Those Concepts Proliferate Everywhere…
Reply to Kassor[*]

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In her paper in this Issue, Kassor describes Gorampa's attitude to contradictions as they occur in various contexts of Buddhist pursuit. We agree with much of what she says; with some we do not.

First, some preliminary comments, and a fundamental disagreement. Kassor says (p. 3):

> Based on [the assumption that Nāgārjuna has a coherent system of thought] one must resolve apparent contradictions in Nāgārjuna's texts in order to maintain the coherency of his logic. The problem with contradictions is that if they are introduced into a classical logical system, that entire system can break down. This is because of the law of explosion: the principle that everything can follow [DGP: does follow] from a contradiction.

> One is driven to render Nāgārjuna consistent only if one supposes that he endorsed

what Kassor calls "classical logic" (the logic of Frege and Russell), and specifically the

principle of Explosion. There is, however, absolutely *no textual evidence* that *anyone*

endorsed Explosion (which is stronger than the Principle of Non-Contradiction) in the

Buddhist canon.[1] Certainly, no one who endorses contradictions is likely to think that

Explosion is a valid principle of inference. Nāgārjuna, in particular, did not.

Next, Kassor claims that Tilleman's views on how contradictions are to be treated in

Indian Buddhism is 'compelling' (pp. 1, 9). We do not feel compelled; we refer readers to our

reply to Tillemans (present volume) for an explanation of that lack of compulsion.

1. The Catuṣkoṭi

Now to matters of more substance. We begin with the catuṣkoṭi. This is a trope of

Indian logic predating the historical Buddha. In its earliest form, it is something like a

principle of exclude fifth. Every claim is exactly one of: true (only), false (only), both true

and false, neither true nor false.[2]

Matters get more interesting by the time we reach Nāgārjuna. As Kassor notes, we

find him sometimes appearing to endorse all of the koṭis on some issues and denying all of

them on some others. Each move is problematic: the first appears to clash with the thought

that the koṭis are exclusive; the second with the thought that they are exhaustive.

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[1] One should note that the syllogistic logic of Aristotle is a paraconsistent logic. The principle of Explosion is
not even formulated in the West until about the 12th century. And it does not become orthodox till the turn of the
20th century. See Priest (2007), esp. sec. 2.

[2] Kassor formalizes the four possibilities (p. 9) as: φ, $\neg\varphi$, $\varphi\&\neg\varphi$, $\varphi\vee\neg\varphi$. This cannot be right, if only because
on her reading the third koṭi entails all the other three. An adequate formalisation of the catuṣkoṭi requires a
4-valued logic (though the four values may be defined in terms of just truth and falsity). For further discussion,
see Priest (2010) and Garfield and Priest (2009).

Now, it is important to distinguish between these two sorts of situations. Elsewhere, we have called the first a 'positive catuṣkoṭi', and the second a 'negative catuṣkoṭi'. As far as the positive catuṣkoṭi goes, as Kassor notes (p. 5), we endorse a parameterisation strategy. The apparent contradiction is defused by disambiguating between conventional truth and ultimate truth.[3]

2.   The Negative Catuṣkoṭi

The negative catuṣkoṭi is a more vexed matter. It would appear that, in using this, Nāgārjuna is accepting that there can be a fifth possibility. Certainly, some commentators interpret Nāgārjuna in this way. Gorampa is clearly in this category. We will come to him in a moment. For our own part, we do not think that this is the best way to interpret Nāgārjuna.[4]

For a start, Candrakīrti is quite explicit to the effect that there is no fifth possibility. Tsongkhapa quotes him approvingly, though of course this would not matter to Gorampa.[5] Moreover, there are important reasons why this should be so. The central concern of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* is to establish that everything is empty of self-being, svabhāva, and the ramifications of this fact. The negative *catuṣkoṭi* often occurs in the context of a *reductio* on the claim that something has svabhāva. This is an assumption made at the start of the argument (usually not explicitly), and employed at various points in the ensuing argument. The argument then demonstrates that all four limbs of the relevant

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[3] The argument is given in Priest and Garfield (2003), sec. 6, and we will not repeat it here. See also our reply to Tillemans in this issue.

[4] Some of the following comes from Priest (2012).

[5] See Candrakīrti (2003), IIa-b, and Tsong kha pa (2006), pp. 50-54.

catuṣkoṭi fail, and the assumption is rejected in a final *reductio*. Looked at in this way, it is clear that if the four cases of the catuṣkoṭi do not exhaust all the relevant possibilities, the argument does not work.

Sometimes, however, as in the celebrated negative *catuṣkoṭi* in chapter XXII of MMK discussed in our reply to Siderits (present volume) and at more length in Garfield (forthcoming), Nāgārjuna uses the negative *catuṣkoṭi* to mark the transition from a conventional to an ultimate perspective, emphasizing that from the ultimate perspective nothing whatever can be said, as is made plain in contexts such as the silence of Vimalakīrti. Candrakīrti affirms this reading as well, as does Tsongkhapa.   It is in contexts such as these that Gorampa's interpretation gains more plausibility.

