

7 Speaking of the Ineffable . . .

Graham Priest

Introduction

Nothing(ness) is an important, difficult, and tantalizing concept.¹ Many philosophers, both East and West, have held it to be of central importance. On the Western side of the ledger, Hegel, Heidegger, and Sartre come immediately to mind. On the Eastern side of the ledger, there are a number of Buddhist philosophers who will be our focus in what follows.

Many philosophers who speak about nothing make the further claim that it is ineffable: one can say nothing about it. They even explain why this is so. Here, for example, is Heidegger:

What is the nothing? Our very first approach to the question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that ‘is’ such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing—asking what and how it, the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.

Accordingly, every answer to the question is also impossible from the start. For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing ‘is’ this or that. With regard to the nothing, question and answer are alike inherently absurd. (Heidegger 1977b, 98ff.)

Our Buddhist philosophers are in the same situation, as we shall see; they take nothing to be ineffable, and explain why.

Clearly, there is a contradiction involved in speaking about the ineffable in this way. What is one to make of the situation? Here, the Buddhist tradition has resources not available, historically, to Western philosophy. A principle of Buddhist logic, the *catuṣkoṭi*, allows for the possibility that some contradictions are true. Perhaps this is just one of them. Of course, modern Western readers, heavily indoctrinated by Aristotle on the law of non-contradiction, may be skeptical of the coherence of such a possibility; however, it can be made perfectly precise and rigorous using the techniques of contemporary non-classical logic, particularly paraconsistent logics—logics in which contradictions do not imply everything. In this paper I will show how.

In the first two sections of the paper I will explain the notion of nothingness as it arises in Buddhist philosophy, by looking at its historical development. Then, after a brief interlude comparing Eastern and Western perspectives on the ineffable, we will look at a formal development of the *catuṣkoṭi*, and how this may be deployed to handle speaking of the ineffable. It might yet be thought that treating ineffability in this way—allowing that it may be spoken about—is something entirely alien to Buddhist thought. It is not. In the last section of the paper, we return again to Buddhist texts: this time the *Vimilakīrti Sūtra*. A central concern of this *sūtra* is exactly the ineffable and the significance of speaking about it.

Indian Buddhism

So let us start by going back to the origins of Buddhist philosophy. One of the most significant philosophical doctrines of early Buddhism is *anātman*, the doctrine of no-self.² All there is to a person is a bunch of physical and mental parts (*skandhas*) that constantly come into existence, interact causally, and go out of existence. A person, to the extent that he exists at all, is just a conceptual construction out of these—in much the way that, one might think, countries are not real, but arise from imposing conceptual distinctions on geographical terrain. There was nothing special about persons in this regard: the same story was applied to all partite objects. What does exist in reality is a bunch of ultimate parts, *dharmas*. These have self-being (*svabhāva*): each is what it is quite independently of any other thing. Everything else, and in particular, the objects of phenomenal reality, like tables and stars, is a conceptual construction out of these. Thus arose the doctrine of two realities, *satyas*:³ an ultimate reality of self-standing elements, and a conventional reality which is merely a conceptual construction out of these.

When Māhāyana Buddhism arose, this picture of reality was severely attacked. In particular, the claim that there is an ultimate reality-comprising *dharmas* with self-being was subjected to fierce criticism. The main architect of this critique was, arguably, Nāgārjuna (c. first or second century CE). In the *Mūlamadhyakamakārikā* (MMK) he mounted many arguments to the effect that no thing has self-being. Everything has its being by relating to other things, including its causes and effects, its parts, and our language/concepts. One might then expect him to have jettisoned the doctrine of two *satyas*. But he did not. Nāgārjuna (MMK XXIV.8–10) says:⁴

The Buddha's teaching of the Dharma/ Is based on two truths:/ A truth of worldly convention/ And an ultimate truth.

Those who do not understand/ The distinction between these two truths/ Do not understand/ The Buddha's profound truth.

Without a foundation in conventional truth/ The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught./ Without understanding the significance of the ultimate/ Liberation cannot be achieved.

How, now, to understand the doctrine of two realities is a difficult and contentious question (see Cowherds 2010). It is clear that everything has the same ontological status, namely being empty (*śūnya*) of self-being. In that sense there is only one reality. But one must understand this reality as having two poles: One pole is our conventional reality, a world infused with conceptual construction. The other is the world *an sich*, the world as it is without such conceptualization: emptiness (*śūnyatā*). (Though note that this, like all things, must be empty. That is, it must be what it is only in relation to other things—in this case, to conventional reality. Conventional and ultimate reality are like different sides of the same coin.) We meet here, the origin of the Buddhist notion of nothing.

