

# *From Metaphysics to Mysticism*

## *Exploring the Case for a Neutral Metaphysical Position*

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*(Revised version of a dissertation submitted to the International Society for Philosophers, 2009)*

### *Preface*

Despite its claim that a true description of the universe would require a language of paradox and contradiction, mysticism claims of its metaphysical scheme that it is Euclidean, that from its first axiom or principle the remainder of the system would follow according to a specifiable logic. Its metaphysical scheme must have this epistemological property as it describes a universe for which this would be an ontological property. Perhaps the most basic metaphysical claim made by the mystics over the ages is that the universe is a unity, that all plurality is some kind of dream or illusion. There would be no true contradictions, for a true contradiction would be as impossible in reality as it is absurd in logic. The universe would be reasonable.

This essay is an attempt to show how this claim that the universe is reasonable might be reconciled with the notoriously self-contradictory unreasonableness of the language used by the ‘mystics’ to describe it. Their metaphysical doctrine may seem paradoxical, and it is usually dismissed from metaphysics for being so, but Lao-tsu tells us that true words seem paradoxical, not that they actually are.

## Part I

### 1. Introduction

Reason in metaphysics, even if it tries, as it professes, only to gain *a priori* insight into those laws which are confirmed by our most common experience, is constantly being brought to a standstill, and we are obliged again and again to retrace our steps, as they do not lead us where we want to go. As to unanimity among its participants, there is so little of it in metaphysics that it has rather become an arena that would become especially suited for those who wish to exercise themselves in mock fights, and where no combatant has as yet succeeded in gaining even an inch of ground that he could call his permanent possession.

Immanuel Kant  
Critique of Pure Reason

These words seem as apt and insightful today as ever. The problem infects all disciplines that ask metaphysical questions. Scientific consciousness studies would be an easy example. Those who argue for mind-only or matter-only theories, or for mind-matter-only theories, already know that metaphysics does not support their case any better than it does those of their opponents and can only waive their hands at them ineffectually. It might be the first rule of metaphysics that it does not produce a positive result. However much we twist and turn our arguments trying to make it endorse an extreme metaphysical position we cannot find a way to do it. Kant does not describe an historical situation, nor is this a record of his own confusion. He describes what we all discover when we do metaphysics. We discover that all selective conclusions about the world as a whole are logically indefensible, do not survive in the dialectic, cannot be true unless the world is paradoxical. Let us pause from hand-waving, then, and see whether there may be a way forward for metaphysics, a way to escape from Kant's arena. Let us examine the reason why we have to continually retrace our steps in metaphysics, why we can never gain an inch of ground.

In our loosely 'western' tradition of philosophical investigation we have been searching for a metaphysical position that would be consistent with our reason and account for the facts for more than two millennia and have not found one. Yet if the universe is 'reasonable' or 'rational' such that we would judge its explanation reasonable if we knew what it was and understood it, as we must assume it is for metaphysics, then there must be at least one metaphysical position that would meet this specification, one theory or description of the universe that would seem reasonable to us if we stumbled across it. So where is this theory? Why is it so difficult to discover?

In the physical sciences we can turn a blind eye to this problem for much of the time and say, with some justification, that metaphysics has nothing to do with us. Metaphysics is not optional for fundamental theories, however, and if we bury our head in the sand in this way we can build only sandcastles. In physics we can have no plausible fundamental theory for anything at all until we have solved one or more of the mysterious paradoxes and riddles that arise for any investigation of first principles. Nor have we found a solution in any popular brand of monotheism. Whitehead characterised the Christianity of the West as a religion 'in search of a metaphysic,' but in truth it seems content to be without one. On this basis many are tempted to dismiss the Church's teachings as false. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we cannot dismiss a religious doctrine on the grounds that it is philosophically flawed unless we can show that there is even such a thing as a logically defensible metaphysical position. If we cannot do this then we are back in the arena handwaiving.

The difficulty of showing that there is such a position has led many metaphysicians to the view that the task is hopeless. They conclude that metaphysics is incapable of producing a positive answer for any of its central questions, and that all we learn from it is that questions about the nature and properties of the universe as a whole are undecidable. All important problems of philosophy are attempts to decide one or other of these questions and thus to many people the whole of philosophy looks hopeless. It has been proposed by Chalmers<sup>1</sup> that we have no other option than to settle for a

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<sup>1</sup> Chalmers, David. J., *The Conscious Mind*, (OUP 1996), and 'Facing up to the problem of consciousness,' *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2: 200-219, (1995).

nonreductive Mind-Matter theory to account for human consciousness, specifically his *naturalistic dualism*, since the more deeply we explore the question of whether Mind or Matter is fundamental the more clear it becomes that neither idea is logically defensible, and there seems to him no other idea available. The problem would be assumed to be intractable, and a truce would at least be a rest from all the fighting. In contemporary physics there is even talk of *ex nihilo* creation, so impotent can rationalism seem in the face of the riddles of existence.

This gloomy view is not forced on us, however, for a different approach is possible. We can, if we wish, take this perennial failure of analysis to endorse any extreme metaphysical position as an important result of the science of logic. Rather than interpreting this 'failure' of metaphysics to as we usually would for physics and philosophy, as evidence of a barrier to knowledge or the intellectual inadequacy of human beings, or perhaps as a justification for 'mysterianism', 'dialethism' and other unscientific theories, we could interpret it as a vital clue for our investigation into the origin and nature of the universe, an empirical fact from which it might be possible to extrapolate to a fundamental theory. If metaphysics cannot produce a positive result then this may be merely the evidence that all positive metaphysical positions are wrong, do not describe reality accurately.

This might seem a straightforward approach to doing metaphysics, almost a naïve one, and a person new to the topic might wonder why metaphysicians do not usually adopt it. The reason would be that it is not as straightforward as it seems. Once we take this approach we are forced to adopt a neutral metaphysical position. We will have eliminated all others from our investigation for being absurd. We must now adopt the only position that would boldly predict the inability of metaphysics to produce a positive result. This is not obviously a viable position to take up. It might seem paradoxical, absurd, irrational even, not so much a metaphysical position as the absence of one. For most people it would represent a paradigm shift. The correct answer to the question 'Is Mind or Matter fundamental?' would now be 'no'. To take this approach, by which we would simply abandon all philosophical positions known to be logically absurd, is to simplify philosophy in certain ways but it would not be to make the issues any less sophisticated.

It might appear that by taking this approach we would be abandoning metaphysics almost before it has begun. Yet a significant minority of widely respected philosophers have made arguments for it. Parmenides, Zeno, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Bradley, Jung, Peirce, Erwin Schrödinger and G. S. Brown would be some prominent examples, and it seems to me that Kant only narrowly avoids making a strong case in the *Critique*.

## **2. An Argument from Metaphysics**

For those who believe that its questions ought to be decidable metaphysics is a famously frustrating business. By the same token, it is a source of reassurance for those who believe otherwise. Into this latter category would fall the mystics of all ages and cultures. It is because they believe otherwise that a formal argument for their view can be made from within metaphysics. It is old argument, an extension of one with which Buddhist philosophers will be most familiar. It can be arranged into something like a syllogism.

- a) All positive metaphysical positions are logically indefensible
- b) A neutral metaphysical position is logically defensible
- c) The universe is a unity

As it stands the argument is casual but it is at least metaphysical. Even so, if these three propositions are not true, once given their intended interpretation, then the doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism is not true. This little argument is therefore of great importance in the philosophies of both East and West. If we can refute the first or last of these statements then we will have refuted the philosophy of Lao-tsu and the Buddha. If we cannot, then we must concede that it is at least logically sound. Because these statements make no 'appeal to mysticism' this little argument allows us to test the plausibility of the metaphysical scheme of the mystics from within metaphysics, as just another putative theory. Such an exploration will be the task of this essay. We stay mainly with the first two propositions.

**Proposition a) All positive metaphysical positions are logically indefensible.**

We can know from the failure of metaphysics to endorse a positive position that in respect of logic there is nothing to prevent the ideal reasoner from concluding that Proposition a) is true. Unless we conjecture that most philosophers are muddled thinkers, and all of them muddled in just the same way, then their ubiquitous conclusion, or failure to reach a conclusion, is powerful evidence for its truth. If this proposition is demonstrably false then the doctrine of Buddhism is demonstrably false, so clearly it is not easily falsified. Its truth is already taken for granted in most of philosophy.

Oddly, however, and on reflection it really is quite odd, while the logical indefensibility of positive metaphysical positions can be established in philosophy and has been many times, the idea that such positions are indefensible because they are *wrong*, because they do not correctly describe the universe, is usually considered heretical. It is an obvious inference to make, and it might even seem a little perverse not to make it. It would be in this sense that when we make it we are adopting a naïve approach to metaphysics, for we would simply be going with the flow of our reason. So why do we not all make it?

One reason for not immediately conceding that the truth of Proposition a) would imply the falsity of positive metaphysical positions is that when we extrapolate from their logical absurdity to their falsity in the real world, as we normally would for an absurd theory or idea, our view immediately becomes approximately consistent with that of Lao-tsu and the Buddha. Not everyone is tempted to set out on such an adventure. So what else can we infer from it? The only alternative is to conclude that according to reason the universe does not conform to a logically defensible metaphysical position, and thus that philosophy is largely a waste of time. Russell opts for this pessimistic view, writing forthrightly in his *Problems of Philosophy*, 'Knowledge concerning the world as a whole is not to be obtained in metaphysics.' But Russell's pessimism was largely self-inflicted. A different view of metaphysics is possible, one by which his view

would be contingent if not actually temperamental. For many philosophers, among them his colleague G. S. Brown, for whose book on mathematics, metaphysics and mysticism Russell wrote a glowing endorsement but seems to have awarded only a superficial reading, the indefensibility of positive metaphysical positions would be a vital piece of knowledge concerning the world as a whole, the most important that could be obtained in any strictly scholastic metaphysics, a secure fact from which it would be possible to derive an entire cosmological scheme. On this view, the failure of metaphysics to endorse an extreme metaphysical view would be a proof of its importance and value as a discipline.

Let us pause to clarify some terms and ideas. A ‘metaphysical’ question, once reduced to its essentials, will present us with a choice between two positive metaphysical positions. ‘Is Mind or Matter fundamental?’ would be typical. Such questions ask us to choose between conflicting world-theories, to choose whether the world as a whole is *this* as opposed to *that*, has *this* property as opposed to *that* property. Is Scepticism true or false? Is Internalism or Externalism true? Is the universe One or Many? Is space-time fundamental? Does freewill exist? Do I exist? Does anything exist? Built into these questions is the questioner’s expectation of an unambiguous answer, an expectation that arises from a prior assumption that the universe conforms to a positive metaphysical position. Such questions arise ineluctably for the underlying assumption, and in every case both of their answers are found to give rise to contradictions. Metaphysics will not endorse any of them.

Some questions are metaphysical in character yet do not ask us to adopt a positive position. These would include: Why are there laws of nature? Why does anything exist? If God is Good why is there suffering? For the definition of a metaphysical question used here these would not be exceptions to the rule but second-order questions. They are predicated, respectively, on the assumption that there are laws of nature, that anything exists and that suffering is real, and so do not directly address first principles. First-order questions would be: Are there laws of nature? Does anything exist? Is suffering real? These questions ask us to choose between two complementary and contradictory extreme metaphysical positions.

