**Graham Priest Interview**

**March 28th 2021**

**Rodrigo Cárcamo**: Since the last quarter of the 20th century, Western philosophy has been thinking that recognition of the difference, the otherness—not reducing the other to the same—is the key to individual and collective ethical behavior, for example, to avoid political colonialisms or reprehensible discrimination that produce human suffering, among other things. Individual and cultural differences would be a fact, and ethical thinking should assume this fact in order to think how we can achieve a peaceful coexistence. Buddhism, on the other hand, would start from another fact: there is no self with respect to which there can be an other, nor would there be an us with respect to which can be a them. Individual and cultural differences could be an illusion. So I would like to ask you: Do you think that for these or other reasons the two ethics could be irremediably incompatible—or perhaps incommensurable—despite pursuing, maybe, a similar goal?

5:48 **Graham Priest**: Well, Buddhism has the view that there’s no self. You’re absolutely right about that. But I think this view is often misunderstood because the word “self” is ambiguous. Sometimes it can just mean a person. So, suppose I say “I saw myself in the mirror” or “She saw herself in the mirror” or “This person always thinks of themself”. In that context the self just means the person. But when Buddhists deny the existence of a self they’re not denying the existence of people. There’s a perfectly good sense in which Buddhism believes in the existence of people. Rather, the self, in the sense in which the Buddhists deny it, is a part of the person which is constant, exists all the time the person exists, and defines the person as that very person. So, in Western philosophy the closest analogue would be the soul. The standard analogy is that of a chariot, but think of a car. What is a car? Well, a car is a bunch of parts. They come into existence at a certain time. They interact with each other. They interact with the environment. Some wear out and get replaced, and in the end the parts all fall apart. There isn’t a part of the car which must remain constant for the car to remain the same car. Anything can be changed—even the number plates. And the Buddhist conception of a person is like that. Of course the parts are different. They’re psychobiological, but nonetheless a person is just this dynamically evolving bunch of parts, and there’s no part that must remain constant. So, when Buddhists deny the self, they’re denying that there is such a part. But they don’t deny that there are people. And, of course, ethics is about how you treat other people. So, the Buddhist conception of no self doesn’t endanger ethics at all, in the standard sense. And as you probably know, Buddhist ethics has many aspects, but one thing it’s centrally concerned with is compassion towards other people. In that sense, your relationship to other people is absolutely integral to Buddhist ethics.

**RC**: In this sense, the Western image of the Buddhist is that of a person isolated from society and even indifferent to it, the image of the lonely Buddhist monk, is false and harmful…

9:13 **GP**: Well, it’s certainly not accurate. The aim of Buddhist religion is the achievement of enlightenment or awakening. And that’s something that you pursue, something for yourself. However, Buddhist ethics has always been an ethics which involves compassion. So the achievement of enlightenment in the end is not just for yourself. It’s for everybody. In fact, Buddhism goes through a very important development around the turn of the Common Era. Buddhist thought starts in the 5th or the 6th century BCE, and develops for five or six hundred years; but around the turn of the Common Era a new kind of Buddhism emerges. It’s called Mahāyāna, The Great Vehicle. And it’s called ‘The Great Vehicle’ precisely because great stress is placed upon compassion. The Mahāyāna Buddhist takes a vow to the effect that they’re not going to enter ultimate awakening, ultimate nirvana (though they could), until everybody does. So compassion is absolutely essential to Mahāyāna Buddhism. The importance of compassion was certainly a part of earlier Buddhism as well, but it becomes absolutely central after the rise of Mahāyāna.

**RC**: Maybe the difference is that inner peace or peace of mind in Western ethics is not an end in itself as proposed by Buddhism, since basically all activity would require it, be it ethical or not.

11:50 **GP**: I’m not sure that there is such a thing as Western ethics. There are many different systems of ethics. Plato’s is different from Augustine’s, and that’s different from Kant’s and from Mill’s, and so on. But there is also the Hellenistic tradition: Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism. In all the Hellenistic ethics you find some sort of emphasis on *ataraxia* or *tranquilitas*. These things are not a million miles away from the peace of mind (Sanskrit: *upekṣā*) which is an important part of Buddhist ethics. So there are at least resonances between some kinds, some systems, of Western ethics and Buddhist ethics.

