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ON ENGAGING PHILOSOPHICALLY WITH INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS

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*Abstract**

This essay considers why English-speaking scholars have been inclined to engage Indian philosophical materials “philosophically,” as opposed to purely historically. That is to say, they have tended to ask questions about the philosophical significance and even validity of the theories they encounter in Indian philosophical writings, often approaching them critically in the way philosophers assess contemporary philosophical ideas. I first attempt to explain how this phenomenon has come about. Then I attempt to justify the philosophical approach to the study of Indian philosophical texts by showing how it complements, in various ways, the historical-philological study of these materials.

What kind of methodology should one employ when studying the writings of the philosophers of classical India?

The approach most scholars have taken up till now, especially continental European scholars, following in the footsteps of the great pioneers of the study of Indian philosophy in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, has been to view their writings as historical documents, as materials for the reconstruction of the intellectual history of India. I shall consider as my example in this essay the 6th c. C.E. Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti. Dharmakīrti was a central figure in the history of Indian Buddhism; he shaped its teachings into a comprehensive, sophisticated, and powerful philosophical system that was immensely influential both in India, where its views provoked intense philosophical debates among

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Buddhists and non-Buddhists that continued for centuries, then later in Tibet. Scholars have attempted, first and foremost, to understand his ideas and theories in their historical context, by identifying their philosophical sources and explicating the theories of other philosophers or philosophical schools they engage. They have also traced further developments of his views by later adherents of his school, the so-called logico-epistemological school of Buddhist philosophy, as well as the responses to them crafted by his non-Buddhist (Brahmin and Jain) opponents.¹

This project has involved the editing and translating of his works and commentaries on his works, and their critical re-editing and re-translation as new manuscript materials have become available. There have been some expository and interpretive studies, though it is generally acknowledged that until all of Dharmakīrti's works have been critically edited and accurately translated, such studies can be considered only preliminary. More recently, there have been attempts to fill in the social and religious background of his thought.

Scholars who have approached the study of Dharmakīrti in this way have tended to shy away, even deliberately refrain, from a *philosophical* engagement with his writings. By that I mean: reflecting on the broader philosophical meaning of his ideas in light of similar and contrasting views of the things they treat – and not just in light of theories that were current in India in his day but even ones familiar to us only from Western philosophy (such as “nominalism” and “idealism”); analyzing his arguments and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses as philosophical arguments and assessing the overall plausibility of his system (Is it internally consistent? Does it present us with a compelling picture of reality?); and arriving at some judgment about how well his theories hold up under the sorts of criticisms that were levelled against them by his contemporaries and subsequent generations of thinkers (*Who won* the great debates that took place between Buddhist and non-Buddhist philosophers over Dharmakīrti's views?).

European scholars have tended to be more cautious about engaging in such reflections and asking such questions. Certainly, this has to do at least in part with the fact that the study of Dharmakīrti in Europe evolved within the

1 It will be evident from my remarks that I am thinking primarily of the study of Indian philosophy in the German-speaking sphere (extended to the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and parts of Switzerland). Isabelle Ratié has pointed out to me that the situation has been quite different in France, and I am sure this is true of other parts of Europe as well. My observations do not have to have universal application (to Europe) in order to draw the contrast I want to draw.

discipline of Indology, which, especially in Europe, is seen as a historical-philological science. Virtually all of the great European Indologists and Buddhologists of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century were trained as classical philologists; they applied the methods and standards of classical philology to the study of Indian texts. Although several prominent German philosophers during this same period worked hard to differentiate the *Geisteswissenschaften* from the *Naturwissenschaften*, and to justify the former as having their own distinctive methodology suited to achieving their own ends – in particular, *Verstehen*, “understanding,” as opposed to *Erklärung*, “explanation” – classical philologists have never been very keen about this distinction. For them, the natural sciences still serve as a paradigm, and they are suspicious of some other kind of “science” that promises its own special kind of knowledge. Indologists and Buddhologists trained in this classical philological tradition have tended to think that their discipline can be practiced with the same rigor, precision, and objectivity as the natural sciences, and that it can achieve the same sorts of results – *explanations* of developments in the history of Indian thought and literature that can compare with the explanations of natural phenomena in the physical sciences.

Another factor that has contributed to some scholars adopting a more “objective,” scientific stance toward Dharmakīrti and other Buddhist philosophers is the fact that their thought appears to be based on certain religious presuppositions. They are concerned with things such as liberation from the cycle of rebirth, the attainment of “perfect, complete enlightenment,” the omniscience of the Buddha, and so forth – in short, with matters that transcend the human condition. A modern scholar cannot really be expected to “think along with” these philosophers, attempt to see the world from their point of view, if that requires assuming the reality of such things. One is also uncomfortable posing questions about the validity of philosophical theories that have such presuppositions, since questions such as whether there really is something like liberation from the cycle of rebirth (not to mention a cycle of rebirth itself!) seem, to us in our time, undecidable. Indeed, concerns of this sort have influenced the field of Religious Studies in the U.K. and the U.S., where scholars have increasingly employed the methodology of the social sciences when studying Indian belief systems.

Another factor contributing to preference for a historical-philological approach to Dharmakīrti that refrains from trying to comprehend and assess his views philosophically has no doubt simply been the incomplete state of our knowledge of his works. We are still putting the pieces of his system together; crucial parts of his corpus have not been critically edited, let alone translated and

studied. The whole has yet to come completely into focus. How, then, could one presume to pronounce judgment on the overall significance and validity of his system, or even of a part of it – a particular theory, such as the *apoha* theory of meaning? And this is true of most, if not all, other Indian philosophers of the classical period.²

Nevertheless, despite all these good reasons for standing back from a figure like Dharmakīrti and treating him as a historical phenomenon, scholars in the English-speaking West (the U.K., U.S., Australia-New Zealand, and Canada) – at least, outside the field of Religious Studies – have been much more inclined to engage philosophically with figures of the history of Indian philosophy such as Dharmakīrti. (Perhaps, however, the Indian philosophers with whom scholars have most often attempted to engage philosophically have been Śaṅkara and Nāgārjuna; more recently, Candrakīrti, Kumārila, Śāntarakṣita, and Śāntideva have received considerable philosophical attention.) I have in mind scholars such as Karl Potter, B. K. Matilal, J. N. Mohanty, Arindam Chakrabarti, Bina Gupta, Mark Siderits, Roy Perrett, Jay Garfield, Stephen Phillips, Jonardon Ganeri, George Dreyfus, Tom Tillemans, and Dan Arnold. And there is now an emerging generation of excellent younger scholars approaching Indian philosophy from the standpoint of analytic philosophy.

In this essay I, first of all, want to try to explain why this is the case, that is, why there appears to be a basic difference in orientation toward Indian philosophy on the part of European and English-speaking scholars. Here, I myself shall be offering something of a historical and sociological explanation for this phenomenon. Second, I want to demonstrate what I believe are the advantages and benefits of a “philosophical” approach. In doing so, I by no means intend to disparage what I shall refer to as the “scientific,” i.e. the historical and philological study of Dharmakīrti. There are certainly ways of viewing it that disparage it. One could depict it as a “totalizing” discourse which brings its object under the interpreter’s power by “objectifying” it, i.e. making it into a thing, etc., etc. There are some who have been inclined to view the entire field of Indology in this way, influenced by Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism. But that is not at all the direction I want to go in. On the contrary, I consider the disclosure of Dharmakīrti’s thought by historical and philological research to be

2 Of course, we do not have anything like a complete and reliable corpus of Aristotle’s works. Many of his “works” do not represent continuous treatises that he intended to publish in the form that has come down to us; some of them may even be collections of notes or drafts edited by later redactors. This has not prevented us from having a rich philosophical engagement with his thought.

one of the most important achievements in the humanities in the last fifty years. Rather, I wish to present the philosophically-engaged study of Indian philosophy, of Dharmakīrti in particular, as a valuable complement to the scientific study of him, which not only reveals aspects of his thought that the latter cannot access but also perhaps assists it in certain ways.³

1

In order to understand why the Anglophone scholar of Indian philosophy practices his discipline in the way he does, one must understand the environment in which he or she works. Almost all of the scholars of Indian philosophy I have in mind were formally trained as philosophers and have held faculty positions in philosophy departments in the U.K. or U.S.⁴ Now, most English-speaking philosophers believe that the twentieth century was one of philosophy's golden ages. During the last century, philosophy was transformed by developments in various disciplines – logic, the foundations of mathematics, the history of science, computer science and artificial intelligence, and cognitive science and neuroscience – which allowed for the reformulation and clarification of many traditional philosophical problems. New insights were achieved into problems that have been with us since ancient times. If they have not been solved, then at least we feel we understand them better; and new questions that appear to open up promising new avenues of investigation have been posed. In short, there is a general sense in Anglo-American philosophy that progress has been and continues to be made. Scholars outside the discipline are often surprised to hear this.