In the language of Kant a positive metaphysical position would be a 'selective conclusion about the world as a whole'. Kant rejects all such conclusions as undecidable. In making such a selection we are forced to choose between two demonstrably absurd positions and our reason prevents us from doing this. If we wish to adopt a positive metaphysical position then we must assume that our reason is not to be trusted. In the philosophical schemes of Hegel and Bradley, for which the 'psychophysical' universe, the world of mental and corporeal phenomena, would reduce to a symmetry beyond the contradictions of selective or partial metaphysical views, a positive metaphysical position would be any one for which plurality is more than mere appearance. The universe would be a pristine unity, and this would be the reason why it is possible to demonstrate that any other view is logically indefensible. Perhaps this view might seem to fail for other reasons, but it would be difficult to imagine a more simple and elegant explanation for metaphysical dilemmas than that they are not built of two truths but of two falsities.

Some examples of positive metaphysical positions would be the common forms of materialism, idealism, theism, dualism, monism, nihilism, realism, solipsism, scepticism and epiphenomenalism. All of these 'isms' make an explicit or implicit selective claim about the universe as a whole. Examples are everywhere. As Russell noted, even though we might not notice it a large proportion of our sentences begin, 'There exists x such that ...'. We are thus doomed to make a positive metaphysical claim almost as soon as we begin to speak. In physics and philosophy any theory for which the universe is assigned fundamental selective properties will embody a positive metaphysical position and must fail in logic. In consciousness studies all mind-matter only theories will be extreme metaphysical positions and fail in metaphysics. A religious doctrine will embody a positive metaphysical position if it is not rigorously apophatic, for otherwise it will be tricked by language into making selective claims.

To say that a metaphysical position is 'logically indefensible' would be to say that it gives rise to contradictions, is formally 'absurd', can be refuted by the use of Aristotle's three laws of logic and dialectic method. Thus Proposition *a*) can be read as stating that wherever a fundamental theory implies a positive metaphysical position it can be refuted in the dialectic. Or, in other words, a consistent theory embodying a



positive metaphysical position cannot be completed. We would not need to examine the theory closely. The details will make no difference. The theory will rest on the assumption that metaphysics can produce a positive result, that not all selective conclusions about the world are undecidable, and if we learn anything for certain from the study of metaphysics it is that once we rule out a neutral metaphysical position it becomes a mock battle, a game of chess with the Devil for which the best result we can hope for is a stalemate.

Logic cannot decide what is actually true in reality, but the proposition that all positive metaphysical positions are logically indefensible appears to be irrefutable in philosophy. At the same time its truth in reality would not be implausible, for this would be by far the simplest explanation for why metaphysics cannot produce a positive result. If this proposition is true then it would be an error to interpret a metaphysical question as a disguised form of the liar paradox or to dismiss it as meaningless, two common but difficult to defend strategies for explaining away its undecidability. The issues would be simpler than this. Metaphysical questions would be meaningful, and they would be undecidable for the same reason as is the question, ‘Would two plus two equal three or five?’ Carnap rejects metaphysical statements as meaningless on the grounds that they cannot be empirically confirmed or refuted, but his view is conjectural. He dismisses the claims of the mystics to empirical knowledge without a thought. Besides, in logic the entire problem with statements of the kind he is considering is that we can refute them quite easily, and this is not consistent with their meaninglessness.

There are few formal proofs of Proposition *a*) but two are widely known. Bradley’s metaphysical essay *Appearance and Reality* is one. Bradley systematically refutes all positive metaphysical positions to show that the universe must be a unity. His argument is a prose version of the proof presented more briefly and rigorously in verse form by the second-century Buddhist philosopher-saint Nagarjuna. What the *reductio* arguments of Zeno of Elea do for certain positive metaphysical positions the arguments of Bradley and Nagarjuna do for all of them, and by the same method. In his *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, by way a series of terse but exhaustive *reductio* arguments, Nagarjuna demonstrates that all positive metaphysical positions

are logically indefensible.<sup>2</sup> This demonstration sets the scene for his *theory of emptiness*. This theory, as it is usually denoted, is the philosophical expression of Mahayana Buddhism, the famous ‘Middle Way’ doctrine, so named partly because it does not embody a positive metaphysical position. For Nagarjuna’s theory we would have to approach metaphysical dilemmas as would the professors of the Colleges of Unreason encountered by the hero of Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, who take the view, ‘Extremes are alone logical, but they are always absurd; the mean is illogical, but an illogical mean is better than the sheer absurdity of an extreme.’

The proofs of Bradley and Nagarjuna are made by abduction, the method recommended by Sherlock Holmes for solving cases involving multiple suspects and only circumstantial evidence. One by one the suspects are eliminated from the enquiry, and if we find that there is only one left, as in the end there is for Bradley and Nagarjuna’s investigation, then the case is as good as closed. If all positive metaphysical positions can be ruled out as logically absurd then the only metaphysical position it would be rational to take up is a neutral one. Or, at least, this would be the only rational position to take up just so long as it is not also logically absurd, and this is why the second proposition of our argument is required. For Bradley and Nagarjuna the first and last propositions are enough.

We can concede here that if a metaphysical position is logically indefensible then it need not follow that it is false. We usually take it for granted that a false proposition will be logically indefensible and that a logically indefensible proposition will be false. This is because we usually assume that the universe is reasonable. We cannot take this for granted in metaphysics, however, where everything depends on it. As we have seen, many metaphysicians come to believe that the universe is not reasonable. For a rigorous argument we would have to close this loophole or add a proviso. Aristotle spots this problem and in *De Interpretatione* tells us that whether we can legitimately apply his three principles for dialectic logic to the world is not something that can be known *a priori* but is an empirical matter. Nagarjuna does not attempt to show that his metaphysical view is ‘true’, only that all of the alternatives are unreasonable. Bradley

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<sup>2</sup> This discussion is heavily reliant on Garfield, Jay. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika*, (OUP, 1995).

addresses the issue directly by noting that we are forced to concede that the universe might be reasonable since any attempt to prove otherwise would be self-defeating. This is less than a proof of its reasonableness, however, and Aristotle must be right to say that whether the universe obeys some set of logical principles is an empirical matter. It may be possible to logically prove that the *best* explanation of the universe would be that it is reasonable, but a sceptic could still argue that what appears to be the best explanation may not be the correct one, and who is to say what ‘best’ means? Perhaps in philosophy the most we can hope for is a proof that it would be perverse to believe the universe is unreasonable, and in philosophy, apart from a small number of proponents of Dialethism and Mysterianism, we may all believe this already. Let us suppose that Proposition *a*) is true and move on.

**Proposition b) A neutral metaphysical position is logically defensible**

For a neutral metaphysical position we must abandon all positive positions.<sup>3</sup> There is, therefore, only one such position, for if we deviate even a fraction from neutrality we abandon it. Metaphysical neutralism may be briefly and precisely defined in this negative manner, it being quite easy to say what it is not. It is a lot more difficult to say what it is, notoriously so, but we need not attempt this quite yet. All that matters initially here for the sake of the case being assembled is that once the truth of the first proposition is conceded there are powerful reasons for investigating Proposition *b*). If we can show that Proposition *b*) is false, as we usually assume it is for our traditional metaphysics, then while metaphysics may continue to be a useful ‘antidote to dogmatic superstition,’ as Bradley characterises it, as a path to positive knowledge it would be a dead end. The universe would be incomprehensible in any rational philosophy since all metaphysical positions would be demonstrably absurd. By contrast, if we can show that this second proposition is true then metaphysics would be a very direct path to knowledge, even if only of the relative kind. It would be a way of working out that the metaphysical scheme proposed by the Buddha and Lao-tsu is the only one that is

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<sup>3</sup> In case there should be any confusion, the neutral position for which a case is being made here is not the Mind-Matter neutralism rejected by Peirce as dualism, for which Mind and Matter would be irreducible. Peirce calls this ‘metaphysical neutralism,’ a rare use of this phrase. Like Chalmers’ ‘naturalistic dualism’ this is explicitly nonreductive and not a fundamental theory.

logically defensible. Hence Proposition *b*) claims a great deal and represents a significant challenge. It is rarely taken up, but we must take it up once we have extrapolated from the absurdity of positive metaphysical positions to their falsity. If we believe that the universe is reasonable then a neutral position is now all that remains open to us and there is little we can do but try to defend our new position. This will be our situation regardless of the ramifications of this position for God, consciousness, space-time, ethics and so forth.

Before examining the truth of Proposition *b*) further let us explore some surrounding issues in order that the claim it makes can be made more clear.

## PART II

Reality is one. It must be single, because plurality, taken as real, contradicts itself. Plurality implies relations, and, through its relations, it unwillingly asserts always a superior unity. To suppose the universe plural is therefore to contradict oneself and, after all, to suppose that it is one. Add one world to another, and forthwith both worlds have become relative, each the finite appearance of a higher and single Reality. And plurality as appearances ...must fall within, must belong to, must qualify the unity.

We have an idea of this unity which, to some extent, is positive. It is true that how in detail the plurality comes together we do not know. And it is true again that unity, in its more proper sense, is known only as contra-distinguished from plurality. Unity therefore, as an aspect over against and defined by another aspect, is itself but appearance. And in this sense the Real, it is clear, cannot be properly called one. It is possible, however, to use unity with a different meaning.

Francis H. Bradley  
Appearance and Reality

We have said that our three propositions represent an argument for mysticism. This was on the basis, first, that if Proposition *b*) were removed what would remain is the

argument presented by the Nagarjuna in his *Fundamental Wisdom*,<sup>4</sup> and, second, that metaphysical neutrality is a feature of the doctrine of all the world's principal wisdom traditions. We need not define this tradition closely for the moment. It may appear as the 'Middle Way', *advaita* or 'nondual' doctrine; the doctrine of 'dependent origination'; 'emptiness', 'unity' or 'unicity' or 'the Mean'. Also as the 'perennial philosophy' or the 'primordial cosmology'. For his list of seventeen kinds of theories of consciousness Broad calls it 'pure neutralism.' In metaphysics it may be called 'absolute idealism' or 'neutral monism', but these are ambiguous phrases. Both may be interpreted as implying a positive claim about the universe and they will not be used here. The phrase 'metaphysical neutralism' is inelegant and unevocative, but is it at least unambiguously the absence of any such claim and a trustworthy mnemonic.

The proposition that the doctrine of mysticism is metaphysically neutral raises complex issues. If it can be justified, however, then the difficult relationship between metaphysics and mysticism can be considerably simplified. Even if the only thing we know about a cosmological theory is that it is metaphysically neutral we can deduce how, in principle, it would solve all metaphysical dilemmas and account for their undecidability. It would be no great feat of deduction or learning. The answer would be the same in each case, the rejection of all extreme views in favour of a global compatibilism. Thus without any need to study the literature, let alone take up the practice, we would be able to identify mysticism's solution for any particular metaphysical problem and predict what will be said about it in the teachings of the various traditions. This is useful, since testing these predictions against the literature is a very direct way to verify that the phrase 'the doctrine of mysticism' can be justified. Our traditional metaphysics would be the study of extreme views, while mysticism would be their rejection for an 'illogical mean' or, rather, what we hope to show is not an illogical mean. This leaves us just one metaphysical theory to study.

It might seem implausible that all metaphysical problems could have the same solution but it might also be what makes mysticism's solution so plausible, that it would act as a universal solvent. If it is the correct solution then its universality would be in accord

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<sup>4</sup> *Mulamadhymakakarika*. Lit. 'Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way.'

with the conclusion of Heidegger and others that all metaphysical problems are essentially the same problem, or arise from the same problem. It is not likely that we will ever prove otherwise and it is not usually considered a controversial idea. Such questions are in a sense holographic. If so, then they should have a common solution. By assuming the holographic nature of these questions we do not make life any easier for ourselves, for now the solution for one metaphysical problem must be the solution for all of them, and if it is not the solution for all of them then it cannot be the solution for any one of them. This would be a tough specification for a solution to meet. Yet a neutral metaphysical position meets it exactly. Heidegger seems to have known this, for after reading a book by Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki he is reported as saying, ‘If I understand correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings.’<sup>5</sup> Thus not only would the relationship between metaphysics and mysticism be simplified by noting that the latter is a neutral metaphysical position, but also metaphysics itself may also be considerably simplified.

