

Nāgārjuna: Master of Paradox, Mystic or Perpetrator of Fallacies?

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11 April 2003*

1 Introductory remarks

In a chapter entitled “Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought,” Jay Garfield and Graham Priest make the following observation about Nāgārjuna.

...his influence in the Mahāyāna Buddhist world is not only unparalleled in that tradition but exceeds in that tradition the influence of any single Western philosopher. The degree to which he is taken seriously by so many eminent Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese philosophers, and lately by so many Western philosophers, alone justifies attention to his corpus. Even were he not such a titanic figure historically, the depth and beauty of his thought and the austere beauty of his philosophical poetry would justify that attention. While Nāgārjuna may perplex and often infuriate, and while his texts may initially defy exegesis, anyone who spends any time with Nāgārjuna’s thought inevitably develops a deep respect for this master philosopher. (Garfield & Priest, 2002, p. 86)

At least one of these claims—the last one—is false, for it is a universal proposition that can be falsified by citing a counterexample. I can cite myself as a counterexample to the proposition that “anyone who spends any time with Nāgārjuna’s thought inevitably develops a deep respect for this master philosopher.” Although I have worked with Nāgārjuna’s texts off and on for more than thirty years, I am afraid I have not yet developed a deep respect for his thought, nor do I regard him as a masterful philosopher. Indeed, I could go on to say that, perhaps because of some profound insensitivity on my part I see very little of either depth or beauty or philosophical poetry in Nāgārjuna’s work, nor can I claim to be either perplexed or infuriated by it. To make matters worse, I still have not changed my mind about Nāgārjuna’s influence since I wrote the following in 1994:

*This paper was prepared to read before the Philosophy Department at Smith College.

Nāgārjuna's writings had relatively little effect on the course of subsequent Indian Buddhist philosophy. Despite his apparent attempts to discredit some of the most fundamental concepts of abhidharma, abhidharma continued to flourish for centuries, without any appreciable attempt on the part of ābhidharmikas to defend their methods of analysis against Nāgārjuna's criticisms. And despite Nāgārjuna's radical critique of the very possibility of having grounded knowledge (*pramāṇa*), the epistemological school of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti dominated Indian Buddhist intellectual circles, again without any explicit attempt to answer Nāgārjuna's criticisms of their agenda. Aside from a few commentators on Nāgārjuna's works, who identified themselves as Mādhyamikas, Indian Buddhist intellectual life continued almost as if Nāgārjuna had never existed. (Hayes, 1994)

Clearly, there is some difference of opinion between Jay Garfield and myself. My principal task for today will not be to try to show that one or the other of us is correct in our assessment, for I think we are in a realm where the dictum *de gustibus non disputandum est* is applicable. Rather, what I should like to do today is simply to point out areas in which our tastes differ. In doing this, I should also like to consider some reflections to my 1994 paper offered by John A. Taber in an article called "On Nāgārjuna's So-called Fallacies: A Comparative Approach," since Taber, like Garfield, draws upon possible parallels among philosophers of several different traditions. As we shall see, however, Taber favors what could probably best be seen as a mystical interpretation of Nāgārjuna, while Garfield holds that

Some interpreters of Nāgārjuna, indeed, succumb to the easy temptation to read him as a simple mystic or an irrationalist of some kind. But it is significant that none of the important commentarial traditions in Asia, however much they disagree in other respects, regard him in this light. And indeed most recent scholarship is unanimous in this regard as well, again despite a wide range of divergence in interpretations in other respects. Nāgārjuna is simply too committed to rigorous analytical argument to be dismissed as a mystic. (Garfield, 2002, p. 87)

Let me begin by recapitulating just a few key points from my 1994 paper, and then turn to Taber's response to that, and finally offer some reflections on Garfield's assessment of Nāgārjuna.

2 Nāgārjuna as a perpetrator of fallacies

In my own attempt to answer the question why so many prominent Indian Buddhist scholastics apparently ignored Nāgārjuna, neither bothering to refute him nor to make explicit improvements to the foundations he laid, I

drew attention to an answer to this very question provided by Richard Robinson 1972 in an article entitled “Did Nāgārjuna Really Refute All Philosophical Views?” In this article, Robinson compares Nāgārjuna’s presentation to a sleight-of-hand trick, rather like the one of hiding a pea under one of three shells and then moving the shells so quickly that the observer loses track of which shell the pea is hidden under. As Robinson described Nāgārjuna’s game:

Its elements are few and its operations are simple, though performed at lightning speed and with great dexterity. And the very fact that he cannot quite follow each move reinforces the observer’s conviction that there is a trick somewhere. The objective of this article is to identify the trick and to determine on some points whether or not it is legitimate.

