

Book reviews

On the Plenitude of Truth. A Defense of Trivialism, by Paul Kabay. United Kingdom: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010, 147 pp.

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In *On the Plenitude of Truth*, which is a revised and expanded version of his doctoral thesis, Paul Kabay presents a defense of trivialism. Trivialism is the point of view that every proposition (or the truth-bearer you prefer) is true. This position has recently regained the attention of philosophers because Graham Priest and other dialetheists have felt the need to answer Aristotle's question about why not accepting that all contradictions are true if some of them are and hence, according to some plausible logical principles, accepting also that every proposition is true. See for example Graham Priest, 'To Be and Not to Be –that is the Answer: Aristotle on the Law of Non-Contradiction' (*Philosophiegeschichte und Logische Analyse* 1, pp. 91-130, 1998); or Graham Priest, 'Could Everything be True?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 78, pp. 189-195, 1999 (both texts reprinted respectively as chapters 1 and 3 of Graham Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006). Trivialism is so extreme that is not clear how to deal rationally with it; it is similar to skepticism as is well remarked by Priest in the foreword (p. 5) and by Kabay himself (pp. 11, 139 and elsewhere).

The book that occupies us consists of six chapters plus an Introduction and a Conclusion, which could be divided into three blocks according to their contents and aims. The first block is formed by chapter 1, in which Kabay presents some antecedents of trivialism and suggests that certain claims by authors like Nicholas of Cusa or Hegel are very similar to the assertion of trivialism. The second block is composed of chapters 2, 3 and 6, where the author argues in favor of the plausibility of trivialism and against non-trivialism mainly from the philosophies of language, logic, mind and action. Regarding the third block, consisting of chapters 4 and 5 and the

Conclusion, it is devoted to study the “empirical” and practical bases and consequences of trivialism. In chapter 4 Kabay discusses some metaphysical problems concerning motion; in chapter 5 he embarks on a discussion of how is that we perceive the world as consistent when in fact it is trivial, whereas in the Conclusion he outlines how could be a life lived according to trivialism.

Kabay discusses many arguments from many fronts. Chapters and even sections within the same chapter exhibit quite different qualities. For instance, in chapter 1 (p. 25) there is a rather superficial and idle discussion on whether Spinoza, had he been aware of the modern logical resources, would have adopted trivialism. There are passages where arguments are showed quickly and incompletely, with poor discussion about premises and the steps that would permit to obtain the conclusions. A remarkable example is provided by Kabay’s quantum speculations in chapters 3 and 5. In the first case, Kabay quickly reviews some answers to the idea that quantum mechanics invalidates the principle of sufficient reason. In chapter 5 he uses an especially problematic part of the already controversial many-worlds interpretation to make plausible the idea that we could be observers of an inconsistent world that looks consistent to us because we are ourselves in an inconsistent state –just as observers would not perceive quantum superposition because they would be in a state of superposition too. In many occasions, more than finished replies, Kabay presents just vague indications of how those replies could start to be constructed, and in others his explanations are far-fetched and weak. In several cases a bit of formalization had helped the reader and the very author. There are well known formal tools for these considerations which Kabay just would have had to modify minimally for improving his exposition and avoid fallacies of scope, which are a latent risk in many parts of the book. An example of how useful would have been a bit of formalization in, say, the discussion on whether the actual world is trivial, is Lloyd Humberstone’s ‘Variation on a Trivialist Argument of Paul Kabay’ (*Journal of Logic, Language and Information* 20, pp. 115–132, 2011).

By having a taste for the subject and maybe because one of us has pondered similar thoughts, the arguments of what we have grouped as second block (chapters 2, 3 and 6), like the one reconstructed below, result more attractive to us, but this does not prevent us

from feeling some dissatisfaction with Kabay's exposition of some of them, though. For example, his treatment of Curry paradox and its implications for trivialism (pp. 52f) is very bald. If someone would ask us to tell her how Curry paradox could be a defense of trivialism, we would recommend Greg Restall's 'Curry's Revenge: The Costs of Non-Classical Solutions to the Paradoxes of Self-Reference' (in *Revenge of the Liar: New Essays on the Paradox*, ed. by J.C. Beall, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, pp. 261-271) instead of the book under review. Restall's text is not even an exploration of trivialism but a survey of difficulties that must be dodged before considering invalid such paradox (on pain of triviality), and whose degree of intractability puts trivialism as a serious consequence of certain logical notions. Even though the author mentions almost all what has been written on trivialism, we must say that we missed, in the middle of many ephemeral references, an equally ephemeral reference to at least two points of view. The first one is McTaggart's argument about the meaningless of trivialism given in *Studies in the Hegelian Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1922, 2nd edition, p. 8); the reader can find a commendable discussion of it in Priest's *Doubt Truth to be a Liar* (Oxford: Oxford, 2006, pp. 28-31). Another is Putnam's Aristotelian-like argument against trivialism in 'There is at Least One A Priori Truth' (*Erkenntnis* 13, pp. 153-170, 1978).