The idea of a neutral metaphysical position would also be useful well beyond metaphysics. If the doctrine of mysticism is metaphysically neutral then this is all we would need to know about it in order to derive many of its most profound predictions for fundamental physics, consciousness studies, psychology and elsewhere. Because of this the stakes are high here. The proposal that mysticism is a neutral metaphysical position and logically defensible as such puts at risk not just the idea that the doctrine of mysticism is unreasonable, but also the idea that it makes no testable predictions for the natural sciences.

It might easily be doubted that for all its many and varied appearances there is just one doctrine of mysticism and that it is metaphysically neutral. A justification would require an extensive literature review. By indicating how this claim might be justified, however, the idea of a neutral metaphysical position can be brought to life a little and the claims made by propositions *b*) and *c*) partially clarified. Nagarjuna provides us with a place to start with his *theory of emptiness* and concomitant doctrine of ‘two truths’ or ‘two worlds’.

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<sup>5</sup> In Kapleau, Philip, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Anchor Books, 2000

For many people Nagarjuna would be the most significant figure in Buddhism after Shakyamuni Buddha. He is the founder of the *Madhyamika* or 'Middle Path' schools of Mahayana Buddhism and the most widely studied of all Buddhist philosophers. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* is his largest and best known text. Here he systematically refutes the idea that psychophysical phenomena have an inherent or independent existence, that there is an 'essence' to which their attributes adhere. Such phenomena would have to be conceived as something like Shannon's 'information', aggregates of 'differences that make a difference,' and not as substantial subjects and objects. Mental and corporeal phenomena would exist in a sense, this is evident, but they would have no existence 'from their own side,' and for an ultimate analysis would not 'really' exist. He shows that the adoption of any other view will lead directly to an absurd metaphysical position.

We need not worry here about the details of Nagarjuna's argument, nor even about whether it succeeds. We need note only two things. First, that for Nagarjuna's view we must abandon all positive metaphysical positions; second, that a defining feature of a neutral metaphysical position is the illusory nature of psychophysical phenomena. From the first we can infer that Buddhism's Middle Way doctrine would not conflict with the results of philosophy or the natural sciences, which are known to be consistent with the falsity of all positive metaphysical positions, and from the second we can confirm that his doctrine is not idiosyncratic in mysticism. All traditions proclaim the epiphenomenal or illusive nature of the psychophysical universe, and a fundamental theory for which psychophysical phenomena are some kind of illusion must be metaphysically neutral, since if it were not then these phenomena would unambiguously exist or not-exist.

We are not immediately concerned here with how reasonable Nagarjuna's theory would be in a technical sense, but we can note in passing that his proof of Proposition *a*) is entirely dependent on the reasonableness of the universe. It might even be read as a proof that the universe is reasonable. If the universe were unreasonable then a true explanation of it would contradict our reason, and in this case positive metaphysical theories would be logically defensible after all. Were Nagarjuna defending an

unreasonable universe his argument would never get off the ground. His argument must fail unless we assume that where a proposition or theory is wrong it will be logically indefensible, and that where it is logically indefensible it will be wrong. By extension his argument states that a logically defensible and (in this sense) reasonable explanation of the universe would not embody a positive metaphysical position.

Nagarjuna's proof is the philosophical underpinning for his 'theory of emptiness' and doctrine of 'two truths' or 'worlds'. This states that there is typically a fundamental disparity between the way we perceive the world and the way it actually is. There would be two worlds, or aspects of the world, the conventional and the ultimate, and because we would, as it were, have a foot in each camp, there would be these two distinct standpoints from which we can perceive and make statements about the world as a whole. When we are speaking of them these two worlds, or aspects of the world, would stand in a relationship of contradictory complementary, such that a statement true for one would be false for the other. Psychophysical phenomena would exist in one world but not in the other, for example, and so would not 'really' exist, or would both 'exist and not-exist,' while an unambiguous statement to the effect that these phenomena do or do not exist would be neither true nor false but unrigorous, inadequate, not exactly right and logically indefensible. For Nagarjuna's doctrine we would require a logic and language of two truths, where each truth on its own would only take into account half of what it is ought to take into account, and within which a statement of the whole truth would seem self-contradictory. With its characteristic brevity and rigour the *Tao Teh Ching* puts this as, 'True words seem paradoxical.' This doctrinal statement could only be true in a metaphysically neutral universe, and so from just these four words we can derive the entire metaphysical scheme of Taoism and confirm its compatibility with the doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism. In his translation and commentary for *Fundamental Wisdom* Jay Garfield writes, 'It is this sophisticated development of the doctrine of the two truths as a vehicle for understanding Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology that is Nagarjuna's greatest philosophical contribution.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Garfield, Jay, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way - Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*. OUP (1995).



Nagarjuna's dual-aspect doctrine is a vehicle for understanding and not a form of dualism. The true principle or original phenomenon would be nondual, and it would be for didactic reasons only that it is spoken of as dual. Considered as dualism his theory would clearly be nonreductive. Insofar as it suggests that the universe is divided into two worlds it might be viewed as a mystic equivalent for Chalmers' *naturalistic dualism*, a double-aspect (psycho-physical) theory of information remarkably similar to Buddhism's two worlds doctrine and requiring few modifications to be compatible with it. Neither theory claims that dualism is true, it is just that both take advantage of it for pragmatic reasons. Logic finds dualism absurd at the limit, whether it is of Mind and Matter, Something and Nothing, Being and non-Being or any other contradictory and complementary pair of categories, as we have stated in Proposition *a*), since problems of self-reference arise. Chalmers proposes, and it is a common view in Buddhism, that a nonreductive theory, one which puts this foundational problem aside for the time being, may nevertheless provide a useful framework within which to research and discuss the issues.

At the limit, however, the universe must be a unity of some sort or there is no such thing. For naturalistic dualism this unity is implied but absent, as it will be for any Mind-Matter-only theory, a missing ingredient or explanatory gap. Such theories must treat Mind and Matter as irreducible categories. In this way the metaphysical problems arising for dualism may be swept under the carpet and there is some justification for calling this form of dualism 'naturalistic'. For a metaphysically neutral theory, however, Mind and Matter would be mutually-dependent epiphenomena and an all-embracing unity would take the leading role. The meta-system would be all. The Mind-Matter distinction would be emergent, in some sense of this word, and this would be why human reasoning indicates that neither is original.

For the Buddhist and Taoist, as for Kant and Hegel, wherever categorical distinctions are reified, applied to the universe as a whole, they would be psychological or philosophical errors. Hegel calculated this, for the universe must be a unity if all selective conclusions about it are absurd, there could be no other explanation. For Nagarjuna, however, and contrary to Carnap, this result would be not only be calculable in philosophy but also empirically verifiable. It would be empirically

verifiable because the universe would be metaphysically neutral. A doctrine of unity allows the possibility of such knowledge, for it would be from this original unity that our individual consciousness arises, or appears to arise, and that maintains it from moment to moment, and from which it can never be separated. Thus Imam Ali, the first Shia Imam, asks, ‘Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form, when within thee the universe is enfolded?’ Far away and many centuries earlier Lao-tsu writes, ‘Since before time and space were, the Tao is. It is beyond *is* and *is not*. How do I know this is true? I look inside myself and see.’

These are astonishing claims. Yet it is not impossible to make some sense of them in philosophy. Neither would be inconsistent with Kant’s proposal that if we look inside ourself we will eventually find a phenomenon that is not an instance of a category, nor with his further proposal that the universe as a whole is not an instance of a category. *A priori* there could only be one phenomenon that is not an instance of a category, and a synthesis of psychology and cosmology is clearly implied. From Kant, therefore, it is only a small step to Hegel’s spiritual unity, Lao-tsu’s Tao, Ali’s enfolded universe, a neutral metaphysical position and the theory of emptiness. Far from being the opposite of Kant’s rational psychology the psychological scheme of mysticism might be derived from it. Mysticism makes far grander knowledge claims, even that it is possible to know what is prior to the psycho-physical universe, but such claims would not contradict Kant’s philosophical results and might even shed light on them.

To see why true words must seem paradoxical for Lao-tsu’s view we could imagine we have been outside and verified that it is raining by getting wet. Under these conditions we would normally judge the statement, ‘It is raining’ to be exactly true, and in the natural language of our everyday psycho-physical world of rain and wetness, where all we mean by these words is that it is raining as opposed to not-raining, it would be exactly true. For a neutral metaphysical position, however, there would be a sense in which this statement would be false, for we would have to take into account the ultimate unreality of such phenomena. The statement ‘It is raining’ leaves something out and could never be the whole truth. At the same time we cannot simply reverse our judgement and say, ‘It is not raining,’ for this would also be inadequate.

Accordingly, in metaphysics at least, we would have to say something like, 'It is raining and not-raining.'

It follows that for a saying which seems 'mystical' all we would need to do is state something about the universe as a whole that would not imply a positive metaphysical position. A famous case in philosophy would be Heraclitus' existential assertion, 'We are and are-not.' Armed with Nagarjuna's theory we need not, with Plato and Aristotle, who according to Whittaker may have learnt of Heraclitus' ideas from a talk given by a student, immediately conclude that Heraclitus had abandoned his reason, nor even, I hope to show, that he had abandoned any of the latter's three rules for the dialectic. We need only interpret his words as indicating a metaphysical position for which on their own the statements 'we are' and 'we are not' would be unrigorous and inadequate.

That the universe is a unity having only complementary and contradictory aspects is a necessary condition for a neutral metaphysical position. The idea is found in all the principal traditions of mysticism, albeit not often in the clear and explicit form it takes in Buddhism after Nagarjuna. Even so, it is quite easy to track it through the literature of the various traditions and in this way confirm their common metaphysic. 'They do not understand that the all-One, conflicting in itself, is identical with itself: conflicting harmony as in the bow and the lyre,' says Heraclitus. His Janus-faced 'all-One' appears again as Jung's *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, the state of *unus mundus* which for the Alchemists is the third and final stage in the union of the individual with reality. We meet it again in G. S. Brown's *Laws of Form*, the underlying thesis of which is that the psychophysical universe, including space and time, arises from a pristine unity by a process of category-making or symmetry-breaking. To our senses and intellect this unity, like Heidegger's Being, must be featureless or transparent, the absence of everything, the desert of the real, a conceptual Void, an Abyss, in psychology the metaphorical Chasm that provides the final test of courage for Indiana Jones in Spielberg's treatment of the Grail mythology. But it would be both an absence and a presence. In his *Seven Sermons to the Dead* the gnostic Jung speaks in words of which Lao-tsu would surely have approved.

Nothing is the same as fullness. In the endless state fullness is the same as emptiness. The Nothing is both empty and full. One may just as well state some other thing about the Nothing, namely that it is white or that it is black or that it exists or that it exists not. That which is endless and eternal has no qualities, because it has all qualities.<sup>7</sup>

In the literature of mysticism it matters not where we look, we keep meeting the same uncategorisable phenomenon, and always we find ourselves struggling with a language of paradox and contradiction. It is quite easy to verify by experiment that when we rigorously avoid all positive metaphysical positions we have no choice but to speak in riddles. This causes intense problems for communication in discussions of mysticism, but as a symptom of a worldview it is useful to us here. It means that it is not usually difficult to spot metaphysical neutralism wherever it appears.