The “trick” that Robinson discovered lay in Nāgārjuna’s definition of the term “svabhāva” in such a way that it was self-contradictory. If the *svabhāva* as defined by Nāgārjuna exists, says Robinson, “it must belong to an existent entity, that is, it must be conditioned, dependent on other entities and possessed of causes. But by definition it is free from conditions, nondependent on others, and not caused. Therefore, it is absurd to maintain that a *svabhāva* exists” (Robinson, 1972, p. 326). Exposing the absurdity of the notion of *svabhāva* as defined by Nāgārjuna only does damage, of course, to those who actually used the term as defined by him. In the remainder of his article, Robinson shows that in fact none of Nāgārjuna’s philosophical rivals did use the term “svabhāva” as he had redefined it, and therefore no one was really refuted by him. In his concluding remark, Robinson says:

The nature of the Mādhyamika trick is now quite clear. It consists of (a) reading into the opponent’s views a few terms which one defines for him in a self-contradictory way, and (b) insisting on a small set of axioms which are at variance with common sense and not accepted in their entirety by any known philosophy. It needs no insistence to emphasize that the application of such a critique does not demonstrate the inadequacy of reason and experience to provide intelligible answers to the usual philosophical questions.

While essentially agreeing with Robinson in his assessment of Nāgārjuna, I suggested that the Mādhyamika bag of tricks also contained one other ploy, namely, the liberal use of equivocation.

2.1 The case for equivocation

N.B This section is lifted entirely from Hayes (1994, p. 311–313).

It is important to note that the position that Nāgārjuna examines is the common Buddhist view based upon the notion that each simple property

(*dharma*) is distinguished from every other simple property in virtue of possessing its own distinct nature, called its *svabhāva* or its own nature, which is a nature that no other simple property has. Each property's own nature is in effect its identity, in the sense of that by which it is differentiated from others. In his criticism of this view, Nāgārjuna plays on an ambiguity in "svabhāva," the word for own nature. The word "sva-bhāva" means a nature (*bhāva*) that belongs to the thing itself (*svasya*); it refers, in other words, to a thing's identity. But Nāgārjuna takes advantage of the fact that the word "svabhāva" could also be interpreted to mean the fact that a thing comes into being (*bhavati*) from itself (*svataḥ*) or by itself (*svena*); on this interpretation, the term would refer to a thing's independence. Assuming this latter analysis of the word, rather than the one that most Buddhists actually held, Nāgārjuna then points out that whatever comes into being from conditions is not coming into being from itself; and if a thing does not come into being from itself, then it has no *svabhāva*. But if a thing has no *svabhāva*, he says, it also has no *parabhāva*. Here, too, Nāgārjuna takes advantage of an ambiguity in the key word he is examining. The word "para-bhāva" can be analysed to mean either 1) that which has the nature (*bhāva*) of another thing (*parasya*), that is, a difference, or 2) the fact of coming into being (*bhavati*) from another thing (*parataḥ*), that is a dependence.

When one reads Nāgārjuna's argument in Sanskrit, it is not immediately obvious that the argument has taken advantage of an ambiguity in the key term. But when one tries to translate his argument into some other language, such as English or Tibetan, one finds that it is almost impossible to translate his argument in a way that makes sense in translation. This is because the terms in the language of translation do not have precisely the same range of ambiguities as the words in the original Sanskrit. In English, we are forced to disambiguate, and in disambiguating, we end up spoiling the apparent integrity of the argument.

Let's look at the phrasing of Nāgārjuna's argument in the original Sanskrit and see why it looks plausible. The original argument as stated in MMK 1:5 reads:

na hi svabhāvo bhāvānāṃ pratyayādiṣu vidyate |
avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate | |

Surely beings have no *svabhāva* when they have causal conditions. And if there is no *svabhāva*, there is no *parabhāva*.

