
Aristotle and the Principle of Non-Contradiction by Gianluigi Pasquale

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The best thing about this very brief book on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* $\Gamma.3-4$ is its determination to treat the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) as a 'law of being'. Of course, Pasquale recognizes that the PNC is also a 'law of thought': the second half of the first chapter is devoted to this dimension of it, and the second of the book's two chapters concerns how we come to know the principle. But he thinks that the PNC is a law of thought because it is a law of being and that we come to know the principle by some sort of intuition of reality. The principle is more commonly discussed in the literature as a logical principle, a common opinion, or a necessary condition of conversation. A law of being is an assertion about things, not beliefs, statements, or reasons. The principle asserts that substances cannot have contradictory attributes. Pasquale sees it as 'protecting' a substance from contradiction.

Pasquale begins his discussion of the PNC as a law of being by contrasting contradictories with the three other Aristotelian opposites [17-29]. Since the PNC concerns predicates of a *single* subject and since a relative opposition exists between two subjects, relatives are not pertinent to the PNC [21]. Whereas contraries have intermediates, contradictories do not [24]; possession/privation presuppose a substrate, but contradiction does not [27]. The significance that Pasquale sees these distinctions as having for the PNC is unclear. The PNC denies that the same predicate belongs and does not belong to a subject, and this is equivalent to denying that *contradictory* predicates belong. Since contradictories are distinct from the other opposites, Pasquale seems to think that the PNC does not exclude

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predicating these other opposites. He notes at the beginning of his discussion that at 1011b17–20 Aristotle lumps contradictories together with contraries and possession/privation; he thinks this means that contraries and contradictories have ‘an equivalent meaning’. But he claims that this is an exception [18–19]. He takes the PNC to deny only that contradictories can be predicated of the same subject.

Pasquale’s mistake is transparent. Aristotle denies that ‘contrary’ and ‘contradictory’ have the same meaning, but it does not follow that one thing cannot be opposed to another in both ways. Aristotle thinks that something’s contrary is included within that thing’s contradictory. Thus, black is not only the contrary of white, it also belongs within non-white. Pasquale is right to distinguish contradiction from other types of opposition. But he seems to think that this means that an *instance* of one opposite cannot be an *instance* of another, for he infers from the fact that contradictories do not have intermediates that the denial of white, non-white, does not include black or any other color but only something outside the genus of color [25]! In fact, the reason that there is no intermediate between white and non-white is that the latter includes *everything* besides white inside and outside the genus of color: there cannot be an intermediate because everything is either white or non-white.

Pasquale next discusses the ‘same subject’ that the PNC denies can admit contradictory predicates [29–36]. He claims that this subject exists and that the PNC ‘protects’ it. The PNC protects one subject from being identified with another, and it also protects a subject from having its accidental attributes identified as essential [30]. As Pasquale puts it: if C is an accident of A, then A is essentially non-C; the PNC protects A from also being essentially C. Further, because each non-substance has its own unity, the principle protects instances of other categories from contradiction [32]. Most importantly, the PNC protects substance, and Pasquale claims that contraries are included within the unity of substance (!), so that PNC excludes only substance’s non-existent contradictory [35—Pasquale’s text is garbled here]. Hence, the PNC serves to *allow* predications but *excludes* non-existent predicates.

Of course, if we already know that the predicate is non-existent, we do not need the PNC to exclude it, nor could the PNC be doing any real work in ‘protecting’ subjects from receiving contradictory

predicates. The principle itself is not a thing that acts; that is part of why it is hard to see it as a law of being. Just what is it about being that makes it impossible for a subject to receive contradictory predicates? That is the real issue. The subject does not need ‘protection’ from what is impossible.

Furthermore, to say that the PNC allows some predications into the ‘unity of the subject’ but excludes others is to continue the error that I noted earlier, the supposition that a denial of some being is ‘absolute’ only in so far as it includes what is *outside* the being’s genus. Thus, non-white would not include black because there is motion and a substrate between white and black, but it would include what is outside the genus of color. So Pasquale wants to say that a subject’s predicates are included in its unity. Surely, though, the PNC excludes predicating white and black of a subject in the same way, at the same time, and so forth, just as much as it excludes predicating white and non-white of this subject, in the same way, at the same time, etc.

Apart from this evident mistake about contradictories, Pasquale has not explained how the subject and its predicates can form a unity. If, as Aristotle assumes, man signifies one thing, such as two-footed animal, then to predicate white of man would make man a plurality. Moreover, since white is different from man, it is also not man. Hence (as Pasquale recognizes [39]), to predicate white of man would be to make man not-man! For just this reason, *any* predication poses an apparent challenge to the PNC. Pasquale sees the challenge although he does not pose the issue this way. To stipulate, as Pasquale does, that predicates belong to the unity of the subject is to accept the legitimacy of predication by fiat, without resolving the issue. In fact, what makes predication allowable is not the subject but the predicate: since there is no intermediate between attribute C and not-C, any subject A must fall under the one or the other. Pasquale is right to say that being is at issue in PNC; but the issue is not what is included within the being of a *subject*, rather it is the being possessed by its *predicate* or by being itself as a predicate.

The really interesting observation that Pasquale makes is that accidental predication, like predicating white of man, challenges the PNC [39]. He claims that the PNC resolves the problem because it stipulates that:

Within the subject substance and accidents have their respective order. Thus, the PNC safeguards, within the subject, the existence together of these two contradictory realities, the substance as substance and the accidents as accidents. [39]

He does not explain why the PNC does this or, indeed, how it could.