But what is this emptiness, the world *an sich*, like? Almost by definition, one cannot say. It is what remains when one strips away all human imposition, and that means all language. Nāgārjuna makes the point explicitly. MMK XXII.11–12 tells us that:

‘Empty’ should not be asserted./ ‘Nonempty’ should not be asserted./ Neither both nor neither should be asserted./ They are used only nominally.

How can the tetralemma of permanent and impermanent, etc./ Be true of the peaceful?/ How can the tetralemma of the finite, infinite, etc./ Be true of the peaceful?

We meet here the *catuṣkoṭi* (Greek: tetralemma; English: four corners) for the first time, so let us pause to look at it more closely. The *catuṣkoṭi* is a logical trope, a sort of principle of excluded fifth, which goes back to the earliest days of Buddhism.⁵ Given any two situations, there are, in general, four possibilities: that one (but not the other) holds, that the other (but not the one) holds, that both hold, and that neither holds. In the standard Buddhist thinking of the time, this applied just as much to being true and being false: statements may be true (only), false (only), both true and false, or neither true nor false.⁶ An exhaustive examination of any situation must, therefore, consider all four cases.⁷

Given all this, the above verses can be interpreted as saying that something (the peaceful) is such that one can say no thing of it; the something in question is ultimate reality.⁸ This does not mean that this reality cannot be experienced. It can (with appropriate training). But a grasp of it can be had only with knowledge by acquaintance, not knowledge by description. All one can do, as it were, is to point at it. It is a simple thatness (*tathātā*).

Nāgārjuna effectively founded the Madhyamaka school of Māhāyana Buddhism. A somewhat different perspective on the matter at hand appeared when the other Indian school of Māhāyana Buddhism, Yogācāra, took shape a few hundred years later. The idealistic spin of Yogācāra comes out clearly in the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (TSN) of Vasubandhu (fourth century CE). According to Madhyamaka, an object has two aspects, conventional and ultimate. Yogācāra splits the first of these into two, making three aspects, or natures, in all. The first nature of an object of phenomenal reality is its *imagined* (*parikalpita*)

nature. A tree, for example, appears to be a mind-independent object existing outside of consciousness, but it is not. That is its imagined nature. Its second nature is its (*other-*) *dependent* (*paratāntra*) nature: the object exists only in dependence upon the cognizing intellect, which constructs it out of concepts, and projects it onto an “outside” world.

The tree’s ultimate aspect is its *consummate* (*pariṇiṣpanna*) nature. For Yogācāra, this ultimate reality is just as ineffable as in Madhyamaka, and for the same reason: the very use of language produces an object of conventional reality. Says Vasubandhu (TSN 25):⁹

The imagined is entirely conventional./ The other-dependent is attached to convention./ The consummate, cutting convention./ Is said to be of an entirely different nature.

What Yogācāra most significantly adds to this picture is an emphasis on non-duality (TSN 13):

Since it is the non-existence of duality./ And exists as non-duality/ The consummate nature/ Is said to have the characteristic of existence and non-existence.

There are no dualities in the consummate. This, in fact, entails that it cannot be described. To attribute any property to it would presuppose a duality between an object, *qua* bearer of properties, and the property borne. (How, then, one might ask, can it be characterized as both existing and not existing? We shall see in due course.)

One duality is particularly important for the Yogācārins: that between (cognizing) subject and object. Because conventional objects have no mind-independent reality, one cannot have an object without an act of consciousness directed toward it. But conversely, of course, an intentional mental state must be directed toward some such object. In conventional reality, then, there is always a duality of subject and object: the two go together. By contrast, there is no such distinction in the consummate. Ultimate reality, then, transcends even this duality.