**RC**: It is not difficult to find topics in which there are affinities between Heidegger's philosophy and Buddhism: the ineffability of Being, the importance of nothingness, etc. You talk about those affinities in some of your books. However, despite all the affinities, there is something that deeply separates Heidegger from the Buddhism with which you sympathize: science. In order to find out your opinion on this, it occurs to me to ask you the following: Why do you think Heidegger was able to say in 1951 that “science does not think” and, instead, the Dalai Lama said that “If scientific analysis were conclusive to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims”?

13:25 **GP**: Most contemporary Buddhists—well, actually that may be an exaggeration, but certainly a number of important contemporary Buddhists—stress the importance of science. The current Dalai Lama is one of them. So, in that sense it's a rather different religion from Christianity, which has always been at odds with science, in its way. And one reason for that is that in Christianity there’s a God, and so there’s divine revelation. If something comes into tension with the things that are held to be true because of divine revelation, that’s going to be problematic. And, of course, in the history of Christianity that’s happened several times. Now, because there’s no God in Buddhism, you don’t have this ground for a potential conflict. So, you can get important Buddhists like the Dalai Lama who think that science is really important. Buddhism is an exploration of how the world is, and science tells you important things about the world. Science and Buddhism can go together. So, that part of the story is relatively straightforward.

The matter concerning Heidegger is different. If you’re talking about Heidegger’s view on science, you think first of his views about technology. Certainly in his later essays on the topic, he’s strongly against technology—or, at least, a certain kind of technological thinking. And this is where the complexity starts. I don’t think Heidegger is against science as such. He’s certainly against technology when it deforms our understanding of the world in which we live. To understand why, you have to go back to his fundamental project, the project that he has right from the beginning. This is answering the *Seinsfrage*, the question of being. At the beginning of *Sein und Zeit* he poses the question: What is being? It’s a much tougher and more important question than one might think. Moreover, the way he thought he might answer this question in *Sein und Zeit* did not materialize: the last part of *Sein und Zeit*, which was supposed to answer it,was never written. The book is incomplete. Later on, after the period of his thought called *die Kehre* (the Turning), he seems to be approaching the question a somewhat different way from that which he envisaged in *Sein und Zeit*. The sort of approach you get in the later Heidegger to the question of being is that you have to let being manifest itself in a certain way. Being is, in an important sense, hidden from us. And to see what it is you have to let beings show it. In some sense it’s a bit like Wittgenstein and the *Tractatus*. There are some things that can’t be said but they can be shown. Moreover, you’ve got to have your eyes opened to how beings show being. And this is what (good) poetry does; this is what art can do; this is what a certain kind of cogitation—what Heidegger calls thinking—can do. Now let’s come back to technology. Heidegger’s big beef about this, at least as I understand it, is that if you have this technological view of the world, it closes off to you the possibility that the beings we have, the technological devices we have, will show us being. We take a piece of machinery such as a car, and we treat it merely as a means of getting from *A* to *B*. We never look at the car and see what it can show us about what it is, what beings like us do with it, what it does to its surroundings, and so on. So, if we just treat it simply as a piece of dead machinery as it were, we’ll never open our eyes to see what it can show us about the world and ourselves. But, you don’t *have* to see it like that: a car can open your eyes to many things, including the bad things our use of it does, like pollute the world. So, in summary, I don’t think he’s opposed to technology as such. He’s opposed to this kind of technologization.

Turning to science itself, I really don’t think that he’s against the thought that science tells us something important about the world either. In the first instance, our understanding of the world is a phenomenological one. Go back to *Sein und Zeit*. In the first instance our grasp of the world is through things which are *Zuhandenheit*, things which are ready to hand. And if you don’t get that, you’re going to miss something really important. But, when you can stand back and look at things, then things become *Vorhandenheit*. I don’t think that Heidegger thinks that when something is *Vorhandenheit* it can´t tell us something about the world. When the hammer breaks, for example, you have to look at it and think about how you repair the damn thing. You’re treating it as a *Vorhandenheit* object. And it does tell you something about the world—the hammer, its construction and potential for repair. So Heidegger isn’t against seeing things as *Vorhandenheit;* he just thinks that if you look at things only that way, you’re missing something that’s really important, namely, that our first grasp of the world is *Zuhandenheit*. To use a distinction often used in “analytic philosophy”, it’s knowledge by acquaintance that’s primary, not knowledge by description. So, even in *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger isn’t’ against science as such. You’ve just got to treat it right.