Beautiful Painted Arrow, a shaman of the Ute and Pueblo Indians, tells us that in his tradition human beings may be conscious in two ways, or have access to two states of being.<sup>8</sup> In translation these would be 'Believing We Exist' and 'Awakened Awareness,' phrases it would be easy to translate as 'Samsara' and 'Nirvana,' the states with which Nagarjuna's two worlds are often (but not always) equated, or as corresponding to the states of 'ignorance' and 'enlightenment' spoken of by the Buddha. We might expect the opposite of 'believing we exist' to be 'believing we do not exist' but an alternative is implied, a resolution of Heraclitus' contradiction. We find the idea of a unity prior to all distinctions in theistic and atheistic traditions alike, it is only that the terminology changes. Here is Dionysus the Areopagite from *The Mystical Theology*, followed by a traditional Zen teaching story. In both we see the rejection of positive metaphysical positions.

. . . [H]e possesses all the positive attributes of the universe (being the Universal Cause), yet, in a more strict sense, He does not possess them, since He transcends them all; wherefore there is no contradiction between the affirmations and negations, inasmuch as he infinitely precedes all conceptions of deprivation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions.

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<sup>7</sup> *VII Sermones ad Moruos*. In S. A. Hoeller (Trans) *The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead*, Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House (1982)

<sup>8</sup> Joseph E. Rael, *Beautiful Painted Arrow*, Element Books (1992)

Yamaoka Tesshu, as a young student of Zen, visited one master after another. He called upon Dokuon of Shokoku. Desiring to show his attainment, he said: "The mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, after all, do not exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realisation, no delusion, no sage, no mediocrity. There is no giving and nothing to be received."

Dokuon, who was smoking quietly, said nothing. Suddenly he whacked Yamaoka with his bamboo pipe. This made the youth quite angry.

"If nothing exists," inquired Dokuon, "where did this anger come from?"

At first glance Nagarjuna's theory divides the world into two categories. While it might appear to be a dual-aspect theory of information along the lines of Chalmers' naturalistic dualism it would differ in that the two basic categories would not be Mind and Matter but the two halves of a more basic distinction. In Chalmers' terms this would be more like the distinction we make between *information* and *information space*, where Mind and Matter would belong in the former category. In this regard Schrödinger, an ardent proponent for over forty years of the nondual cosmology, speaks of the contents of consciousness and 'the canvas on which they are painted.'<sup>9</sup> Or it may be a deeper distinction, it is hard to be sure. At any rate, as we have seen, this is not be just another form of nonreductive dualism, for whatever these final two categories are they would be reducible. For the Buddhist philosopher the phrase 'naturalistic dualism' would be an oxymoron. Dualism would not be naturalistic. Only a true doctrine could be naturalistic. Information and information space would not be categorically distinct phenomena, there could be no such thing, but would comprise yet another Hegelian distinction or Kantian antinomy to be transcended on the path to unity, whether in logico-mathematical analysis or in experience. The Middle Way doctrine is reductionist with a vengeance. By reduction all distinctions, even that between Samsara and Nirvana, would be category errors. 'I have put duality away. I have seen that the two worlds are one,' writes the Persian poet and Sufi adept Jalaluddin Rumi of this final reduction. For the Grail scholar Joseph Campbell the Kingdom of the Grail is, 'To be achieved only by one capable of transcending the painted wall of space-time with its foul and fair, good and evil, true and false display of

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<sup>9</sup> Schrödinger, Erwin, *Mind and Matter*, Cambridge University Press, (1992)

the names and forms of merely phenomenal pairs of opposites.’<sup>10</sup> For the Kabbalist it would be only through the transcendence of the discriminating intellect in experience that the Unity of God spoken of in the *Shema* of the Jewish liturgy is revealed.

If a phenomenon is defined as ‘unconditioned’ or ‘beyond the categories’ then clearly it cannot simply exist or not-exist. For a theory of information consistent with Buddhism’s theory of emptiness, therefore, the unity to which information and information space reduce would lie not only beyond the mind-matter distinction but even beyond the existence/non-existence distinction. Only with this unconditioned phenomenon would a reductionist analysis of the universe finally end. This could be viewed as a strong epiphenomenalism for which mental and corporeal phenomena would be emergent and just one phenomenon truly real.

Kant’s reluctance to equate the subject of rational psychology with the universe as a whole, despite their conceptually identical nature and properties, (the inevitable voidness of any concept of a phenomenon beyond categorisation), has awkward consequences for his cosmology. He is forced to the idea that space-time phenomena are *empirically real* but *transcendentally ideal*, where a *transcendentally ideal* phenomenon is an idea and in this sense unreal. Such phenomena would be empirically real and logically unreal. For the *Madyamika* philosopher this view would be incorrect, just as the contradiction implies. Kant concludes that reality has two aspects, and to this extent he and Nagarjuna are in agreement. Nagarjuna, however, offers a different solution. He proposes that space-time phenomena are *conventionally real* but both *logically* and *empirically unreal*, where a *conventionally real* phenomena would be a conceptual imputation. Here there is no contradiction. On the issue of what empiricism can tell us about the reality of space-time phenomena, then, the two philosophers do not agree, taking directly opposing positions. They agree that from logical analysis we must conclude that space-time phenomena are in some sense real and unreal at the same time, that their reality is somehow dependent on our point of view, but once Kant has denied an identity between the parts, (the categorizable), and the whole, (the uncategorizable), he cannot make his double-aspect theory work. He makes an

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, (Viking Press, 1968)

assumption about the limits of empiricism and the reality of phenomena that leads him to the view that the unreality of spacetime phenomena cannot be empirically verified, and this renders his view paradoxical. Reason would lead us to one conclusion and empiricism would lead us to its opposite. But common-sense suggests that reason and empiricism should not lead us to two directly opposing conclusions about the reality of tables and chairs. For Nagarjuna they would lead us to the same conclusion, that space-time and all it contains are conceptual imputations. These phenomena would reduce to *sunyata* or emptiness, and this would be both demonstrable in logic and empirically verifiable. Logic and ontology would coincide. For Kant logic would outrun empiricism. For Nagarjuna it would be the other way around, but logic would not mislead us.

In much the same way Kant goes as far as placing the origin of sentience beyond the categories of thought but does not go on to infer that individual experiencers must therefore have empirical access to a world beyond the categories, beyond the distinct mundane and transcendent worlds, beyond experience and experiencer, is and is-not, knower and known, perceiver and perceived, appearance and reality, existence and non-existence, subject and object and so forth. Yet this is clearly implied. Körner summarises Kant's view.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Analytic of Concepts* Kant has drawn a sharp distinction between the '*I think* which must be *capable* of all my presentations,' thereby giving them synthetic unity, and the empirical, introspective, self which is itself a presentation. To be truly *a priori* rational psychology must have for its subject the former, i.e. the self of pure self-consciousness. This however is *not*, according to Kant, an object of experience and so of the applicability of the Categories. It is not an instance of any Category.

Perhaps *Fundamental Wisdom* could be read as an attempt to demonstrate what Kant came so close to concluding, that the psychological and physical universe can be reduced to a phenomenon that is not an instance of any category and to which all beings with a psychology have immediate access. We cannot say what this phenomena is since natural language is inherently dualistic and forces us to predicate and thus to

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<sup>11</sup> Körner, S, *Kant*, (Pelican Books, 1955)

categorize. All predication must be part of the conventional or lower world, or aspect of the world, and will fail where we speak of the world as a whole. A predicate is a selective conclusion and cannot be legitimately attached to a phenomenon that is unconditioned. Here would be part of the reason why Lao-tsu states, 'The Tao that is eternal cannot be talked.' Predication is necessary for a conventional description of phenomena, but impossible where the subject is defined as not an instance of any category. Nevertheless, Lao-tsu goes on, 'The Tao must be talked.' As he demonstrates so well, however, we would have to speak of it apophatically or in a language of contradictory complementarity. Thus, for example, we might say that Tao is an instance of a category that is not an instance of a category, for there are always two ways we can think about it. What it actually is we cannot think or say.

Predication is the very basis of language according to Nietzsche and others, and it seems true for all but the most primitive system of grunts. For language we are forced to separate subject and predicate, essence and attribute, particular and universal, set and member of set and so forth, and in this way are forced into dualism. In everyday life this linguistic dualism is appropriate and indispensable, and it is the very basis of set theory. Its use in philosophy, however, leads to the reification of distinctions and thus the adoption of positive metaphysical positions. For a neutral position we must avoid dualism in any of its forms. Echoing Bradley's remark quoted at the head of this essay regarding the use of the term 'unity', his injunction that the Real cannot properly be called 'one', the Sufi sage Al Halaj warns that it is unrigorous to claim that God is One, since 'Whoso testifyeth that God is One thereby setteth up another beside Him,'<sup>12</sup> namely his own individual self as testifier. These are the traps of language. Hence the metaphysically neutral interpretation of the Hindu Upanishads expounded by Radhakrishnan in his *Philosophy of the Upanishads* is characterised as *advaita*, a term which means 'not-two,' but which, we are regularly reminded, should not be taken to mean 'one.' We would naturally attempt to conceive of a unity as something that is numerically one, but this would be a mistake for the original unity spoken of in mysticism, which would not be an instance of a numerical category. In his unfinished book *A Guess at the Riddle* Peirce notes, 'We can easily recognise the man whose

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<sup>12</sup> In Baldock, John, *The Essence of Sufism*, (Arcturus Publishing, 2004)



thought is mainly in the dual stage by his unmeasured use of language.’ In order to talk about Tao we must assign it predicates, as we have done here by the use of the word ‘it.’ Yet in no case can we say that ‘it’ is *this* as opposed to *that*, or even *that* as opposed to *me*. Bradley speaks of this problem when he writes that in metaphysics, ‘The separation of the predicate from the subject seems at once to be necessary and yet indefensible.’<sup>13</sup> Thus for Buddhist philosophy we must choose whether to speak from a conventional perspective, from which perspective this separation is necessary and legitimate, or from an ultimate perspective, from where it is impossible. To speak from the ultimate perspective is made possible only by the unsatisfactory method of regularly denying whatever is affirmed, and even this is said to be inadequate.

Having made a first sketch of what a neutral metaphysical position is and perhaps lent a little plausibility to the claim that mysticism depends on such a position, it is almost time to investigate Proposition *b*). Just before that, however, let us return to Proposition *a*) to deal with a loose end. There is one metaphysical position that is not eliminated from our enquiry by Proposition *a*). This is Dialethism. That the universe disobeys the rules of Aristotle’s logic is an axiom for Dialethism, and if Proposition *a*) is true this lends it credibility. Being neither a neutral nor positive metaphysical position it balances precariously on the ancient and increasingly rickety fence between the stereotypically ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ kinds of philosophy, in some ways serving as a useful bridge between them. As noted earlier, even if we concede that all positive metaphysical positions are logically indefensible we are not actually forced by abductive reasoning to adopt a neutral position. There remains one other possibility, which is that the universe does not conform to *any* logically defensible metaphysical position. This is what Dialethism claims.

For Dialethism the first proposition of our argument would be true and the second false. All positive metaphysical positions would be self-contradictory and false, such that all selective conclusions about the world as a whole would be undecidable. This would be explained not by the idea of an Hegelian unity or Kantian metasystem in which all categories are exposed as errors, however, but by positing the existence of

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<sup>13</sup> Bradley, Francis, *Appearance and Reality*, (Oxford University Press, 1951)

true contradictions. The universe would be paradoxical, such that an accurate description of it would be logically absurd. Here is the loophole in Nagarjuna's argument. He proves Proposition *a*) but does not directly address the possibility that the universe disobeys the rules of his proof. In logic there is no direct way to rule out this possibility.