Out of these considerations comes a revised notion of emptiness. In Madhyamaka, to be empty is to be empty of self-being. For Yogācāra, it is to be empty of all duality (as well), especially subject/object duality. Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is beyond all such things.¹⁰

Chinese Buddhism

Next, to China. When Buddhism entered China at around the turn of the Common Era, it encountered the indigenous philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism; and the former, in particular, was to exert a profound influence on its development. The foundational text of Daoism is the *Dao De Jing*, a text

of uncertain origin, probably written or compiled sometime around the fifth century BCE. Its gnomic utterances can be interpreted in various ways. But one particular sort of interpretation is relevant here.¹¹

Phenomenal reality is in a constant state of change. All things have both a positive and a negative aspect, *yang* 陽 and *yin* 陰; as one waxes, the other wanes, until matters are reversed. Beneath the flux, however, there is a meta-physical ground, the *Dao* 道 (Wade-Giles: 'Tao'). The myriad objects of phenomenal reality are its manifestations. Just as one cannot have manifestations without the thing of which they are manifestations, one cannot have the thing without its manifestations.

The Dao, however, is ineffable. As the famous opening lines of the *Dao De Jing* say:¹²

The Tao that can be talked about/ is not the true Tao./ The name that can be named/ is not the eternal Name./ Everything in the universe comes out of Nothing./ Nothing, the nameless, in the beginning./ While Heaven, the mother, is the creatrix of all things.

The Dao cannot be described because, to give any description, one would have to say that it is a *this*, rather than a *that*. The Dao is not a being: it is behind all beings. Indeed, there are passages in the *Dao De Jing* which suggest that it is the application of language which constructs the phenomenal world: "the Tao has no name; it is a cloud that has no shape. . . . Things have been given names from the beginning" (Chapter 32).

Because Dao cannot be described, it is common for it to be referred to as *wu* 無, nothing, nonbeing. This contrasts with *you* 有, the beings of phenomenal reality. Some care is needed here, however. *Yin* and *yang* are opposed pairs (day/night, male/female, cold/hot), and one of these pairs is *being* and *nonbeing*. These are categories that apply to the things of the phenomenal world. This sort of nonbeing is a *relative* nonbeing, on a par with being. The *Dao*, by contrast, is *absolute* nonbeing (nothing), behind both.

The similarities between the Buddhist ultimate and conventional realities, on the one hand, and the Dao and its manifestations, on the other, are obvious. Indeed, so much so that in China, at first, Buddhism was taken to be an exotic form of Daoism. Though it is not, the similarities were such as to ensure a substantial Daoist influence on the development of Chinese Buddhism (see Priest 2010a). In particular, a concept of ultimate reality as nothing emerged from the fusion of the Indian Buddhist concept of *sūnyatā* with the Daoist concept of *wu*.¹³

Nothing plays a very important role in what is perhaps the most distinctive of Chinese Buddhisms, Chan (called Zen in Japanese).¹⁴ The very name of this kind of Buddhism already says something very important about it. 'Chan' is a phonetic corruption of the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, meditation; and 'Zen' is a phonetic corruption of this. In Indian Buddhism, a major function of meditation was to provide a phenomenological experience of *tathāta*, ultimate reality. Various

Chan masters developed these meditative techniques, and augmented them with other notable techniques, such as shouting, eccentric behavior, striking, and other shock tactics. One of the most important devices in the context was the *kōan*, which is a puzzle given to students to solve. They struggle with it, only to discover that it has no coherent solution. The puzzle is generated by the fact that language is an inadequate vehicle for describing (ultimate) reality. Realizing this can trigger the veil of language to fall away.

The ineffable nature of ultimate reality is expressed by perhaps the greatest Zen theoretician, Dōgen (twelfth century, Japan). In one of his lectures to his monks, he says the following: (Note that ‘*Dharma-nature*’ is just one of the many names used for ultimate reality.)

when people who call themselves twenty- or thirty-year veterans witness discussion of the *Dharma-nature*, they stumble on through life in blank oblivion. They climb upon the [master’s] round wooden chair, claiming to have become satisfied with monastic life, but when they hear the sound ‘*Dharma-nature*’ or catch sight of ‘*Dharma-nature*,’ their mind-and-body, object-and-subject, usually just blob into a pit of confusion. Their state is such that they deludedly imagine that after the triple world and the ten directions¹⁵ which we are experiencing in the present have suddenly dropped away, then the *Dharma-nature* will appear, and this *Dharma-nature* will be other than the myriad things and phenomena of the present.¹⁶ The true meaning of the *Dharma-nature* can never be like that. This universe of things and phenomena, and the *Dharma-nature*, have far transcended discussions of sameness and difference, and have transcended talk of disjunction or union. Because they are beyond past, present and future, thought, action, and consciousness, they are *Dharma-nature*. (Nishijama and Cross 1994–1997, III: 126.)