3 A critique of the philological-historical approach, however, is implicit in the suggestion that it should be complemented by a philosophical approach, which I develop in section 2 of this paper. As Jay Garfield (personal communication) provocatively puts it: The project of interpreting philosophical texts “conceived as free from philosophical analysis is simply incoherent. You can't study what you do not understand, and to understand a philosophical text is to do philosophy.”

4 Dreyfus holds a joint appointment in Philosophy and Religion at Williams College; Dan Arnold teaches in the Philosophy of Religions program in the Chicago Divinity School. Only Tom Tillemans, Prof. Emer. of Oriental Languages and Civilizations at the University of Lausanne, to my knowledge has not held a permanent position in a philosophy program. He studied philosophy, however, as an undergraduate at University of British Columbia when Jonathan Bennett was teaching there, and continued taking philosophy courses as a graduate student at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne.

A historian of philosophy working in such an environment – in which advances are being made in the various sub-fields of philosophy and there is an atmosphere of optimism about progress; in sort, *in which philosophy remains a vital enterprise*⁵ – is, first of all, outnumbered. In a given “analytic” philosophy department, for every historian – and normally at most two historical fields will be represented: ancient philosophy and modern philosophy; positions devoted to medieval philosophy and nineteenth-century philosophy are considered luxuries – there are four or five philosophers working in the various systematic areas: metaphysics and epistemology, ethics, philosophy of science, social and political philosophy, and logic. Historians are under considerable pressure to keep abreast of developments in these other areas in order to stay in touch with and be able to talk to their colleagues. Moreover, they are often under pressure, no doubt to some extent self-imposed, to justify their pursuit of the history of philosophy by showing how it relates to what is going on in contemporary philosophy. This often manifests itself in an apologetic attitude on the part of historians. There is now a whole literature devoted to the question of the value of the history of philosophy for philosophy. A recent volume on this topic contains essays with titles such as: “Is the History of Philosophy Good for Philosophy?,” “The History of Philosophy as Philosophy,” “What is Philosophical about the History of Philosophy?” (SORELL / ROGERS, 2005).⁶ Yet it would also not be inaccurate to say that some philosophers working in areas of analytic philosophy still wonder why there are historians in their departments.⁷ It is not unheard for someone working in analytic philosophy to refer to himself as “doing philosophy” and to his historian colleagues – with whom he will be on quite friendly terms – as “doing scholarship.” Finally, it is not unheard for a philosophy department that includes specialists in analytic philosophy and historians to split into two separate departments, say, a philosophy department and a history of science department.

The positive side of American historians of philosophy being trained and teaching in philosophy departments alongside colleagues who are (one hopes) doing cutting-edge work in contemporary philosophy, is that they tend to see the philosophical problems discussed in the texts they study as *living* problems.

5 Much of this has to do, of course, with the fact that the sheer number of professional philosophers today is so much greater than at any time in the past.

6 See also RORTY / SCHNEEWIND / SKINNER, 1984; HARE, 1984; and LAVINE / TEJERA, 1989. HATFIELD, 2005 contains a useful survey of this literature with an extensive bibliography.

7 The prominent Princeton analytic philosopher Gilbert Harman once put a sign on his door that said, “History of Philosophy: Just Say No!” SORELL, 2005: 43–44 explains why Harman was not being quite as dismissive of history of philosophy as it seems.

They are aware that they raise questions that are still being investigated today, in different forms (though some contemporary philosophers would dispute this). And they often justify their work on historical figures by claiming that they can still provide insights into the problems we are now working on. Indeed, historical texts present us with “landmark passages” in which philosophical questions are posed for the first time. These first formulations can be clearer, more direct – “purer,” if you will – than their articulations in contemporary literature (which are often overlaid with qualifications intended to head off objections and criticisms, and which can also be very technical). More importantly, perhaps, these landmark passages were composed by geniuses; their content seems inexhaustible. By going back to the source of a problem, to its original statement in the *magnum opus* of some great philosopher of the past, even a contemporary philosopher immersed in the discussion of the modern iteration of the problem may notice an aspect of it he missed or had simply forgotten. At least, this is what historians of philosophy would like to think!⁸

A historian of philosophy trained in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, or the U.K., moreover, seeing the problems addressed by the figure he is working on as problems he and his colleagues are still concerned with, is more inclined I think – I realize this is a perilous generalization – to adopt a critical stance toward them. The Anglophone historian of philosophy has been encouraged in his training as a philosopher to think independently and originally about philosophical questions; he/she sees historical figures not as authorities but as interlocutors. I believe this tendency especially contrasts with the attitude of European, especially continental, historians of philosophy. I do not want to fall back on stereotypes or make invidious comparisons, but I have studied philosophy both in Europe and the U.S. and I have always sensed that there is a fundamental difference in this respect. A teacher of mine when I was an undergraduate at the University of Kansas, who had earned his doctorate in Germany and who after a long, tortuous journey finally ended up teaching philosophy at a large public university in the American Midwest, was always taken aback when

8 Wilfrid Sellars stands out as a leading analytic philosopher who was also steeped in the history of philosophy. He wrote essays and books on historical figures (especially Kant) throughout his career. In the preface to a collection of his essays he writes, “For the juxtaposition of historical and systematic studies I make no apology. [...] I cannot conceive that my views on such topics as abstract entities, mental acts, induction, and the relation between theoretical and practical reasoning would have taken the form they have, if they had taken form at all, if I had not devoted as much time and energy to teaching and research in the history of philosophy as I did to these topics *an sich betrachtet*.” (SELLARS, 1974: vii.)

I and my fellow philosophy majors would “refute” Kant or Aristotle or Plato or Descartes simply by pointing out this or that “fallacy” in their writings. “Who am I to criticize these great minds?,” he would say. “I can only hope to understand them!”

Finally, the English-speaking historian of philosophy, working in a philosophically dynamic environment, is less likely to be affected by what one might call the disillusionment with, or loss of faith in, philosophy that infected other humanistic disciplines toward the end of the twentieth century. This is the view that philosophy is finished, obsolete, has exhausted itself. Not only do we realize now that God is dead, we have also come to recognize that philosophy cannot provide us with definitive answers to metaphysical, epistemological, or ethical questions. Various factors have contributed to the emergence of this view, including developments within philosophy itself. In the middle of the twentieth century the field of philosophy was confronted with the challenge of the logical positivists that the statements of metaphysics are meaningless, and with the challenge of Wittgenstein that philosophical problems are really pseudo-problems that arise when “language goes on a holiday.” Meanwhile, the very idea of objective truth has been called into question in the continental and American pragmatist traditions (Derrida, Rorty, etc.). That is to say, there is no “transcendent” or “objective” truth valid for everyone, independent of the inquirer’s perspective and discoverable through philosophical or even scientific investigation; there is no “God’s eye view” of things, as it is sometimes put. But the analytic tradition has by and large overcome these challenges. Logical positivism was defeated by a devastating critique of the verificationist theory of meaning (Carl Hempel) and the definitive rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction (Quine). Wittgenstein’s views on language stimulated the emergence of a new and immensely fruitful sub-discipline of philosophy, the philosophy of language, which *transformed* metaphysics and epistemology and by no means eliminated them. And the repudiation of objective truth is seen, by analytical philosophers at least, as logically incoherent. It is simply warmed-over relativism, which Plato supposedly refuted 2500 years ago. It is mainly scholars in other humanistic disciplines – literary theory, cultural studies, rhetoric, and religious studies – to whom the results of technical analytic philosophy are inaccessible, who have been impressed with these kinds of criticisms and tend to make statements to the effect that philosophy has exhausted its possibilities.⁹

9 For a recent example see (last visited: February 18 2013)
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/01/does-philosophy-matter/>.

