While the presence of a contradiction will alert us to the presence of error, the absence of contradiction does not guarantee the presence of truth. For that, we need other criteria.

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## Conclusion

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