As we have seen above, the word "svabhāva" can be interpreted in two different ways. It can be rendered either as **identity** (which I shall call *svabhāva*₁) or as **causal independence** (*svabhāva*₂). Similarly, the word "parabhāva" can be interpreted in two ways. It can be rendered as **difference** (*parabhāva*₁), or as **dependence** (*parabhāva*₂).

Now the sentence in MMK 1:5ab makes perfectly good sense if it is understood as employing *svabhāva*₂.

Statement 1 Surely beings have no **causal independence** when they have causal conditions. (na hi svabhāvaḥ bhāvānām pratyaya-ādiṣu vidyate |)

Statement 1 makes sense at face value, because it is obviously true that if something is dependent upon causal conditions, it is not independent of causal conditions. The sentence in MMK 1:5cd, on the other hand, makes better sense if it is understood as employing svabhāva₁ and parabhāva₁.

Statement 2 And if there is no **identity**, then there is no **difference**. (avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvaḥ na vidyate |)

Statement 2 also makes sense at face value, because a thing's identity is understood as a feature that distinguishes the thing from things other than itself; if a thing has no such features, then it has no identity and is therefore not distinguishable or different from other things.

It would be much more difficult to get a true statement out of the sentence in MMK 1:5cd if it were understood as employing svabhāva₂ and parabhāva₂.

Statement 3 And if [beings have] no **independence**, then they have no **dependence**. (avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvaḥ na vidyate |)

Indeed statement 3 seems to be quite false at face value. So if one gives Nāgārjuna the benefit of the doubt by assuming that he was trying to write sentences that were true (or at least appeared to be true at face value), one is likely to reject statement 3 as the correct interpretation of MMK 1:5cd and to adopt statement 2.

The problem that now arises is this: no matter how much sense statement 2 may make as an independent statement, it does not at all follow from statement 1. It only appears to follow in the original Sanskrit because of the ambiguity of the expressions involved. A careful logician would not be deceived by Nāgārjuna's argument, but it is phrased in such a way that it might very well take the unwary reader off guard.

3 Nāgārjuna and the principle of co-existing counterparts

My claim that Nāgārjuna's arguments are vitiated by logical fallacies has not gone unchallenged. One published response to this claim was presented in an interesting article by John Taber. While broadly agreeing that there may be something amiss in Nāgārjuna's reasoning, Taber maintains that I have misidentified the nature of the putative error that Nāgārjuna has made—I say “putative error” because, as we shall see in a moment, Taber eventually argues that what Nāgārjuna is doing may be something that is not at all undermined by the type of reasoning he offers. With reference to MMK 1.5, which says “Surely beings have no *svabhāva* when they have causal conditions, and if there is no *svabhāva*, there is no *parabhāva*,” Taber says:

If any fallacy is committed in karika 5, then, it is not a fallacy of equivocation but rather ... the fallacy—if it is a fallacy—that a thing cannot be a certain type unless its counterpart exists simultaneously with it. I shall call this the principle of coexisting counterparts. (Taber, 1998, p.216)

Later on in his paper, Taber elaborates on this point:

The principle of coexisting counterparts appears *prima facie* to ignore the fact that a thing in the first instance is what it is by virtue of its inherent properties and is only secondarily related to its counterparts, whatever those may be. A thing's being related to its counterparts can be said to be contingent in the sense that it derives from more basic properties that define the thing as such as well as other, external circumstances. Thus a dog is something other than a cat. But its being a dog is prior to whatever relation it may have to other creatures; it is a dog by virtue of the properties inherent in it. Only because it has those properties—and a cat has the properties that it has—is it other than a cat. Similarly, a woman is a mother of a child only secondarily. First and foremost she is a woman, and it is by virtue of her properties as a woman, as well as other circumstances, that she is a mother. She does not depend on the child in order to exist as a woman. (Taber, 1998, 217–218)

In what I regard to be the most interesting section of Taber's article, he explores the possibility that this principle of co-existing counterparts need not be seen as a fallacy at all. Rather, he says, Nāgārjuna's seemingly odd way of proceeding may well have stemmed from a profound experience of the interconnectedness of all things. Read in this way, Nāgārjuna could be seen as promoting a kind of thinking found in numerous mystical traditions—and, one might add, in Jungian psychology—in which one finds various ways of playing with the notion of the coincidence of opposites or the interpenetration of all entities. Taber makes a case for this possibility by citing various passages from such authors as Spinoza and Chuang-tzū and showing that there may well be a congruence between their thinking and Nāgārjuna's and suggesting that all these authors may have had insights similar to those of Heraclitus and Leibniz and various authors of the Hua-yen tradition of Buddhism. Being careful not to overstep the bounds of his textual evidence, Taber admits that this reading of Nāgārjuna is merely one of several possibilities.

