

Graham Priest. *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi.* Oxford University Press 2019. 208 pp. \$60.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198758716).

With the nonchalance for which he is widely known in philosophical circles, Graham Priest, the author of the book with the somewhat enigmatic, but equally sublime title *The Fifth Corner of Four* (referred to as *5of4*, from now on) takes the reader on an adventurous expedition through two millennia of Buddhist metaphysics.

In the book, there is plenty of fascinating material, so this review cannot be exhaustive. It is so rich in clear argument and interpretation of ancient Buddhist texts that it sometimes feels like tumbling down the Buddhist rabbit hole. As we get deeper down, we encounter such esoteric concepts as *emptiness* and *interdependence*. And, as does Alice, we eventually discover a path to liberation – *enlightenment* – for which Priest gives a metaphysical analysis. Always at his side, the centerpiece of the discussion, the *catuskoṭi*; in its simplest, from the view that any claim can be *true*, *false*, *both true and false* or *neither true nor false*. Soon the reader learns that there is more to the *catuskoṭi* than this oversimplified statement about truth-values. Here is one instance of the *catuskoṭi*:

*Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real.
This is Lord Buddha's teaching.
(MMK XVIII:8)*

The *catuskoṭi* is a controversial piece of Buddhist philosophy. Why? Perhaps because it inflates the number of alethic values from the Aristotelian standard '2' (*true, false*), to '4' (*true, false, both, neither*) and sometimes even '5' (*true, false, both, neither, ineffable*). How can we make sense of the *catuskoṭi*? Priest thinks formalization is the key! Here is a straightforward interpretation of what are supposed to be the four mutually exclusive and exhaustive *kotis* (corners):

- (1) A
- (2) $\neg A$
- (3) $A \wedge \neg A$
- (4) $\neg(A \vee \neg A)$

That the *catuskoṭi* does not go hand in hand with classical logic is no surprise. In fact, it collapses in a classical framework: (4) is equivalent to (3) by De Morgan, and (3) entails both (2) and (1). Priest convincingly refutes a number of influential attempts to capture the spirit of the *catuskoṭi* in a bivalent framework and puts forward his formalization of the *catuskoṭi* in (plurivalent) First-Degree-Entailment. This is not the point to go into the logic, but it is (nearly) undeniable that once the *Non-Contradiction* and *Explosion* are given up, the mutually exclusive and exhaustive nature on the *kotis* can be preserved.

Priest covers a lot of ground in this Buddhist philosophy deep dive, commencing part I of this three-partied essay with a precis of the teachings of the historical Buddha himself (§2), followed by the developments of those teachings through ancient India. (§3) introduces the metaphysics of the Abhidharmas, which Priest describes as ontologically well founded on atomic joints of nature, the *dharmas*. Part II focuses on Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka (§4, §5), which infamously denies the existence of *dharmas*, as well as their ontological status as self-sufficient beings (i.e., as having *svabhāva*). After a subplot on Jaina logic, which blows up the number of alethic values to 7 (§6.8), we move on to the Sino-Japanese forms of Buddhism in part III, the final act of the drama, most

notably the Schools of *Sānlùn* and Huayan (§7, §8). Here, a lot of the loose ends of the discussion are tied together in Priest's analysis of the *Net of Indra*, a fascinating metaphor for *universal interdependence* and *relational quiddity*. The journey ends with a final discussion of the philosophy of Zen patriarch Dōgen Zenji and his concept of enlightenment (§9). Once the discussion reaches the Sino-Japanese forms of Buddhism, the concepts that seemed wobbly before suddenly fit together like pieces of a puzzle, constituting a glorious Buddhist metaphysical edifice. Tying together the open threads of the discussion so neatly is the greatest accomplishment of Priest's work, yet also its primary target for criticism. I shall return to this later.

The tradeoff for a project of this scope is most commonly depth, but this is also the case here, though, given Priest's aims, not problematic (indeed, rather beneficial to the project). The reason for this is the following: *5of4* (Priest openly calls attention to it repeatedly) is neither a scholarly work on Buddhism (as a philosophy or religion), nor of any of the Buddhist philosophers with which Priest engages. Qua scholarly work, it would certainly lack the required depth. Yet, the lack of scholarship does no harm to the book. Indeed, *5of4* is a valuable and enthralling interpretation of Buddhist metaphysics for the very reason that it is *not* the work of a scholar of Buddhism, but a philosopher and logician.