All of these things, then – the continuing vigour of the analytic tradition of philosophy, the training of English-speaking historians of philosophy as philosophers themselves, and the lack of disillusionment about philosophy and the continuing inclination to take philosophical problems seriously – support, I believe, a tendency to engage philosophically with historical texts among English-speaking historians of philosophy, including historians of Indian philosophy.

To be sure, there are English-speaking historians of philosophy who practice their craft in the “scientific” European fashion, just as there are European historians of philosophy who are informed and influenced by analytic philosophy. In the U.S. I have in mind scholars such as Paul Guyer, Karl Ameriks, Daniel Garber, Catherine Wilson, Donald Rutherford, Edwin Curley, and Stephen Gaukroger, among many, many others. There is a perception in some quarters that there is a renewed interest in this type of history of philosophy, once again, the kind that pays greater attention to the broader intellectual, social, and cultural context in which philosophers conceived their theories, which Gary Hatfield calls “contextual” history of philosophy (HATFIELD, 2005). Yet most historians still believe they are doing *philosophy*, not just history. There are exceptions, but I think it is significant that they still adopt a rather defensive stance.¹⁰ At the same time, there are also historians who are not at all defensive or apologetic about doing history of philosophy. The main reason for studying the history of philosophy, they would say, is so that we are not constantly re-

10 Daniel Garber, a Descartes scholar, refers to the type of research he does, rather self-deprecatingly I believe, as “antiquarian history of philosophy.” He writes, “What [...] can the historian of philosophy say to the analytic philosopher? Don’t study the history of philosophy with the idea that it will help you solve a particular problem that interests you. It probably won’t. But if a good philosopher is one who is reflective about his practice and his discipline, then a good philosopher is one who understands the larger historical context of what he is doing. In this way, the history of philosophy should be part of everyone’s philosophical education, even that of the analytic philosophers who think they need it least. That is not why I, as antiquarian, pursue the kinds of studies that I do. I do them simply because I find them fascinating. But the larger perspective is something I am happy to offer my colleagues and their students.” (GARBER, 2005: 145–146.)

What this statement reflects is that analytic philosophy is still the gold standard in the discipline of philosophy in the U.S. If you’re not doing it, or doing something that can somehow be seen as contributing to it – if you are really seriously doing the history of philosophy – then you must either marginalize yourself, as Garber seems to have done, or you will be marginalized by your colleagues!

inventing the wheel.¹¹ Obviously, there are many approaches Anglophone scholars take to the history of philosophy, and I have simplified matters considerably in order to make my point.

Now, the scientific historian of philosophy might object to what I have been saying thus far as follows. Does not a philosopher who wants to “engage philosophically” with a historical figure at least have to be able to read his works in the original? Does not he/she have to interpret them accurately, which requires understanding them in their historical context? And does not that involve the recovery and restoration of the philosopher’s works through the collation and study of manuscripts and the publishing of critical editions? How can we presume to know what a philosopher said except from his words? And how can we presume to understand the meaning of his words without reconstructing – by carefully examining all of his critically edited works, as well as the works of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, commentaries on his works, and so on – what the words he used must have meant *to him*. In short, should not philosophical engagement with a philosopher of the past, even if it somehow complements purely historical research, be grounded on and preceded by historical-philological scholarship?

I believe the answer to this question is: it depends on the quality of the philosophy on offer. A truly first-rate philosophical discussion of a problem or set of problems found in a historical text, or even problems not really *in* the text but merely suggested by it, can compensate for a more “relaxed” style of scholarship. Classic examples are Bertrand Russell’s book on Leibniz, P. F. Strawson’s book on Kant, and Bernard Williams’ book on Descartes.¹² These writers – but may we not call them scholars, too? – admit that they are not chiefly concerned with historical accuracy: what the philosophers they are studying actually intended, or what their works meant in their historical context. They are concerned, rather, with systems of ideas or specific theories they believe they find, expressed more or less adequately, in their works. Their primary interest in those ideas and theories is whether they are true. In discussing them, they may even do

11 Henry Allison, the noted Kant scholar, is a good example of this attitude. He writes, e.g. in the introduction to his work on Kant’s transcendental idealism: “Unlike most writers on Kant, I take much of the *Critique [of Pure Reason]* to be not only ‘interesting’ or to ‘contain more of value than is sometimes supposed,’ but to be philosophically defensible. At the very least, I believe that with a bit of help from the sympathetic interpreter it can be defended against many of the familiar criticisms that are repeatedly presented as ‘devastating.’” (ALLISON, 1983: 3.)

12 Though I think the last has considerable scholarly merit as well.

violence to the texts themselves, attempting to “fix them up” (HATFIELD, 2005: 90, 94–97) so that they convey the positions they see in them more forcefully. They may reformulate statements to make them more consistent or rigorous; ignore or dismiss passages they believe detract from, or create confusion about, the ideas and theories they think their philosophers are trying to work out. The works such “philosophical” historians produce may in the end tell us more about their own views than those of the philosophers they are writing about. Yet the depth of their reflection, if it really does originate in and is honestly inspired by the thoughts of their subjects, can often yield considerable insight into what the latter really meant.

But how is that possible?, the scientific historian might persist in asking. How can one know what ideas are being expressed by a text if one is not guided by the letter of the text? Surely, our only clue to an author’s intention – or, if you prefer, the meaning of a *text* (if you want to leave the author out of it) – are his or its actual words (HACKER, 1965).

The answer to this question is itself a philosophical one: *any meaningful discourse, or any statement, is about some object which itself is not reducible to the words of the text*. A medical treatise may be concerned with, say, digestive disorders. It offers certain descriptions and explanations of a variety of ailments and prescribes treatments for them. In order to comprehend what the treatise is saying about these ailments one must, obviously, be acquainted with them to some extent independently (though, it is hoped, not by having them!); one has to know the things the text is describing and theorizing about. Our knowledge of those things, of the phenomena the text is referring to, together with our knowledge of the language and concepts employed in the text itself, guide our interpretation; our interpretation is the product of our knowledge of the meanings of the words themselves as they are employed in the text and our knowledge of the phenomena they describe and analyze. This is also true of philosophical texts. A philosophical treatise articulates a certain theory or position, which occupies a place on a scale or in a matrix of possible positions one can take on a certain problem – a certain position in “logical space.”

Consider Dharmakīrti’s theory of *apoha*. It is a theory about the meaning of general terms that occupies a certain position on a spectrum of possible theories of general terms. The *apoha* theory belongs to a type that is not unfamiliar to Western philosophers; it is similar to (nominalist-)constructivist proposals about general terms proposed by European philosophers in the early modern period

(Spinoza, Locke, Hume), to replace Aristotle's doctrine of substantial forms.¹³ As such, it is an object that exists independently of Dharmakīrti's writings, which they are addressing.¹⁴

Similarly, Dharmakīrti's anti-realism (or idealism, if you prefer) is a proposal that occupies a certain place on a continuum of possible anti-realist positions. As such, it is an object Dharmakīrti is writing *about* and separable from what he says. Now, a good philosopher – by that I mean a philosopher who is conversant with a broad range of philosophical theories and adept at analyzing and critiquing them, who moreover knows what it is to come up with a defensible solution to a philosophical problem – can pick up a text of the history of philosophy and, with very little to go by, perhaps even unable to read the text in its original language, *recognize* which position in the matrix of possible positions on a certain problem it is addressing – even if, paradoxically, it is one he/she has never encountered before.¹⁵ And he can then proceed to reflect on it independently of the text, exploring its assumptions, its implications, and its strengths and weaknesses as a philosophical position on the problem in question. It is such a philosopher's insight into the inner logic of the position adopted by the figure in question that can sometimes be of use to the scientific historian. By addressing himself to the *type* of theory behind the text or addressed by the text – this may sound very Platonic or Fregean, but I do not think there is any other more plausible view – by examining its consistency, plausibility, and ramifications *as a set of ideas*, the philosopher may bring out aspects of the thought of a historical figure that the scientific historian, working more closely with original source materials, has overlooked.¹⁶

13 SPINOZA, 1982: 87–90 (*Ethics* II, Props. 37–40, esp. *scholium* 1 ad Prop. 40); LOCKE, 1995: 326–335 (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, Chap. 3).

