

Jeremy Barris. *Sometimes Always True: Undogmatic Pluralism in Politics, Metaphysics, and Epistemology.* Fordham University Press 2014. 320 pp. \$55.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780823262144)

For us, people of the Occident, Aristotle's (formulation of the) law of non-contradiction—a law not coined by Aristotle nor exclusive of the West—has, up until now, been accepted rather straightforwardly. True, there are very good reasons for this almost unequivocal acceptance (and not just out of fear of Avicenna's retaliation—he, in fact, argued that everybody who disagreed with this law should be beaten quite thoroughly and during a prolonged time to allow him the chance to prove that he was also not beaten). However, should it? Or better, should it always? Jeremy Barris' book, *Sometimes Always True*, argues that it should not. At times, contradictions can actually contribute to, or be a form of, making sense (even logical and logically) (cf. 233). Sometimes, as Barris proposes, we could and should follow the 'paradoxical logic of legitimate violations of sense' (233). Sometimes, what is irreconcilably contradictory, the overall claim of this book can be summarized, can be overcome by the almost nonsensical acceptance of both being actually and simultaneously acceptable. This is what Barris defines as the 'sometimes always' logic.

Although this book would require different 'judgements' (necessarily in the plural—and I will come back to this issue later), it needs to be said from the very beginning that in the end, and notwithstanding the necessary different 'judgements' and notwithstanding some of the work's shortcomings (also to this I will come back later), this book is exceptional (almost brilliant) and should be read by all who care for this strange thing called philosophy (maybe it should not be read in full, its 'Preface' and 'Introduction' should be obligatory though). Working in philosophy, and working with philosophical theories, comes, in fact, down to Barris' masterly title: it is working in and with things that are sometimes always true.

Some words on the work's structure and content: the book, a collection of previously published essays, is subdivided into 9 chapters, which cover three different but fundamentally interrelated philosophical themes. The themes, which according to Barris are only 'different expressions of the same set of fundamental concerns' (1), are pluralism, the philosophical big questions, and questions of conduct and existence.

Barris' book begins, as already indicated, with a fundamentally important 'Preface' and 'Introduction' (interrupted by a short 'Acknowledgments' section). It is worth standing still, albeit just very briefly, with some of the more important observations made by Barris here. Almost everybody (with exclusion of the partisan orthodox philosophers [*but what a large group this has become*]) involved in the philosophical voyage will have been confronted with the often opposing but very insightful observations made by some (many) of its leading characters. Barris' brilliant intuition is that not only do the often clashing insights not invalidate one another, but neither do they eliminate philosophy's (resulting) capacity to formulate definite and always valid answers. In fact, '[T]hey each have something definitively right' (viii). Philosophical work consists in the attempt of 'understanding and working with their simultaneous and yet wholly mutually exclusive truth[s]' (viii). This

will bring us, according to Barris, to a genuinely needed undogmatic and truly pluralist philosophy that is able to treat its traditional Big Questions whilst contemplating itself existentially and, simultaneously, also defying simple and simplistic relativism (cf. 9).

The first chapter treats the effects of clashing cultural and theoretical frameworks and the justification of the truth(s) correlated to them. This is done through a discussion of Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty's different take on this problem; that is, their refusal to recognize any possible sense in similar antithetical clashes of cultural and theoretical frameworks (Barris, obviously, disagrees both with Davidson and Rorty; or better, he quite cunningly argues that they only do half their work and don't think their own theoretical framework through). The second chapter continues the discussion of fundamental justification begun in the first chapter. The focus of this chapter, though, moves to the problems related to knowledge rather than truth, whilst discussing the difference and interconnectivity of logic and rhetoric. The third chapter, while remaining in the field of knowledge (chapter 2) and integrating in it the problematic of mutual meaninglessness (chapter 1), takes the discussion into the more delineated field of political epistemology, mainly through the example of feminist political epistemology. All three chapters encounter the same (and necessary) problem of self-contradictoriness that can be overcome (is self-cancelling) by what the author, on the back of his title, calls the 'sometimes always' logic.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Oscar Wilde. The eighth chapter will also find its main protagonist in the Irish playwright, poet, and novelist. Both of these chapters claim that the writings of Wilde function as very articulate examples of what is at stake in the overcoming, the self-cancellation, of the contradictoriness by means of the 'sometimes always' logic argued for by our author. In the fourth chapter, the previous chapter's problematic of the political is taken up again but is now brought, through the usage of a variety of Wilde's texts (mainly though *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) and their wit and style, to the heights of a truly pluralist form (precisely through the overcoming/self-cancellation of the almost nonsensical contradictoriness). The eighth chapter will perform a very similar operation in the broader and wider field of metaphysics—*The Importance of Being Earnest* will be Barris' main mining field there.