Obviously, it would take us too far afield to try to document the idea in all these sources, and it would be impossible to show conclusively that it is precisely the same idea that is expressed in all of them. I can only assert somewhat baldly here, with the hope that the reader shares the impression, that the notion—or different versions of the notion—that everything in the cosmos is inti-

mately tied together, so that the existence of one implies the existence of all, even of that to which it is essentially opposed, occurs in a range of texts.

I propose that the MMK be seen as an attempt to articulate this vision, which for Nāgārjuna is ultimately based not on discursive reasoning but on some kind of non-discursive insight. In that case, the MMK should be seen as a transformative text which does not attempt to demonstrate the truth of interconnectedness, but rather to illustrate its implications in complete detail—the main implication for him being that the world of appearances is unreal—and thereby ultimately evoke the intuitive insight upon which it is based in the reader. The principle of coexisting counterparts, then, which contains the idea of the interconnectedness of entities in seed form, is not employed by Nāgārjuna as a premise—of his own or anyone else's—in his arguments. Rather, it represents his final position; it is the realization with which his philosophy begins and ends. As such, it cannot be criticized from the standpoint of common sense, and so cannot be declared a “fallacy;” for that would beg the very question at issue in Nāgārjuna's thought.

Thus I suggest that Nāgārjuna might only pretend in the MMK to demonstrate in rigorous philosophical fashion the illusory nature of the world. In reality his arguments serve only to describe the interconnectedness, hence illusoriness, of all phenomena, not establish it as true. They function to convey knowledge simply by displaying the perspective of highest truth in the fullest possible terms. The reader is not compelled to adopt that perspective by rigorous logic, but is invited to do so by making a paradigm shift, if you will—a leap beyond ordinary experience. Viewed in this way, the principle of co-existing counterparts can once again hardly be dismissed as a fallacy, a mere mistake of reasoning, because it expresses Nāgārjuna's main metaphysical insight. While it may be false, it cannot be trivially so. It hardly seems satisfactory to dismiss it on grounds of common sense, since the gist of the principle is to call common sense into question. (Taber, 1998, p. 237)

It should be clear from this passage that Taber, in describing Nāgārjuna as a thinker who had insights like those of various people whom we might call mystics, is hardly dismissing him. On the contrary, he is attempting to find a reading more charitable and felicitous than those put forward by Robinson and myself. Taber's is a reading that does not require seeing Nāgārjuna as Robinson and I do, namely, as a relatively primitive thinker whose mistakes in reasoning were eventually uncovered as the knowledge of logic in India became more sophisticated in subsequent centuries.

4 Nāgārjuna as an explorer beyond the frontiers of thought

Let me turn now to a discussion of the paper by Graham Priest and Jay Garfield entitled “Nāgārjuna and the Limits of Thought.” Since I assume this paper, or at least the views expressed in it, are well known in these parts, I shall not attempt a synopsis of it. Rather, what I should like to do is to offer a few observations on some specific points brought up in that paper. Let me by quoting a couple of passages that discusses two concepts that are at the heart of Nāgārjuna’s presentation, namely, the doctrine of two truths and the concept of *svabhāva* as the term is apparently understood by Nāgārjuna. First, the two truth theory, which is explained by Garfield and Priest in the following way:

Central to Nāgārjuna’s view is his doctrine of the two realities. There exist, according to Nāgārjuna, conventional reality and ultimate reality. Correspondingly, there are Two Truths: conventional truth, the truth about conventional reality; and ultimate truth, the truth about the ultimate reality—qua ultimate reality. For this reason, discussion of Nāgārjuna’s view is often phrased in terms of Two Truths, rather than two realities. (Garfield & Priest, 2002, p. 90)