Graham Priest has proposed that Dialethism, a term that translates roughly as 'two truths', is not a new philosophy but merely a new name, and that it was probably endorsed by Heraclitus, Nicolas of Cusa and Hegel.<sup>14</sup> These philosophers are given a different interpretation here, but this interpretative disagreement does at least show the similarity of our positions. Dialethism and the doctrine of mysticism share important features, and in his *Paradoxical Nature of the Universe* Melhuish has shown that their logical schemes are almost isomorphic.

At least one of them must be false, however, or not entirely true. This is because for mysticism the universe would not be paradoxical. It would only appear to be paradoxical. There would be no true contradictions. This is exactly what Nagarjuna and Bradley prove. Paradoxes depend on distinctions, while for mysticism we would have to extend our ontology, epistemology and psychology to include a phenomenon that is beyond Cusa's *coincidentia oppositorum*, beyond the conflicting harmony of Heraclitus's bow and lyre, beyond Lao-tsu's *is* and *is-not*, beyond Chalmers' mind and matter, and beyond any possible contradiction. The Holy Grail of Christian and pre-Christian legend is said to have the power to dissolve all distinctions. Here we would find, whether in logic or practice, a phenomenon that is uncategorizable, a phenomenon that is not Nothing but which to the intellect is of necessity void, an unconditioned element, the transcendent principle which for Kabbalism is prior even to God. As Hegel's Absolute Idea this would be the culmination of philosophical thinking, the phenomenon that allows the final reduction necessary for a fundamental theory, the transcendence of the dialectic by a sublation of all categories to reveal a pristine unity. This would be the original unity that allows Brown to overcome Cantor's set-theoretic paradox where Frege and Russell could not, and thus to be able

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<sup>14</sup> Priest, Graham, *Dialetheism*, (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, online)

to describe the universe within a formal calculus without paradox. As Bradley's 'Real' this unity cannot be called 'one', but it would be possible 'to use unity with a different meaning.' Among the multitude of phenomena painstakingly catalogued in Buddhism's *Abhidhamma pitaka*, or 'basket' of teachings, where the Buddha's underlying ontology is framed in terms of bare ontological factors called *dhammas*, this one alone is undefined, the only one not evanescent and subject to conditions.

It may be important to note that for the Mahayana Buddhist this is a phenomenon and not just a mythological entity or explanatory device. In Buddhist phenomenology the term *dhamma*, which would include all mental and corporeal 'things' or 'thing-events', all that would be 'information' for Chalmers' naturalistic dualism, may be rendered as 'phenomenon' just as long as this term is not thought of as implying a correlative 'noumenon'. *Nibbana*, the unconditioned element, is spoken of as one of these *dhammas*, and it appears in the *Abhidhamma* literature in the 'Enumeration of Phenomena' in several of the classificatory groups. This phenomenon, however, would be supramundane and not included in the realms of conditioned existence. In his *Abhidhamma Studies - Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time*, Nyanaponika Thera writes,

'Though *Nibbana* ..., does in fact appear quite often in the *Dhammasangani*, it should be noted that: (1) In all cases it is merely mentioned without any further explanation beyond the classificatory heading under which it appears, and so it differs in that respect from the other "things," to all of which a definition is added; (2) the classifications of *Nibbana* are all negative in character. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that *Nibbana* is definitely termed a *dhamma*, ...'

A phenomenon lying beyond the categories is an unavoidable implication of a neutral metaphysical position. It is denied by all positive metaphysical positions and also by Dialethism. Nevertheless, for Dialethism the universe would be metaphysically neutral in a way, or up to a point. Positive metaphysical positions would be false and logically indefensible and this would render all selective conclusions about the universe as a whole undecidable. As a consequence we would require a logic of contradictory complementarity or two truths for an adequate description of the universe as a whole

or to speak the whole truth about it. A selective description of the universe would be partial and inadequate, and in no case would we be able to say that the universe is *this* as opposed to *that* without abandoning rigour. For an assertion that would still be inadequate but might be slightly less misleading we would have to say that the universe is *both* this and that or *neither* this nor that. About much of this the dialethist and the mystic can agree. For the latter, however, all opposing views would have to be sublated for the truth, exposed as category errors. The universe would have all attributes and no attributes, or this would be the two complementary ways we can think about it, but neither would be the fundamental view. It would be just that two contradictory half-truths is the best the discursive intellect and natural language can do to represent the situation. The same problem would arise for any kind of representation. The Yin-Yang symbol denies the clear-cut contradictions we are forced into by language but does not entirely avoid an implied metaphysical dualism. Nor would a language of contradiction and paradox, for while by its use we can approach a step closer to the truth than is possible in natural language it could never take us all the way. The Tao that is eternal cannot be talked and in philosophy, where it must be talked, we would have to be content with a language that points in its direction. The dialethist would disagree here and say that this language points nowhere but simply reflects the paradoxical nature of the universe. He or she might agree that assertions about the universe as a whole must take the form of pairs of contradictory and complementary half-truths, but would not agree that this language points beyond itself to a profound unity. They would certainly reject the idea that when Meister Eckhart says, 'Why does thou prate of God? Whatever thou sayest of Him is untrue,' it might be in part this problem he is talking about, as also the idea that what we are examining here is the origin of the Biblical and Quoranic warnings about the dangers of idolising the Ultimate.

For Dialethism true words would not just seem paradoxical, they would actually be so. The universe would be absent the undefined meta-psychophysical phenomenon on which Nagarjuna's solution for the problems of philosophy depends, and its absence would render the universe paradoxical and incomprehensible. There would be an ingredient missing. Far from being a reasonable theory Dialethism states that all

reasonable theories are false. This is the position we will be forced to adopt if we find that the first proposition of our syllogism is true and the second is false.

We must note that Proposition *b*) would not render Dialethism false. It states, or this would be its implication, that Dialethism is *ad hoc*. This is as much as it can state. Logic alone could never force us to believe that the universe is or is not paradoxical. It can prove nothing about reality. Even if we were able to rigorously demonstrate that Propositions *a*) and *b*) are true we would not have refuted any doctrine for which the universe is paradoxical. Our first proposition would render all positive positions absurd and the second would render all absurd positions redundant. This is a weakness in our argument, that we cannot quite dismiss Dialethism, but it seems unlikely that many people would want to exploit it. As Bradley notes, as long we are committed to the idea that the universe is reasonable then the first two propositions of our argument will imply the third. Given the truth of Proposition *a*) and the self-proclaimed logical indefensibility of Dialethism, then if a neutral metaphysical position is logically defensible the case is closed. If Proposition *b*) is demonstrably true, or not demonstrably false, then to suppose that the universe is paradoxical would be perverse.

### Part III

Anything that contradicts experience and logic should be abandoned.

The Dalai Lama  
The Little Book of Buddhism

Given the truth of our first proposition there are four possible outcomes for an investigation into the truth of the second, two of which are equivalent.

1. We find that *b*) is demonstrably true. It would be premature to claim that the truth of *c*) would follow from this, since the argument as stated is

simple and clear at the expense of formality and rigour. The truth of *c*) would follow if the argument can be made valid and rigorous.

2. We find that Proposition *b*) is demonstrably undecidable. In this case it is demonstrably true.
3. We find that Proposition *b*) is demonstrably false. In this case all metaphysical positions are logically indefensible and the universe is demonstrably unreasonable. The truth or unfalsifiability of Proposition *a*) and the demonstrable falsity of Proposition *b*) could be explained only by assuming that there are true contradictions. The doctrine of mysticism would be logically indefensible and something like Dialethism would have to be true.
4. We find that *b*) is undecidable in practice but that its undecidability cannot be demonstrated in philosophy. This would be not so much a result as a predicament, one we could never know we are in. If we cannot show that this proposition is false, true or undecidable, and cannot even show that this is our situation, then it will always be reasonable to argue, with Nagarjuna and Bradley, that *a*) directly implies *c*). It is just that this conclusion could never be forced on us. It would always remain a possibility that *b*) is false. Logical reasoning alone would allow us to establish no more than what Nagarjuna and Bradley establish by its use, which is that *a*) is true and *c*) might be.

Let us now examine whether a neutral metaphysical position would be logically defensible. As Lao-tsu notes, the claims that this cosmological scheme makes about the world may appear to be ‘illogical’ or self-contradictory, and it would be easy to conclude that it simply must be logically indefensible, that it must be quite easy to reduce it to absurdity in the dialectic. Even within mysticism we find the view that the universe would transgress the rules of classical logic. Nagarjuna’s logical refutation of positive metaphysical positions asks us to reconsider this view. The logic he employs for the task is no different from Aristotle’s, and unless his own position is impregnable

his argument fails. This logic requires no modification to accommodate his two worlds doctrine. Indeed, his argument can be interpreted as a proof that a neutral metaphysical position would be consistent with Aristotelian logic. He may have seen no *logical* reason not to step immediately from the absurdity of all positive metaphysical positions to the conclusion that his Middle Way doctrine is true.

But this is a very big step, and in a strictly inferential philosophy we cannot take it unless we must. This is especially true here, where a neutral metaphysical position is mysticism. To know whether we are forced to take this step we would have to decide Proposition *b*). It must be decidable, for it makes no claim about the universe, and if it is undecidable then it is true. Admittedly, a proposition stating that the linguistic and philosophical scheme of Buddhism and Taoism obey the laws of classical logic might seem surprising, but unless this is the case then Nagarjuna's argument fails.

That a neutral position is systematic, and can be represented as a formal system of terms and theorems, has been shown by George Spencer Brown in his *Laws of Form*. Russell praised the 'calculus of indications' Brown presents us with there, and, consistent with the idea that the metaphysical scheme of Buddhism and Taoism is not paradoxical, agreed with Brown that it does away with the need for his Theory of Types. Brown's calculus is a model of a metaphysically neutral universe and the process by which forms emerge from formlessness. Russell's famous paradox cannot arise for it because the system is emergent from a unity that cannot be characterised as container or contained, set or member of set, one or zero, something or nothing. In a lecture at the Essaline Institute in the 1960's Brown likens this axiomatic phenomenon to an unmarked piece of paper. Paradoxes of self-reference cannot arise for a cosmological doctrine which states that categories are not fundamental. Notwithstanding all this, a cosmological doctrine for which true words must seem paradoxical and for which all positive metaphysical positions would be false can hardly be accused of being unsystematic. But would it pass Aristotle's test for reasonableness?

On this question there is some disagreement even among its proponents and, as usual, it may be just a matter of how we look at it. Brown proposes in *Laws of Form* that a

neutral cosmology would require a modification to Aristotelian logic similar to that which Heisenberg considered necessary for quantum theory. My impression is that most physicists follow Heisenberg and would conclude likewise that the universe disobeys the rules of classical logic, forcing on physics a modification to those rules. Yet it may be argued that neither Brown's advaitan cosmology nor Heisenberg's quantum mechanics would require a modification of classical logic, and that this would have been Aristotle's view.

