

Forthcoming in *Reasons and Empty Persons*, Christian Coseru (ed.), Dordrecht: Springer.

Buddhist Shipping Containers

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1 Siderits on Priest

At the end of his review of *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi* by Graham Priest, Mark Siderits (2019) remarks:

[I]t might be said that just such decentering [i.e., the decentering that can be induced by looking at another tradition] occurred when Buddhist thought came to China from India, yet we still think of East Asian Buddhist thought as Buddhist. Perhaps something similar might be said about Priest's 'reconstruction' of the tetralemma in Asian Buddhist philosophy.

Priest's *The Fifth Corner of Four* is a book about the argumentative method, *catuskoṭi* or tetralemma, developed and used by classical Indian philosophers including Buddhists. The *catuskoṭi* and various other devices went through some transformation by Chinese Buddhists when they were 'exported to China in Buddhist shipping containers' (Siderits (2019)). The book follows the development of this method by the Buddha in certain *sūtras*, Indian Madhyamaka, Chinese Huayan and finally Chan Buddhism. Siderits takes issue with Priest's attribution of dialetheism (the view that there are true contradictions) to Buddhists who make use of the *catuskoṭi*. He claims that 'Nāgārjuna et al. did not say many of the things Priest takes them to have said'. He gives evidence to substantiate his claim.

While he criticises Priest's philology, Siderits nevertheless suggests that Priest's work is 'of considerable interest' for two reasons. First, 'when two independent traditions use similar methods to work on similar issues, it is always possible that one may have hit on approaches that the other missed'. Second, 'the decentering that can be induced by looking at another tradition may trigger fresh insights, even if those insights are not ones that were actually developed by the tradition marked 'other''. He then ends his review with the above quoted remark.

Now, Siderits seems to be implying that Priest's work offers new approaches to the issues that concerned traditional Buddhist philosophers and triggers fresh insights even though it is philologically problematic. What are those approaches and insights? The main task of this paper is to unpack some of Siderits' thought on those. He explains why Priest's take on the *catuṣkoṭi* as it was used and conceived by classical Indian philosophers is problematic. However, he is rather cryptic about the positive contributions that he thinks Priest's work brings out. But I am not going to conduct another book review. Instead, by analysing some of Priest's work, I will suggest a decentering that must have taken place in China. In particular, I will suggest that the two threads of Siderits' remark are tightly connected. That is, I will show that Priest has 'sinologised' Indian Buddhism with the use of modern logic. For anyone familiar with the forms of Buddhist philosophy developed in India, various forms of Chinese Buddhism can often look strange. Some ideas that were debated and defended by Indian Buddhists do not appear anywhere in Chinese Buddhism and some assumptions have been quietly added to Buddhism by Chinese Buddhists. By showing that Priest's work brings out clearly the 'innovation' that Chinese Buddhists gave to Buddhism as it was 'exported to China in Buddhist shipping containers', I will show that the decentering that must have taken place in China is exactly what Priest makes use of.

2 On Nāgārjuna's Ontological Paradox

Many of Priest's thoughts contained in *The Fifth Corner of Four* can be traced to his early work with Jay Garfield. What is crucial in my reconstruction of Siderits' suggestion is already present and more explicit in the early work. So, I will follow Priest's early work rather than his latest work.¹ Garfield and Priest (2003) argue that Nāgārjuna's doctrine of emptiness, when it is analysed to its logical end, can be seen as entailing that reality is contradictory. They do not claim that Nāgārjuna presents an argument or arguments for the contradictory nature of reality. Nor do they claim that he (explicitly) accepts that reality is contradictory. Their claim is

¹I will largely follow Tanaka (2016) in what follows. For Siderits' criticism of Priest's work with Garfield, see Siderits (2013). For Garfield and Priest's latest rejoinder, See Garfield and Priest (this volume).

that the doctrine of emptiness entails that reality is contradictory and this can be shown by rational reconstruction of Nāgārjuna's thought.