14 When the *apohavāda* is compared with these European proposals, it becomes even more pressing to explain why the Buddhists adopted a “double negation” strategy (where one of the negations is term negation and the second is sentential negation) to stress that general terms do not refer to anything real and universals are only figments of our imagination. European philosophers were able to convey a sense of the imaginary nature of universals without resorting to any notion of exclusion.

15 Compare a jeweller who has seen many, many kinds of gem. He picks up a type of gem he has never seen before and recognizes it as a new type, which relates to the other types of gems he is already acquainted with in certain ways.

16 Thus, RUSSELL, 1937: xii: “Where we are inquiring into the opinions of a truly eminent philosopher, it is probable that these opinions will form, in the main, a closely connected system, and that, by learning to understand them, we shall ourselves acquire knowledge of important philosophical truths. And since the philosophies of the past belong to one or other

Let me be clear, however: this is not the approach I prefer. For one thing, I lack the philosophical ability of a Strawson or a Russell or a Williams – or even a Mark Siderits or a Jonardon Ganeri! For another, over the years I have come to mistrust my first impressions of what Indian philosophers are saying. Invariably, I find, as I continue to work more closely with the texts, that it turns out to be something quite different from what I initially thought and – this is key – something better. It is often an altogether new way of looking at a problem that would never have occurred to me, which also seems quite defensible; at the very least, it has something to recommend it. When one has had this experience over and over, one becomes much more concerned with the actual words of the author one is studying and their precise meaning *in the corpus of his writings and texts of the same period*. I myself have come to believe that the single most important task today in Dharmakīrti studies is to produce a critical edition and translation of the *Pramāṇavārttika*. That is why I travel to Europe when I can, to learn the skills of editing and translating texts, or at least to collaborate with other scholars who are more proficient in those practices than I.

But can one even edit and translate a philosophical text without reflecting on it philosophically? I take up this question in the next section.

2

Even at the most basic level of the philological processing of a text, the compiling of a critical edition, a rudimentary understanding of the argument being presented in the text is crucial. A necessary condition, it would seem, for selecting a reading from among different variants is that it should assist, or at least not interfere with, one's ability to make sense of the text. The passage one is editing does not have to be cogent or convincing, but it cannot be gibberish. As Erich Frauwallner wrote in 1957, in his review of Rāhula Sāṅkṛtyāyana's 1953 *editio princeps* of the *Pramāṇavārttika* with Prajñākaragupta's commentary, "[Philosophical texts] cannot be edited in a satisfactory way as long as the phi-

of a few great types – types which in our own day are perpetually recurring – we may learn, from examining the greatest representative of any type, what are the grounds for such a philosophy. We may even learn, by observing the contradictions and inconsistencies from which no system hitherto propounded is free, what are the fundamental objections to the type in question, and how those objections are to be avoided."

losophical situation of their time is not adequately understood.” Yet the philosophical situation can be understood only on the basis of published texts; therefore, one should not expect first editions to be free from faults. Nevertheless, he takes Sāṅkṛtyāyana to task for “many mistakes which might easily have been avoided” if he had simply understood what the text is discussing. Examining Sāṅkṛtyāyana’s edition of a verse in the fourth chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika* where, apparently unbeknownst to Sāṅkṛtyāyana, Dharmakīrti is explaining Dignāga’s definition of the *pakṣa*, he writes, “R. S. cannot have grasped the meaning of the sentence, else he would not have written such nonsense” (FRAUWALLNER, 1957: 59). Let that suffice as a reminder that meaning, obviously, comes into consideration even when editing a text. If one is editing a philosophical text the meaning should, ideally, be a coherent philosophical thought.

It does not require specialized philosophical training to be able to do this. Most historians who work on Indian philosophical texts develop this ability. Nevertheless, it is a philosophical skill.

Of course, when it comes to translating a philosophical text, grasping the meaning becomes even more important. A philosophical text, by its very nature, aims to demonstrate something. Many Sanskrit philosophical texts have the word *siddhi*, “proof” or “demonstration,” in the title: the proof of momentariness, the proof of a self, the proof of *apoha*, of the existence of God, of the existence of other “[mental] series,” i.e. other minds, etc. A translation of a philosophical text should ideally make it possible to follow the argument of the text, the proof of whatever it is proving – and not just in its general outline, but every twist and turn. Now some annotated translations succeed in doing this. But the author of an annotated translation always has a choice whether to explain something or not, and in the best annotated translations of Sanskrit philosophical texts these days it is philological questions that receive the most attention. The philosophical meaning, the argument, tends to be neglected. I stress that this is not always the case; moreover, it is essential that philological questions be discussed thoroughly; finally, sometimes the philosophical meaning of a text is rather elusive, and one can only explain what one can. Nevertheless, insufficient attention paid to the argument of a text is the reason why when philosophers who are not specialists in Indian philosophy pick up a translation of a work of Indian philosophy, they often just scratch their heads. They cannot even figure out, from the translation, what it is about.

I believe it is the responsibility of a translator of any philosophical text, Indian or Western, to do everything in his/her power to make its argument clear – that means, to explain it without remainder – by whatever method one chooses

(notes, a commentary, a synopsis, etc.). A proof consists of a sequence of steps, each one of which is essential for the conclusion to follow. If one of the steps is missing or obscure, the proof does not work. And it does require a certain philosophical sensibility, which most Indologists working on such materials naturally develop, to recognize when one has or has not succeeded in explaining an argument. Doing this is important, I believe, not because one has an obligation to make the text accessible to non-specialists. *We are kidding ourselves if we think that contemporary philosophers will ever mine the works of Indian philosophy for insights that might solve contemporary philosophical problems; they have more than enough resources at their disposal from their own tradition.* Rather, it is important because it is part of what is required to do full justice to the text.

Philosophical considerations can come into play, however, even when it is a matter of translating a single word. Perhaps the two most famous sentences in Dharmakīrti's entire corpus are contained in PV 2.1ac': "A means of knowledge is a cognition that is reliable¹⁷. Reliability is the continuation of the causal efficacy of the object."¹⁸ Here, Dharmakīrti specifies "reliability" as one of the criteria of a means of knowledge, and defines it as the continued experience of the causality of the object cognized, i.e. its capacity to have effects on other things. But what exactly does the "*continuation* of causal efficacy" (*arthakriyāsthiti*) mean? How, in particular, can an object, which according to the Buddhist metaphysics that Dharmakīrti vigorously defended, exists only for a instant, continuously exercise a causal capacity? It would seem that this problem has caused scholars to flounder somewhat in offering rather different translations of this expression, while consensus has more or less been reached about how to translate the other technical terms in the passage (*pramāṇa*, *avisaṃvādin*, and *arthakriyā* by itself). Thus, we find in TILLEMANS, 1999: 6, "confirmation of practical activity"; in FRANCO, 1997: 54 (n. 21), "Non-belying [means] to stand firm in respect to purposeful action"; in ELTSCHINGER, 2010: 408, "compliance with [the object's capacity] to perform a function"; in VAN BIJLERT, 1989: 125–126, "constancy [on the part of the thing and the cognition of it] with respect to the production of a [useful] effect [by the real particular thing, *svalakṣaṇa*]." Van Bijlert's translation is closest to the usual meaning of *sthiti*: "remaining," "abiding," "continued existence," etc. Obviously, these translations vary so

17 More literally, perhaps: non-belying or does not lead astray.

18 *pramāṇam avisaṃvādi jñānam, arthakriyāsthitiḥ / avisaṃvādanam [...]*.

widely because we have not yet understood the thought Dharmakīrti is trying to communicate.

