

Review of Graham Priest: *The Fifth Corner of Four. An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018.

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Jan Westerhoff

If Euthyphro and Agrippa secured places in the history of philosophy for the dilemma and trilemma, Nāgārjuna did so for the tetralemma (*catuskoṭi* in Sanskrit). Even though this second-century Indian thinker did not invent the argumentative pattern in which the four alternatives of a position, its negation, both, or neither are considered, it became inextricably linked up with his philosophical approach, and Nāgārjuna (and the philosophical school of Madhyamaka he founded) plays a central role in Graham Priest's "essay on Buddhist metaphysics and the *catuskoṭi*". The book might remind readers of his landmark 2002 "Beyond the Limits of Thought"; even though the historical and conceptual scope in the present volume is a bit more narrow, many of the key features are still there: a chronological exposition following along with the history philosophy, a focus on dialetheism in different manifestation, and descriptions of various formal constructions (in the present case drawn primarily from non-classical logic and graph theory) to elucidate complex and often quite obscure ideas of past masters.

[Overview]

Priest's exposition is divided into three main parts, each of which is divided into three sub-sections. The first two main parts deal with themes in early and late Indian Buddhist thought, the final one concentrates on East Asian Buddhist thinkers. (My remarks will be mainly concerned with the "Indian" sections, due in equal parts to the limitations of my expertise and the restrictions on the length of this review.)

The book begins with some very brief remarks on Buddhism and Buddhist metaphysics, followed by a section on the tetralemma in early Buddhism, attempts to make sense of it in 20th century Buddhist studies, and Priest's own proposal to understand it in terms of the logic of First Degree Entailment (FDE). All of this is done in sixteen pages, so it would be unfair to expect a comprehensive account either of the early history of this intriguing argument pattern, or indeed of the attempts of modern scholars to analyse it. Here as elsewhere in the book Priest starts with some historical highlights, considers some contemporary analytical attempts,

and then offers his own interpretation, usually by suggesting some formal model that gets explained further in a technical appendix. The part on early India concludes by a section on Abhidharma metaphysics, focusing on the mereological reductionism and metaphysical foundationalism of this school of early Buddhism.

The second main part (“Later India”) begins with a discussion of the theory of emptiness found in the Perfection of Wisdom *sūtras* and the works of Nāgārjuna, and introduces a system of First Degree Entailment that adds a fifth truth value (“ineffable”) to the familiar four of true, false, both, and neither. Priest uses this to argue for an ontological interpretation of Nāgārjuna’s use of the tetralemma in which a fifth, ineffable state of affairs (“the fifth corner of four”), which Priest takes Nāgārjuna to accept, is added to those corresponding to the four positions of the tetralemma that Nāgārjuna rejects. This section concludes with a further investigation of this paradoxical fifth state of affairs (paradoxical because it is *ex hypothesi* ineffable, but, *qua* subject of philosophical discussion by Priest and the ancients, effed), relating it to a central Mahāyāna text, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, and adding some remarks on Jaina logic.

In the final, third main part the discussion moves to East Asia, beginning with a look at Chinese Madhyamaka in the works of the 6th century Chinese thinker Jizang (吉藏), followed an analysis of the theory of emptiness in the Huayan (華嚴) school of Buddhism. In these two chapters Priest introduces two further interesting formal models. The first (the “Jizang hierarchy”) illustrates an infinite succession through philosophical theories in which the conventional and ultimate of the previous stage becomes the conventional of the next stage, and the denial of both becomes the new ultimate. The second (“diagram D”) uses some simple graph theory to model the puzzling Huayan conception of the ontological interpenetration of all things. The final part finishes with an account of some concepts in the work of the 13th century Japanese Zen master Dōgen (道元), trying to connect all the major themes of the book to some ideas of Dōgen, whom Priest also considers as “a focal point of all the rays of our narrative” (142).