Garfield and Priest understand the doctrine of emptiness to be that nothing exists with *svabhāva*. The term *svabhāva* has several connotations. But when it is understood as essential property or essence that *ultimately* gives an object its numerical identity, the lack of *svabhāva* means that *ultimately* nothing exists. So, the doctrine of emptiness entails that 'there is no ultimate reality' (p. 10). According to Garfield and Priest, Nāgārjuna nevertheless 'tells us about the nature of ultimate reality' (p. 11) suggesting that there is ultimate reality for Nāgārjuna. Hence, so Garfield and Priest conclude, the doctrine of emptiness entails that there is and is not ultimate reality. This means that if something exists, it does and does not exist ultimately. They call it Nāgārjuna's ontological paradox: what ultimately exists is paradoxical. They attribute to Nāgārjuna the claim that the ultimate reality is paradoxical.²

Garfield and Priest's interpretation of Nāgārjuna is radical in the sense that the Madhyamaka tradition (as well as most Buddhist traditions) is usually thought of as rejecting contradictions (perhaps except some Chinese and Japanese traditions such as Chan/Zen). Nāgārjuna himself seems to be sensitive to the idea that his doctrine is contradictory and rejects such an idea.³ Garfield and Priest are well aware of this. They take on the 'burden of proof' to demonstrate that the doctrine of emptiness entails the ontological paradox. As part of demonstration, they show that the doctrine of emptiness can be characterised by a structure in terms of the *inclosure schema*. The schema has two parts. First, *transcendence*: something, which has a limit, *transcends* that limit. Second, *closure*: it is, nevertheless, within the limit. By showing that the inclosure schema entails a contradiction, they argue that what ultimately exists must be paradoxical for Nāgārjuna.

As I will show in the next section, the inclosure schema entails the *domain principle*: for anything of a certain kind, there are all of those things. If the doctrine of emptiness can be characterised by the inclosure schema and the conclusion entailed by the schema can be attributed to Nāgārjuna, Garfield and Priest must accept the idea that Nāgārjuna is committed to the domain principle. However, the domain principle implies the existence of a whole under which all things can be unified. This means that Garfield and Priest's analysis entails that Nāgārjuna is committed to the existence of *the one* that categorises all things as empty. In the Indian context, attributing conceptual recourses that commit Nāgārjuna to the existence of *the one* is questionable. The idea that there is an all-encompassing whole did develop in China (and transported to Korea and Japan). Garfield and

²In this paper, I will deal directly with the ontological paradox and leave aside the issue about language. For a discussion of the semantic issues that come with the ontological paradox, see Tanaka (2016).

³See, for instance, *Vigrahavyāvahārikā* 29. For a discussion, see Westerhoff (2009) pp. 183ff.

Priest's analysis of Nāgārjuna is, thus, a sinologification of Indian ideas which is part of the decentering that might have 'occurred when Buddhist thought came to China from India' (Siderits (2019)). This is what I will show in the remainder of the paper.

3 The Inclosure Schema and the Domain Principle

My first task is to show that the inclosure schema entails the domain principle: for anything of a certain kind, there are all of those things. The inclosure schema concerns properties, φ and ψ , and a function, δ , that satisfy the following conditions:

- (1) $\Omega = \{X : \varphi(X)\}$ exists and $\psi(\Omega)$.
- (2) For all $X \subseteq \Omega$ such that $\psi(X)$:
 - (i) $\delta(X) \notin X$ (Transcendence)
 - (ii) $\delta(X) \in \Omega$ (Closure)

Let $\varphi(X)$ to mean that X is empty, $\psi(X)$ that X is a set of things with some common nature, and $\delta(X)$ is the nature of things in X . Then (1) says that the set of all things that are empty exists and that such a set is a set of things with some common nature. It is an ontological claim about what exists and a metaphysical claim about what it is like. (i) says that the nature of things in the set of empty things having some common nature is not part of the set of empty things, and (ii) says that it is part of the set of all things that are empty.