If we look a bit farther afield, however, toward a discussion later in the same chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika*, such an understanding begins to emerge. At PV 2.63–72 Dharmakīrti is considering whether a substratum (*āśraya*) or a container (*ādhāra*) – presumably in this context, a body, but he could also have in mind the *ātman* – is necessary for the “continuation” or “continuity” of cognition.¹⁹ The larger context is the defence of the possibility of rebirth, that is, the question whether consciousness is able to survive the destruction of the body. (Dharmakīrti must be able to maintain that it is possible in order to allow for the possibility of the Buddha purifying and perfecting himself by practicing compassion over many lifetimes to achieve the status of an omniscient being, a *pramāṇa* unto himself, at least in regard to dharma.) If a substratum is required for the continuation of cognition, and that substratum is the body, then obviously cognition stops with the destruction of the latter. Now clearly in this passage, when Dharmakīrti is considering “continuity” he is not talking about the continuation of the *same* cognition over time but the continuity of the cognition *series* (*santati*). To say that cognition is continuous is simply to say that it keeps recurring (even, perhaps, after death). But, then, the *causal efficacy* of an object could be continuous in the same sense: it would not be continuously bringing about the same effect but its causal power would be actualized intermittently, that is to say, it would *recur*. In the typical epistemic situation, its initial occurrence would be when the object produces a cognition of itself in the cognizer. As Dharmakīrti implies at PV 3.50, discussing the unreality of universals, the minimal efficacy of an object is the capacity to produce a cognition (which a universal lacks – therefore, it cannot be considered a real thing).²⁰ The confirmation of one’s initial cognition of the object, constituting the cognition’s reliability, then, would be the effect the cognized object produces in one upon acting on one’s cognition and obtaining the object – the warmth of fire, the coolness of water, etc. That would indeed represent the “continuation” of the causal efficacy of the object.

19 The passage is analyzed by FRANCO, 1997: 139–155 and translated with Prajñākaragupta’s commentary 296–321.

20 *jñānamātrārthakaraṇe* ‘py ayogyam ata eva tat / tadayogyatayārūpam tad dhy avastuṣu *lakṣaṇam* //’. Manorathanandin comments on *jñānamātrārthakaraṇe* ‘py ayogyam as follows: *anyā hiyam bhāvānām arthakriyā yad uta svajñānajanānam*.

This may not, in the end, be the correct understanding of what Dharmakīrti is saying at PV 2.1ac,²¹ but *some* such understanding, a coherent philosophical idea behind the verse, has to be grasped if we are to translate it correctly. Translation presupposes interpretation.²² If it is a philosophical text one is translating, it will be a philosophical interpretation.

A philosophical sensibility is still more important when it comes to understanding the overall significance of a text or the thought of a particular figure in its historical context. To understand the significance of a philosophical text in its historical context means to understand, among other things,²³ the philosophical situation of the text: What was the state of thinking about a particular problem or set of problems that confronted the author of the text? Or, what stage of development had thought about the particular problem or set of problems that the author is concerned with reached? What was the prevailing view (or views) about the problem; how was it formulated; in what ways was that formulation flawed or inadequate? What kinds of objections were in fact being brought against it? What other, competing positions did the author have to contend with? Given the state of thought about the problem, those objections and those competing positions, *and given the nature of the problem itself that the author is grappling with*, how does what he says amount to a “solution” of it? Because the history of philosophy requires one to think through these sorts of questions, it is considered by those who practice it to be not just a historical discipline, but also a philosophical one. It is through this process that real insights can be achieved into problems that are still alive in philosophy today.

To make this more concrete, let us consider one of the more striking, yet at the same time puzzling, features of Dharmakīrti’s system, his anti-realism. Anti-realism is the view that the empirical world, the world that presents itself to us in sense experience, even as understood in the natural sciences, is unreal – not

21 One problem is whether a real entity (*vastu*) must exercise causal efficacy at every moment it exists or, as Dharmakīrti seems to suggest (PV 3.3), merely have the capacity to do so (*arthakriyāsamartha*). In mentioning the “continuation” of the *arthakriyā* he could simply mean the continuation of the *capacity* for *arthakriyā*. One must also consider other possible meanings of *sthiti*. Sometimes Dharmakīrti uses it in the sense of “a fixed rule,” e.g. PV 3.145. Sometimes he employs it in the sense of “separate existence” or “distinction,” which can have an epistemic connotation (e.g. possibly PVS 117, 22).

22 As interpretation presupposes translation! This is one of the many forms the hermeneutical circle takes.

23 Again, “other things” would include: the social, political, religious, and broader intellectual/cultural context of the text.

necessarily that it does not exist (as Berkeley maintained), but that it is at least different from how it appears. Anti-realism has a long history in Buddhism. One may trace it all the way to the Buddha himself, who taught that, despite appearances, things are undergoing constant change, which teaching was later formulated in Abhidharma philosophy as the doctrine of momentariness. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the anti-realist tendency of Buddhism is much more pronounced: all things – even momentarily existing entities – are said to be altogether empty of essence (*nihsvabhāva, nirātma*). Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school, attempted to show this by carrying out a rigorous, unrelenting deconstruction of all the fundamental categories that (consciously or unconsciously) structure ordinary experience for us: causation, motion, substance, essence, being, etc. In the Yogācāra tradition, with which Dharmakīrti has important affinities, the world is said to exist only in consciousness or cognition. This anti-realist teaching established itself within Mahāyāna as a strong alternative to Madhyamaka anti-realism. Now, the first really rigorous *philosophical* working out of this view, the consciousness or cognition-only doctrine (*vijñaptimātratā*), was attempted by Vasubandhu (400–480 C.E., according to Frauwallner) in his *Vimśikā*. In that text he seems to be trying to prove the unreality of objects outside cognition, i.e. physical objects, in two ways. First, he suggests that sense experience is indistinguishable from a dream (an idea that goes back to earlier Yogācāra texts, e.g. the *Mahāyāanasaṅgraha*), and indeed we can explain all aspects of our experience as the effects of mechanisms within cognition itself, so that there is *no reason* to postulate external objects.²⁴ Second, he argues that there is no coherent account one can give of physical objects, whether one conceives of them as consisting of atoms or as “wholes,” that is, as unified substances.

Now, when we come to Dharmakīrti (whose date is a matter of lively controversy today, but who probably lived sometime in the 6th century)²⁵, we find that he takes neither of these approaches in developing his anti-realist position. First, instead of a deconstruction of physical objects as either collections of atoms or as wholes, he mounts a critique of the object or “domain” (*viśaya*) of perception, namely, the concrete particular or *svalakṣaṇa*, which in his system

24 Indeed, one sometimes gets the impression when reading the *Vimśikā* that Vasubandhu is arguing purely negatively. That is to say, he is presenting an argument *ex silentio*: there are no external objects, because there is no *pramāṇa* that establishes them. The argument from “non-apprehension” (*anupalabdhī*) was widely employed in early Indian philosophy, especially in the Nyāya tradition, to prove nonexistence.

25 See, most recently, KRASSER, 2012.

counts as that which “ultimately exists” (*paramārthasat*) in the conventional realm because it is capable of having effects on other things – it is causally efficacious. In essence, he argues that, if one scrutinizes the *svalakṣaṇa* closely, at least as the *extended* thing that is presented to us in perception, one sees that it can be neither one thing nor many things, hence (since those are exhaustive alternatives) it cannot be real.²⁶

So – and this is one of the paradoxical aspects of his anti-realism – we arrive, implicitly at the idea that what “ultimately exists” (in the conventional realm) is not real.²⁷ Clearly Dharmakīrti’s argument is related to Vasubandhu’s argument against sense-objects, yet in crucial respects it is quite different. Interesting also is that it echoes the kinds of deconstructive arguments one finds in Nāgārjuna’s writings. Second, instead of trying to salvage Vasubandhu’s

26 The heart of the argument is PV 3.208–211. Dharmakīrti is engaged with the Vaiśeṣika in this section of PV 3, and has just finished refuting the notion of a whole (*avayavī*) as the *svalakṣaṇa*, especially in such cases as a butterfly or a variegated cloth, which obviously are many things. (He does not employ Vasubandhu’s arguments to reject the possibility of a whole *per se*, though obviously he thought such a thing was absurd.) Dharmakīrti appears to hold that the *svalakṣaṇa* is a mere collection of atoms (thus, admitting the coherence of the notion of an atom as such, which Vasubandhu questions), and that it is indeed possible to apprehend many things at once. His opponent, however, turns the tables on him at PV 3.208: “If oneness is not possible with respect to objects that appear variegated [such as a butterfly or a multicolored cloth], then how is the cognition that appears variegated one?” (*citrāvabhāṣeṣv artheṣu yady ekatvam na yujyate / saiva tāvat katham buddhir ekā citrāvabhāṣinī //*). Dharmakīrti has to admit that it cannot be one, nor can it be many. This leads him to admit, PV 3.211, “Therefore, neither in the case of objects nor the cognition is there the [true] appearance of something bulky/extended; for something of that nature is denied for a single thing. Nor is it possible for many things, either” (*tasmān nārtheṣu na jñāne sthūlābhāṣas tādātmanah / ekatra pratisiddhatvād bahuṣv api na sambhavat //*), and this calls into question the very reality of both object and cognition. In the subsequent verses, PV 3.212–219, Dharmakīrti draws out the anti-realist implications of this position using Yogācāra terminology.

