Jc Beall, THE CONTRADICTORY CHRIST

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I hated almost every part of this book. Even the writing conventions. I also loved almost every part of this book. Even the bit about writing conventions. How is that possible? Are there true contradictions? No: rather, books are composed of two different types of things. On the one hand, books are composed of immaterial propositions. I mostly hated those: I thought they were false, dangerous, and frustratingly difficult to discredit—even the propositions about writing conventions. On the other hand, books are composed of material sentences. I mostly loved those: I thought they were funny, clever, and impressively clear and concise. Even the sentences about writing conventions. I loved reading this book, even though I hated its main claims. Contradiction averted.

Jc Beall’s *The Contradictory Christ* develops and defends a truly novel Christological theory and does so with panache and rigor. Beall advocates an explicitly *contradictory* Christology, arguing that the God-Man Jesus Christ is a contradictory being: an infinite and unlimited divine being, but also a finite and limited human being. Hence, the true theory of Christ is a contradictory theory. Though it must be stressed that Beall’s view is that Christ is an actually existing contradictory being (Beall is no atheist), his position is a radical, if not heretical, departure from Christian tradition. Prevailing views hold that Christ’s apparently contradictory features are merely apparently contradictory, much in the way that the apparent contradiction in the previous paragraph was merely apparent. Beall’s Christology, on the other hand, embraces the contradiction with open arms. According to Beall, we should accept a contradiction (perhaps I should say “the Contradiction”) not just as true, but as the Truth—and the Way, and the Life. We should accept this contradictory Truth into our hearts as our Lord and Savior. Given how genuinely radical Beall’s view is, it is genuinely impressive that he defends it as well as he does. I’ve never so-enjoyed reading something I disagreed with so much.

The book begins with a delightfully written preface and then moves on in Chapter 1 to an exposition of the Fundamental Problem of Christology (henceforth, “the Problem”), as well as an overview of Beall’s solution to it. The Problem is that Christ’s two natures—true god and true man—lead
to apparent contradiction. For example, the fact that Christ is human seems to entail:

(M) Christ is mutable.

And the fact that Christ is divine seems to entail:

(I) Christ is immutable.

And the Problem, in a nutshell, is that (M) and (I) appear to be contradictory. Beall’s solution to the Problem is simplicity itself: accepting appearance as veridical and hence that the truth about Christ is truly contradictory.

Chapter 2 explains the logical theory behind Beall’s solution to the Problem. According to Beall, logic allows for sentences that are neither true nor false (and thus have a truth-value “gap”), and for sentences that are both true and false (and thus have a truth-value “glut”). Neither gaps nor gluts are tolerated in classical logic. Non-classical logics come in many flavors. Beall’s preference is for First Degree Entailment, or FDE. There are several important things to note about how FDE differs from classical logic:

- FDE allows for the existence of gaps and gluts in a domain, but it doesn’t require them. Beall himself takes both gaps and gluts to be disallowed by our best theories in most domains, including mathematics and natural science. In fact, Beall think gluts are exceedingly rare: there are some “semantic gluts” (e.g., the liar sentence), but Christ is the only contradictory being: the only source of true non-semantic contradictions “in the world.”

- FDE denies the law of excluded middle: if A is gappy, (A v ~A) won’t be true, since neither disjunct will be true.

- FDE denies the validity of “explosion,” a rule in classical logic that allows anything whatsoever to be derived from a contradiction. If explosion were valid, and the true theology were contradictory (as Beall argues), the true theology would have the ungodly consequence that Christ is Satan.

- FDE denies the validity of modus ponens: if B is false and A is glutty, both A and (A ⊃ B) will be true. To see this, think about how the material conditional is defined: (A ⊃ B) = (~A v B). Since A is false (while also true), that disjunction is true, and so both A and (A ⊃ B) are true, even though B is false. Similar reasoning shows that FDE invalidates modus tollens.

- Finally, FDE denies the validity of disjunctive syllogism: if A is glutty, we can use disjunction introduction to get (A v B) (since A is true) for any B whatsoever. But then, since A is (also) false, disjunctive syllogism would allow us to derive B. So, to avoid explosion, FDE must reject the validity of disjunctive syllogism.

Chapter 3 lays out seven arguments that support Beall’s theory over competing theories. The most important are:

**Simplicity**: “Few—probably no—objectors to the apparent contradiction of Christ seriously doubt that some consistent construction or other can be
done with the right amount of metaphysical and/or semantical verve; but too often such constructions appear to be not only unduly baroque but ultimately changing the topic. . .” (38); “the simplest explanation of the apparent contradiction is that the appearance is veridical” (37).