Although this way of stating things has become standard and probably accurately reflects usage for the passage fifteen hundred years or so, I am afraid it may distort the picture of Nāgārjuna’s agenda. To speak of two realities makes the central question seem to be primarily one of ontology, of what there is. And insofar as it is framed as a question about reality, it may also be seen as a question about semantics, the relationship between what there is and how what there is expressed in symbols or thought about through symbol-based propositional thinking. Clearly, this is the issue that most preoccupies Garfield and Priest, who depict Nāgārjuna as a frontiersman adventurously exploring what they call the limits of thought. Although this way of speaking about Nāgārjuna is no doubt very appealing to modern philosophers who have become high by sniffing the fumes of various 20th century European philosophers, I suspect that Nāgārjuna’s program was probably considerably more down to earth.

Let me first say something about the theory of two so-called truths, What I should like to argue is that the distinction between *paramārtha* and *vyavahāra* is less concerned with ontology and semantics than with axiology, that is, with making judgements of value. The literal meaning of the term “paramārtha” is the highest or most excellent (*parama*) goal or objective (*artha*). For a Buddhist, of course, this is *nirvāna*, which is the eradication of the root causes of unpleasant experience (*duḥkha*). Here a contrast is being made between two basic orientations to life, or between two goods (*satya*). The lower of the two goods is the commercial good (*vyavahāra-satya*), which

brings only limited and temporary forms of contentment. The highest good (paramārtha-satya) is the lasting contentment that comes of having ceased to be attached. Attachment, of course, can be to various kinds of acquisition, both material and intellectual. Numerous Buddhist practices are effective in reducing attachment to material acquisitions. What Nāgārjuna claims he was offering was a method of reducing the attachment to intellectual attainments, such as views (*dr̥ṣṭi*) and even to the very process of thinking (*prapañca*). The holding of views is one of the many things that was said by the Buddha to result in disputation and competition, and ultimately to such forms of gross incompetence as violence and war. It is in this context, I believe, that we must understand the Buddha's statement "na mama pratijñā," which is often translated as Garfield and Priest render it: "I have no proposition" (Garfield & Priest, 2002, p. 98). As they point out, this certainly sounds self-contradictory, for "I have no proposition" sounds very much like a proposition. The locution of Nāgārjuna's is not quite so paradoxical, however, when we recall that the Sanskrit term "pratijñā" does not mean just any proposition. Rather it means a proposition in a dispute, a proposition for which one is prepared to adduce evidence to advance and defend in a competitive game. To say that one has no *pratijñā* is not to say that one is not saying; rather, it is to say that one is not going to argue with someone else in a competitive way that will produce a joyous winner—and therefore a mournful loser. This is not a statement about the limits of thought, but about making the aesthetic choice not to mar the potential beauty of life through unnecessary disputation that disturbs everyone's peace of mind.

Although I have misgivings about seeing Nāgārjuna as an adumbration of such clever Europeans as Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Derridas, let me continue to quote Garfield and Priest in their discussion of ultimate truth. They go on to say this:

What is ultimate truth/reality, according to Nāgārjuna? To understand this, we have to understand the notion of emptiness, which for Nāgārjuna is emphatically not nonexistence, but, rather, interdependent existence. For something to have an essence (Tibetan, *rang bzhin*; Sanskrit, *svabhāva*) is for it to be what it is, in and of itself, independently of all other things. (This entails, incidentally, that things that are essentially so are eternally so; for if they started to be, or ceased to be, then their so being would depend on other things, such as time.) To be empty is precisely to have no essence, in this sense. (Garfield & Priest, 2002, p. 91)

In saying this, Garfield and Priest have made an important observation. Incidentally, their observation reinforces the point made by Robinson and cited above, namely, his observation that Nāgārjuna defined the term "svabhāva" differently than the followers of the abhidharma tradition had done, and we might add his definition is also different from that used later by Dharmakīrti. Because the ābhidharmikas and epistemologists used the term differently

