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AGAINST METHODOLOGICAL POSITIVISM IN TEXTUAL STUDIES

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Abstract [1]

In the Indian subcontinent only such texts survived for more than a small number of centuries that were copied regularly. The texts available nowadays are the ones that have passed the filtre of history. The methodological decision to limit one's researches to texts that have survived, sometimes called methodological positivism, implies taking the side of traditions that have survived until today, at the expense of other traditions that may have existed. This decision is criticized in this paper.

The philologist who occupies himself with India has to work with texts that have survived until today. This is a truism, but one whose implications are not always fully realised. Texts in the Indian subcontinent that were composed more than just a few centuries ago and were not chiseled into stone or engraved on copper have only survived if they have been regularly copied. Manuscripts that are more than five centuries old are exceptional in India, and most do not live as long as that. I do not know the average life expectancy of a manuscript in the subcontinent; I am sure that it varies a lot from region to region depending on climatic and other conditions. It is however certain that for texts that were composed more than a thousand years ago we completely depend, with rare exceptions, on manuscripts that were copied from earlier manuscripts.

The implication of this well-known state of affairs is that texts that were no longer copied from a certain date onward have not left surviving copies. The question whether these texts were or were not widely read in their own time is irrelevant. All that counts is the interest for the text during the intervening centuries. Texts that were once important and widely studied may yet have disappeared for the simple reason that subsequent generations were not interested in

1 This is the text of a paper read at the working seminar called "Books lost, fragmented and forgotten: Life and Authority of the Absent Text," held at Jagiellonian University, Krakow, October 13–14, 2007.

copying them. It follows that we, modern researchers, only get to see texts that have passed through the filter of history. This filter of history has nothing to do with an active suppression or indexation of texts. Texts did not need to be prohibited in order to disappear. They disappeared all on their own, for the simple reason that no one bothered to copy them.

To get a clear picture of what I am talking about, consider Buddhism. This religion was once extremely important in India, and many aspects of Indian culture have been deeply influenced by that religion. Moreover, the Buddhist order in India has been called "the greatest scriptural composition community in human history", producing "what is arguably the world's most extensive scriptural corpus".[2] And yet, if we had no other sources about Buddhism at our disposal than the ones that have survived in Hindu India, our knowledge about its role in the subcontinent would be minimal. Most of what we know about Indian Buddhism we owe to its survival in the margins of the subcontinent and especially outside it. If Buddhism had not survived outside India, our knowledge about its position in Indian history would be almost nil.

Ājīvikism is an example of a religion that, like Buddhism, disappeared in India but which, unlike Buddhism, did *not* survive outside the subcontinent.[3] The inscriptional evidence suggests that Ājīvikism was not less important than Buddhism at the time of the Mauryas. It survived in Southern India until the fourteenth or fifteenth century, almost two millenia after its creation. During this long period it may have exerted an influence on other currents of thought.[4] And yet not a single Ājīvika text has survived. We know about the existence of this religion through inscriptions, and about its teachings through the criticism which others directed at it.[5] The fact that there were no Ājīvikas for the last five centuries or so may, all by itself, be responsible for the present absence of texts belonging to that school.

Buddhism and Ājīvikism are examples of religions that could not look after their literary traditions in the subcontinent. A philosophical school that disappeared without leaving anything beyond the critical remarks of its opponents is that of the Cārvākas.[6] This school once had a Sūtra text and several commentaries, but only fragments remain in the works of its opponents. All of these examples illustrate that literary traditions that are not looked after—i.e., whose

2 Davidson, 2002: 147.
3 Basham, 1951.
4 Bronkhorst, 2007b.
5 See Bronkhorst, 2003; 2007a: 38 ff.
6 Bronkhorst, 2007a: p. 150 ff.

texts are not copied and recopied all the time—simply disappear. We know about Cārvākas and Ājīvikas from the literary traditions that *have* survived. This they owe to the circumstance that those surviving traditions considered the two threatening enough during certain periods to feel obliged to criticize and reject them. In doing so they kept memories alive that might otherwise have been lost altogether.