[The tetralemma]

How to understand the tetralemma is a key question Priest discusses in the book. The four sides (*koṭi*) of the tetralemma subsume a specific position, its negation, the conjunction of the position and its negation, and the negation of the disjunction of the position and its negation. It seems to be uncontroversial the *koṭis* express four different positions one can hold with respect to a given subject-matter, but this is already where the problems start, since the third *koṭi* is obviously contradictory, and the fourth is logically equivalent to the fourth. Even, as is usually the case in Madhyamaka, all four *koṭis* are rejected we are still left with the problem why the ancient Indian authors thought it worthwhile to consider the third contradictory position separately, and why this position is expressed in two different equivalent forms in the third and fourth *koṭi*. For the last century or so scholars of Buddhist

philosophy have been trying to figure out what is going on here, often using some resources from formal logic, and Priest's account, after a brief discussion (18-22) of some contemporary analyses of the *catuṣkoṭi* "that do not work" (including one by the present reviewer),¹ continues the sequence of these attempts by interpreting the four alternatives of the tetralemma in terms of the four truth values (true, false, both, neither) of the logic of FDE. While I believe that this suggestion is a useful addition to our conceptual toolkit when trying to understand the mechanics of the *catuṣkoṭi* I do not think that it will be able to explain its ancient Indian usage in a comprehensive manner.

One difficulty I see with Priest's account is that he tends to assume that the *catuṣkoṭi* is just one thing, i.e. a single logical structure that works in the same way in all cases. This is not the case. Not only are there cases where all four *koṭis* are affirmed, it is also clear that Priest's reading in terms of propositional logic (which renders the third *koṭi* as $A \ \& \ \neg A$) cannot even account for every instance of the *catuṣkoṭi* where all four *koṭis* are denied. The analysis of the different possibilities of causal production that we find in numerous Madhyamaka texts (examining the alternatives of things being caused by themselves, by other things, by both, or by neither) is a central application of the tetralemma as an argumentative pattern, but here the third *koṭi* is not a conjunction of the first two, but a kind of compromise solution: things are not wholly produced by themselves, nor wholly by other things, but partly from themselves, and partly from other things. As such the third *koṭi* does not entail the first two, and is not a "flat contradiction". To develop a robust theory of what the Mādhyamikas had in mind when discussing the third 'contradictory' *koṭi* it is essential to look at their reasons for rejecting it (in the cases where all four *koṭis* are rejected). It then becomes clear that they do not always reject it for the same reason. Sometimes the third *koṭi* is rejected because it is a contradiction (e.g. MMK 25:14), sometimes because it combines the faults of the two previous *koṭis* (e.g. *Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:98ab, *Prasannapadā ad* MMK 12:9). In the latter case the third *koṭi* is taken to imply the first two, since the rejection of these justifies the rejection of the third *koṭi*. Elsewhere² Candrakīrti points out that because the third *koṭi* is not established, the fourth *koṭi* is likewise impossible. Contrary to Priest's assumption that "[t]he four cases are supposed to be exclusive" (19) it seems that implication relations between the different members of the tetralemma are endorsed and used by Madhyamaka commentators. We should be reluctant to assume that different instances of the *catuṣkoṭi* always express the same logical form.

¹ One difficulty that Priest (22, note 17) identifies with the account in Westerhoff 2009 is that, according to Priest, illocutionary negation does not iterate. I am puzzled by this; the meaning of the sentence "I do not assert that I do not assert that it is raining" seems to me perfectly transparent (and expressing the rejection that the position at issue in the tetralemma is inexpressible). I am also not sure what Priest means by his claim that "there is no textual evidence that negation is functioning in two different ways in the *catuṣkoṭi*" (22), given the use Madhyamaka commentators like Bhavya and Candrakīrti make of this distinction in explaining Nāgārjuna's thought (see e.g. David Ruegg: *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2010, note 10, 41-42.)

² *Bhāṣya ad Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:21.

Priest is also not very sympathetic to the suggestion that we could understand the *catuṣkoṭi* in terms of presupposition failure (28-29), as has been proposed by some interpreters. The idea is that if some object *x* does not exist, none of the four positions of the *catuṣkoṭi* concerning the ascription of some property *A* could be applied to *x*, and that hence all should be rejected. Here Priest objects that whatever we may want to say about non-existent objects, it is covered by some of the four *koṭis*, so that there would be no reason to reject *all four*. If we think all property-ascriptions to non-existent objects are false, we should go for the second *koṭi*, *-A*. If we take the Fregean line that they are neither true or false, we should go for the fourth *koṭi*, neither *A* nor *-A*.