Before examining Aristotle's view let us first clarify what a neutral metaphysical position would imply for logic by reference to cases. At a first glance, and not only at a first glance, a neutral metaphysical position might seem to obviously contravene what most of us take to be the laws of thought. The mean really does seem 'illogical'. And yet in scholastic philosophy the idea of taking a neutral stance on metaphysical dilemmas is a quite common one. As an alternative for the orthodox view it is usually there among the solutions for any particular metaphysical problem. Axiomatically it is only ever endorsed on a piecemeal basis, on which basis it is found not to work, but in a partial form the idea is easy to find. Even the defiantly non-mystical Russell was a neutral monist on the Mind-Matter question, allowing the possibility that this is not a dilemma after all but a trilemma with a term missing. Much like Kant, however, he does not extend this idea to a principle, and so in the end his theory falls foul of the One-Many problem and belies its title by ending up in an irreducible plurality of indistinguishable neutral entities. He ventures a step beyond 'naturalistic dualism' but becomes trapped in contradiction and so pulls up short of Nagarjuna and Hegel's fundamental solution. Physicists adopt a neutral position on various dualities and are accustomed to dealing with the problems that arise for logic and language, but they do not usually extend this idea to the metaphysical underpinnings for their theories, the Something-Nothing problem, the closure principle, the background-dependence problem and so forth, and so are forced to defend positions which are known to be logically indefensible rather as if metaphysics did not exist.

Perhaps those who conjecture that the question of whether space-time is fundamental is undecidable are close to adopting a neutral position, for this might suggest that spacetime is fundamental or emergent depending on how we look at it, or perhaps on



how we define physics. We could say that spacetime is a Kantian initial condition for the appearance of the psychophysical phenomena that comprise the exclusive subject matter of today's physics, and fundamental in this sense, but that it would not be a necessary condition for the unconditioned phenomenon from which spacetime would be emergent. This question must remain forever beyond experimental physics, beyond even the intellect, although not beyond all experiment. As a dual-aspect solution compatibilism will not work, however, unless it can be generalised into a principle. Only then can it be integrated into a systematic philosophical scheme. We must answer all metaphysical questions or none at all.

For any translation into physics it is undoubtedly a problem for a neutral metaphysical scheme that it would be impossible to observe the unconditioned phenomenon prior to spacetime that it predicts. The observer/observed distinction would be impossible in practice and indefensible in logic. For a formal description of the universe this phenomenon would have to be strictly defined as a largely undefined term. Nevertheless, in both physics and philosophy, and most apparently where these strands of research intermingle in modern consciousness studies, it could never be a redundant entity. It survives Ockham's razor because it makes its presence so clearly felt by its absence. Once this phenomenon is assumed to be a mystical fiction our theories are beset on all sides by intellectual dilemmas, *ignoramibuses*, contradictions, explanatory gaps, missing ingredients, antinomies, undecidable questions and other barriers to knowledge. Under these circumstances it could never be *ad hoc*. We may be sceptical of Nagarjuna's solution but we cannot deny the problem. It may be predicted to arise, since it is inevitable that for every conceiving observer there will be one inconceivable and unobservable phenomenon, namely that which conceives and observes. In order to avoid problems of self-reference a formal axiomatic description of the universe would require at least one undefined term. Mathematics and logic also tell us this, but currently physics does not allow for the possibility of this being the most primitive term in the system let alone a real phenomenon. Yet if logic and ontology coincide then it must be a real phenomenon, the missing ingredient in, or rather not in, our present scientific theories of consciousness.

To see how Nagarjuna's solution would work in practice we can examine any metaphysical problem. In respect of logic the story will be the same for each of them. One of the most closely studied and clearly delineated is the Internalism-Externalism problem, by immediate extension also the Subject-Object or Mind-Matter problem. Most philosophers favour one or the other horn of this dilemma and some kind of mind-only or matter-only theory. Robert Pepperell has proposed a neutral approach as its solution, however, arguing that it is not a dilemma but a trilemma. It would be a dilemma only if we assume that there either is or is-not a fundamental distinction between our mind and the universe it inhabits. Of course, there is no denying, and it hardly needs saying, it is natural to suppose that there is a fundamental distinction between 'my mind' and 'my world' and extremely difficult to suppose otherwise. All the same, the dualistic view to which we commit ourselves makes no sense when closely examined. Yet the opposite theory, for which our mind and our world are identical, also brings with it intractable intellectual problems. Thus a neutral position seems forced on us. Pepperell writes,

The uncertain relationship between mind and world has of course generated countless finely nuanced philosophical arguments. But, put starkly, it seems there are three options:

That the mind and world are distinct.

That the mind and world are unified.

That the mind and world are both distinct and unified.

... While there are many powerful arguments in favour of the first two options, it is the third which I explore here, and the one I will suggest is most plausible.

René Descartes (1596-1650) is often credited with formalising the dualistic distinction between thinking substance (*res cogitans*) and material substance (*res extensa*); that is, between ideas attributable to the mind on the one hand and the material world of bodies and objects on the other.

... Descartes' reputation as the prototypical dualist, however, does not fairly convey the complexity, some would say confusion, of his view on the distinction between mind and world. In the synopsis of the *Meditations*, we read:

... the human mind is shown to be really distinct from the body, and, nevertheless, to be so closely conjoined therewith as together to form, as it were, a unity.

And again in Mediation VI itself:

Nature teaches me ... that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity.

Despite the hint of qualification, Descartes is quite explicit: The mind and body are both 'really distinct' and united - they are two and one.<sup>15</sup>

This seems to be approximately the solution offered by Nagarjuna. The idea that there could be a middle path between Internalism and Externalism may seem 'illogical', and yet this is the only alternative to the demonstrable absurdity of these two extreme views. It would not be that 'my mind' and 'my world' are identical, for then they would have to be distinct, but that by reduction both would be unreal. That is to say, they would be reduced not one to the other, and not by synthesis or admixture, but by annihilation. All distinctions would be seen to be conceptual.

If we stray for a moment away from metaphysics and into mysticism proper it becomes possible to show the surprisingly close relationship between the views of Peperell, Kant, Decartes and Nagarjuna, and to place the origin of the metaphysical scheme of mysticism where it belongs, beyond logic and conjecture in empiricism. In his *Taboo of Subjectivity: Towards a New Science of Consciousness*, Alan Wallace clarifies the connection between Peperell's neutral solution and Kant's subject of rational psychology.

Conceptually unstructured awareness – which is nondual from the phenomena that arise to it – is regarded as the ultimate reality, and the realisation of such nondual consciousness is the final goal of contemplative practice. In this experience, the very distinction between public, external space, in which physical phenomena appear to occur, and private, internal space, in which mental phenomena appear to occur, dissolves into a "mysterious space", which is the very nonduality between the conceptually constructed external and internal spaces. The ultimate nature of objective phenomena, therefore, is found to be none other than the ultimate nature of subjective phenomena; and that is the nonduality of appearances and awareness.

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<sup>15</sup> Peperell, R., & Punt, M.. *Screen consciousness: cinema, mind and world*. (Consciousness, Literature & the Arts, 4, 2006)

When one achieves perfect realisation of this state, in which there is no longer any difference between one's awareness during and after formal meditation sessions, it is claimed that one's consciousness becomes boundless in terms of the scope of its knowledge, compassion, and power. Hence, the contemplative pursuit of such realisation is said to be the most sublime of sciences.

Perhaps Descartes, Kant and those who share Wallace's view are not so far apart on this issue as they are usually portrayed. We would expect the views of philosophers to converge as roads to Rome and they may often be closer than they appear. Many people would vehemently object to the idea, rife among practitioners, that mysticism is or ever could be a science, but we see here that it is at least not the opposite of empiricism. We see that a neutral metaphysical position solves the Internalism-Externalism problem, or at least transforms it into a different kind of problem. Perhaps it also indicates how for its exponents mysticism can be a metaphysical position, a practice, a religion, a science and a way of life all at the same time.

Turning back to metaphysics we can say that for a neutral metaphysical position mind and body would be both two and one, different in a sense and identical in another. Were they not identical in one way they could not be different in another. Internalism and Externalism would be false, but each would be partially true as aspects of the final truth. It is not obvious that this idea is reasonable and it is for claims such as this that a neutral metaphysical position is often judged to contradict the laws of classical logic, in particular Aristotle's *tertium non datur* rule. Precisely the same situation would arise in respect of all metaphysical problems.

Despite this, for the sake of our argument we must now try to reconcile this position with the principles by which we usually judge the reasonableness of philosophical theories. For most people these would be the three principles formalised by Aristotle for the dialectic. For better or worse we have adopted these principles from the start here and are forced to say that wherever a theory, explanation or description of the universe requires that we abandon one of these principles we must judge it to be

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absurd, unreasonable and also, since we are proposing that logic and ontology coincide, false. Aristotle's laws would be inviolable for a rational worldview.

## PART IV

Very few seek knowledge in this world. Mortal or immortal, few really ask. On the contrary, they try to wring from the unknown the answers they have already shaped in their own minds – justifications, explanations, forms of consolation without which they can't go on. To really ask is to open the door to the whirlwind. The answer may annihilate the question and the questioner.

Anne Rice

Marius - The Vampire Lestat

Aristotle's laws for dialectic reasoning are the laws of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle. The law of identity (LI) states that A is A. It need not concern us for the moment. The law of non-contradiction (LNC) states that for any A it is impossible for both A and  $\sim A$  to be true. That is to say, if the assertion 'x is square' is true, then the assertion 'x is-not square' cannot also be true. Finally, the law of the excluded middle (LEM) states that for any A it is necessary for one of A and  $\sim A$  to be true. Either x is square or it is not, there is no third alternative. Where there is a third alternative then A and  $\sim A$  are not legitimate dialectical propositions.

These latter two laws are simple and clear and we use them with hardly a thought from almost the day we are born, regardless of whether we have heard of the dialectic or Aristotle. When we go to the cupboard for the marmalade either it is there or it is not. We do not expect it to be both in the cupboard and not-in the cupboard. In everyday life we are utterly dependent on these principles of reasoning for our moment to moment survival. Simple and familiar as they are, however, it is quite easy to inadvertently abuse them. Most importantly, where we apply these laws to pairs of assertions such as, 'The marmalade is in the cupboard,' and 'The marmalade is-not in

the cupboard,' it would be vital to ensure that A and  $\sim$ A really are two precisely contradictory assertions. If they are not then it would not be legitimate to apply either the LNC or the LEM. Logic would allow for both assertions to be true and for both to be false. The assertions 'It is raining,' and 'It is foggy,' for example, would not form a contradictory pair of the form A and  $\sim$ A. Both assertions could be true without this breaking the LNC, and both could be false without this breaking the LEM. As a consequence the idea that it can be both raining and foggy at the same time or neither does not seem paradoxical to us. Only where A and  $\sim$ A are a true contradictory pair could the LNC and LEM be the laws of thought. To know how to apply these laws legitimately, therefore, we must be very clear as to what, according to Aristotle, would constitute a true contradictory pair of assertions.

Aristotle deals at length with contradictory pairs in *De Interpretatione*.<sup>16</sup> Here, for the dialectic, he gives the rule for contradictory pairs, or the formal condition under which it is legitimate to apply the LNC and LEM.

Of every contradictory pair, one member is true and the other false.

From this rule it follows tautologically that unless it is legitimate to apply the LNC and LEM to a pair of assertions they are not a true contradictory pair. A metaphysical question would be a dilemma only where it asks us to choose one member of a true contradictory pair of assertions. Where it does not it would be a category error.

Aristotle gives examples of permissible exceptions to his laws, instances where it would not be legitimate to apply them. If we look upon these as illegitimate applications of the laws then we can say that the LNC and LEM would be inviolable for any rational philosophy and that wherever Aristotle says it is legitimate to apply these laws we can allow of no exceptions, transgressions or modifications whatsoever. A rational way of reasoning would obey Aristotle's three laws just so long as they are rigorously applied.

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<sup>16</sup> See Whittaker, C. W., *Aristotle's De Interpretatione: Contradiction and Dialectic*. I follow Whittaker's reading of this text throughout and am heavily indebted to him for this part of the discussion.