**Conservativity:** “There is no question whatsoever that, independent of the quest to consistentize Christ, the change-the-meaning approach is *ad hoc*” (38); “meaning change is a rejection of the standard theory—a rejection of the standard Christology. Meaning change is also a last resort, an option taken only when there are no other viable candidates for the truth” (134).

**Neutrality:** “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” (39). Beall also defends the epistemological analogue of this principle: “to stake one’s solution to the fundamental ‘problem’ of Christology—to the apparent contradiction of Christ—on a particular candidate or family of candidates [for the true epistemological theory] strikes me as unduly biased if there’s a viable account that avoids said wager” (147).

**Topicality:** “[A] Christology wherein Christ is the principal subject of Christ’s properties is better than one wherein something that is not Christ [e.g., one of Christ’s parts] is the principal subject of the key properties ‘of Christ’” (40).

Chapter 4 discusses and replies to various methodological, epistemological, theological, metaphysical, and ecumenical objections. One particularly important objection hinges on the fact that FDE invalidates *modus ponens*, *modus tollens*, and disjunctive syllogism. But since reasoning according to those rules is ubiquitous, the cost of rejecting those inferences would be ruinous. We’d have to tear everything down and start from scratch, à la Descartes. But surely we don’t have to do that, do we?

Beall argues that FDE does not have this ruinous consequence, since almost every *theory-specific* consequence relation validates those rules. Hence, reasoning according to those rules within almost every domain is valid. It’s just not *logically* valid. The distinction between logical and theory-specific validity can be unintuitive, so let me give an illustration. Consider “the Proof”:

> If 8 were prime, it would have no divisors other than one and itself. But 8 has divisors other than one and itself: e.g., 2. *Therefore*, 8 is not prime.

There are (at least) three things a defender of FDE might say about the Proof. One is that while it isn’t logically valid, it’s mathematically valid. That is, the very argument that is invalid when considered from a logical perspective is valid when considered from a mathematical perspective: what’s invalid in the logic room is valid in the math room. But since mathematics is done in the math room, the Proof does not need to be revised. The second thing a defender of FDE might say about the Proof is that
it’s valid, simpliciter, since the “therefore” that appears in it expresses mathematical rather than logical validity. Once again, no need for revisions. Finally, a defender of FDE might say that the Proof has a suppressed premise: that 8 doesn’t both have and lack divisors other than one and itself. (Perhaps this premise is suppressed because it is obvious or taken as given.) With that suppressed premise, the conclusion follows as a matter of logic: again, no need for revisions. Of course, these replies assume we can cleanly distinguish between mathematical, logical, and theological claims and contexts: a task somewhere on the spectrum between harrowing and hopeless. (For further discussion, see §4.1.4 and Meghan Page, “Detachment Issues: A Dilemma for Beall’s Contradictory Christology,” Journal of Analytic Theology, 2021.)

Chapter 5 argues that Beall’s solution to the Problem compares favorably to the extant alternatives. One reaction to the Problem is to claim that it is merely epistemic. For example, Mysterian accounts, discussed in §5.7, argue that while there is a solution to the Problem, such-and-such epistemological theory shows that finding it is beyond human ability, at least at this point. In addition to being inherently dissatisfying, Mysterian accounts violate (epistemic) neutrality, since the solution ties its fortunes to that of a specific epistemological theory.

Perhaps the most common solutions to the Problem involve “qua operators,” discussed in §5.3. 1-QUA accounts render (M) and (I) consistent by attaching qua-operators to their grammatical subjects, e.g.:

(M1Q) Christ-qua-human is mutable.
(I1Q) Christ-qua-divine is immutable.

1-QUA accounts score badly according to Beall’s metrics: they’re apparently semantically revisionary (since they interpret “Christ” in a funny way) and they violate simplicity (such funny interpretations are an added complication), neutrality (they tie their fortunes to whatever metaphysics is required to make sense of referring expressions like “Christ-qua-human”), and topicality (the subjects of (M1Q) and (I1Q) are something other than Christ himself).

2-QUA accounts render (M) and (I) consistent by attaching qua-operators to their copulas:

(M2Q) Christ is-qua-human mutable.
(I2Q) Christ is-qua-divine immutable.

2-QUA accounts preserve topicality, but appear to be semantically revisionary, and they violate simplicity and, perhaps, neutrality (if qua-predication has metaphysical commitments).

Finally, 3-QUA accounts render (M) and (I) consistent by attaching qua-operators to their predicates:

(M3Q) Christ is mutable-qua-human.
(I3Q) Christ is immutable-qua-divine.
3-QUA accounts preserve topicality and are metaphysically and epistemologically neutral, but they appear to be semantically revisionary and they violate simplicity. (While Beall doesn’t discuss 2-QUA or 3-QUA accounts, they are illuminating alternatives to 1-QUA accounts.)