**RC**: Perhaps this is so because it is about overcoming the modern subject-object dichotomy, and it seems to me that this is the link between Heidegger's thought and Buddhism. To think the subject and the object as a unit to overcome the dichotomy.

21:27 **GP**: Yes, I think that’s a really interesting point. And, of course, you do get something very similar in Buddhism because—especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism—there’s a great emphasis on overcoming this subject-object dichotomy. The kind of intuitive picture we all have is that there’s us and there’s the world. And if you see things in that way, all kinds of problems immediately open up. How do you cross the gap? How do you grasp the world? Overcoming this subject-object dichotomy is integral to Heidegger’s philosophy, as you’ve pointed out. But it is, also, in Buddhist epistemology. In that way they are similar.

**RC**: This is a personal appreciation, but when I play the drums, the musical instrument, sometimes I can feel that the dichotomy is overcome. It is as if the songs can make the decisions, not me, and my drumsticks seem to disappear when I am very interpenetrated with the music and the rest of the musicians. When I read about Buddhism, this experience always comes back to me ...

23:40 **GP**: And quite rightly so. But one needs to be a bit careful here. Just now I said that there’s no such thing as Western ethics; there are many Western ethics. And I think one’s got to be careful in the same way about Buddhism, because there are many different systems of Buddhism—in China, in India, and elsewhere—though of course there are connections. The different Buddhisms are connected historically, but they may emphasize different things. The sort of experience you are describing, that overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object , actor and action, myself and the world, is emphasized very much in Chinese Buddhism and especially *Chan* Buddhism—or what the Japanese call *Zen*. The Japanese call this experience *mushin* (無心) no mind, where the subject-object dichotomy phenomenologically disappears.

And Heidegger sometimes talks about it in a very similar way. There’s an essay—in fact it was his inaugural lecture at Freiburg in 1929—called *Was ist Metaphysik?* where he talks about nothingness. One thing he talks about in this is angst, though this doesn’t really mean what you might think. Like so many things in Heidegger, he bends the notion to his own ends. In particular, he says that when we experience angst, we experience nothingness—which he says is the same as being. One thing he emphasizes about this experience is that the subject-object dichotomy disappears. So, certainly, in that essay he’s very close to the Japanese Buddhist experience of *mushin*.

At least that’s the way I read it. How you interpret Heidegger is always bound to be contentious. No two Heidegger scholars will interpret Heidegger the same way! I’m giving you my interpretation, and I’m well aware that Heidegger scholars may disagree. I interpret this text through Zen spectacles; but I think the focus they provide is pretty accurate.

**RC**: In your book *One*, you say: “When ideas morph from one culture to another, they change—dropping things which were brought to it by the old culture, and adding things present in the new one. The movement of Buddhism from India to China provides a striking case-study in the matter. Buddhism is now moving into “Western” cultures, and I have no doubt that it will morph again in the process”[[1]](#footnote-1). I have no doubt that the West has already benefited from Eastern thought, but do you think West can also bring positive changes to Buddhism in this process? What kind would they be, political, philosophical…?

26:40 **GP**: You’re right. Buddhism has moved from southern Asia into eastern Asia, to southeast Asia. And wherever it goes it certainly takes on new aspects and drops old aspects. It’s now moving to the West and the same will happen. It’s early days here, so, it’s hard to predict, but let me make a couple of predictions anyway.