If we take this approach then were we to find Heraclitus' statement, 'We are and are not' to be comprised of two contradictory assertions we would have to judge his doctrine unreasonable. Not necessarily false, although this would be the implication, but contrary to reason. If, on the other hand, his statement would not comprise a true contradictory pair then it cannot be refuted in Aristotelian logic and in this sense would not be unreasonable. It would simply be a case of it being rainy and foggy at the same time, or neither. What we must establish, then, if we are to decide Proposition *b*), is where it would be legitimate to apply Aristotle's laws and where it would not. Heisenberg concludes that the LEM at least must be modified for quantum mechanics, and it may seem necessary to modify this law for a neutral metaphysical position. If it would be illegitimate to apply it in either case, however, then it would be unnecessary to modify it in either case.

The importance of being able to identify true contradictory pairs stems from their essential role in the practice of the dialectic. If we cannot identify such pairs then we cannot reason dialectically, and perhaps not even rationally. For a dialectical debate one player will propose a thesis and the others would attempt to refute it. They would do this by asking a series of questions chosen in such a way as to lead the proposing player to contradict himself, and thus to refute his or her own thesis. These two roles may be and often are played by the same person, simply in order to get through the day. For the refutation to work the questioner must ask only legitimate dialectical questions. A dialectical question is one that forces the answerer to assert the truth of one member of a contradictory pair of propositions and the falsity of the other. Simply put, a dialectical question is one that demands a yes or no answer. To such questions the first player is free to answer as they please, and the answer they give must be accepted. To refute their thesis we would not challenge their answers but use them to derive a self-contradiction revealing the absurdity of their position. Nagarjuna's and Bradley's method for refuting positive metaphysical positions is dialectical in this sense.<sup>17</sup> Both show that for any positive metaphysical position there is a series of dialectical questions by which it can be reduced to absurdity. Proposition *b*) states that

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<sup>17</sup> The practice of dialectical debate is a part of the core curriculum for the Tibetan universities. In philosophy, the Dalai Lama remarks, 'there can be no progress without contradiction.'

it would be impossible to refute a neutral metaphysical position in this way, and that in this sense it is logically defensible.

Aristotle warns us against combining assertions into pairs for which it is not the case that one member is true and the other false. In such cases the answerer cannot be expected to provide an answer. The answerer would have to assert that one member of the pair is true and the other false while knowing this is not the case. ‘Have you stopped beating your wife?’ would be an over-worked example. Category-errors are fatal to the system, as we see when we ask ‘Is the marmalade in the jar or the cupboard?’

Heraclitus’ assertion, ‘We are and are not,’ therefore, may or may not break the laws for rational thinking, depending on what he meant. It might look as if it must, but if we assume that he shared Nagarjuna’s double-aspect view of reality, for which nothing *really* exists, then this statement would contain a complementary pair of assertions. It would be partly true that ‘we are’ and partly true that ‘we are not’, while if we simply state ‘we are’ or ‘we are not’ then we would be adopting an absurd positive metaphysical position. His assertion would state no more than that it is not exactly true to say *either* ‘we are’ *or* ‘we are not’. There would be no contradictory pair, just two false assertions combined so as to point beyond themselves to a more subtle truth, the need to sublimate these contradictory ideas for the final truth. Clearly these two assertions cannot form a contradictory pair if his thesis is that neither of them is true. In metaphysics these two propositions are usually considered mutually exclusive and as exhausting the possibilities, but this is not a view forced on us by logic. Rather, as Kant and so many others have found, logic suggests this is an incorrect view. In logic the illogical mean will always seem more plausible than the absurdity of the extremes.

There is another condition a contradictory pair of assertions must meet before it would be legitimate to enforce Aristotle’s rules. Aristotle tells us that the negation of an assertion must be internal to it, such that one statement must assert a combination of subject and predicate and the other their separation. Whittaker explains:



For Aristotle, negation is internal to a sentence. An affirmation claims that two elements, denoted by two words, are combined. In ‘Socrates sits,’ for example, it is asserted that Socrates and sitting cohere as a single compound entity. A negation makes the opposite claim about the same simple elements: that is, it represents them as separated rather than as combined. In an affirmation, it is the verb that signifies the combination of subject and predicate, and so makes an assertion into a claim that something holds of something else, rather than a mere list. Since it is the verb which expresses the combination of subject and predicate, it is the verb which must be negated if they are to be represented instead as divided. As ‘is’ expresses a combination, so ‘is not’ expresses a separation. The process of negation, then, involves going to the heart of the assertion, rather than treating the assertion as an atom, and affixing the negation sign to the outside.

He considers the situation for the sentence, ‘Man is just.’

We find that other words in the sentence may also be negated, as in ‘not-man’ or ‘not-just,’ but an assertion will only be a negation if the verb or copula itself is negated. So, the negation ‘man is-not just’ must be distinguished from the affirmation ‘man is not-just.’ One asserts a combination between man and not-just, while the other asserts a separation between man and just: thus, one is an affirmation and the other is a negation, and, since the two assertions do not both cite the same predicate, they must belong to different contradictory pairs.

Hence the assertions, ‘An electron is a wave’ and ‘An electron is a particle’ would not form a true contradictory pair. Each would belong to a different pair, and the rules for the dialectic would need no modification for a theory stating that electrons have both or neither of these properties. Hegel would say that these two concepts, a particle and a wave, if we mean an unextended point and an infinitely extended field, are equivalent or co-dependent. One is impossible without the other, as we can verify by a thought experiment. We can imagine an infinitely small point to just the same extent that we can imagine an infinitely large space containing it. The two concepts are complementary, a single concept comprised of two aspects, each dependent on the other for its existence. For the truth we would have to look beyond this apparent contradiction. Aristotle’s laws would not fall apart just because quantum mechanics is very strange. He covered all the eventualities. The correct negation for the affirmation ‘An electron is a wave’ would be ‘An electron is-not a wave.’ Consequently, we can assert that an electron is both a wave and a particle or neither a wave nor a particle,

and neither assertion can be reduced to absurdity in logic. They are reasonable ideas even if they seem incomprehensible.

To summarise, if we are to show that a neutral metaphysical position would give rise to contradictory assertions about the universe such as to render it logically indefensible or 'unreasonable', then first we must show that these contradictory assertions would qualify as true contradictory pairs and are not just mismatched assertions that could lawfully both be true or false. At the very least we would have to be sure that the truth of one or both of them is being asserted. As we have seen, however, for a neutral metaphysical position this will never be the case. This renders it irrefutable in the dialectic.

If the professors at Butler's Colleges of Unreason see the 'middle way' solution for philosophical dilemmas as 'illogical,' this can only be on the grounds that it would require a modification to Aristotelian logic. If it actually broke the laws then it would be no less absurd than the other two solutions, and if it required no modification of them then it would not be illogical. This view, that the 'illogical mean' is the solution for metaphysical dilemmas is sustainable because we cannot demonstrate that it is not. True or false, it is a view that logic cannot refute. The idea that this solution is illogical rather than downright absurd may be enough to allow it to survive in philosophy departments as a curiosity, but it is clearly not enough to make it plausible. What would make it plausible is if Butler's professors are wrong, as Proposition *b*) claims. For Nagarjuna there would be no such thing as a philosophical dilemma and so no modification to ordinary logic or recourse to 'illogic' would be required to solve one. They would seem to be dilemmas only when we ignore Aristotle's rules. These rules are regularly overlooked. In dialectic logic when we ask whether the universe begins with Something or Nothing we would be breaking them. The true contradiction would be between Something and not-Something, or between Nothing and not-Nothing. If, therefore, we answer 'no' to the Something-Nothing question, our answer would be paradoxical or illogical only in the sense that it is impossible to imagine a phenomenon that is not unambiguously a member of one or the other category. This failure of imagination has no bearing on the formal reasonableness or even the plausibility of our answer. If we take this approach to the problems of philosophy then it would be

Nagarjuna's solution for them, and the reason why it survives the Aristotelian argument he makes against all other solutions.

If this is a correct analysis then there is nothing paradoxical about Pepperell's proposal that Internalism and Externalism are false. The proposition that Mind-only and Matter-only metaphysical theories are false cannot be refuted in logic, and it would explain the inconclusiveness of the debate in traditional metaphysics and modern consciousness studies. The conclusion Pepperell draws from this cannot be refuted just as long as we apply the laws of logic more carefully than we normally need to in everyday life, when hunting for the marmalade say, or even than we do for much of metaphysics, and more as we would for quantum mechanics or Dialethism. If a neutral metaphysical position seems incomprehensible that is another matter. If the difficulty of making sense of Nagarjuna's doctrine does bear on its plausibility then it probably lends it some. 'The way we have to describe Nature is incomprehensible to us,' Feynman remarked during a public lecture given in the 1950's, and for physics little has changed in the meantime. If a neutral metaphysical scheme describes Nature correctly we would not expect it to be easy to comprehend. In all other respects its comprehensibility is irrelevant here. If we decide, on the basis of Aristotle's guidelines for their use, that a neutral metaphysical position would not constitute a breach of the laws for the dialectic nor require their modification, then we must find Proposition *b*) true.

## Part V

The position is simply this. In ordinary algebra, complex values are accepted as a matter of course, and the more advanced techniques would be impossible without them. In Boolean algebra (and thus, for example, in all our reasoning processes) we disallow them. Whitehead and Russell introduced a special rule, which they called the Theory of Types, expressly to do so. Mistakenly, as it now turns out. So, in this field, the more advanced techniques, although not impossible, simply don't yet exist. At the present moment we are constrained, in our reasoning processes, to do it the way it was done in Aristotle's day.

This, then, is the case that can be made in metaphysics for a neutral metaphysical position, or a sketch of its main components. Perhaps in this version it is not convincing, but it may be enough to show that while there is undoubtedly a sense in which mysticism is 'at the opposite end to rational thought,' as Paul Davies puts it, it is not in the sense that its metaphysical scheme would be contrary to reason. We can now update our argument with a necessary proviso.

- a) All positive metaphysical positions are logically indefensible.
- b) A neutral metaphysical position is logically defensible.
- c) The universe is either metaphysically neutral or paradoxical.

The conclusion is now more secure and all three propositions ought to be decidable by analysis. No appeal to mysticism is necessary, and yet this is an argument that must be defeated in philosophy if we wish to dismiss mysticism's doctrine of unity as self-delusion or superstition.

It is a strictly metaphysical argument and as such it leaves open the possibility that a neutral metaphysical position would contradict the facts of the empirical sciences. There is a widespread presumption that eventually it will be found to do so, though no evidence as yet. This speculation cannot be suppressed in logic, where it will always remain a theoretical possibility that such contradictory facts exist, or even that the universe is paradoxical. Perhaps not all apples fall down. All we can say is that no empirical counter-evidence has been found to date. We need not worry that some evidence has been discovered and we have not heard about it, for the first person to announce a fact inconsistent with the truth of the perennial philosophy will become world-famous very quickly. As it happens, when we examine cases what we see is that rather than contradicting the facts this doctrine has over time become more and more obviously in conformity with them. The theory of emptiness was wholly incompatible with the old Newtonian universe, but it is difficult to see how it can be a bad theory if quantum mechanics is a good one. Moreover, on the analysis here it would be as true

in physics as it is in logic that proving Nagarjuna's theory false would entail proving that the universe is paradoxical, and in physics and metaphysics this is just as impossible to do as proving the opposite.