Simplifying (perhaps not so) slightly, 1-QUA strategies are *metaphysical*, in that they render (M) and (I) consistent by “fiddling with” the metaphysics of their subject(s), 2-QUA strategies are *logical*, in that they render (M) and (I) consistent by fiddling with the logic form of predication, and 3-QUA strategies are *semantic*, in that they render (M) and (I) consistent by fiddling with the meaning of their predicates. There is obviously a broader sense in which all three strategies are semantic, however, since all involve fiddling with the meaning of *something* in (M) and (I).

Most other proposed solutions to the Problem fall into one or more of these categories and inherit their associated problems. **Compositional** accounts, discussed in §5.4, are fundamentally metaphysical, rendering (M) and (I) consistent by fiddling with their subjects. For example, one might paraphrase (M) and (I) as:

(M\textsubscript{CF}) Christ’s human nature is mutable.

(I\textsubscript{CF}) Christ’s divine nature is immutable.

To preserve topicality, a semantic variant of those initial paraphrases might be offered:

(M\textsubscript{CD}) Christ is in-part mutable (has a mutable part).

(I\textsubscript{CD}) Christ is in-part immutable (has an immutable part).

On this picture, (M\textsubscript{CF}) is *fundamentally* what makes (M\textsubscript{CD}) derivatively true, and likewise with (I\textsubscript{CF}) and (I\textsubscript{CD}). Compositional accounts thus typically contain both a metaphysical and a semantic element.

**Relative-Identity** accounts, discussed in §5.6, have both metaphysical and logical elements, in the sense that they make surprising claims about both the subject(s) of (M) and (I) as well as the logic governing them. In short, Relative-Identity logic allows the following claims to be consistent:

(M\textsubscript{RI}) The man Christ is mutable.

(I\textsubscript{RI}) The God Christ is immutable.

(M^*\textsubscript{RI}) The God Christ is not mutable.

(I^*\textsubscript{RI}) The man Christ is not immutable.

(=\textsubscript{RI}) The man Christ is the God Christ.

Finally, **Meaning-Changing** accounts, discussed in §5.5, fiddle with the meaning of the predicates: e.g., paraphrasing (M) and (I) as:

(M\textsubscript{MC}) Christ is mutable\textsuperscript{*} (has a concrete nature which is mutable).

(I\textsubscript{MC}) Christ is immutable\textsuperscript{*} (has a concrete nature which is immutable).
These claims are clearly consistent, at least if the idea of something with two natures is consistent.

In sum, we can say that metaphysical solutions defend the consistency of (M) and (I) by making surprising claims about metaphysics (and the meanings of their subject expressions), logical solutions defend the consistency of (M) and (I) by making surprising claims about logic (and, usually, the meanings of logical expressions), semantic solutions defend the consistency of (M) and (I) by making surprising claims about the meanings of their predicate expressions, and epistemological solutions defend the consistency of (M) and (I) by making surprising claims about epistemology (in particular, our ability to determine whether claims like (M) and (I) are consistent). We should add a final category: theological solutions attempt to solve the Problem by making surprising claims about theology, such as that divinity does not entail immutability (i.e., by rejecting (I)). One of the chief benefits of Beall’s view is that it is a logical solution that does not make surprising claims about the meanings of logical expressions.

The final chapter of the book provides a brief account of how the machinery behind Beall’s view can be used to provide a satisfying account of the Trinity (a book-length treatment of the topic is forthcoming). The dialectical importance of this chapter is clear: if theory A can give a satisfactory account of the Trinity and a solution to the Problem, and theory B can only give a solution to the Problem, we should prefer theory A to theory B even if B’s solution to the Problem is slightly or even somewhat more satisfactory than A’s. The preliminary remarks in this chapter seem promising.

So much for what the book says—is what it says true? Is the correct Christology contradictory? Do Beall’s arguments at least made that plausible? By my lights, “plausible” is a high bar for a contradictory theory, but Beall has certainly made the view more plausible. Of course, how much you are moved will depend on where you begin. If, like Beall, you accept the existence of gluts when you come to the Problem, you will be likely to be moved to accept Beall’s solution to it. If, like me, you find the idea of gluts conceptually incoherent, you will be . . . less likely to be moved to accept Beall’s solution. Despite this rather radical difference in starting points, I thoroughly enjoyed and benefited from reading The Contradictory Christ. Having given the book its due praise, however, let me give it its due criticism.

First, a remark about the writing. While most of the book is wonderfully written, Beall’s prose is terse and readers without a strong background in logic will be in for some rough sledding. Significant amounts of terminology and content may be unfamiliar. For example, on page 93 there is a discussion of logic’s relation to the norms of inquiry in which the notion of monotonicity plays a prominent role. I would guess that many readers will have to review this paragraph several times in order to understand it.