27 One must note, however, that, as if returning to his senses after a bout of temporary insanity in PV 3.212–219, Dharmakīrti seems to adopt a realist position in vv. 220ff. The *cognition*, at least, which presents an extended, variegated appearance indeed could be one thing (PV 3.221); and the *svalakṣaṇa* as a collection (*sañcita*, PV 3.194) of atoms could indeed acquire a new capacity of being visible which those atoms do not have individually (PV 3.223–224). Thus, Dharmakīrti appears to be deviating from Dignāga’s position at *Ālambanaparīkṣā* 3–5 that a mere collection of atoms (**sañcita*) cannot be the *ālambana*, which is also denied by Vasubandhu, *Vimś. 13–14* (discussing the proposal of the “Kaśmīra Vaibhāṣikas” that atoms that are collected, *samhatāḥ*, but not touching each other, comprise the object). See in particular PV 3.224.

“dreaming argument,” which at a certain point was couched as a formal inference, an *anumāna*, but had come under withering attack in that form by Brahmin and Buddhist authors alike,²⁸ he devises the notorious *sahopalambhaniyama* argument, which turns on the idea that object and cognition must be non-different because one is never perceived without the other.²⁹ It is this argument which became the focus of heated debate over the existence of an external world between (Buddhist) anti-realist and (non-Buddhist) realist philosophers in subsequent centuries.

Now, I would maintain that in order to understand Dharmakīrti’s anti-realism historically, one must see how it *evolved out of* the anti-realist views that were in place when he took it upon himself to start thinking about the problem of what is real and what is not. Perhaps the most important precursor to his position would have been Vasubandhu’s view as modified, apparently, by teachers who intervened between Vasubandhu and Dharmakīrti who I think were trying to dress it up, couch it in a more rigorous logical form, together with certain considerations brought up by Dignāga (Dharmakīrti’s immediate precursor) in a brilliant short treatise of his on the “object-support” (*ālambana*) of perceptual cognition, the *Ālambanaparīkṣā*. The historian must, in other words, see what was wrong with or inadequate about the received views that compelled Dharmakīrti to introduce the innovations he did, and how those innovations contributed to a stronger, less objectionable and more plausible argument for anti-realism. And that, I would insist, is a philosophical task. There is never a completely seamless transition from the writings of a philosopher’s predecessors to his own; in the case of Indian philosophy of course many of those writings are missing. Even when the historical record is complete, however, there are still gaps or leaps – indeed, we hope there are, otherwise our author would not be saying anything really new. The historian must fill in the gaps, make sense of the succession of statements leading up to the statement of the author, by *thinking*

28 See TABER, 1994 and 2010. The (re-)formulation of the argument I am referring to appears in Kumārila as: “The cognition of a post, etc., is false because it is a cognition (*pratyayatvāt*); for whatever is a cognition is seen to be false, like the cognition of a dream”; *stambhādipratyayo mithyā pratyayatvāt tathā hi yah / pratyayah sa mṛṣā svapnādipratyayo yathā* // (ŚV, *Nirālambanavāda* 23). Versions of this argument are discussed in various other Buddhist and Brahmin texts. It appears to be loosely based on the first verse of the *Vimśikā*. It was easy to show that it is fallacious.

29 The *sahopalambhaniyama* argument is presented at PV 3.335, 388–390 and PVin. 1.54ab.

through the problem himself, as a philosopher, from the standpoint of that author.³⁰

What I have been talking about here has been referred to by some as “internal” history of philosophy. The best depiction of this approach that I know of is that of J. B. Schneewind, the American historian of early modern philosophy, which I quote here at some length:

[...] We would like to understand the work of earlier thinkers as philosophers. On our own understanding of what philosophy is, it involves argument and the working out of the full logical implications of a principle or a position. So we want the historian of philosophy to explain earlier thinkers, and their conversations, in ways that bring out their philosophical aspects. We are not content if we are told simply that they came to hold certain views – never mind why – and that these views influenced later writers – never mind how. An important intellectual historian tells us, for example, that the Enlightenment was “always moving from a system of the universe in which all the important decisions were made outside of man to a system where it became the responsibility of man to care for them himself.” This may be true. Indeed I think it is. But I do not understand it philosophically until I can see what rational steps led various thinkers from the earlier “system” to the later one. And to see this is to have an internal explanation of the change.

More generally I think that the most satisfying account possible of why someone believes something is one which shows that what is believed either is true or is the proper outcome of a compelling argument from premises the person accepts, and that the person was in a good position to notice this. We may need to appeal to external factors to explain why the thinker was in a position to notice a truth or to see previously unnoticed implications of some of his beliefs. But we feel – surely correctly – that the fact that someone noticed the truth of some proposition or saw the soundness of an argument from his own beliefs to a new conclusion must be a strong explanation of why the person came to believe what he did. If such an explanation is available and correct, it seems to make unnecessary any search for further, non-rational, accounts of why the person held the belief. It seems then that it is only where

30 Kurt Flasch, a leading European historiographer of philosophy, explains what the historian must understand as follows: “Der Begriff ‘historische Relativität’ ist zu präzisieren [...]. Im Zusammenhang geschichtlicher Selbstbesinnung kann er bedeuten: Theoretiker, Künstler und Handelnde arbeiten, oft über längere Zeitspannen hinweg, die Implikationen der für diese Zeit grundlegenden Philosophien durch oder entwickeln die in ihnen angelegten Gegensätze. Sie machen deren Prämissen, Konsequenzen und Widersprüche deutlicher. Sie konfrontieren sie mit neuen Erfahrungen und verändern sie entsprechend; sie finden deren Begründungen unzureichend und machen neue Entwürfe” (FLASCH, 2005: 85). And he depicts the process of “historical philosophizing” in this way: “Historisches Philosophieren besteht nicht darin, dass man ‘geschichtliche Umstände’ oder Veranlassungen philosophischen Texten vorspannt oder nachsetzt, sondern im mitdenkenden Vollzug von Theoremen, die als solche mitvollzogen werden müssen, um in ihrem internen Zeitcharakter erfasst zu werden” (Flasch 2005: 88).

internal explanations of the history of thought cannot be found that we must turn to external explanations; and if this is so, then it is evident why we should begin our work by seeking internal accounts. (SCHNEEWIND, 1984: 174–175.)