from how Nāgārjuna used it, his claim that beings have no *svabhāva* of the sort that he envisioned did not at all deter them from saying that all beings do have *svabhāvas* of the sort that they envisioned. What Nāgārjuna is saying is that no being has a fixed and permanent nature. What the ābhidarmikas maintained was that everything has features that distinguish it from other things. What Dharmakīrti maintained was that the distinguishing features of a being is nothing but the totality of specific causal factors (*hetusāmagrī*) on which the being uniquely depends. As John Taber points out, Nāgārjuna's tendency to use key terms in ways importantly different from how the person he tries to refute uses them is an example of the fallacy that the Naiyāyika philosophers called *chala*. *Chala* is defined as basing a refutation of a position on a term defined otherwise than how the term was defined by the opponent being refuted. It is, in other words, a particular kind of equivocation. In addition to the two distinct ways that Nāgārjuna himself uses the term "svabhāva," we can add these ways the term was used by other Buddhists. It is not difficult to see that all the ingredients have been gathered for a rather spectacular and messy philosophical muddle. Indeed, this muddle has kept Buddhist thinkers busy thinking for nearly two millennia.

5 Conclusions

Let me end by simply stating a few points that seem to remain open for fruitful discussion. First, I still find it intriguing that there can be such a difference in opinion between those who see Nāgārjuna as a trickster with a rather limited bag of tricks that he used with tediously predictable regularity and those who see in Nāgārjuna a philosopher of almost unparalleled significance. I wonder whether there is a way to find a felicitous middle way between these two evidently extreme views.

Second, I am struck by the fact that although the analyses of Robinson, Taber, Garfield and Priest differ in some important ways, they are not really at odds with one another. Agreeing with one of them does not require disagreeing with the others. It is quite possible, for example, that Taber was essentially correct in his portrayal of Nāgārjuna's insight into the interconnectedness of all things and that he was a mystic in the sense of someone who realized that wisdom consists in making space in one's thinking for opposites. To be a mystic in this sense is not at all to be a mystic in the sense that Garfield and Priest use the term, where it seems to mean an irrationalist who eschews logic and disparages the enterprise of offering systematic argumentation. Where Garfield and Priest clearly depart from Taber is that they see Nāgārjuna as seriously trying to put forth rigorous argumentation, while Taber suggests that he may have been only pretending to offer rigorous arguments. This makes Taber's Nāgārjuna, if not a trickster, at least an ironist.

Finally, there is no necessary tension between Garfield's claim that Nāgārjuna made a serious attempt to argue for a particular view of reality the claim by Robinson and me that in so doing he put forward fallacious argu-

ments. I am inclined to agree that Nāgārjuna had a serious philosophical agenda. It seems pretty clear to me that he wrote the *Mūla-madhyamakārikā* with the intention of making a knock-down argument against anything that might stand as a candidate to be a self (*ātman*). So seriously did he take the Indian Buddhist taboo against selfhood that he was not content with the standard Buddhist view that a complex being, such as a human being, has only a derivative self—a self derived from its constituent parts. He apparently felt an obsessive need to take the doctrine of non-self to its ultimate conclusion by showing that even the constituent parts of a complex being have no self. As Candrakīrti makes explicit, a *svabhāva* is to a constituent part as an *ātman* is to a sentient being, so what offering a demolition of the concept of *svabhāva* accomplishes is that it robs the complex being even of derivative selfhood. Taking all possibility of any kind of selfhood out of the picture was clearly Nāgārjuna's agenda. It is my opinion that he failed to accomplish what he said out to do, because he availed himself of faulty logic.

Given that I have still not been convinced that Nāgārjuna's project was not vitiated by serious flaws in his argumentation, I am naturally less inclined to take what Garfield and Priest have dubbed "Nāgārjuna's paradox" as an interesting paradox. Garfield and Priest describe what they call Nāgārjuna's paradox as follows:

If Nāgārjuna is correct in his critique of essence, and if it hence turns out that all things lack fundamental natures, it turns out they all have the same nature, that is, emptiness, and hence both have and lack that very nature.

While I agree that we might have an interesting paradox if Nāgārjuna was correct in his critique of essence, I do not think Nāgārjuna succeeded in his critique. So the paradox named for him turns out to be to very interesting. The interesting paradoxes, I take it, are those that, like the liar's paradox and Russell's paradox, use unexceptionable logic to arrive at surprising conclusions. Perhaps someone—let's call him pseudo-Nāgārjuna—may yet succeed in generating an interesting paradox of the type that Garfield and Priest describe. When that day comes, then Nāgārjuna's uninteresting pseudo-paradox may give way to pseudo-Nāgārjuna's interesting paradox.

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