As we have said, Kabay presents many arguments of various kinds and it would be impractical even attempting to review all of them. Lest the reader get a rough idea of the arguments that can be found in the book, we will summarize that from chapter 2 (pp. 34-50). In it Kabay studies what could it mean to deny trivialism and argues that non-trivialists do not exist, for a non-trivialist should deny trivialism and that is an impossible speech act. For this, his (first) operational definition of trivialist is as follows:

(T1) An agent s is a trivialist if and only if for every proposition p , $B_s p$

where B is a belief operator, but also can be read as an assertion operator. Hence, ' $B_s p$ ' can be read in the usual way, " s believes p ", or " s asserts p ".

There are many ways of characterizing what is to deny p . Consider the following:

(D1) To deny p means to assert the negation of p , not- p .

(D2) To deny p means to assert an alternative proposition to p .

(D3) To deny p is to perform a *sui generis* speech act in which not necessarily something is asserted: p is just applied denial illocutionary force.

Kabay presents some traditional arguments for discarding (D1) as an adequate characterization of the notion of denying p . Think of an advocate of truth value gaps: If she denies p this does not imply that she asserts not- p . Or think of an advocate of truth value gluts: If she asserts not- p it does not imply that she denies p . It makes no difference whether one thinks that there are no gaps or no gluts, the point is that one understands someone who thinks there are, and one understands their assertions and denials.

Now let us turn to (D2). Even if the concept of alternative proposition (to a given proposition p) is a “fundamental concept”, it is not true that “we all can recognize an alternative point of view even if we cannot explain in detail its necessary and sufficient conditions” and the author should not have gave up and proclaimed that he cannot “say anything very informative about this” (p. 37). Moreover, his examples make clear that Kabay presupposes that q is an alternative to p if and only if the semantic content of q is not part of the semantic content of p . Also by his examples it is not hard to conclude that he is presupposing is a very traditional notion of content of a proposition, traceable back to works such as Wittgenstein’s, Carnap’s or Popper’s, namely that the content of a proposition consists in the collection of its non-tautological consequences (or the conditions under which it is false). According to this characterization of an alternative to p as a proposition q whose content is not part of p , trivialism, the claim that every proposition is true, cannot be denied because every other proposition is part of its content: There is no alternative to the trivialist assertion.

According to Kabay, a non-trivialist cannot deny trivialism in the sense (D3), either. A trivialist, as is characterized in (T1), believes that she has good reasons for asserting and denying each and every one of the propositions; she also believes of herself that is rational and

hence she will proceed to make those assertions and denials. Everything asserted by the non-trivialist is also asserted by the trivialist; everything denied by the non-trivialist is denied by the trivialist too.

Thus Kabay concludes that the non-trivialist does not exist, because there is no one capable of performing the speech act of denying trivialism in none of the three senses of denying specified above. Then nobody could say 'I am a non-trivialist' because none of her beliefs, assertions or denials would make her different from a trivialist (cf. p. 49). Of course one could try to block the argument, or probe different notions of denial or of content of a proposition. But even if not conclusive, this is a nice argument.

Insofar as editorial questions, we would say that the edition is rather poor and that an exemplar looks like one of the printed copies of the dissertation, but with a modified index and with a more attractive cover. But even so, there are some oversights that must not be allowed in a doctoral thesis and much less in a book that is supposed to be a revised version of it. But maybe they are not mistakes. Maybe it should not surprise us that in a book that presents a defense of trivialism it is said that the chapter following the first one is chapter 5, and that the following to this is chapter 3, even though the index states the usual order. Calling 'Mortenson' (at least 16 times between pp. 59 and 62 and five times in the bibliography) to Chris *Mortensen*, 'Plank's constant' (p. 78) to *Planck's* constant, 'Amour Garb' (p. 88) to Bradley *Armour-Garb* or 'Esher' (three times on pp. 98f) to Maurits Cornelis *Escher* also must be a way of expressing trivialist beliefs in the field of spelling proper names. This is in no way an exhaustive list of the slips and the reader can find many more.

It is very likely that *On the Plenitude of Truth* does not reach the magnitude of a trivialist manifesto, as was Graham Priest's *In Contradiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007, 2nd edition) with respect to dialetheism. This is partially due to the lack of the formal apparatuses that *In Contradiction* does have and that help to ease the discussion with the dialetheist. As a defense of trivialism, in general we do not consider *On the Plenitude of Truth* successful. Nevertheless, we think it succeeds as a defense of the idea that trivialism is worth discussing. Kabay deserves all the credit for putting in the philosophical scene a defense of that which has everything to be indefensible. Whether Kabay believes or not in the thesis that he is expounding, it seems to

us that he is doing his work as a philosopher, trying to analyze the value of a worldview that at first glance looks outrageous and has also tried to wield bold arguments that should be first-hand known by the reader of this review. Analytic philosophers, so prone to propose and discuss puzzles, will find a considerable amount of material and suggestions in *On the Plenitude of Truth*. For many people, to refute trivialism does not need even an incredulous stare, but Kabay's work suggests that many headaches will be required to refute trivialism and that is the value of this book in spite of the weaknesses pointed out before. After all, as Priest well spotted in the foreword, it is an irritation which produces pearls.

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