That the inclosure schema interpreted as above entails an ontological paradox can be shown as follows. Assume that $X \subseteq \Omega$ and $\psi(X)$ (i.e., X is a set of empty things with some common nature). $\delta(X)$ is that nature. But all things are empty. So $\delta(X) \in \Omega$ (where Ω is the set of all empty things) (Closure). This means that $\delta(X)$ (i.e., the nature of all empty things) has no nature. So $\delta(X) \notin X$ (Transcendence). Hence $\delta(X) \in X$ (the nature of all empty things is empty) and $\delta(X) \notin X$ (the nature of all empty things is not empty since emptiness is the nature commonly shared by all things that are empty). This means that emptiness is and is not empty. This must be the case, Garfield and Priest argue, since all empty things share a common nature, namely, emptiness. Given that emptiness pertains to ultimate reality, what ultimately exists is empty since everything is ultimately empty but it is not empty since it has emptiness as its nature.

Can we legitimately attribute this ontological paradox to Nāgārjuna? The schema is formulated set-theoretically. It is hard to know how Nāgārjuna would understand set-theoretic notions such as set membership. To be charitable to Garfield and Priest, let's understand the schema in terms that Nāgārjuna might

understand.⁴ He might understand mereological relations (part-whole relations). If we understand the schema mereologically, (1) says that any empty thing is part of the totality of all empty things. But this is the domain principle. So (1), understood mereologically, is an instance of the domain principle: for anything of a certain kind, there are all of those things. This shows that the inclosure schema entails the domain principle.

Now the domain principle commits one to the existence of wholes that are constituted by myriad things and that unify these things to be parts of the wholes. The first half of (1) of the inclosure schema says that there exists a totality of things that can be uniformly characterised as being empty. Given that everything is empty, it effectively asserts the existence of the totality of empty things. This means that Garfield and Priest's analysis commits the existence of *the one* that encompasses and unifies all myriad things as the Chinese would put it.

4 The Domain Principle in the Indian Context

Before examining the domain principle in the context of Nāgārjuna, I should make clear what is *not* at issue. What is not at issue is the notion of totality or the possibility of talking about *all* things whether ultimately or conventionally. Nāgārjuna (and Mādhyamikas) might be comfortable talking about all things. He might even admit the existence of the totality of all things. Indeed, the doctrine of emptiness contains a universal quantifier over all things: all things are empty. So, he must be able to talk about all things just like the Buddha must have been able to talk about all things by claiming that all things are *duḥkha* (suffering).

What *is* at issue is the domain principle that, for each thing that is empty, it forms part of the whole consisting of all empty things. To put it using the terminology of particular/universal, the domain principle has it that for each particular thing that is empty, it forms part of the universal under which all particular empty things fall. In other words, what the domain principle, understood mereologically, commits one to is the existence of the whole that unifies all things as empty.

From the perspectives of Vasubandhu and Dignāga-Dharmakīrti, there cannot be such unifying wholes. They would, thus, reject the domain principle. For instance, Vasubandhu, in the *Abhidharmakośa*, argues for the position that there are only particulars. He employs a reductive analysis to come to this conclusion. He shows that any macro-object can be analysed in terms of its parts. Because of this, macro-objects do not have real or ultimate existence. For Vasubandhu, there

⁴I say 'might' because I am very sure that Nāgārjuna would not understand what Garfield and Priest are talking about in terms of the inclosure schema. The conceptual resources such as modern mathematics that are necessary to understand the inclosure schema were just not available to Nāgārjuna.

cannot ultimately be wholes that unify things and classifies them as certain kinds.⁵ So, for him, it is not the case that for any particular thing, there are all of those things. Hence, the domain principle must be rejected by Vasubandhu.

What about Nāgārjuna? Would he accept the domain principle? Given that he does not explicitly accept or reject the principle or anything similar (as far as I can see), it is hard to categorically demonstrate that he would accept or reject it.⁶ However, there is reason to think that Nāgārjuna would not accept it.

