

GORDON H. CLARK AND THE LAWS OF THOUGHT

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In *JETS* (June 1981) 163-171, Gordon Clark makes a critical appraisal of a volume by Mark Hanna. It is not our purpose to enter that debate but only to consider Clark's statement on p. 168 to the effect that the law of contradiction and the law of identity are really the same law. What he actually says is this: "If truth is a logical system, its first axiom must be the law of contradiction, or of identity, which is really the same thing."¹

What prompts Clark to think that the law of contradiction and the law of identity are "really the same thing" I do not know. It is possible that the ambiguity of a common way of stating the law of contradiction could lend credence to such a view. I refer to this formulation: "Nothing can be both A and not-A." If "not-A" is understood to mean simply "the absence of A," then of course the law of contradiction is really the same as the law of identity ("If anything is A, it is A."). And in this connection it may be noted that Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, to which Clark refers twice on p. 167, states that "privation is a kind of contradiction."²

But Aristotle thought—and everyone agrees, so far as I know—that the law of contradiction implies more than the absence of A. He argued that the law of contradiction must be true, otherwise one could affirm that "the same thing (is) a trireme, a wall, and a man."³ This means, however, that the law of contradiction is not identical in meaning with the law of identity. The law of identity simply implies that if you have a trireme, you have a trireme; if you have a wall, you have a wall; if you have a man, you have a man. It says nothing about it being impossible for the same thing to be all three at the same time. It is only the law of contradiction that disallows the judgment that the same thing can be all three at the same time. "Not-A" in the law of contradiction cannot mean simply the absence of A, if that law has the significance commonly if not always accorded to it. It must mean "a positive contrary of A." And to say that the law of identity and the law of contradiction are "really the same thing" is quite unwarranted.

In this connection it may be noted that the law of contradiction assumes the

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¹If truth is a logical system, those who believe in God must be pantheists if they are to be consistent. The law of logic that one cannot have in his conclusion(s) what he does not have in his premise(s) forces this judgment.

²Aristotle says, "What suffers privation is either that which is quite incapable of having some attribute, or that which, being of such a nature as to have it, has it not" (*Metaphysics*, Book Iota, 1055b).

³*Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, 1007b. Actually he says, "If all contradictory statements are true of the same subject at the same time, evidently all things will be one. For the same thing will be a trireme, a wall, and a man, if of everything it is possible to affirm or to deny anything." It is significant that he never really considers the possibility of *some* contradictory statements being true.

law of identity. Only if A is A, and not-A is not-A, does the law of contradiction have validity. In other words the law of contradiction is dependent on the law of identity but is not implicit in it. But this means that while the law of identity may be an absolute, the law of contradiction is not—it is conditioned. The implications for philosophy are profound.⁴

It is not surprising that Clark should state that the law of identity and the law of contradiction are “really the same thing.” Though he does not use such terminology as “the law of identity” and “the law of contradiction,” Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, fails to distinguish the two laws, and confusing them is common among philosophers down to the present day. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 72, is a modern example.

Both Aristotle and Russell manifest the failure to distinguish the two laws properly when they think that “nothing can both be and not be” is a way of stating the law of contradiction. Actually the statement that nothing can both be and not be is a way of stating the law of identity only. Aristotle and Russell, and all who have agreed with them, have failed to notice the ambiguity of all statements that include the concept of nonbeing. In all such statements nonbeing is treated as though it were something, when it is not.⁵ When this is taken into consideration it quickly becomes clear that “nothing can both be and not be” means no more than that “if something is, it really is.” The form of the statement must not be allowed to obscure its meaning, as it has done for Aristotle and for a multitude of philosophers ever since.

In this connection it may be noted that Aristotle’s choice of illustrations in his *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, is unfortunate. He urges, as we have noted, that “the same thing (cannot be) a trireme, a wall, and a man,” but he never examines such a statement as this: “Joe is, and is not, the same boy he was yesterday.” This is surprising since he is aware that Heraclitus had stated that “it is impossible to step twice into the same river.”⁶ Had he given careful attention to such statements he might have still emphasized the importance of what we call the law of contradiction without implying, as he does, that it is an absolute.⁷

The idea that the law of identity and the law of contradiction are “really the same thing” is not sound. It derives from the argument of Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma,⁸ but in this respect Aristotle is a broken reed.

⁴In this connection it may be worthwhile to point out that there can be only one absolute in any universe of discourse.

⁵Of course if nonbeing is a form of being, as Plato taught, this criticism is invalid. But if nonbeing is a form of being, not-A is not merely the absence of A—the very point for which we have been contending. Aristotle, however, is not assuming that nonbeing is a form of being. Careful study of his *Metaphysics* shows that he has absolute nonbeing in mind in Book Gamma.

⁶*Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, 1010a.

⁷We are aware that he thought he had refuted the argument of the Eleatics that motion is logically impossible because it breaks the law of excluded middle. B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, p. 63, insists that Aristotle’s refutation of the Eleatics does not stand scrutiny.

⁸In *JETS* (June 1981) 167 Clark twice refers to this book of the *Metaphysics* with appreciation.