The irony of this passage is that it comes from a lecture entitled *Hosshō*, *Dharma-nature*. Dōgen’s claim that nothing is ineffable is embedded in a whole lecture about what it is. Dōgen, just as much as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and the Daoists, is speaking of the ineffable.

Ineffability East and West

The Buddhist traditions we have been looking at, then, seem committed to speaking of the ineffable. Indeed, they do so in explaining why nothing is ineffable. This is, in fact, not an uncommon phenomenon in the history of philosophy, the West just as much as the East, for instance in the work of Heidegger, as we have already noted. The same thing happens for Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. According to him, the form (of a fact, of a proposition) is not an object, and one can speak only of objects. Hence form is ineffable—the rub is that all this is explained in the *Tractatus*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is at pains to explain why the categories cannot be applied to *noumena*. Any statement about something deploys the categories. So one cannot make

statements about *noumena*—the rub, again, is that all this is explained in the *Critique*.¹⁷ (And before one runs away with the idea that this happens only in way-out metaphysics, it should be noted that exactly the same sort of thing happens in a number of the logical paradoxes of self-reference. More of this anon.)

Of course, the Western philosophers in these apparently contradictory situations have often suggested ways to defuse them. However, they have met with no great success in this regard. This is not the place to survey the matter, but let us take just one example. In the famous penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously bites the bullet, and declares most of the *Tractatus* meaningless. This, however, saws off the very branch on which he was sitting. If what the *Tractatus* says is meaningless, we have been given no reason to suppose that form is ineffable—or even that there is such a thing.

Now, what do our Buddhist writers make of the predicament in which they find themselves? Perhaps surprisingly, they often don't mention it. (Why this might be, we will come to in a moment.) When they do, they tend to deploy the same sorts of evasive maneuvers as their Western colleagues—with the same degree of success.

Take, for example, the fifteenth century Tibetan Māhāyana philosopher Gorampa. He is as clear as his Māhāyana predecessors that the ultimate is ineffable. He says in his *Synopsis of Madhyamaka*:

The scriptures which negate proliferations of the four extremes [cf. of the *catuṣkoṭi*] refer to ultimate truth but not to the conventional, because the ultimate is devoid of conceptual proliferations, and the conventional is endowed with them. (Kassor 2013, v. 75)

But he also realizes that he is talking about it. Indeed, he does so in this very quote. Gorampa's response to the situation is to draw a distinction. Kassor describes matters thus:

In the *Synopsis*, Gorampa divides ultimate truth into two: the nominal ultimate (*don dam rnam grags pa*) and the ultimate truth (*don dam bden pa*). 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 or 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. (Kassor 2013, 406)

It does not take long to see that this hardly avoids contradiction. If all talk of the ultimate is about the nominal ultimate, then Gorampa's *own* talk of the ultimate is about the nominal ultimate. Since the nominal ultimate is clearly effable, Gorampa's own claim that the ultimate is devoid of conceptual proliferations is just false.

In fact, the situation played itself out again 300 years later in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. To try to avoid the apparently contradictory situation in which he finds himself with respect to talking of the ineffable, Kant drew a distinction between an illegitimate positive notion of a noumenon and a legitimate negative, or limiting, notion. This does not help, however: according to Kant, the negative notion is there to place a limit on the domain in which we can apply thought/language. But to say that there is a domain to which we cannot apply thought/language is clearly to say something about this domain, and so apply thought/language to it.¹⁸

Indeed, the Gorampa/Kant/Wittgenstein 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*, about which one *can* talk, is just to change the subject.

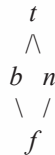
How, then, is one to proceed if one is to make sense of the situation?

Formalizing the *Catuṣkoṭi*

A strategy that recommends itself is simply to endorse the contradiction involved! After all, the Buddhist thinkers were working in the context of the *catuṣkoṭi*, the third *koṭi* of which is precisely that of a true contradiction. (Perhaps this is why many of the Buddhist thinkers we have met did not appear to be troubled by the contradiction.) But how is one to make sense of this, precisely?

It might be thought that the idea is entirely incoherent. It is not. The *catuṣkoṭi* can be given a rigorous formulation by applying the techniques of contemporary paraconsistent logic. Deploying these, one may see exactly how some things can be true of the ineffable. I now show how.