To think that Nāgārjuna would accept the existence of unifying wholes, we would have to think of him as rejecting the kind of argument that Vasubandhu advances against the ultimate existence of wholes in the *Abhidharmakośa*. In particular, Nāgārjuna would be seen as rejecting the reductive analysis showing that macro-objects do not have real or ultimate existence. Far from rejecting such an analysis, at least in some parts of his arguments, Nāgārjuna seems to be applying it to the ‘parts’ and showing that the parts themselves cannot have real or ultimate existence on the very basis of reductive analyses. As Garfield (2015) writes:

The anti-realism with respect to the macroscopic, composite entities of ordinary life espoused by early Abhidharma philosophy is extended in the Madhyamaka perspective to the *dharmas* [i.e., the ultimate parts] themselves. (p. 62)

An application of reductive analysis to its logical end showing the non-existence of ultimate parts is an integral part of Nāgārjuna’s argument. Based on such an application, he was able to show that nothing has ultimate existence and, thus, there is no ultimate reality.

If this is right, it is hard to think of Nāgārjuna as rejecting Vasubandhu’s argument (or similar arguments). If he were to reject Vasubandhu’s argument, he would be undermining his own argument. There is, thus, a *prima facie* case against attributing the commitment to the existence of unifying wholes and, hence, the domain principle to Nāgārjuna.

I cannot conclude from the above discussion that no Buddhists in India were committed to the domain principle. Such a general conclusion would require a thorough investigation of the history of Buddhism in India. For instance, we

⁵See, for instance, Siderits (2007) chap. 6.

⁶It is never clear to me how to evaluate historical counterfactuals such as: If Nāgārjuna were here now reading Garfield and Priest’s work, he would accept the inclosure schema. How can we examine the conceptual apparatus of Nāgārjuna if it is not the conceptual apparatus that he had when he was writing down his thought but the one that he would have had if he were in a position to understand Garfield and Priest’s work? Priest (2018), on the other hand, seems optimistic when he says: ‘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.’ (p. 149.) I do not intend to settle this issue in this paper. However, I do wonder where Priest’s confidence comes from.

would have to examine the pudgalavādins who seem to have rejected Vasubandhu's (or someone like him) reductive analysis.⁷ However, what I have shown is that some of the major figures in Indian Buddhist philosophy would not accept the domain principle. When we use the terminology of particular and universal, the domain principle says that for each particular, there is a universal under which it falls. So, the domain principle would entail the existence of universals. Given that the commitment or the lack of the commitment to the existence of universals was one of the distinctive issues that separated non-Buddhists from Buddhists in India, an analysis of Indian Buddhist thought that entails the existence of universals is, therefore, generally problematic.

5 The Domain Principle in the Chinese Context

The thought that there is a whole of which everything, every myriad thing, is a part is ubiquitous in China.⁸ The *Book of Changes* describes the world to have began as primordial *qi* (here understood as vital energy) which is undifferentiated. Over time, this undifferentiated whole fractured into layers or regions. Eventually, discrete shapes and individual things emerged out of this process. In this way, 'the things of the universe are one in a deep and distinctive sense' (Ivanhoe (2017): 20-21).

Early Daoists gave this metaphysical view a twist. Instead of undifferentiated, primordial *qi*, they considered the world to have come from *wu* (nothing) the state where there are no things (as opposed to the state of nothingness). This idea is expressed in various passages in the *Daodejing*.

Neo-Confucians gave this traditional metaphysical view yet another twist. The *Book of Changes* and the *Daodejing* present the world as a single body and everything in it is its part. Neo-Confucians think of the world as a unified system consisting of *li* (principles or patterns). The world is conceived as a living organism with a unified structure and every part of it is interconnected in terms of this structure. Under the influence of Buddhism, in particular Huayan Buddhism with the image of the Net of Indra, they took this to mean that everything in the world contains the principles or patterns of the world. This allowed them to 'develop a more robust and dramatic sense of oneness as a kind of identity between self and world' (Ivanhoe (2017): 22).⁹

⁷For an examination of the pudgalavādins, see Carpenter (20015). The analysis of the pudgalavādins by Coseru (this volume) does not settle the question of whether or not the pudgalavādins presupposed or (implicitly) made use of the domain principle.

⁸A proper historical study of the development of Chinese thought is too complex to be conducted in one place. In this paper, I will follow Ivanhoe (2000, 2002, 2017). See also Ivanhoe, Flanagan, Harrison, Schwitzgebel and Sarkissian (2018).