The situation is more delicate in traditions that have survived until today, but which have undergone certain modifications in the process. Subsequent thinkers of a philosophical school, for example, are not always willing to enter into a debate with their predecessors on points where they disagree. Outside critics are not hampered in this way. This leads to the remarkable situation that, in order to learn about the early history of a particular philosophical school, we may depend as much, sometimes more, on its outside critics than on its representatives whose works have survived. Sāṃkhya is a good example. We know from a variety of non-Sāṃkhya thinkers—among them Bhartṛhari, Dharmapāla, Mallavādin, but also the much later (10th century) Rāmakaṇṭha—that Sāmkhya had held the view that substances are nothing but collections of qualities.[7] Nothing of the kind appears in the surviving Sāṃkhya texts. Indeed, there is reason to think that the major change that took place within Sāṃkhya and that resulted in the abandonment of this earlier position was not brought about by a clash of different views, but by a transition inspired by an external challenge. The earlier view was henceforth simply given up by the adherents of the school. Only external critics went on criticizing points of view which the thinkers of the school itself had silently abandoned. These modified views do not only concern substances as collections of qualities, but also the nature of *pradhāna*, one of the key notions of Sāṃkhya. About this earlier conception of *pradhāna* we read, once again, nothing in the surviving school texts. What we know about it we learn from Śaṅkara and other non-Sāṃkhya thinkers.[8]

What we can learn from these and other examples can be expressed in a simple phrase: *the winner takes all*. The texts that have survived are the ones that belong, or were acceptable, to the currents of thought that have been victorious in the long run, for whatever reason. If, as philologists, we decide to limit our attention to the texts that have survived, we take the side of the victors, perhaps unwittingly. Worse, by doing so we run the risk of taking the side of the victorious tradition, which includes projecting back *its* vision of the past. Everyone

7 Bronkhorst, 1994; Watson, forthcoming.

8 Bronkhorst, 2007.

is of course free to join any tradition that appeals to him or her, but this cannot be the task of academics and university departments.

If we do not wish to fall in the trap to become, in Indian studies, second rate imitation pandits, if we wish to gain a truly historical understanding of, say, the history of Indian thought, we have to think twice before we decide to limit our attention to texts that have survived. In that case we have to do what is possible to find out what we can about those whose texts have *not* survived. In many cases that will no doubt be impossible. There may have been currents of thought and practice whose very names have been forgotten. In such cases the modern philologist is helpless. There are other cases were evidence has been preserved, usually in the works of critics. This evidence will always be lacunary and difficult to interpret. This can however be no excuse for ignoring it. Quite on the contrary, it is in many cases our only hope for studying our texts historically, i.e., to study the past rather than the selection of texts which more recent tradition imposes on us.

These reflections seem to me rather obvious and not particularly innovative. I have yet drawn attention to them, because there are scholars in the field of Indian studies who appear to think otherwise. One of them has even introduced a name for his alternative position: *methodological positivism*. Klaus Butzenberger uses this term in a study of the beginnings and the early development of the doctrine of transmigration. He describes it as follows (1996:58): "If all important features of a certain theory or doctrine are provided by a certain tradition or set of texts, we see no reason whatsoever to seek or assume additional evidence or traces of influence in other traditions or texts." In this form it sounds harmless. A closer look at the evidence reveals that Butzenberger, rather than showing that the surviving texts explain sufficiently certain later developments, has done the opposite. He has deprived those later developments of their most characteristic feature, so as to be left with something for which he can find, he believes, some antecedents in the earlier Vedic literature. Let me explain myself.

As I pointed out already, Butzenberger is interested in the beginnings and the early development of the doctrine of transmigration. Doctrines of transmigration are not rare in this world. Anthropological literature shows that they are found in some form or other in probably all continents. Classical Indian thought does not distinguish itself from other cultures by its doctrine of transmigration, but by its combined doctrine of transmigration and karmic retribution. In this respect India may well be unique. Butzenberger leaves out the element "karmic retribution" and is thus left with something that is far less distinctive.