The quite remarkable fifth chapter (*but I do have to admit my own personal liking for Michel Foucault*) attempts to demonstrate that, contrary to what has been claimed over and over again, the French philosopher Michel Foucault's philosophy—in particular his frequent referring to a plurality of 'regimes of truth' in what is clearly a singular and all-embracing regime of truth as well (that is, his own philosophical framework)—does not end in relativism, but is a uniquely well-functioning theoretical form of pluralism in the 'sometimes always' logic style. As Barris correctly remarks, Foucault himself did 'not fully account for the logical possibility' of this 'sometimes always' logic, but this does not affect Barris' argumentation whatsoever.

Chapter six re-confronts the question of sexuality, already present in the third chapter by means of feminism, but confronts it in a/its much wider metaphysical-horizon. The (supposedly) irreconcilable concepts of nature and essence (constructed) are the main characters of this chapter.

Both can be, have been, and are considered mostly as antithetically clashing cultural and theoretical frameworks that, however—following Barris’ by now familiar argumentation—need to be taken to their limit (as nonsensical contradictoriness) for them to be able to be overcome in favor of the pluralist ‘sometimes always’ logic: ‘we desperately need to reclaim construction-free natures or essences, and...we need to think of them as ultimately constructed, and...these views are irreconcilably contradictory’ (150).

The seventh chapter takes us more profoundly into the workings of the ‘sometimes always’ logics as argued for by Barris. The philosopher and philosophy taken as Barris’ field of action is the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. That Heidegger is the ‘chosen one’ regards his continuous influence on much of the philosophy produced on the Continent (what applies to Heidegger will thus also apply on his ‘followers’). The main point of contention in Barris’ discussion of Heidegger is his divergence in, respectively, ‘sometimes always continuously consistent’ logic and ‘simply continuously consistent’ logic (180). Although Heidegger, as Barris correctly remarks, often argues for openness of understanding, his equally often violent and very decisive conceptual understanding (its ‘simple-ness’—it is like this and not otherwise) does, in the end and according to Barris, not allow for the pluralism he is striving to reason for through the means of his ‘sometimes always’ logic.

The ninth and final chapter turns to dreams and their relationship with reality. Often dreams operate along the lines of the ‘sometimes always’ logic that has accompanied the reader throughout this book. Maybe this is Barris’ argument: dreams should not be considered as merely dreams that do not make sense, but are a demonstration that the ‘sometimes always’ logic is already very much part of our existence—and not just ignorable trivia.

As I said in the beginning, and as it might as well be repeated: this book is exceptional (almost brilliant). But, a specification that was necessary to be made, it is exceptional *notwithstanding* some issues; let me mention some of these issues.

The first issue is rather contradictory (but I am sure Barris doesn’t mind another contradiction) and it regards the mixture of philosophical traditions. Barris is clearly a member of the analytical tradition, but he seems to rather appreciate the continental one. The fact that he can roam and trespass these walled and barbed wired frontiers, and he does so very knowingly, can only be applauded (except by the partisan orthodox philosophers mentioned in precedence). However, it only works sometimes—not always. For a continental philosopher (which I am) Barris is still much too analytical (and I presume that his interest in the continental ‘obscurantists’ is not always appreciated by his fellow analytical colleagues). However, this, more than anything, is to be considered as a challenge for his next book(s).

From this it follows that at times reading this book becomes a little annoying. In fact, a number of discussions return and are repeated (over and over) in a number of the essays. Although this is acknowledged by the author in the introduction (cf. 23), and at times a minor difference or a tiny change of perspective is added, this does not eliminate the fact that one has to struggle and writhe

through these passages (again and again). This could (and should) have been avoided— notwithstanding the fact that this is a collection of essays (essay, like the French verb *try* [*essayer*], Barris might have tried just a little bit harder).

Finally, whilst insisting once more on the fact that this book is an example of a mentally engaging text that should be read by as many philosophers—and non-philosophers (maybe waiting for the paperback version)—as possible (undergraduates, graduates, and all the practicing philosophers who care about the functioning of philosophy and its acceptance in the ‘wider world’), just a question (a question for Barris and all his readers—like me): is it / was it necessary to logically justify the fact that at times, sometimes, it is justified to argue/act non-logically (violating logics)?

P.S. — I, but this is just me, don't think it is necessary.

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