However, consider an example of presupposition failure where someone wants to ascribe primary colours to numbers. The number 5 is not red, so we reject the first *koṭi*. We might also reject the second *koṭi*, saying that the number 5 is not red, at least to express that its being not red is very different from this blue marble not being red: the number 5 is just not the *kind of thing* that could be red. The third *koṭi* is rejected too: if the number 5 is not red, it is certainly not red *and* something else. But now the fourth *koṭi* (“neither red nor not red”) also looks problematic, at least if denying that the number 5 is neither red nor not red (i.e. either blue or green) still preserves the supposition that it could have some other, non-primary colour (the negation would here be a presupposition-preserving *paryudāsa*-negation). In this case presupposition failure could motivate the rejection of all four positions of the tetralemma.

A second difficulty is connected with Priest’s assumption that the ancient Indian Buddhist authors accepted the existence of true contradictions. There is a considerable amount of discussion of this in the contemporary literature,³ and it would be foolish to believe to be able to settle the matter here. I just want to make two points that might deserve more attention than they have received so far.

One is that the predilection for classical logic in interpreting the Madhyamaka materials might be seen not simply as the result of a misguided conservatism, but as an expression of a methodological version of the principle of parsimony, claiming that as long as we can give some reasonable explanation of what is going on in the texts using the simpler theoretical toolkit of classical logic⁴ we should not use a more complex, non-classical one. In order to justify the application of the dialetheist framework we need a clearer account of how and why Mādhyamaka philosophy would be “significantly furthered by accepting a contradictory notion of nature or an inconsistent version of ineffability”.⁵

³ See e.g. Graham Priest, Jay Garfield: “Nāgārjuna and the limits of thought.” In: Graham Priest: Beyond The Limits of Thought, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002; Mark Siderits: “Contradiction in Buddhist argumentation”, *Argumentation* 22, 2008, 125-133; Tom Tillemans: How Do Mādhyamikas Think?, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2016, ch. 3-4.

⁴ By “simpler” I do not have overall theoretical simplicity in mind (the dialetheist will hold that once we try to resolve paradoxes such as the liar or Russell’s paradox the dialetheist framework will come out as the altogether simpler one), but greater interpretative simplicity in accounting for the *prima facie* position of the Indian authors on contradictions.

⁵ Tillemans 2016: 89.

The second point is that Priest's discussion might face the danger of immunizing his dialetheist interpretation against any potential textual counter-example.⁶ Whenever a textual passage is presented where a Mādhyamika author says "... and this is a contradiction, and should therefore be rejected", or some words to this effect, Priest will make one of two replies:

- a) Rejecting one contradiction does not imply rejecting all. The author might still accept that there are other true contradictions.
- b) The Mādhyamika is only saying that his opponent, who accepts the law of non-contradiction, should reject the statement in question, because it leads to a contradiction. That does not entail that the Mādhyamika himself accepts the law of non-contradiction.

We can hold on to the theory that all swans are black by denying that anything white is a swan. But rather than supporting our theory this makes it weaker, since it ends up telling us only about an idiosyncratic way of defining 'swan', not about swans.

[Some further points]

The discussion of the *catuṣkoṭi* is only one aspect of Buddhist philosophy that Priest analyzes in his book. Much of his book is concerned with the systematic attractions of Buddhist metaphysics more generally, as well as with the interpretations of specific Buddhist thinkers (with an emphasis on Madhyamaka). There are many points that might be raised about these additional areas of discussion; I will restrict myself to two.

First, Priest argues that the position that "there is no ultimate ground to reality" is not to be found in the Western philosophical tradition ("[I]t is hard to think of a position that endorses such a view in Western philosophy." (56)) While the position Priest mentions is certainly not one that is widely accepted, I believe that there are some thinkers who defend views quite similar to it. Priest dismisses James Ladyman's Ontic Structural Realism (OSR) as a candidate, since for this "all things depend in the last instance on a structural relation-matrix, and the matrix itself does not depend on anything" (56, note 17). However, as far as my own discussion of this matter with the originators of OSR goes they seem to be quite happy to endorse the position that it is "patterns all the way down", without proposing to postulate anything substantial the pattern is a pattern *in*. Another, earlier discussion that also provides a philosophical picture of a world without an "ultimate ground to reality" is the account developed in Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* and subsequent writings. Moreover, there is a considerable amount of contemporary literature that