By adding two further propositions our syllogism may be converted into something like a proof that the universe is not paradoxical. In metaphysics, where logical terms generally have referents 'out there' in reality, a logical argument depends on a universe that is systematic, law-governed, that is in most respects predictable, that evolves over time according to laws which would not contravene the laws by which we think. At the very least, metaphysicians must assume that these are qualities of our own minds and brains. We may not often make this premise explicit but it must always be there at least implicitly. As Bradley points out, that the universe is law-governed and systematic must be adopted as an initial premise even for an argument that the universe is paradoxical or unreasonable. For our argument to work we must either assume that the universe is reasonable, such that logical reasoning would be a guide to the truth about it, or, as we have here, add a proviso to our conclusion in case it is not. We could, if we wished, now drop this final proviso and instead make the reasonableness of the universe our starting premise. Then our starting premise would become also our final conclusion. Our starting premise would state that the universe is reasonable, such that all explanations of it are unreasonable except for the true one, and this premise would allow us to construct an argument proving that this is the case.

It might be objected that neither Nagarjuna's nor Bradley's proof is successful, that Proposition *a*) has never been satisfactorily proved. This objection is possible because it is difficult to decide whether their proofs are successful. It would be very easy to doubt it. The issues are highly technical and few people would be competent to judge. This author is not one of them. But it does not really matter. While it would reflect badly on the skills of these philosophers if their proofs did fail it would make no difference here. The failure of a proof is not a counter-proof. Their common result appears to be unassailable regardless of how it was reached. Metaphysics depends on an assumption that the universe has exactly one reasonable explanation. This seems to be a widely agreed principle everywhere and is presumably the reason why philosophers argue with each other. While this one explanation may or may not be

comprehensible, whether in practice or in principle, it is usually assumed that it will be logically defensible. If we assume that the universe is reasonable, and as long there is not an infinite quantity of logically absurd explanations of the universe to wade through, then sooner or later, by a process of elimination, metaphysics must arrive at a reasonable explanation and it will be the correct one. This will be the only result that metaphysics can produce. This is what we would expect and what our initial premise predicts. And right from the start, over and over again, metaphysics has produced the same result. Those who see this as a failure of metaphysics see no significance in this result but they reach it all the same. Nagarjuna's proof is famous for its rigour, brevity, clarity, elegance and explanatory power, but he proves only what quite ordinary metaphysicians routinely discover. His proof is an important philosophical exegesis of the Buddha's teachings, but read purely as a logical proof it is probably redundant in today's metaphysics, where his result has been reproduced in so many ways by countless people during the intervening centuries.

It may seem implausible that it is possible to work out the truth about the universe in metaphysics, and there is no getting away from the fact that this is what is being proposed here. But is this not exactly what we would expect to be able to do? Why would it have to be impossible? When we assume that the universe is reasonable we assume that in principle it is possible for us to work out the truth about it in metaphysics. If we find that we can actually do this then we need not very surprised, regardless of how surprising our conclusion turns out to be. Metaphysics cannot be an antidote for dogmatic superstition if it is not a guide to truth. It proceeds by contradiction, by abduction, by inference to the best explanation, and if the universe is reasonable, and if we make no mistakes, then this procedure will eventually eliminate all logically absurd views. When we find that there is just one view remaining, and that try as we might we cannot eliminate it, then this is what we assumed would happen right from the start. This is how metaphysics is supposed to be.

Suppose the case for a neutral metaphysical position has been made, or might one day be made. What would remain to be done? Anything? Do we all go home? Is there still a research program or is it the end of metaphysics? It seems clear that it would be the end of metaphysics as we know it, or as many of us have known it for a long time, but

only in the sense that the boundaries of traditional metaphysics would have to be extended. Far from being the end of metaphysics it would be the final recognition that metaphysics has a vital role to play in our understanding of ourselves and our world. It would remain forever a compulsory stage of the analytically inclined philosopher's journey, just not the final destination. There could never be an end to metaphysics while each generation of thinkers must retrace the steps of their predecessors in order to confirm and understand its conclusions. To avoid it entirely would be possible, but only by taking its ultimate futility on faith and setting out from where metaphysics usually ends, as the Buddha, whose focus is strictly soteriological, advises us to do. But we would not have to avoid it entirely to go beyond what a strictly scholastic metaphysics can achieve. We do not have to agree that a successful case for a neutral position is where metaphysics has to end, and can argue instead that this is where it begins in earnest. If we give metaphysics this broader definition then a vast amount of work would remain to be done, and much of it over and over again.

Wittgenstein tells us that once we have climbed the ladder of his propositions we must abandon it. It will have served its purpose. In much the same way, once we have used our traditional metaphysics to refute all positive metaphysical positions we can abandon it. But not abolish it. Each philosopher will want to climb the ladder themselves. The survival of the traditional European model of metaphysics, constrained by an unrigorous medieval neo-Aristotelian logic to the study of positive metaphysical positions, is not threatened by this diagnosis of its problems, for its problems will always need to be understood and solved. A formal study of them would be necessary for a philosophical understanding of Nagarjuna's solution even if in the end we reject it. And even if we find we must reject it will at least have dispensed with the popular idea that metaphysics is a waste of time.

If we define metaphysics as it is defined in mysticism, as the philosophical and scientific study of reality, existence and knowledge, then the concession that mysticism is a legitimate metaphysical doctrine would revitalise the traditional western academic discipline. It would now include the task of translating, systematising and making sense of mysticism in metaphysics, even if only for the purpose of once and for all refuting it, since we would no longer be able to simply ignore it. Whether we would still be

writing footnotes to Plato might depend on how we interpret him, but even if this is all we are doing they would be important notes. At this time these notes do not include a refutation of the view proposed here, and this glaring omission would require more than a footnote to repair. Other interesting questions arise once we relax our boundaries and allow them to be asked. We might ask how the ethical scheme of the Buddha would follow from the neutrality of his metaphysical position. If we can answer this question then we have used metaphysics to ground an ethical scheme in Nature. There seems no good reason why the study of this question should not be called metaphysics. There are dozens of such questions, and of such complexity and subtlety as to keep a metaphysician in work for ever. Metaphysics is, after all, alive and well in Buddhism, where meditation encompasses analysis. But the research program, which is what it would become if we throw off our shackles in this way, would have to be freed from the confines of medieval European metaphysics. Its boundaries are man made and do not define where the issues begin and end.

Opportunities in other areas of knowledge would be similar in potential since many of the issues discussed here are under-researched. We would have to venture into some poorly charted areas of knowledge. In physics we might ask how the topology of Nagarjuna's universe, which is somehow both extended and unextended, or neither exactly extended nor unextended, can be squared with quantum cosmology. In religion, if we really are in search of a metaphysic, we might examine what a neutral metaphysical scheme would imply for the interpretation of the scriptures of our own religion. Usually it is not difficult to find evidence of it in the language of our prophets and sages. In consciousness studies we might investigate the practicality of the modifications to Chalmers's nonreductive 'naturalistic dualism' that would be required to make it equivalent with Nagarjuna's doctrine, or with Barkin's 'relative phenomenalism', and then see whether it would work as a fundamental theory.

Mathematics is not the topic here, but so close is its connection with metaphysics that for the sake of the plausibility of our argument we must note one crucial mathematical implication. It might be objected that Proposition *b*) cannot be true, since to be considered reasonable, in the sense this term has been used here, a theory of the world as a whole, of everything there is, would have to take the form of a complete and



consistent formal axiomatic system of sufficient complexity to include mathematics. This is usually thought to be an impossible object. This objection, however, only draws attention to one of the most credible features of a neutral metaphysical position. The incompleteness theorem would be a proof of the necessity for such a theory. Gödel showed that the problem of completing a consistent metaphysical theory must arise for formal reasons, that it is not simply a lack of data, a fault with human reasoning or because the universe is paradoxical, and thus that it might not necessarily be a fault of mysticism that it cannot just come straight out and describe the universe in an unambiguous way. It is simply a property of sufficiently complex formal axiomatic systems of description that they cannot describe a universe that is complete and consistent. This is a limit of language, of course, and not evidence that universe is incomplete and/or inconsistent. In a mathematical translation Proposition *b*) would state that a neutral metaphysical position describes an exceptional kind of system, one for which all metaphysical statements having a Fregeian truth-value would be undecidable, consistent with its unconditioned axiom, the unmarked piece of paper from which Brown's calculus of distinctions emerges, and as such is not constrained by the incompleteness theorem. For such a metaphysical system true theorems would seem paradoxical. For this system there would be not just the odd undecidable but true statement hidden away somewhere in the system, but all selective statements about the world as a whole would be undecidable. The incompleteness theorem would apply rather differently in these circumstances.

It is not an objection, but there is certainly something worrying about the idea that we might be able to work out the truth about our own existence. Were we to succeed, or come to think we have succeeded, we would no longer be free to believe what we like. It is a worry that philosophers must live with. Metaphysics is a dangerous game if played seriously, and no doubt this does not contribute to its popularity. It might be important to say here, therefore, in order to make this legalistic argument for mysticism less immediately confrontational, that even if we were to become convinced that the universe can be described in metaphysics as a neutral metaphysical position, and even if we were to become convinced that the teachings of the wisdom traditions on some of these issues are essentially true, then we would not immediately be forced to throw away all of our current beliefs. In this respect mysticism is quite non-

threatening. It is not as if we can understand its claims and their consequences for our beliefs from reading an essay. It is not at all obvious what it says about God, for instance, who for many readers will be the elephant in the room here, and it is really quite difficult to tell. In Islam, in quiet corners, the debate continues as to whether it is correct to say that Allah ('Al-ahad,' 'the One') may properly be called God, and with a unanimity that Schrödinger suggestively likens to the particles in a ideal gas the mystics say that we are God. On the other hand, in his *Enneads* Plotinus reminds us of the limits of our languages and concepts, and advises us that when we read the sayings of mysticism it is usually best to preface them with the words 'It is as if'. If theism and atheism form an antinomy the adoption of a neutral metaphysical position confuses rather than clarifies the issue and we are not immediately confronted by a difficult choice. If we are swayed by the argument here we would have to acknowledge the plausibility of the doctrine of mysticism, but we would not immediately be confronted by a list of beliefs we are forced to adopt or reject. Rather, we would be faced with a set of conundrums that make it difficult to know what to believe. Mysticism asks us to suspend our beliefs and search for the facts. Only in empirical practice, where we cannot dismiss unpalatable conclusions as sophistry or the philosophical issues as too complex to call, can we actually be forced to alter our beliefs. We can also note that a neutral position is not the opposite of a positive position, for its opposite will be another positive position to which a neutral position is equally opposed. Whatever metaphysical belief a person holds there would most likely be some truth in it. There would be a certain sense in which Materialism is true and a sense in which Idealism is true; a sense in which the universe is eternal and a sense in which it is timeless; a sense in which we have freewill and a sense in which we do not; a sense in which consciousness exists and a sense in which it does not, and so on *ad infinitum* for the attributes of the Absolute, and also a sense in which the Absolute has no attributes, and even a sense in which there is no Absolute. These are symmetries that can be unbroken, distinctions that can be sublated, category-errors that can be corrected. Clearly it is difficult to pick a head-on fight with a neutral position, and its implications are not immediately threatening to our worldview or lifestyle in logic, where even if we understand the implications of our conclusions we can never be sure that we have not miscalculated, or even that the universe obeys our rules.

We have been concerned here only with certain aspects of mysticism, those immediately relevant to the case at hand, and only with what can be learnt of mysticism from a literature survey. The result may be a partial, prosaic and even in some ways misleading. Fortunately, there is a vast ocean of literature available to correct any false impression conveyed here, little of which suffers from these faults. It is one of the great joys of studying this literature that it describes a world about as unprosaic as it would be possible for a world to be. This is not an introduction to mysticism, however, and our propositional argument does not even mention it. It is an attempt to show that a case may be made for a neutral metaphysical position in logic and, in support of this case, that this would be the position necessary for the perennial philosophy.

End

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