I think some of these are already happening. One of them is fairly obvious because, whatever the official philosophical story is, Buddhism as a religion, has been as patriarchal as nearly all the other major world religions. So, yes, orthodox Indian Buddhism says that women can’t achieve enlightenment. They’ve got to be good girls, come back in another life, and when they’re men then they stand a chance. In Buddhist orders, even when you get a nun’s order, there has to be a man in charge. There’s never been a female Dalai Lama. Most heads of temples in Japan are men. So, Buddhism has been patriarchal. Now, in the West, the people that Buddhism as a religion appeals to are largely educated middle class, or relatively affluent people. And there it is that the women’s movement has had the most success and people have taken the lessons of the feminist movement to heart. The patriarchy of Buddhism will not wash with such Buddhists, generally speaking, any more that it will wash with Moslems of Christians of the same kind. So, I think we’re going to see a kind of Buddhism in the West which rejects this patriarchy of traditional Buddhism entirely.

That’s one thing that is already happening, I think. Another thing is more speculative. The belief in rebirth is a very important part of traditional Buddhism. You don’t really find it argued for in the canonical Indian texts. It’s just something that Buddhist thought takes over from orthodox Indian thought around the fifth or the sixth century BCE. So, famously Buddhism rejected some of the aspects of its ambient culture. It rejects the existence of the self, the “ātman”; it rejects the existence of god, “Brahman”. But it doesn’t reject everything—it can’t; no new social, religious, or philosophical movement can begin from nothing—and it takes over this view of rebirth. Now, as I say, you very rarely find arguments for this in canonical texts, but it’s there as a belief, and it plays a pretty central part. I don’t know that it ever disappears in Asian Buddhism; although in Chinese Buddhism, it starts to play a lesser role, especially in Zen. There, the whole emphasis is on the present, and the future is of lesser importance. At any rate, with some qualifications, rebirth has played a central role in Buddhist religion. Now, rebirth is something that most Westerners find very hard to take. I have just said that the sort of people that Buddhism as a religion appeals to in the West tend to be educated, middle class; they believe in science, and there appears to be very little scientific evidence of rebirth. So, I think, when Buddhism moves into the West, the emphasis on rebirth—maybe the entire belief in rebirth—is going to disappear. Buddhism as a philosophy does not need of rebirth. I don’t think Buddhism as a religion needs rebirth either. That’s more contentious, and traditional Buddhists are liable to deny this. But I think that it’s perfectly coherent to be a Buddhist without the doctrine of rebirth, and I suspect that we will see a kind of Buddhism which doesn’t endorse rebirth becoming a very standard Western Buddhism.

**RC**: Sometimes in philosophical debates about whether there are contradictions in reality, the contenders seems to be inhabiting different paradigms or worldviews. In such discussions, it seems that nothing can change the mind of someone who thinks that there are no contradictions in the world, no type of argument or example. Sometimes, the same happens with those who do not admit the claim that there are true contradictions. Let me ask: Do you think that for someone to change their mind in these topics, it takes more than the rigorous examination of a technical argument; that, it takes, for example, a change of attitude, or a kind of conversion, and not so much an exclusively intellectual work? I'm thinking of a conversion like Kuhn's Gestalt switch in science.

32:40 **GP**: I don’t know if logic is special, I think there’s a general story to be told with new ideas. You mention sciences, but the same is true of philosophy, logic, and maybe a number of other areas. In most of those areas there is some kind of orthodoxy. And especially older people are attached to it. As you become older it becomes harder to admit that you’ve been wrong about things for so many decades. So, most people have an emotional resistance to change. And when it comes to changing ideas, I think it's particularly hard for older people to change them. So it is indeed very hard for a rational argument, on its own, to get people to change their ideas when they get older. As you may know, Max Planck is reputed to have said that quantum mechanics will succeed, not because it persuades the pre-quantum-mechanics scientists, but because they will die first! So there’s an element of truth in what you say.