⁶ It seems to be clear, for example, that Kamalaśīla makes a general case for the law of the excluded middle and against a third truth value in saying that "when two things are mutually exclusive, the negation of one must mean the affirmation of the other" (*yau hi parasparaparihāreṇa sthitalakṣaṇau tayor ekaḥ pratiśeḍaḥ so 'paravidhināntarīyakah*), Ganganatha Jha: *The Tattvasaṅgraha of Śāntarākṣita*, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1987, 1: 704-5. Tillemans (2016: 86) argues that even a mild form of contradiction-tolerance that might be ascribed to pre-3rd century *sūtras* cannot be found in the commentarial literature Priest refers to.

connects key Madhyamaka ideas with philosophical accounts originating in the West, ranging from Pyrrhonian Skepticism to interpretations of quantum mechanics.⁷

The second point concerns a somewhat curious Kantian reading of Candrakīrti (on page 59)⁸ where, if I understand him correctly, Priest suggests a parallel between the ultimate/conventional and the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, and argues that both thinkers endorse that there are two aspects of reality, and that one is a conceptual superimposition on the other, but that where they differ is that for Candrakīrti “certain meditative practices” give you “access to the conceptually naked” (i.e. ultimate reality), while for Kant there is no epistemic route to the noumenal.

I find it hard to make sense of this as an interpretation of a thinker who holds that while the illusory manifestation of the world appears to the unenlightened, fully awakened Buddhas do not perceive anything at all. For Candrakīrti, at least, it seems that the culmination of the Buddhist path is not insight into reality denuded of any conceptual overlay, but the complete cessation of the flow of mind and mental factors.⁹

[Methodological background]

I want to conclude by some remarks on the methodological background of Priest’s project and its place in the study of Buddhist philosophy more generally. Right at the beginning Priest points out that his book “is not a scholarly work” (xvii). By this he seems to mean two things. First, his discussion only deals with texts translated into English (indeed, given the languages of the texts referred to include Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Classical Chinese, and Japanese accessing them all in their original form would necessitate a very high degree of polylingualism). Second, Priest claims that he is not “trying to give an authoritative textual and historical interpretation of the texts”.

The first point strikes me as less of a difficulty for the philosophical engagement with historical texts than is often assumed. If we argued that the only people who can say something worthwhile about Aristotle must be able to access his works and those of his commentators in Greek, Latin, and Arabic, a much smaller number of

⁷ Georges Dreyfus, Jay Garfield: “Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Skepticism”, in: The Cowherds. Moonshadows. Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, 115-130; Michel Bitbol: De l’intérieur du monde: pour une philosophie et une science des relations, Flammarion, Paris, 2010.

⁸ Also note that passage introducing this discussion (58) is not by the 7th century Indian Candrakīrti, but by the 19th century Tibetan ‘Ju mi pham.

⁹ *sems dang sems las byung ba’i rgyu ba gtan log pa, Bhāṣya ad Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:28, Poussin 108:10-11. John Dunne (“Thoughtless Buddha, passionate Buddha”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:3, 1996, 525-556: 544) and Dan Arnold (*Buddhists, Brahmins, and Belief*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005: 204) present two different takes on this passage, though neither sees Candrakīrti as endorsing a cognition of a concept-free reality behind the conceptually tinted appearances.

In this context it might also be worthwhile to point out that Candrakīrt was highly critical of Jain doctrine of non-onesidedness discussed by Priest (see e.g. *Bhāṣya ad Madhyamakāvatāra* 6:98).

people would have said something worthwhile about Aristotle. I believe that this is a fair analogy in the present context, as for many of the texts Priest works with there are reliable, high-quality contemporary translations, as well as an abundance of modern secondary literature (much of which is available in English) on the topics Priest engages with. Of course matters are more difficult in cases where one's philosophical interpretation might rely on a single translation, and where there might not be many previous Western interpretative attempts. However, given that the translation and interpretation of difficult philosophical texts should evolve together, even in such cases tentative interpretations can be useful for exploring the conceptual range in which a reasonable understanding of a philosophical text might fall, as long as we are aware that our interpretation can only be tentative. There is therefore no reason to fetishize the original language version of a text when carrying out a philosophical analysis of its contents. Not only would it be quite absurd to demand such 'scholarship criterion' when studying Western philosophical texts, in fact such a criterion was not even adopted by Asian scholars working on Buddhist philosophy. The majority of thinkers who were responsible for the subsequent development of Madhyamaka thought in Tibet and China knew little or no Sanskrit, and did only access the Madhyamaka texts through the lenses of Tibetan and Chinese translations.