3.   Talking of the Ineffable

This brings us to Kassor's reading of Gorampa. Let us say right at the start that we have no desire to contest her clear and elegant exegesis of his view.[6] As she explains, for him, there is an ultimate reality, and it is appropriate to deny all four koṭis when talking about it. For this is non-dual. *Ipso facto*, one can apply no conceptual categories to it: it is free of "conceptual prolifierations".

But contradiction still looms, of course. Ultimate reality is, on this understanding, ineffable. Yet Gorampa himself talks about it. Kassor quotes him as saying, 'the ultimate is devoid of conceptual proliferations'. This explains why, indeed, it is ineffable; but it is also *says* something about it, namely that it is devoid of conceptual proliferations and therefore ineffable! Some things about the ineffable *can* be expressed. We are faced with exactly a

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[6] In particular, we accept that our casual reference to Gorampa
(Garfield and Priest (2003), fn. 1) is far too swift.

limit contradiction of the kind in which we are interested, as Kassor herself notes (p. 14).[7]

Gorampa's reaction to the contradiction, as Kassor explains, is to draw a distinction, which she describes thus (p. 14):

> In the *Synopsis*, Gorampa divides ultimate truth into two: the nominal ultimate
> … and the ultimate truth [DGP: reality] …. While the ultimate truth ... is free
> from conceptual proliferations, existing beyond the limits of thought, the
> nominal ultimate is simply a conceptual description of what the ultimate is *like*.
> Whenever ordinary persons talk about of conceptualize the ultimate, Gorampa
> argues that they are actually referring to the nominal ultimate. We cannot
> think or talk about the *actual* ultimate truth because it is beyond thoughts and
> language; any statement or thought about the ultimate is necessarily
> conceptual, and is, therefore, the nominal ultimate[8].

It does not take long to see that this hardly avoids contradiction, however. If all talk of the ultimate is about the nominal ultimate, then Gorampa's own talk of the ultimate is this. And the nominal ultimate is clearly effable. So, if this is the ultimate of which he speaks, Gorampa's own claim that the ultimate is devoid of conceptual proliferations is just false. On the other hand, if he wants to say truly that the actual ultimate is inexpressible and beyond conceptual elaborations, he can do so only by expressing such elaborations.

It is worth noting that situations of this kind arise in Western philosophy as well. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant explains that there are noumenal objects about which one cannot talk/think. For talk/thought constitutes *phenomenal* objects. Realising the bind he is in here, Kant drew a distinction between an illegitimate positive notion of a noumenon and a

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[7] As explained in Garfield and Priest (2003), sec. 5. This is paradox 3
in our reply to Tillemans.

[8] It is worth noting that Tsongkhapa draws exactly the same distinction for exactly the same reason, and that he fails in the same way to escape the paradox. (Tsongkhapa 2006, pp. 495-496)

legitimate negative, or limiting, notion. This does not help: according to Kant, the negative notion is there to place a limit on the area in which we can apply thought/language. But to say that there is an area to which we cannot apply thought/language is clearly to say something about this area, and so apply thought/language to it.[9]

Indeed, the Gorampa/Kant predicament is inevitable. If one wishes to explain why something is ineffable, one must refer to it and say something about it. To refer to something else, something kind of like it but about which one can talk, is just to change the subject.

4.   The Limits of Thought

We reach, then, our main disagreement with Kassor – and Gorampa if he thinks he has found a way of avoiding contradictions about ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is ineffable; yet there *are* things one can say about it. Kassor takes it that she can restrict such paradoxes to acceptable contradictions concerning the nominal ultimate (p. 15), saving the consistency of the actual ultimate; but the nominal ultimate buys us nothing in the end. Indeed, to the extent that the nominal ultimate is merely the ultimate conceptualized in a certain way, it is really just conventional reality. For conventional reality is exactly what is produced when we apply concepts to ultimate reality in a certain way.

Our concepts thus have a way of spilling over into the ultimate.   The ultimate is something to which concepts cannot apply, and about which nothing can be said, yet to which they do, and about which we just said something. This is a familiar paradox at the limits of language. It is hardly surprising that those such as Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, Tsongkhapa and Gorampa who are so concerned to scout those limits run up against them. Nor is this

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[9] See Priest (2002), 5.5.

paradoxical nature of the limits a sign of the failure of their project, only of its successful inconsistency.

Kassor maintains nonetheless that Gorampa avoids these contradictions. Even though he does not appeal to parameterization in connection with the negative tetralemma (p. 12):

> … on Gorampa's interpretation of the tetralemma, no contradictions are actually asserted. Nothing, in fact, is asserted at all: 'not existence, not non-existence, not existence and non-existence, nor the absence of the essence of both'. And because nothing is asserted, there are no contradictions, and therefore there is not need to justify claims of the tetralemma through parameterization, or any other logical maneuvering.

On this reading, he avoids asserting contradictions by avoiding asserting *anything*. Alas, even this desperate expedient (anticipated by Huntington 2007) fails. Of course nothing can be said of the ultimate: it is ineffable. But that is only half of the story. We *can* say some things about it as well, such as that it is ineffable.   One does not resolve a paradox simply by endorsing half of it and forgetting the other half.

Kassor ends her article saying:

> The problem with dialetheism … is that while it can take us *to* the limits of thought, it can never take us *beyond* those limits.

That is *exactly* where it takes us.

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