The conclusion of Pasquale's intriguing discussion of 'at the same time' [40–47] is that the PNC 'derives from the transcendental unity of being and... guarantees the multiplicity of being in the world' [46]. He means, I think, that the PNC treats motion as a multiplicity of states; since these states do not exist at the same time, there is no contradiction. Hence, the PNC 'protects the multiplicity of being' [43]. This, at any rate, seems the most plausible interpretation of what Pasquale means to say here.

If this 'protection' is like the others, then the multiplicity of beings should be contained within the unity of the subject. But in this case a subject that changes from its own nature *would* be internally contradictory! In my view, the PNC is not *protecting* the multiplicity in this sense, but serving to *separate* multiple stages of a single being. Aristotle's point is that a nature's change is not contradictory because, though it will have contrary characters, the nature does not have them at the same time or, better, together.

The second half of the first chapter [48–67] is devoted to the PNC as a law of thought. In a well-known article, Jan Lukasiewicz [1979] claims that Aristotle argues for the 'psychological Law of Contradiction', the impossibility of believing a contradiction, by taking contrary beliefs as contrary attributes of the believer. Lukasiewicz dismisses the argument on the ground that Aristotle has not established that 'beliefs answering to contradictory sentences are contraries.' Pasquale begins his discussion by arguing that Aristotle holds we have an intuitive understanding of things [49–52].

In my view, Aristotle's identification of a belief about a thing with a state of being, that is, with a form or something connected with a form, suffices to explain why beliefs in contradictions are themselves contradictions. The point is that beliefs are not simply sentences but states of beings. At one point, Pasquale seems to say something like this [55], but he goes on to claim that contrary beliefs could not belong to the same unity of thought [64–65]. He concludes that the PNC protects thought from contradiction [67].

The problem here, as earlier, is that Pasquale ends up simply assuming that the principle must be true and then explaining what that means. In this case, he is concerned with what it means for thought. But, again, the PNC is not doing any real work in protecting thought if such contradictions are genuinely impossible. Many people do seem to hold contradictory thoughts and this fact is probably what fuels Lukasiewicz' denial that believing contradictories is itself contradictory. What we need to see is why contradictory beliefs are impossible to hold. To put the point differently, reflection on the principle of non-contradiction often aims to show that apparent contradictions are not contradictions because they do not belong at the same time, in the same way, and so on. Thus, someone can hold beliefs that are contradictory and not violate the PNC if he holds the beliefs at different times, or of different subjects, or in different ways. The work of the PNC is not, as Pasquale thinks, to form unities of things, orders, or thoughts that are somehow protected, but rather to distinguish individual things or thoughts from others that are different and incompatible.

In chapter 2 [60–109] Pasquale identifies the PNC as the only principle that 'defines being as "it is"' [71–72] and that also makes an object explicit in the soul [78]. Pasquale notes that although Aristotle claims that the PNC is treated by metaphysics, he seeks to establish it by dialectic.

Aristotle's philosophical disciplines, of which metaphysics is one, consist of demonstrative knowledge, whereas dialectic merely probes and tests. However, since the PNC is the highest principle, it cannot be established by demonstration because the premises of such a demonstration would be prior to it. How, then, can the PNC be known by metaphysics? Pasquale's solution is that the metaphysician must also be a dialectician [97]. He thinks that the PNC is known through the type of intuition that Aristotle sketches in the last chapter of the *Posterior Analytics*. The arguments that Aristotle supplies in *Metaphysics* Γ are, then, instances of dialectic that are meant to help those who would deny the principle to intuit its truth. They serve to make deniers conscious of their self-contradiction [108].

Pasquale does not do much to show us how Aristotle's arguments could lead someone to intuit the PNC. He says very little about the actual arguments. Aristotle thinks that we can somehow

intuit essences and that the process of intuition does generally involve dialectic, specifically the dialectic he expounds in the *Topics*. In intuiting an essence, we are somehow grasping the substance whose essence it is, and this substance is the principle of a special science. The PNC, however, belongs to the highest science, metaphysics. To grasp it is not to grasp an essence. The problem with conceiving of an intuitive grasp of the PNC along lines of *Posterior Analytics* 2.19 is understanding what *thing* we grasp when we intuit the PNC. This is what Pasquale really needs to explain. This is particularly important for him since he insists that the PNC is a law of being. Just what sort of being is the PNC itself? Furthermore, it is hardly adequate to show one who denies the PNC that he contradicts himself since he professes to accept the existence of contradictions. What Aristotle does is, rather, to show us that the denier invokes the principle in asserting its denial or in making any other assertion.

Aristotle and the Principle of Non-Contradiction is often difficult to follow. There are numerous errors in spelling and grammar. Pasquale should have had the book proofread by a native speaker. From what I can see, there are some intriguing ideas here that are marred by significant mistakes about Aristotle and the failure to explain and argue central claims. Aristotle claims that those who deny the PNC do away with substance or make all things one, yet Pasquale passes over these significant ontological claims. His claim that the PNC ‘assures’ the existence of essence and accident as different ontic orders [113] is problematic because PNC does not distinguish orders. On the contrary, it is the difficulty of drawing such distinctions that encourages the denial of the PNC. Pasquale inadvertently suggests this point, but the reader suspects that he himself does not take the possibility of the PNC’s being false seriously enough to pursue it. Further, Pasquale’s notion that Aristotle’s arguments are dialectical refutations that promote intuition never gets off the ground because he does not work through the arguments. Despite these limitations, his basic approach to the PNC as an ontological principle is significant and right. That may make this book worth reading.

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