On the other hand, I wouldn’t say that arguments can’t play, and don’t play, an important role in change. Because when all is said and done, when scientists did became persuaded of the truth of quantum mechanics, it was because of the evidence, and the theory’s explanatory power. I think exactly the same is true in philosophy. Philosophers do change their views—just think how many times philosophers have changed their views in the last hundred years. And fashion plays a role, undoubtedly; but as in science, new ideas arise which are more powerful, have more applications, and so on. These things play an important role too—again, particularly with younger philosophers. I’ve been around for quite a long time now, and I’ve seen views which one generation of philosophers found implausible becoming much more popular amongst younger philosophers. They don’t have the kind of emotional investment in the older views, and are prepared to consider things much more on the strength of argument and evidence. In logic it is the same. In the last fifty years, the most important developments in philosophical logic have been in so called non-classical logic. Classical logic was the theory developed by Frege and Russell, and then polished by Hilbert, Gödel, Tarski, and others. These are the great logicians of first half of the twentieth century. But I think most of the more recent interesting philosophical developments have been in non-classical logic. Generally speaking, such logics weren’t well received by classical logicians in the 1950’s and 1960’s, but that’s changed completely. Most philosophical logicians now will make heavy use of the techniques of non-classical logic. To come back to paraconsistent logic, which is what your question was about: paraconsistent logic is one kind non-classical; and it had a particularly rough ride, just because it problematises the principle of non-contradiction, which has been so deeply entrenched in the history of Western philosophy. But the attitudes of younger philosophers and logicians, at least as I read matters, is that they don’t reject ideas of this kind out of hand. They’re open minded in a way that logicians from thirty or forty years ago were not, for reasons that we’ve been talking about. So a change of the kind you are talking about may not require a Gestalt shift; or it may, but of course argument can bring about a Gestalt shift! At any rate, I don’t think we’re going to have to wait for all old logicians to die off (laughs).

**RC**: But have you seen colleagues who used to reject paraconsistency and now accept it?

38:32 **GP**: Yes, I think a lot of older logicians, especially the good ones may not be paraconsistent logicians or dialetheists—at least not yet!—but they recognize that these provide moves that are out there in logical space, so to speak, and must be taken account of. The reaction to paraconsistent logic 40, 50 years ago, was “this outrageous, and not to be take seriously”, but a number of very good logicians, classical logicians or orthodox logicians, have come to see that there are things to be said in favour of these views. They might not think they’re right, but logicians such as Stewart Shapiro, Hartry Field don’t reject them as crazy in the way that logicians used to. And once this is the case, others are going to start to think more about them and their possible applications. So I do think the situation has changed. It’s changed more in research-intensive philosophy departments than in smaller teaching-oriented departments, where they are using text books which were written some decades ago, and are now rather dated. Whenever new ideas happen, it takes one or two generation for people to catch up with what is happening at the research frontiers. Of course, this happens not only in logic, but in science, philosophy—maybe most areas.

**RC**: And can it be that the contradiction that we see in Buddhism are seen differently with the use of logical formalization or vice versa?

41:17 **GP**: Certainly in a number of Asian philosophical texts, including Buddhist texts ,you find people playing with contradictory ideas and not rejecting them. In early Buddhist philosophy, for example, there’s a logical trope called the “*catuṣkoṭi*”, which says that statements can be true, false, both, or neither. And the *catuṣkoṭi* plays an important role in the development of Buddhist philosophy, at least until the fifth or sixth century of the Common Era. Now, I think Western Buddhists scholars in particular, when looking at this, have had to try to find some way of interpreting what’s going on which rejects this possibility of accepting contradictions in some way. In other words, they looked at the Buddhist texts—and more generally Asian texts—through the eyes of Western philosophy, and in particular through the Aristotelian paradigm which endorses the Principle of Non-Contradiction. What some contemporary Buddhists scholars in the West have now seen is that you don’t have to look at things this way. You can look at them through the eyes of non-classical logic, in particular paraconsistent logic. This opens up to you a new kind of hermeneutical space to understand what’s going on in the texts. So, arguably, you can see these texts more in the way they were intended, and not in the way that they appear through more traditional Western eyes.

**RC**: Could we say something similar about the problem of the ineffable in Buddhism? Because I understand that your interpretation of the tetralemma or *catuṣkoṭi* requires adding the possibility of a fifth element which is ineffability.