We will proceed in four stages. The first is a simple formalization of the *catuṣkoṭi*. First Degree Entailment (FDE)¹⁹ is a system of paraconsistent logic that can be set up in many ways, but one of these is as a four-valued logic whose values are exactly: *t* (true only), *f* (false only), *b* (both), and *n* (neither). The values are standardly depicted by the following diagram—called by logicians a ‘Hasse diagram’:



The four corners of truth and the Hasse diagram seem like a marriage made for each other in a Buddhist heaven! (as observed in Garfield and Priest 2009). The four corners (*koṭis*) of the diagram are exactly the four corners of truth.

Sentence are assigned *one* of these values. If a formula, *A*, has the value *t*, its negation, $\sim A$ (*it is not the case that A*) has the value *f*. If a formula has the value

f , its negation has the value t . The negation of a formula with value b is itself b ; and the value of a formula with value n is itself n . The value of a conjunction of two formulas, $A \wedge B$ (A and B), is the greatest lower bound of the values of A and B ; that is, the greatest value that is less than or equal to both of them. (So if A has the value t and B has the value b , the conjunction has the value b ; and if A has the value b and B has the value n , the conjunction has the value f .) The value of a disjunction of two formulas, $A \vee B$ (A or B), is the least upper bound of the values of A and B ; that is the least value that is greater than or equal to both of them.

A valid argument is one that preserves truth, in some sense. In many-valued logics of the kind we have here, the values to be preserved are called *designated values*. In the present logic, the designated values are t and b (true only, and both true and false). So an inference is valid just if whenever all of the premises take one of these values, so does the conclusion. (In particular, then, the inference from A and $\neg A$ to B is invalid, since A and $\neg A$ can take the value b , while B takes the false f .)

As formulated, FDE gives us an account of *truth*. But what we need is a theory that explains how certain states of affairs are ineffable. In other words, we need, not a theory of truth, but a theory of *reality*. This is obtained by reinterpreting the semantics in a natural way. This is the second stage of our procedure.

We now think of the bearers of semantic values, not as sentences, but as states of affairs. Connectives generate complex states of affairs. Thus, if A and B are states of affairs, then $A \wedge B$, $A \vee B$, and $\neg A$ are the corresponding conjunctive, disjunctive, and negative state of affairs. As for the values themselves: A state of affairs that receives the value t exists, and its negation does not. A state of affairs that takes the value f is such that its negation exists, and it does not. A state of affairs that receives the value b is such that both it and its negation exist. A state of affairs that receives the value n is such that neither it nor its negation exists.

Now that we have machinery to talk about states of affairs, we can represent the thought that some of these are ineffable. This is the third stage of the construction. We do this by adding a fifth value to the values of the *catuskoṭi*, e (emptiness).²⁰ This is the value of a state of affairs that is ineffable. It cannot be described. *A fortiori*, it neither exists, does not, both or neither. Clearly, a state of affairs is ineffable iff (if and only if) any complex state of affairs involving it is. (Thus, e.g., you can describe the state $\neg A$ iff you can describe the state A —by adding or removing a negation.) This means that the truth functions for the connectives should be extended to handle e , by requiring that a state of affairs take the value e iff one of its parts does. Nothing else in the machinery, including the designated values, changes.

We now need to accommodate the possibility that a state of affairs can be ineffable, *and* that one can say something about it—that is, that it can take the value e *and* one of the other value. This is done with the fourth, and most crucial, stage of the construction. We turn the logic into plurivalent logic.²¹ In the

usual semantics of a logical system, including the ones we have been dealing with so far, the bearers of semantic values (formulas or states of affairs) take *exactly* one semantic value. In a plurivalent logic they can have *more* than one. So technically, value-bearers are evaluated not by a function, but by a relation. Every bearer relates to at least one of our five values, but possibly to more than one.

$\neg A$ relates to some value, v , just if v can be obtained by negating (in the old sense) some value of A . $A \wedge B$ relates to some value, v , if this can be obtained by conjoining (in the old sense) some value of A and some value of B . Similarly for disjunction. A valid inference is now one such that whenever every premise has at least one designated value, so does the conclusion.²²

With this, our aim has been achieved. The crucial point, for present purposes, is that a state of affairs can have the value e (ineffability), but it can have one of the (other) values of the *catuṣkoṭi* as well.