Why does he do so? Because he thinks there are antecedents of this unremarkable doctrine in the Vedic texts, but none of the distinctive doctrine of transmigration *along with karmic retribution*. As a matter of fact, transmigration with karmic retribution is mentioned in two late Vedic passages, one of which states specifically that this doctrine had not so far been known to the Vedic Brahmins.

What, then, has Butzenberger done? In the name of a high-sounding principle he has pushed his prior conviction that these later developments have to be explained out of earlier elements that belong to the Vedic tradition. Aware that such an explanation is far from obvious, he has cut the element that is to be explained down to a size which he can handle. It is hardly necessary to recall that it is, and has always been, orthodox Brahmanical tradition to believe that everything worthwhile can be found in the Veda. Certain modern adherents of this tradition go to the extent of searching for aeroplane designs and cures for AIDS in those venerable ancient texts. Modern scholars, one would hope, should show a more critical spirit.[9]

For my second example I have to tell something about the indigenous Indian tradition of Sanskrit grammar, whose most important representative is Pāṇini (after 350 BCE). The history of Pāṇinian grammar is all too often presented as a very orderly affair. Pāṇini wrote his grammar. Kātyāyana and Patañjali discussed it in their commentaries and tried to improve upon certain details. For subsequent commentaries nothing much remained to be done beyond elaborating and refining Patañjali's observations.

This is the vision of its past which the orthodox Pāṇinian tradition as it exists today presents and favours.[10] I am convinced that it is a simplification of a

9 For a detailed analysis, see Bronkhorst, 2007a.

10 Not only the orthodox Pāṇinian tradition. Among contemporary scholars Thomas Oberlies should be mentioned in particular (1989; 1996; 2006). Oberlies implicitly resorts to "methodological positivism", as is clear from the following passage (2006: 382 n. 8): "[E]s [ist] bemerkenswert, dass alle uns erhaltenen, der Kāśikā zeitlich vorausgehenden Kommentare zur Aṣṭādhyāyī von jainistischen und buddhistischen Autoren stammen und dass der erste auf uns gekommene 'brahmanische' Grammatiktext nach Patañjali kein Aṣṭādhyāyī-, sondern Bhartṛharis Mahābhāṣya-Kommentar ist. Daraus kann/könnte doch der Schluss gezogen werden, in der brahmanischen Tradition habe kein Bedarf an einem '(Schul)kommentar' zur Aṣṭādhyāyī bestanden und mit der Kāśikā sei 'lediglich' (und erstmals) auf buddhistische und jainistische Bemühungen reagiert worden, weshalb gerade dort Anleihen gemacht wurden." Note that this passage, apart from illustrating "methodological positivism", contains a false claim, viz. that commentaries on the Aṣṭādhyāyī by Jaina and Buddhist authors have survived from the period preceding the Kāśikā. None have. What we

historical development that was more complex. This vision leaves out inconvenient elements, not so much with the intention of distorting historical reality, but rather through lack of interest in developments that were considered "incorrect". Lack of interest, as we have seen, leads to loss of texts, so that in the end only traces in surviving works allow us to reconstruct what really happened.

Note, to begin with, that I am concerned in this lecture with Pāṇinian grammar. There may have been grammarians who situated themselves in other traditions and wrote their own grammars, but I am not concerned with them. I wish to talk of those who looked upon Pāṇini's text as point of departure. These grammarians, who belonged all of them to the Pāṇinian tradition, were yet divided into different groups that did not always see eye to eye. The fundamental discord concerned Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya. The tradition which we *now* consider orthodox accorded full authority to Patañjali, more even than to Pāṇini. This is for the first time stated in so many words by Kaiyaṭa, more than a millennium after Patañjali. Half a millennium before Kaiyaṭa, and more than half a millennium after Patañjali, Bhartṛhari (or rather, the author of the Vṛtti, who may have been different from him) made a reference to a problem connected with the preservation of the Mahābhāṣya and its interpretation. Bhartṛhari may have been the first to write a commentary on the Mahābhāṣya. He certainly stands near the beginning of the apotheosis of the Mahābhāṣya that characterises orthodoxy henceforth.