45: 00 **GP**: Buddhist philosophers in Asian traditions disagree with each other on many things, of course. And certainly different schools of Buddhist philosophy will disagree about whether one should accept the principle of non-contradiction. For some of them it’s crucial; for some of them it’s not. Now, talking about things that are ineffable is, obviously, seriously inconsistent. Some Buddhist philosophers have tried to get out of this inconsistency, some others have not. I certainly wouldn't want to suggest that all Buddhist philosophers accept contradictions; some certainly don’t. There are debates amongst orthodox Buddhist philosophers about how one should respond to the situation. But I think that some of them may slowly be coming to see that developments in Western logic may help them to approach these issues. It’s clear that Western philosophers have a great deal to learn from the Asian tradition; but of course the Asian traditions have a lot to learn from Western tradition as well. So I think that we’re in a very exciting period of philosophy. Traditions, East and West, knew relatively little about each other, and they’re coming to learn about each other and see important things they can learn from each other. I think it’s a really exciting period.

**RC**: And you contribute to that with the logical formalization of the *catuṣkoṭi* and other Buddhist topics with the tools of paraconsistent logic…

47:01 **GP**: I love philosophy, and when I read philosophy I try to discover what is of value in it. And it doesn’t matter whether I’m reading Plato or Dōgen or Heidegger. All great philosophers have something of value in them. And if I can use what I know about to interact with things that I’m learning from other traditions, that’s great.

**RC**: In philosophy, the mental exercise of thinking about what was there before the arrival of the human being in the world is frequently used to think objectively about reality, because sometimes we define "reality" as that which independent of the human mind. Thus, it can be thought that if the human being brought negation into the world, the contradictions can only have a type of reality limited to the human mind or human language, because negations are a constituent part of contradictions. So, do you think that this recurring mental exercise is harmful to understanding the idea that there exist real contradictions in the world? What basic precautions should we have when we use it?

**GP**: So, the question is specifically about dialetheism?

**RC**: Yes, the problem of conceiving that there would be no contradictions in the world if there were no negation in the world.

49:54 **GP**: So the thought is that negation itself can’t be a part of the world. So if you think of the world as it was before there were people, before language, there were no contradictions in the world, so that’s a problem? Well, let’s start here: there was a world before there were any sentient creatures. I don’t know any modern philosopher who would deny that. Even the ones who have idealistic tendencies don’t go as far as to say “science is completely wrong about this”. That seems right. So before there were people, there was no consciousness in the world; does this mean the world was consistent?

Consistency and inconsistency have to do with truth. What makes a claim true? Generally speaking, if we call something true, it is so in virtue of two things: the first is the meanings of the words in which the claim is stated, or the concepts that are employed if you like; and the other is what’s out there in the world. So take a statement that says “Melbourne is in Australia”. That’s true. What makes it so? Well, first of all, the meanings of the words “Melbourne”, “Australia”; if those words meant something other than they do mean, the claim might not be true. But that’s not enough, because the truth also needs the cooperation of the world. It needs the appropriate configuration of geographical masses in the southern hemisphere. So, for a true statement, truth will generally be a product of two things: meaning and the world. Maybe sometimes there’s a kind of degenerate case where the meanings themselves are sufficient—traditional analytic truths. But generally you need both things. Now, suppose we make claims about the world as it was before sentience evolved. Their truth (or otherwise) will depend on the meanings of the language we use but also the world as it was. Given the concepts we use, could the world before people have been such as to make those statements true? Yes, certainly. We clearly make true statements about how the world was before there was people. Could some of those things be contradictory? I don’t see why not. We use negation in making these statements. But then negation is just one of the concepts we use, and I don’t see why negation should be treated any differently from those other concepts.

**RC**: But then negations are always something linguistic to you?

54: 28 **GP**: Negation is a concept that we use in describing the world. But we use lots of other broadly logical concepts, like conditionals, predication. And these are part of all natural language. We use language to describe the world, and when we make statements which use these concepts, well, if those statements are true it’s because the world is such as to make them true. Negation is a concept no different from other concepts in this way.

**RC**: But is it not also necessary to think that there are negative properties in the world to affirm that there are real contradictions in the world, I mean, contradictions that don't depend on what we say or think about the world? In other words, that before the arrival of people to the world there were already these negative properties?