I shall not comment further on this statement; it speaks forcefully for itself.³¹ I note, however, that Schneewind's remark regarding when “external factors” should be taken into consideration in the history of philosophy is pertinent to a new approach that is being explored in the study of Buddhist epistemology. In a striking and erudite article, Vincent Eltschinger (ELTSCHINGER, forthcoming) argues that the internal development of Indian philosophy cannot explain “the sudden outburst of philosophical confrontation” among the different traditions that occurred around the beginning of the 6th century. Prior to that time, though there are stories of public debates between Buddhist and Brahmin philosophers and a science of dialectic had evolved in both traditions, we have only a few examples of texts in which the views of the other side are pointedly attacked. Therefore, it seems, we are compelled to search for other causes of this phenomenon, and Eltschinger has in this connection drawn attention to an increased Brahminical hostility toward the Buddhists, as reflected in, among other things, Purānic prophesies that blame heretics for the decline of dharma in the *kaliyuga*. This heresiological apocalypticism, if you will (my phrase, combining two expressions Eltschinger uses separately), could have been one of several factors that put the Buddhists on the defensive, so to speak – there certainly had to be other political ones as well – and served as part of the background for the emergence of a range of innovations in Buddhism that we begin to notice toward the end of the fifth century:

the foundation of [...] *mahāvihāras* or *vihāramāṇḍalas* ‘mimicking feudally grounded fortresses,’ the nearly contemporaneous rise of Buddhist Tantrism and epistemology, the strong decline of Abhidharmic creativity and [intra-Buddhist] controversy, etc. (ELTSCHINGER, forthcoming: 24).

31 One might, however, object at this point along the following lines. The standards of rationality we would apply today in making judgments about “the rational steps” that led from one stage of thinking about a problem to another are historically determined, therefore certainly different from those that prevailed in Dharmakīrti's time. There is no such thing as a universal perspective from which one might understand the evolution of Indian philosophical thought. The short answer to this objection is that, when we examine Dharmakīrti's writings on logic, and other texts on logic from the classical period of Indian philosophy, it becomes abundantly evident that the rules of correct reasoning then were very close, if not identical, to those we follow today.

Whether an internal explanation for the sudden explosion of intense debate between Buddhist and Brahmin philosophers really cannot be provided – one could argue that preoccupation with the *pramāṇas* extends all the way back to early Madhyamaka in Buddhist philosophy, and that it was Dignāga’s proclamation that the Buddha himself is to be considered a *pramāṇa*, and his attendant, devastating critiques of the definitions of the *pramāṇas* of Brahmin philosophers as well as even his own reputed teacher, Vasubandhu, that started everything – nevertheless, Eltschinger’s resorting to external explanatory factors *when he believes internal ones are unavailable or insufficient*, is quite consistent with the practice of the internal history of philosophy as Schneewind presents it.³² A philosophical text, like any other text, Yves Charles Zarka reminds us,

is produced at a moment in human history, in a particular society which is confronted by specific problems. It goes without saying that philosophical thoughts do not come into being in some kind of heaven of ideas which is indifferent to worldly events (ZARKA, 2005: 149).

That is a dimension of its meaning, too, though not the entirety of its meaning.³³

32 Eltschinger of course is more cautious than to maintain that these social-cultural developments can explain *particular positions or theories* that were adopted by different philosophers or schools, e.g. the *apohavāda*. Again, in his words, “To be clear, my aim is certainly not to hold Gupta apocalyptic eschatology itself as responsible for the conspicuous heresiological turn of the Mīmāṃsā during the sixth century, and even less as responsible for the striking new directions taken by Indian philosophy from this century on. Rather, my use of apocalyptic prophecies aims at showing the growth of a Brahmanical hostility that may, at least in part, explain why Brahmanical schools such as Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā turned their attention towards Buddhism, and why the Buddhist epistemologists changed their habits and the meaning of Buddhist philosophy radically during the sixth century” (ELTSCHINGER, forthcoming: 22); “[...] By looking closer at the evolution of the Brahmanical apocalyptic eschatology, I hope I have been able to uncover one part of the ideological background against which these philosophical shifts and many other things make sense” (ELTSCHINGER, forthcoming: 23).

33 Once again, the more radical position of a philosopher’s approach to historical figures is neatly expressed by RUSSELL, 1937: xi–xii: “The history of philosophy is a study which proposes to itself two somewhat different objects, of which the first is mainly historical, while the second is mainly philosophical. From this cause it is apt to result that, where we look for history of philosophy, we find rather history *and* philosophy. Questions concerning the influence of the times or of other philosophers, concerning the growth of a philosopher’s system, and the causes which suggested his leading ideas – all these are truly historical: they require for their answer a considerable knowledge of the prevailing education, of the public to whom it was necessary to appeal, and of the scientific and political events of the period in question. But it may be doubted how far the topics dealt with in works where these elements

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The final benefit of engaging philosophically with Indian philosophical materials is even less tangible than the ones I have discussed so far but I believe it is the most important of all, and this is that it enables one to appreciate the philosophical value of the texts one is studying. By “value” I mean, essentially, their plausibility, persuasiveness, or cogency as accounts of whatever it is they are concerned with. Do they offer any real insights into reality or the human condition? Do they have anything to say *to us*?

Now I think most scientific historians will say that this kind of consideration really is completely irrelevant to what they are doing, that it is inappropriate for the historian to be concerned with such a thing. The historian, after all, is attempting to chart the course of human development, and it is through that that he or she reveals something important about human nature and the human condition. It really does not matter whether what humans believed in a particular period, in a certain civilization, was true or false; what matters are the circumstances that led them to adopt that belief, how it influenced their behaviour, and how it determined the subsequent course of their culture or civilization. That is how we arrive at an understanding of what makes humans tick.

Granted all that, I still think that at certain junctures in our study of the thought systems of other cultures and even our own civilization in other historical periods the question *naturally* comes up: Is this all just a lot of nonsense, or is there something to it? It is, indeed, our humanity that prompts us to ask this question, for it is our nature to want to know solutions to the great problems of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. (As Aristotle said: All humans desire to

predominate can be called properly philosophical. There is a tendency – which the so-called historical spirit has greatly increased – to pay so much attention to the *relations* of philosophies that the philosophies themselves are neglected. Successive philosophies may be compared, as we compare successive forms of a pattern or design, with little or no regard to their meaning: an influence may be established by documentary evidence, or by identity of phrase, without any comprehension of the systems whose causal relations are under discussion. But there remains always a purely philosophical attitude towards previous philosophers – an attitude in which, without regard to dates or influences, we seek simply to discover what are the great types of possible philosophies, and guide ourselves in the search by investigating the systems advocated by the great philosophers of the past.”

It is of course the latter that Russell intends to pursue. One of the implications of this passage is that even the sort of “internal” history of philosophy scholars like Schneewind advocate would be considered *history* and not *philosophy* by Russell.

know, and to know these things especially! [if I may so paraphrase the first book of his *Metaphysics*.] Nothing is more *unnatural* than to suspend all concern with truth-claims when studying other cultures or historical periods, as the historical and social sciences typically demand of us. Indeed, we can manage to do so for a while, but in the end curiosity about the truth of the vision of reality and human existence of a particular society or ancient thinker gets the better of us: *Is* everything really suffering? *Is* the empirical world really just an illusion? – *unless*, of course, as I suggested above, one has completely “grown out of” asking such questions or thinks they are just bunk. (But, as I have also said, most philosophers have *not* grown out of them or think they are bunk!) If you doubt that this is our most humane response, just give a lecture to a general audience on Indian philosophy strictly from the standpoint of the history of ideas and see what kinds of questions you get from the audience during the discussion period! (“But how can the world be just an illusion?!”)

There’s a statement, attributed to the Harvard philosopher Burton Dreben, that analytic philosophers like to quote when they are ridiculing the history of philosophy: “Garbage is garbage, but the history of garbage is scholarship.” Now, to be sure, those who quote this statement are often unaware of how interesting garbage can be! Ethnologists have drawn fascinating and important inferences from examining garbage heaps. But it does seem, when we are investigating not only the material artifacts of a particular culture but also its thought system, that we want to know whether what we are looking at is garbage or something else. Is an established teaching fundamentally irrational? If so, that in itself requires some explanation. (How *could* such a teaching become established?) Is the methodology a certain school of thought employs to establish its views fundamentally flawed? That, too, would require some explanation. Some scholars have maintained that Nāgārjuna, the founder of the Madhyamaka school, extensively employed logical fallacies in deconstructing the categories of Abhidharma philosophy; his writings are just a tissue of bad arguments. It seems pretty important to determine whether indeed that is the case or not, and so there is a considerable literature on this topic.

And so, even the most rigorous of historians invariably find themselves, in their more reflective moments (moments of weakness?), touching on questions of the values of the ideas found in the texts they study.