This, then, was the development within the Pāṇinian tradition that came to prevail. The victory of the followers of Patañjali was not however clear from the beginning. It did come, slowly it seems, but once the battle was won no one in the Pāṇinian tradition was interested in the works of the heretics any longer. And works that inspire no interest get lost, as we have seen. There may be only one work belonging to this alternative tradition that has survived: it is the Paribhāṣāvṛtti or -sūcana attributed to Vyāḍi and edited by Dominik Wujastyk (1993). The reason it has survived may well be that its differences from the orthodox tradition are minimal and do not attract attention. Only a detailed analysis of the surviving texts can bring to light positions and ideas that belonged to the non-orthodox Pāṇinian grammarians: their works are lost.

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have are independent Sanskrit grammars composed by Jaina and Buddhist authors, composed, to be sure, under the influence of the Aṣṭādhyāyī. The question of the influence of Candra's grammar on the Kāśikā continues to be discussed, most recently in the contributions by Aussant, Bhate and Vergiani to the volume *Studies in the Kāśikāvṛtti* edited by Pascale Haag and Vincenzo Vergiani (2009).

I have tried to collect some of these non-orthodox positions in a few publications, basing myself primarily on relatively early sources: Candra's grammar, the Kāśikā and, of course, Bhartṛhari's commentary on the Mahābhāṣya.[11] This led me to the inevitable conclusion that these non-orthodox positions belonged to a period preceding the earliest of these three sources, Candra. In those publications the question could not be raised, for lack of evidence, whether everything changed suddenly with the appearance of Candra's grammar and Bhartṛhari's commentary on the Mahābhāṣya. *A priori* that does not seem likely, for why should grammarians who do not recognise the Mahābhāṣya as authoritative change their minds from one day to the next? For lack of source material the question remained hypothetical.

Recently I have been able to make some progress in this matter. Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's Nyāyamañjarī contains some passages that criticise a grammarian. They are explained in Cakradhara's commentary named Nyāyamañjarīgranthibhaṅga, which provides much valuable information and tells us that the grammarian concerned was called Udbhaṭa. Cakradhara's most important passage is unfortunately corrupt, but a detailed analysis makes it possible to draw certain conclusions. It appears that Udbhaṭa allowed himself great liberty in interpreting Pāṇini's sūtras so as to accomodate the formation of some difficult words. He uses tricks such as dividing a rule in two (*yogavibhāga*), of changing the wording of a sūtra, and of pronouncing that a recalcitrant word is an indeclinable (*nipāta*). Cakradhara disagrees with these interpretations and presents the correct orthodox explanation of those same words.[12]

Udbhaṭa obviously is a non-orthodox grammarian in the Pāṇinian tradition, which means that he did not feel bound by Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya. However, Udbhaṭa is much more recent than Candra and Bhartṛhari. E. A. Solomon (1978) situates him in "the final quarter of the eighth century and the first quarter of the ninth century" or somewhat later, i.e., around the year 800 CE. This would imply that the deviant tradition of Pāṇinian grammar had not stopped at the time of Candra and Bhartṛhari, i.e. before the middle of the first millennium. On the contrary, this case suggests that it continued until the ninth century at the least. From, say, the fifth to the ninth century, at least two Pāṇinian traditions existed side by side, the one orthodox, the other non-orthodox. The term "orthodox" is here used to mean that the grammarians concerned looked upon Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya as their guiding light. The non-orthodox grammarians may have

11 Bronkhorst, 1983; 2002; 2002a; 2004; 2009; 2009a.

12 Bronkhorst, 2008.

studied the Mahābhāṣya, but they felt free to deviate from it wherever they considered that necessary or advantageous. They even felt free to modify Pāṇini's sūtras, like Patañjali long before them. In a certain way they continued along the lines of Patañjali, unlike the orthodox grammarians, who were hesitant to look upon themselves as being on a par with that scholar.

We do not know much about these non-orthodox grammarians. Their texts have not survived, because subsequent generations lost interest in them. No one copied their works, with the final result that modern scholars have long been able to think that the history of Pāṇinian grammar was satisfactorily described by the caricatural picture which I presented to you earlier. The time has come to abandon that incorrect idea, and along with it the view that methodological positivism in textual studies has anything to recommend itself.

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