⁹It is not clear that Huayan Buddhists think of the relationship between the world (whole)

It is important to note that the principles or patterns that manifest in everything in the world are the principles or patterns of the world. And, to think of the principles or patterns of the world is to think of the world as a whole. Everything in the world is unified under the principles or patterns of the world and the world is the whole of which everything in it is a part.¹⁰ For neo-Confucians, thus, there is the whole which unifies all the myriad things.

The same or similar metaphysical view can be found in various traditions of Chinese Buddhism. I think one of the most striking differences between the forms of Buddhist philosophy (scholarsticism) we know existed in India and those that developed in China has to do with the attitudes they have towards the whole that unifies all the myriad things. This is not the place to examine or speculate about the direction of influence between Buddhism and more ‘indigenous’ Chinese schools of thought such as neo-Confucianism and I won’t offer any historical examination of who influenced who. What I will do below is briefly present the metaphysical views held by some of the Chinese Buddhists that implies the existence of *the One*, the whole under which all things are unified.

Chinese Buddhists tend to subscribe to and make use of not the Two Truths that often plays out in Indian context including Madhyamaka but the Three Truths.¹¹ What those three truths are depends on the ‘schools’ of Chinese Buddhism. For Tiantai, according to Ziporyn (2016), the first and the second truths represent two extremes and the third truth represents the centre (*zhong*) that sits between those extremes. This centre is an important element of their metaphysical view as it ‘denotes the inclusiveness of all opposites as well as the subsuming field that unifies them all. It is thus the ground of the being of all the entities it subsumes, the centre of gravity that brings them into the relationships with each other that determines their identities’ (p. 153).

Instead of thinking of the interconnection between things in the world in terms of principles or patters (*li*) as neo-Confucians subscribe, Tiantai views the interconnection in terms of what Ziporyn calls ‘recontextualisation’. To be something is to be a part of the world. Thus, to understand the nature of something is not to see it as it is in itself but to ‘recontextualise’ it by the rest of the world (Ziporyn (2016): 163). For Tiantai, the unification of the world is a transcendental

and everything in it (every part) to be a kind of identity. For an alternative analysis of Huayan metaphysics, see Jones (2015). Here I follow Ivanhoe and assume for the sake of this paper that neo-Confucians have interpreted Huayan Buddhists to be saying that the relation is a kind of identity.

¹⁰This seems to be how Zhu Xi understand *li* (principles or patterns). See Kim (2000) for a discussion.

¹¹Three Truths, or something similar, can already be found in Vasubandhu’s *Yogācāra*. See, in particular, *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*. Again, I leave speculation about the influence of *Yogācāra* for Chinese Buddhism for another occasion.

condition that makes every little fragment of the world ‘findable’ (Ziporyn (2016): 143).

A very much the same metaphysical view can be found in Huayan. The metaphor that is often used to illustrate reality by Huayan metaphysicians is the Net of Indra. The Net of Indra is described as consisting of infinite number of jewels. Each jewel (thought of as a node of the web) is said to be connected to and reflect all the other jewels of the Net. Each jewel ‘interpenetrates’ (or ‘mutually depends on’) each other. The whole Net also ‘interpenetrates’ each of the parts. By ‘interpenetrating’ each part, the whole gives unity to them. But the whole is not identical with any of the parts. This means that the whole exists over and above the parts. However, the ‘interpenetrating’ relations form an infinite chain which consists of all of the parts but also the whole. The whole is, thus, a part of this chain as much as all of the (proper) parts are. So, the whole is not distinct from the parts either. The whole Net is, thus, not distinct from the parts nor not distinct from them. Nevertheless, the whole is real as much as the myriad things are.¹²

This is not to say that Chinese philosophers have largely accepted the domain principle. I am not aware of anyone who has formulated their thought in terms of the principle. Nevertheless, the intellectual resources available in China are amenable to accepting the domain principle. At least, it is not difficult to imagine that the domain principle would find wide acceptance in China if it can be presented with appropriate terminologies.