I am less clear about Priest's second point, the claim that his aim is not an authoritative textual and historical interpretation of the texts he deals with. In particular, Priest argues that for many of the thinkers discussed in the book, the dialetheist interpretation "is the natural way to read them" (xviii). Where precisely the line between a natural reading and an authoritative textual and historical interpretation is to be drawn is, unfortunately, not made clear. This ambiguity persists when specific examples of formalizations are discussed. When Priest formulates the *catuṣkoṭi* in the logic of FDE he distinguishes his position from the view that the semantics of FDE "was endorsed by our Buddhist philosophers" (25). But given that we need the semantics to use FDE in the analysis of the *catuṣkoṭi* the worry remains that we are analysing a set of ancient Indian ideas by tools that make presuppositions that the Indian authors would not have endorsed (such as the claim that a sentence can have multiple truth-values). But perhaps Priest's thesis is the counterfactual claim that the ancient authors would have endorsed these ideas had they been presented to them. Some passages seem to suggest this: "Would the actors in the drama of this book have used those insights and tools had they been available to them? I see no reason why not. They were all thoughtful people, and were certainly not averse to novelty." (149). But of course there are other reasons apart from aversion to novelty why one might not want to use non-classical logic, for example because one disagrees with some of its semantic presuppositions. Which brings us back to the question whether the ancient Indian thinkers Priest discusses would have been happy accepting true contradictions.

It seems to me that one charitable interpretation of Priest's project could be based on comparing it to the study of ancient technology. Some intriguing contraption like the *catuṣkoṭi* is dragged up from the textual ocean of the Buddhist canon (much like

the Antikythera device from the Mediterranean sea) and the present-day researcher tries to puzzle out how it worked. At this stage the inquiry can take two different routes. We can either try to reconstruct the device using the technical resources that we assume would have been at the disposal of its makers, or we can try to build a machine that does essentially the same as the ancient one, but does so (and perhaps more efficiently) by relying on technical developments that only became available much later. Priest's approach is very much oriented towards the second direction. Of course if we are only interested in how the ancients solved a specific technological problem, such an approach might appear quite perverse. But in the case of a philosophical device what it does might be of more than historical interest, and how it does so (what is going on argumentatively "under the hood", so to speak) may be considered to a certain extent in separation from its aim as a systematic piece of philosophy. Priest obviously finds many of the conclusions of the texts he discusses philosophically attractive, and to this extent one may conceive of his project as creating philosophical devices that essentially do what the ancient ones do, but on the basis of an internal argumentative structure that is heavily influenced by the developments of contemporary philosophical logic. Of course one may then question whether updated Buddhist arguments, reconfigured Priest-style, do the same things that the original versions did or were supposed to do, but this is an essentially different issue from charging Priest with anachronistic reconstructions.

The general project Priest pursues in this book strikes me as very important. He sets out to construct a set of models (using resources from non-classical logic and graph theory) in order to interpret and understand philosophical claims made in a series of ancient texts.¹⁰ This approach compromises on historical faithfulness (none of the ancient authors had any acquaintance with the technical machinery being employed here), but this is offset by the gain in precision. Given that we have a very clear idea of how these models work, when comparing features of some ancient theory with the model, at least one side of the comparison is completely transparent to us. Priest argues that the benefit of this procedure should be two-way. On the one hand the ancient text might provide philosophical content for some of the technical developments. A particular piece of non-classical logic might be interesting from a formal perspective, but whether it has any philosophical significance is quite a different question. On the other hand some mathematical structure might provide us with insight into the kind of thing an ancient text might have been speaking about. Of course the devil is in the details, but many of the problems connected with the details (some of which I have mentioned above) will only be resolved by further research of the type Priest has showcased here. I therefore hope that his book will inspire many enthusiastic successors.

¹⁰ One might argue that the more puzzling the theories become, the more useful the models tend to be. Chapter 8 gives an interesting way of making sense of the Huayan theory that every part of reality contains every other part. Priest's graph-theoretic model is able to make precise sense of a statement which might otherwise simply be regarded as an expression of mushy mysticism.