Although Priest's engagement with the material could be considered too casual, this is a hasty impression. The book (being in the tradition of Priest's contemplations of the heresies of his discipline) dares to go the unorthodox way, and is frank about it. It is the work of a *philosophe sans frontières* who draws on the thinkers of both the Eastern and the Western tradition at his convenience. In a time where borders have become *en vogue* again, Priest's methodology is to be embraced.

Although the methodological approach of *5of4* is absorbing, it is not entirely unproblematic. A closer analysis of Priest's dialectic is necessary. The dialectic with which Priest is analyzing the metaphysical concepts systematically postpones a comprehensive explication of the concepts at hand to a discussion of (what Priest takes to be) the historical successor of those concepts. The object of this dialectic is the *catuṣkoṭi*. Piece by piece, the reader gains a better understanding of the concept, while Priest is sweeping through the historical developments of Buddhism. Here is the dialectic with which Priest explicates the *catuṣkoṭi*:

- (1) First, Priest starts with the *explanandum*, the four-valued *catuṣkoṭi*.
Sense of it can be made with recourse to non-classical logic. But what role does the *catuṣkoṭi* play in Buddhist philosophy?
- (2) We learn that the Madhyamakas were adding a fifth value to the *catuṣkoṭi* which represents *emptiness*. But what is *emptiness*?
- (3) Priest argues that *Sānlùn* patriarch *Jízàng* built up a hierarchy of truth-levels from the *catuṣkoṭi*, connecting conventional truth and ultimate truth. But what is the ultimate/conventional dichotomy all about?
- (4) Answer to the question in (2): In Huayan philosophy, the fifth value of the *catuṣkoṭi* (emptiness) has itself a structure of interdependence – so, to be *empty* is to be *interdependent*. Interdependence is again explained with resource to modern formal tools.
- (5) Finally, we get the answer to the question in (3) and eventually an *explanans* for (1): We learn about the connection of the four-valued *catuṣkoṭi* and the fifth value through Priest's interpretation of Dōgen's explication of enlightenment (*satori*).

Following Priest's dialectic means, to (fully) understand the *catuṣkoṭi* in the context of the Madhyamakas, one has to understand the teachings of the Zen masters. Therefore, Priest's interpretation of Buddhist metaphysics looks like a tacit interpretation of Zen Buddhism (which itself is explained, to a large extent, by Priest's analysis of Huayan philosophy). In this context, the *catuṣkoṭi* turns out to be *upāya* (a means to enlightenment), and instrument to overcome dualities, practically equivalent to the *kōan* of the Zen tradition. What is to say about this dialectic?

Certainly, the Sino-Japanese Buddhism(s) are the latest development of those ancient ideas. Their concepts are therefore, one could argue, increasingly conceptually stable, less slippery than their predecessors. Trying to understand those convoluted, knotty ancient ideas, then, we can first try to understand those incarnations, which are closer to our current state of knowledge and go from there. (Ultimately, it is modern logic and analytic philosophy, which is closest to the intended reader's current state of knowledge). This is essentially what happens in *5of4*. The writings of the Kyoto School philosophers perhaps serve a similar purpose, as the access point to Eastern thought, for those educated along broadly Aristotelian lines. This rewind-dialectic is certainly powerful, (scholarly) attempts like Westerhoff (*Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka*. Oxford University Press 2009), however, do not try to exceed textual, historical and cultural circles and still succeed in making sense of difficult metaphysical concepts. Sometimes, it feels like problems can and should be addressed where they occur and not postponed by several hundred years of philosophical development – at least not without an argument for why this is necessary in retrospect.

Whatever one wants to say about the dialectic of *5of4*, it is a refreshing and profound, modern philosophical discussion of Buddhist metaphysics and a perfect example of successful intercultural philosophy. Asian philosophical traditions have, for too long, been written off and marginalized in the West. Priest provides the limelight they deserve. It is not least Priest's careful and easily digestible use of formalizations, which contributes to the success of his project. Even those who abhor non-classical logic and its friend, *dialetheism*, may at least this time be convinced by Priest's arguments. Why? Because this time, it does not threaten Aristotle-territory – Buddhist thought, some may think, is equally obscure: As Rudyard Kipling once said: '*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.*' Let's overcome this anachronism. I highly recommend this book to philosophers, logicians and buddhologists and everybody else interested in Buddhist philosophy.

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