The Paradox of Speaking of the Ineffable

Given these technical details, we can now return to speaking of nothing. A state of affairs that receives the value e is ineffable.²³ If a state of affairs receives one of the other values, it exists or it does not, and its negation exists or does not. *A fortiori*, it is effable, since we can say true and false things about it.²⁴ A state of affairs can therefore be both ineffable and not ineffable.

The fact that one can say true things about a state of affairs might well be thought to render its ineffability—the assignment of e to it—otiose: an idle wheel. That would be a mistake. The fact that one can say something about nothing does not undercut the fact that one cannot. We are, after all, in the context of the *catuṣkoṭi*, where the falsity of a statement does not necessarily rule out its truth. But what, then, grounds the assignment of the value e ?

We may answer this question by noting how paradoxes of ineffability arise in modern logic, in connection with some of the paradoxes of self-reference—notably, those that concern the notion of definability. Take König's paradox, for example. There is an absolute infinity of ordinals, but only a countable number that are definable: that is, such that there are names (non-indexical noun phrases) that refer to them. Hence, there must be a least one undefinable ordinal. Since it cannot be referred to, one cannot say anything about it. But the phrase "the least undefinable ordinal" refers to it, so one can say something about it, such as that it is undefinable.²⁵

So it is with nothing. Let us write 'n' for 'nothing'. The symbol 'n' is certainly a name for nothing. To see this, note that the natural principle governing the predicate 'denote' is the Denotation Schema:²⁶

$$\bullet \text{Den} ('t', x) \text{ iff } x = t$$

That is, ‘ t ’ denotes an object x iff $x = t$ (e.g., ‘John’ denotes x iff $x = \text{John}$). In particular:

$$\bullet \text{Den}(\mathbf{n}, \mathbf{n}) \text{ iff } \mathbf{n} = \mathbf{n}$$

Since it is a logical truth that $\mathbf{n} = \mathbf{n}$, it follows that $\text{Den}(\mathbf{n}, \mathbf{n})$. That is, ‘ \mathbf{n} ’ denotes *nothing*.

But nothing is not an object; it is behind all objects. So no object is \mathbf{n} . That is, for every object, x , $x \neq \mathbf{n}$. Hence, if ‘ t ’ is any name of an object, $t \neq \mathbf{n}$. By contraposing the Denotation Schema, it follows that $\neg \text{Den}(t, \mathbf{n})$. Thus, \mathbf{n} has no name—not even ‘ \mathbf{n} ’.

Therefore, ‘ \mathbf{n} ’ behaves exactly as does the name ‘the least indefinable ordinal’. It refers to something that cannot be referred to—nothing—and so this cannot be spoken of. But it does, so it can.

The Transcendence of Duality

It might be thought that this kind of maneuver, though it be at home in modern logical paradoxes, is alien to Buddhism. Let me therefore conclude my discussion by looking at one of the most important Māhāyāna texts, at least in the Chinese tradition, the *Vimīlakīrti Sūtra*. This text is much concerned with the transcendence of dualities, including that between the effable and the ineffable, and it shows exactly how one can, indeed must, talk about the ineffable.

At one point in the *sūtra*, a goddess appears in the room. When the somewhat hapless Śāriputra tries to brush of the flower petals she scatters around, a dialogue ensues. This turns to the question of how long Śāriputra has been enlightened. We then read:

“Venerable sir,” said the goddess, “how long has your attainment of emancipation been?”

Shariputra was silent and did not answer.

The goddess said, “With your great wisdom, venerable sir, why do you remain silent?”

Shariputra replied, “Emancipation cannot be spoken of in words. Therefore I do not know what I can say to you.” (Translation from Watson 1997, 87)

The emancipated state (grasping nothing) is ineffable, so one can say nothing of it. Śāriputra then receives a sharp rebuke:

The goddess said, “Words, writing, all are marks of emancipation. Why? Because emancipation is not internal, not external, and not in between. And words, likewise, are not internal, not external, and not in between. Therefore, Shariputra, you can speak of emancipation without putting words aside.

Why? Because all things that exist are marks of emancipation.” (Watson 1997, 87)

One can, then, speak of the ineffable. If all things have the nature of emptiness, then so do words. Words are not things over and above nothing. They are in nothing.