56: 52 **GP**: Good question. Let’s take a particular example. Let’s talk about motion, because there was certainly motion in the world before there was sentience. Now, what is it to move? —an old and tough philosophical question. Hegel had a theory of motion, which is not the current orthodoxy, but let’s play with it for a minute. If you ask a contemporary philosopher what they think motion is—and setting aside the problems caused by special relativity—the standard answer would be of Russellian kind. To be in motion, the thing in question has to be *here* in one time and *there,* at a different place, at another time. That’s essentially the answer that Russell gave, and something like this is the common orthodoxy. Now, this was not Hegel’s view, because, he said, if the thing is *here* at one time, and *there* another, that’s not sufficient for moving. It could be stationary *here*, and stationary *there.* It has to go from *here* to *there*, right? That’s what it is to be in motions. And for motion to occur, the thing has to be both *here* and *not* *here—*at the same place at the same time. That is, the thing is *here*, but because it’s in motion, it’s already going a little bit further, and maybe it’s not even quite there yet. So motion realizes a contradiction.[[2]](#footnote-2) Now, whether or not Hegel’s account of motion correct is obviously highly contentious. But let us suppose he’s right—just for the sake of argument. If so, then motion realizes contradictory states. Well, there was certainly motion before there was sentience. Take something in motion before there was sentience, then it realizes contradictory states. It was at a location and not at that location.

Does that mean there were negative properties? Well, that depends on whether you think that truth must be analyzed in terms of objects and properties. That takes us a step further. But certainly the world was such that it realized this contradictory state. All that is hostage to the Hegel’s theory of motion, of course, but it makes the point. There is, in principle, no reason why the pre-sentient world should not be such as to realize situations that we describe (correctly) as contradictory.

**RC**: And for these problems could we think of some Buddhist notion of nothingness? I know that maybe I’m mixing things up because now I'm thinking in metaphysical terms, but in some books[[3]](#footnote-3) you have shown us that, for Buddhism, things do not have an intrinsic nature, each thing interpenetrates with others. If this is the case, then nothingness is the background of all kinds of objects. Besides, being an object depends on its being distinct from nothing. So, nothingness must have existed before the arrival of sentient creatures. If nothingness is a contradiction we would have contradictions before the existence of sentient creatures. But nothingness is, precisely, a contradiction, because it is an object and it’s not an object—although I do not know if this is so *only* because it is ineffable and not ineffable, and this takes us back to persons with language and negations.

1:01:29 **GP**: That’s interesting. Well, there are a number of philosophers who thought that there ias an essential connection between nothingness and negation. In *Was ist Metaphysik?* Heidegger discusses which comes first: nothingness or negation—as does Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. And both of them say that nothingness came first. I’m not sure I see things in that way. As explained, I’m inclined to think of negation as a kind of linguistic construction which we employ in making sentences which could be true or false. Nothingness, on the other hand, I see as the absence of all objects. It’s what you’d get if you removed all objects. And if there’s something which is nothingness, so to speak, then that doesn’t have much to do with negation. So I don’t see the connection that Heidegger and Sartre saw. However, I certainly think that nothingness is important, maybe not for the same reason as Buddhist philosophers do, but actually for reasons very similar to what Heidegger says. In *Was ist Metaphysik*? He says that beings are what they are because they “stand out against nothingness”; I think that’s right. So, in some sense, nothingness is prior to beings. I don’t mean that in a temporal sense, but in the sense of metaphysical grounding. As long as there have been objects, there has to have been nothingness, so to speak.

In Buddhist philosophy, interdependence and nothingness play an important role in understanding the world of things—especially in some of the Chinese forms of Buddhism. I’m still thinking about what to make of possible connections here. It’s a fascinating issue.

1. Priest, G. (2014). *One*. Oxford University Press, page 210, n. 2]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For details see Priest. G. “Inconsistencies in Motion” in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct.,1985), pp. 339-346; and Priest, G*. In Contradiction. A Study of the Transconsistent*. Oxford University Press (2006), section 12.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Priest, G. (2014). *One*. Oxford University Press, section 11.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)