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# The Contradictions are True—And not Out of this World: Reply to Yagisawa

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## THE CONTRADICTIONS ARE TRUE—AND IT'S NOT OUT OF THIS WORLD! A RESPONSE TO TAKASHI YAGISAWA

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**Graham Priest**

In this issue, Takashi Yagisawa maintains the following position. Just as there are physically impossible worlds, where the laws of physics are different from those of the actual world, so there are logically impossible worlds, where the laws of logic are different from those of the actual world. The logical laws of the actual world do not allow contradictions to hold there, but in some other worlds the laws of logic may allow them to do so. Moreover, we should interpret all worlds in a realistic fashion, à la David Lewis. Each world is just as real as the actual world, that is, *this* world (said with a stamp of the foot). Finally, the contradictions that Deguchi, Graham, and Priest (DGP) diagnose in the Buddhism of Nāgārjuna and those who follow him in this matter are true at some of these logically impossible worlds. The understanding of how things are in these worlds is, however, important, since it allows us to understand things in this world, just as the understanding of things in the future and the past may help us to understand how things are in the present.

Yagisawa's comment here is technically astute, and philosophically rich. And we agree with a good deal of what he has to say. To start with, we are happy to agree with Yagisawa that, just as there are (logically) possible worlds, there are (logically) impossible worlds.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not such worlds should be interpreted realistically is more contestable. Lewis himself rejected this possibility. His arguments, however, can be resisted; and a realistic interpretation of these worlds is certainly coherent.<sup>2</sup> We are not inclined to subscribe to such realism,<sup>3</sup> but for the sake of the present discussion, we grant Yagisawa a realistic interpretation of worlds.

Next, simply to endorse the claim that contradictions may occur at worlds other than the actual is not to endorse dialetheism. This is because truth-at-a-world (possible or impossible) is not the same as *actual* truth (truth at the actual world, @).<sup>4</sup> There are worlds at which it is true that Melbourne is in New South Wales, but Melbourne is not actually in New South Wales; anyone who acted on this basis would get very lost.<sup>5</sup>

Yagisawa denies that contradictions may be true at @. However, he holds that they are true at *some* worlds. Why, then, should we suppose that @ is not one of them? Recall that DGP produce arguments that certain contradictions are true.<sup>6</sup> Unless one finds a flaw in these arguments—a false premise or an invalid inference—then @ *is* a world where some contradictions are true. Yagisawa does not provide an analysis of the arguments showing why they are fallacious, but this is necessary if his position is to be sustained.

And if the arguments are indeed fallacious, why should we even suppose that the contradictions are true at *any* world? The most plausible reply, as far as we can see, is that, impossible worlds being what they are, for every proposition there is *some* world at which it is true. We will return to this point.

Against the main charge, Yagisawa might reply that the contradictions cannot be true at this world, because they can hold only at impossible worlds, and this is not an impossible world. But an impossible world is, recall, one where the logic is different from the one that holds at @. Why suppose that the logic of @ rules out the holding of contradictions? DGP obviously think it does not. The logic of @ is paraconsistent. Hence, to sustain his position, Yagisawa would have to defend the claim that the logic of this world is such as to rule out contradictions; that is, that it is explosive (assuming that we can disregard the possibility that this world is the trivial world, where everything holds). This is obviously no mean undertaking, and too big an issue for him to have undertaken in the present context. It is, however, necessary if his position is not simply to beg the question against DGP.

Let us turn, finally, to matters specifically Buddhist. First, Yagisawa notes that according to DGP, *reductio* arguments work in certain contexts. He seeks to vindicate this claim by interpreting contexts as worlds. Now, DGP certainly did not mean this. What we had in mind were *argumentative* contexts. In the context of certain kinds of arguments, *reductio* is a good form of argument. What context these are, and why it is acceptable to use *reductio* arguments in them, is certainly a good question, about which more needs to be said.<sup>7</sup> But DGP's contexts are not worlds, possible or impossible.

To the final and most important point: Buddhist theoreticians take themselves to be explaining how the actual world is. It is important to understand that *this* world is a world of *samsāra*, that there are important reasons why this is the case, and that there are important things to be done in the light of it. It is important that *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are both distinct and identical at *this* world; it is important that all phenomena at *this world* are empty and that the ultimate truth about *this world* is ineffable. After all, Buddhism is about the elimination of suffering and its causes *here*, not somewhere else. A story about emptiness—and the contradictions that follow from this, according to DGP—is an important part of Madhyamaka Buddhism. There are, then, important Buddhist reasons why, if DGP are right, it is *this* world that is contradictory.

Yagisawa deliberately sets aside matters specifically Buddhist. He does indicate, though, that if the DGP contradictions are true at *other* worlds, this might still tell you something of importance, something of Buddhist importance, about *this* world. He refrains from speculating what this might be, but we find it hard to see a plausible story that could be told here. How would it help the Madhyamaka project to know that at *other* worlds, but not this one, everything is empty? It is not like the analogous temporal case, where knowing things about the future and the past can tell us something about the present. This is so because there are causal connections between situations at different times. There are no causal connections between situations at different worlds. Moreover, it is hard to see how there could be a plausible answer to

this question. Recall that, assuming that the DGP arguments do not work, the main reason we have for supposing that contradictions hold at some world is that *any claim* is true at some world. It would seem, then, that the contradictions of emptiness could have no more relevance to this world than any other claim, for all of these hold at some world, too.

## Notes

- 1 – See, e.g., Graham Priest, *Introduction to Non-Classical Logic: From If to Is*, 2nd ed. (revised and expanded), Cambridge Introductions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 9.
- 2 – See Ira G. Kiourti, “Real Impossible Worlds: The Bounds of Possibility” (Ph.D. thesis, University of St Andrews, 2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/10023/924>.
- 3 – One of us, in particular, prefers a noneist interpretation of worlds (possible and impossible) other than the actual. See Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- 4 – “[W]hen he [Priest] defends dialetheism and says that some contradictions are true, I understand him as saying that they are actually true, that is, true at the actual world.”—Quite so.
- 5 – We are inclined to identify truth at the actual world with truth *simpliciter*. Yagisawa denies that there is such a thing as truth *simpliciter*, however. Every truth is relative to some, possibly implicit, context. Contexts may be worlds, spaces of worlds, spaces of spaces of worlds, and so on without end (see his note 24). We fear that, if so, a relativism that holds that every claim to truth, *A*, is really of the form ‘*A* is true relative to *x*’ (for some *x*) launches us off into a vicious infinite regress from which truth never returns.
- 6 – These are rehearsed briefly in our reply to Tom Tillemans in this issue.
- 7 – Some of this is said in our reply to Tillemans in this issue.