6 Buddhist Shipping Containers

Siderits starts his book review of Priest (2018) by writing that ‘the *catuṣkoṭi* or tetralemma [is] a device used by some classical Indian philosophers and then exported to China in Buddhist shipping containers’. What happened in the Buddhist shipping containers? A lot of things must have happened not just to the *catuṣkoṭi* but also to many other devices used by philosophers (whether Buddhist or not) in India. Following the above discussion, I speculate that one thing that must have happened is the change of focus. As we have seen, Chinese philosophers focus on the interconnections between the myriad things that exist and that we can observe in the world. This is a change of focus from emptiness to interdependence. One of the changes in emphasis the notion of emptiness brings is the non-existence of ultimate reality. When the focus shifts to interdependence, the emphasis moves to the nature of the relationship between existing things.¹³ But, in so doing, there is

¹²This is exactly the view that the modern analysis of the Net of Indra by Priest (2014) provides.

¹³Priest (2015) presents this shift as entailment: emptiness entails interdependence. The entailment he presents seems invalid, however. Thanks go to Alan Háyeek for pointing this out. An

a tendency to affirm the existence of ultimate reality where the ultimate reality is now conceived to be that everything is interdependent. It is this decentering that allows Chinese Buddhists to commit to the existence of the One.

From a Chinese perspective, then, the analysis that Priest (with Garfield) provides makes perfect sense. The inclosure schema that he (or they) make use of entails the domain principle that commits the existence of the totality under which everything is unified. As we saw, there are various devices in China that are readily available to make good on that commitment.

So, what could we have discovered when we opened the Buddhist shipping containers? One thing we might have found there is a contradiction (or various contradictions). Priest's sinologisation reveals that the thought that existed in India can be seen to entail contradictions when examined through Chinese lens with the help of modern logic. Dōgen complained about many of the thoughts that were entertained by Chinese Buddhists. For instance, he writes:

[T]here are careless fellows who form groups; they cannot be set straight by the few true masters. They say that the statement, "The eastern mountains travel in water," or Nanquan's story of a sickle, is illogical; what they mean is that any words having to do with logical thought are not buddha ancestors' Zen stories, and that only illogical stories are buddha ancestors' expressions. ... "Ancient masters used expedient phrases, which are beyond understanding, to slash entangles vines": People who say this have never seen a true master and they have no eye of understanding. [T]hese last two or three hundred years, there have been many groups of bald-headed rascals. What a pity! ... How sad that they do not know about the phrases of logical thought, or penetrating logical thought in the phrases and stories! (*Sansuikyō*, translation in Tanahashi (1985).)

Interpreting Dōgen is notoriously difficult and I do not claim to have an authoritative interpretation of the passage.¹⁴ However, *prima facie* at least, Dōgen is admonishing those who subscribe to the 'illogical' nature of the Buddha's teaching. In the context where paraconsistent logic (logic which does not trivialise contradictions) is not available, illogicality is equivalent to contradiction. Thus, Dōgen is criticising those who have interpreted the true teaching of the Buddha to be contradictory.

examination of Priest (2015) goes beyond the scope of this paper and so I will leave it for another occasion. Also I won't speculate whether or not any historical Buddhist tried to derive interdependence from emptiness and whether or not such derivation is valid.

¹⁴This translation maybe questionable as a literally accurate translation. Yet I think it is one that captures the poetic aspect of Dōgen's writing and, for that reason, captures his 'sentiment' he expresses in his writing. It is, thus, appropriate to use this translation in this context.

Instead of hitting with *keisaku* as might happen in a Zen meditation hall, Siderits sits in the middle of all kinds of activities taking place around him while making crucial contributions to them. He observes that certain decentering can take place when some intellectual tradition is shipped to somewhere else.¹⁵ When various Buddhist devices were shipped to China from India, a new approach to the understanding of emptiness opened up. And such an approach might have provided fresh insights that the ultimate reality, once it is reconceptualised in the presence of the One, may, perhaps, be contradictory. Siderits teaches us that decentering may be inevitable and also crucial in the development of intellectual traditions. We just need to be reflective about our engagement with historical material by paying attention to the decentering that can take place when the shipping containers arrive at the destination.

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¹⁵Westerhoff (2020) observes something similar which he describes in analogy to the study of ancient technology.

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