Second, a remark about the central argument. Given the costs and complications of moving to a contradictory Christology, convincing reasons
are required to make this route preferable to the more traditional and well-worn path. The reasons Beall presents—simplicity, conservativity, topicality, and neutrality—are, by my lights, less than compelling.

To begin with, simplicity is really only a tiebreaker, and Beall’s account creates complications when it comes to the assessment of arguments in other domains (recall the Proof). Second, topicality relies on notoriously frail intuitions about aboutness, making it a rather tentative consideration at best. Topicality is also satisfied by many traditional accounts. Third, while neutrality is nice if we can get it, we rarely can. As Beall admits, his account is hardly *logically* neutral and, insofar as it is committed to the existence of contradictory beings, it is doubtful that it is metaphysically neutral either. Epistemological neutrality also appears to be violated, since some forms of coherentialism are inconsistent with true contradictions.

Finally, I was unconvinced by Beall’s allegation that traditional accounts are semantically revisionary. Beall objects that traditional accounts give a “non-standard semantics” (46) that involves “changing meanings,” “semantic games,” and “playing with words” (3). The “standard” semantic picture is, however, a helpful, but false, idealization. For example, *most* predicates are massively polysemous and/or ambiguous. Consider the difference between “red hair” (hair with a reddish tint), “red apple” (apple with red skin), and “red dye” (needn’t be red, as long as it colors things red). Once we stop idealizing, *semantic games must be played*: the “standard semantics” of many expressions is inadequate and what Beall calls “playing with words” is actually serious semantic theorizing. But if we have antecedent reason to think *that*, independently of our Christological theorizing, the “cost” of invoking a “non-standard semantics” in the Christological realm has already been paid. (Beall might say in reply: if we have antecedent reason to think that logic is non-classical, the “cost” of invoking non-classical logic in the Christological realm has already been paid. *Touche*. But I, at least, have *not* antecedently accepted non-classical logic. As noted above, anyone who has will have a very different cost-benefit analysis than mine when it comes to evaluating Beall’s Christology.) Of course, Beall’s criticism of competing solutions to the Problem isn’t merely that they invoke non-standard semantic claims; it’s that the non-standard semantic claims they invoke are *ad hoc*. By this he seems to mean that they are motivated by metaphysical considerations, as opposed to “linguistic” evidence. I believe this popular form of objection is mistaken: the truth about semantics depends, in part, on the truth about metaphysics, and so linguistic theorizing that ignores metaphysical considerations is based on a non-representative subset of our total evidence. (See, e.g., John A. Keller, “Paraphrase, Semantics, and Ontology,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, Bennett and Zimmerman (eds.), 9 (2015): 89–128.)

All of this is just to say that Beall’s arguments are considerations, not demonstrations. Which is to say, *The Contradictory Christ* is a book of philosophy, not mathematics or logic. And it is a *great* book of philosophy, sure to become required reading for anyone working on the Problem.
Of course, it isn’t a great book for everyone. I don’t recommend it for a Yankee gift swap, even a departmental one. If you’re not at least somewhat familiar with contemporary work in the philosophy of logic, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion, it may not be a great book for you. But I am familiar with those things and this was a great book for me. I devoured it, digested it, disagreed with it, and delighted in it. If you’re like me, this will be a great book for you too.

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In _The Excellent Mind: Intellectual Virtues for Everyday Life_, philosopher Nathan King provides an introduction to the intellectual virtues. The book is well-organized and thorough, and it is marked by King’s characteristic clarity of writing. _The Excellent Mind_ is a welcome text on the intellectual virtues, which are under-represented in the virtue theory literature. This book would be an asset in the philosophy classroom. Moreover, with topics such as echo chambers (206), intellectual gluttony (a vice of excess with respect to curiosity (42)), and fair-mindedness (230), this book is a timely, important resource beyond the academy and in the public square. In what follows, I outline the basic structure and arguments of the book, flagging significant passages and the questions they raise.

_The Excellent Mind_ is divided into three sections: In Part I, King describes what the intellectual virtues are and motivates their importance. Part II examines particular virtues. Part III offers guidance about how to grow in intellectual virtues.

**Part I.** King begins by explaining why intellectual virtues matter and for whom they matter. He describes his own interest in the intellectual virtues as being rooted in a desire not to “produce a bunch of intellectual mercenaries”—students for whom knowledge retention is a means to pass tests and earn credentials, but who leave unchanged by the process of learning (x). King describes education as a formative, rather than merely informative, process by which students become better thinkers.