If one left matters at this, one might just think that the *sūtra* is simply rejecting ineffability. It is therefore important to take the preceding passage in conjunction with another concerning silence that occurs a little later in the *sūtra*. The topic at this point is the nature of transcending duality. Vimilakīrti asks a host of bodhisattvas what it is to transcend duality. Each bodhisattva notes a duality and says what it is to transcend it. The dualities are things such as: good and not good, perception and object perceived, self and other. For example, the bodhisattva Good Eye says:

The unique in form and the formless constitute a dualism. But if one understands that the unique in form is in fact the formless, and then does not seize on the formless but sees all as equal, one may in this way enter the gate of nondualism. (Watson 1997, 104)

At the end of the sequence, Mañjuśrī himself (the Bodhisattva of Wisdom) is asked for his answer. He says:

To my way of thinking, all *dharmas* are without words, without explanation, without purport, without cognition, removed from all questions and answers. In this way one may enter the gate of nondualism. (Watson 1997, 110)

Finally, Vimilakīrti, the real hero of the *sūtra*, is asked what he thinks:

Then Mañjuśrī said to Vimilakīrti, “Each of us has given an explanation. Now, sir, it is your turn to speak. How does the bodhisattva enter the gate of non-dualism?”

At that time Vimilakīrti remained silent and did not speak a word.

Manjushri sighed and said, “Excellent, excellent! Not a word, not a syllable—this truly is to enter the gate of non-dualism. (Watson 1997, 110)

Effable/ineffable is itself a duality. If all dualities are to be transcended, then so must this one be. The goddess has shown how to speak about nothing. Vimilakīrti shows how not to. What Mañjuśrī appreciates is that, in conjunction with what has already been said, Vimilakīrti’s silence—unlike his own words—manifests the transcendence of this duality.

Non-duality, then, *requires* that one talk about the ineffable; the techniques of paraconsistent logic show how to make precise sense of this idea.

Notes

- 1 In English, ‘nothing’ may be a noun phrase or a quantifier phrase. In this essay, I shall use it solely as a noun phrase, reserving ‘no thing’ for the quantifier phrase.
- 2 For a general introduction to Indian Buddhism, see Siderits (2007).
- 3 ‘*Satya*’ can also mean ‘truth’. Unfortunately, it is standardly translated this way, which is often most misleading.
- 4 Translations from the MMK are from Garfield (1995).
- 5 Thus, for example, in some of the *sūtras*, we find interlocutors of the Buddha employing it. For discussion, see Priest (2010b).
- 6 Note, in particular, that something’s being false is *not* the same as it not being true, since it can be both true and false.
- 7 Jaina thought, developing around the same time, took there to be not just four, but seven, possibilities on any given topic. See Priest (2008a).
- 8 In fact, the above claim is made about a Buddha, someone who has achieved liberation. But we are told just a few lines later that a Buddha and (ultimate) reality have the same nature. Indeed, it is a common view in Buddhism that the Buddha has three distinct embodiments, one of which is just reality itself, the *Dharmakāya* (reality body).
- 9 Translations are taken from Garfield (2002).
- 10 See Garfield and Priest (2002), esp. sections 5 and 7.
- 11 For an account of Daoism, see J. L. Liu (2006, ch. 6, 7).
- 12 Translations are many and varied. The following come from Kwok, Palmer, and Ramsay (1993).
- 13 Much of this is made by Watts (1957).
- 14 On Zen, see Kasulis (1981).
- 15 Sc.: the directions of time and space.
- 16 Recall that these are aspects of the one reality.
- 17 For more on these matters, see Priest (2005).
- 18 See Priest (2002, Sec. 5.5).
- 19 For full details of FDE, see Priest (2008b, Ch. 8).
- 20 For what follows, see Priest (2010b), where the logic is called FDE^e .
- 21 For the technical details of what follows, see Priest (2014).
- 22 It can be shown that these semantics determine exactly the same inferences to be valid as FDE^e .
- 23 Strictly speaking, here and in what follows, what is said is with respect to a particular assignment of semantic values.
- 24 Is to be ineffable to be such that one can say no *true* thing true about it, or no *true or false* thing about it? These, in fact, come to the same thing. If one can say no true or false thing, one can say no true thing. And if one can say no true thing, one can say no false thing either. For if one could say something false, one could say something true by negating it.
- 25 On König’s and related paradoxes, see Priest (2002), Secs. 9.3, 9.4.
- 26 See Priest (2005), Sec. 8.2.