I shall conclude this essay with an example of how this can occur. Here, I move away from Dharmakīrti into another area of Buddhist thought. I shall draw on the work of one of the greatest living Buddhologists, Prof. Lambert Schmithausen. One of the areas in which Prof. Schmithausen has made pioneering

contributions is the history of Buddhist ethics. He has written several important studies of Buddhist attitudes toward nature, including even plants and inorganic nature. He has also published numerous studies of the evolution of key Buddhist ethical concepts such as non-violence and compassion.³⁴ For my purposes I wish to focus on just one article that Prof. Schmithausen has written on the history of the idea of non-violence, *ahimsā*, in Buddhism and other Indian religious traditions, “A Note on the Origin of *ahimsā*,” published in 2000 in a Festschrift for the Japanese Indologist Minoru Hara.

In this article Prof. Schmithausen identifies what initially appear to be two distinct kinds of motivation for advocating non-violence in early Buddhist, Jain, and Brahmanical writings. One is fear of retaliation. This is related to a variety of stories, going back to the Vedic Brāhmaṇas (e.g. the story of Bhṛgu in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*), that tell of individuals who are punished for acts of violence, usually toward animals, by having violence inflicted on them by their victims in the next world, or by other animals – representatives of the victims, as it were – in this world.³⁵ Such fear gave rise to “ritualistic” prohibitions against killing for the sake of avoiding its unfortunate consequences for oneself and, more interestingly, to recommendations of specific ritualistic procedures in the context of the Vedic sacrifice to conceal the fact that killing is actually taking place or otherwise neutralize its effects (for instance, the practice of slaughtering the sacrificial victim at a location removed from where the offerings are made). We can call this the “prudential” motivation for non-violence: it is a matter of prudence that one not commit violence, because it will sooner or later rebound on oneself.

The other motivation for non-violence is, apparently, empathy. This is sometimes expressed in formulations of the Golden Rule, which are also found both in early Jain and Buddhist texts. For example:

I for one want to live and not to die. I want happiness and dislike pain. Since I want to live, etc., it would not be agreeable or pleasant to me if somebody were to take my life. Again, for another person, too, it would be disagreeable and unpleasant if I were to take his life, since he [too] wants to live, etc. Precisely that which is disagreeable and unpleasant to me is disagreeable and unpleasant also to the other. How then could I inflict upon the other that which is disagreeable and unpleasant to myself? (*Samyutta Nikāya* V 353, 29ff.)

34 Of course, this hardly does justice to the numerous and varied contributions Prof. Schmithausen has made to Buddhist Studies and Indology.

35 Here Prof. Schmithausen draws on SCHMIDT, 1968 and 1997.

We however (in contradistinction to other teachers who assert that all living beings may be [...] killed) declare thus [...] “All living beings [...] should not be struck, not be commanded, nor crushed, nor tormented, nor slain [...]. This is what the Noble Ones say.” [...] We ask [the other teachers] severally: “You debaters, is pain pleasant to you or unpleasant?” and if he has well understood [this matter], he will answer: “For all living beings [...], pain is unpleasant, [...] a great [cause of] fear.” (*Āyāraṅga* I.4.2.5–6.)

In texts such as these, violence, harm to other living creatures, is clearly being prohibited on the grounds that a person who is keenly aware that other creatures experience pain and suffering in the same way and to the same degree as oneself, will not be able to tolerate inflicting further pain and suffering on them.³⁶ Now Prof. Schmithausen sees this attitude as being “truly ethical” (SCHMITHAUSEN, 2000a: 275). So let us, following his usage, call this the “ethical” motivation for non-violence.

Now, the question of the motivation of *ahimsā* relates to a long-standing problem in the field of Buddhist ethics, a problem which is clearly more a philosophical than a historical one, and that is whether there is any “truly ethical” purport to the injunctions to obey the Five precepts of Buddhism and other lesser commandments, and to follow the rules of “right livelihood” of the Eight-Fold Noble Path. For in many passages these seem to be viewed instrumentally, as means to salvation. The practice of *sīla/sīla*, morality, in general, is to be observed in order to prevent the arising of defiled states of mind, such as aversion, greed, and confusion, which in turn prevent one from attaining liberation. To attain liberation one must be cleansed of all such defilements, which cloud the mind so that it is unable to achieve insight into the nature of reality as expressed in the Four Noble Truths or the formula of “three marks.” The cultivation of the “divine abidings” (*brahmavihāra*), meanwhile – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – are chiefly meditative practices engaged in for attaining “liberation of the mind” (*cetovimutti*) or even “companionship with Brahmā” (*brahmasahavyatā*). A “truly ethical” attitude, on the other hand – which is usually understood to be one that appears to advocate carrying out or

36 This attitude is already reflected in some texts that draw attention to the consequences of violence. Schmithausen, discussing *Āyār.* 2, 13–15, writes: “The predominant motive seems to be disgust with or even dismay at the ubiquity of pain and suffering in this world where beings, though unhappy themselves, torture one another, not knowing that they perpetuate their own misfortune because their violent acts entail, after death, rebirth in forms of existence the vast majority of which is undesirable” (2000a: 263). A bit later he writes, “Horror of perpetuating mutual killing in the world would seem to be the motive for *ahimsā* also at *Āyār.* I.6.1.2–4” (SCHMITHAUSEN, 2000a: 264).

refraining from certain actions simply because they are right or wrong – becomes evident, some scholars believe, in such texts as the ones quoted above, which appear to preach non-violence without regard to any personal or soteriological benefit but simply as something that is required by the principle of reciprocity.

The insight that Prof. Schmithausen offers us in this essay is this. The ritualistic or prudential motivation for the observance of non-violence, which is rooted in fear of retaliation, should actually be seen as compatible with the ethical one that relates to empathy.

What I should, however, like to point out is that in spite of all the difference between the two motivations a close analysis of the former may show that they are after all not entirely incompatible but may, ultimately, derive from a common background. In a sense, the idea implied in the Bhṛgu story that the victims will try to take revenge upon the eater or killer in the yonder world (or, for that matter, that congeners³⁷ may do so even in this world) incontrovertibly presupposes the idea that the victims (or the congeners) react – emotionally and actually – upon injury inflicted upon them [...] in more or less the same way as one would oneself do. Just as one would dislike being injured or killed (or losing one's relatives), so too the victim (or its congeners). Just as one would long for retaliation, so too the victim (or its congeners). Thus, the idea of the victim taking revenge upon the killer in the yonder world presupposes at least an inkling of empathy, in the sense of sensing intuitively that the feelings of other creatures are basically similar to one's own feelings. (SCHMITHAUSEN, 2000a: 275.)

This is the main interpretive conclusion Prof. Schmithausen comes to as a result of his analysis of these materials, and it is not insignificant or uninteresting. Further reflection, however, will make us aware that this is not the only possible interpretation.

What is being said in the passages cited by Prof. Schmithausen? *Why does the observation that others experience pain like we do lead to a prohibition of inflicting harm on them?* (Note that the conclusion that one should not inflict violence is not even explicitly stated in the second passage; cf. SCHMITHAUSEN, 2000a: 273.) It seems that there are actually two possibilities: (1) One recognizes that it is *wrong* to act in a way that one would not want them to act toward oneself, in Kantian terms, that inflicting harm or pain on others is a violation of the Moral Law.³⁸ (2) Aware of what suffering feels like in one's own case, one

37 I.e. animals of the same species.

38 The principle of morality can of course be formulated in other, e.g. consequentialist, terms.

cannot bear to witness others undergoing it, similar to one who cannot bear the sight of blood. Just to see others suffer causes oneself to suffer.

Now, in fact, there is very little evidence in Buddhist literature that *himsā* is recognized as a violation of the Moral Law. We encounter a number of statements to the effect that one should not commit violence, or that the saint is incapable of doing so, but I am not aware of any clear, unambiguous statement to the effect that it is inherently bad or wrong as opposed to something that merely causes a good person considerable discomfort. (Do these two things fall together? Perhaps. But I shall try to separate them below.) Conversely, there are many statements that say monks ought to act for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of others, but none that declare that it is their *duty*.³⁹ Indeed, I would venture to affirm – as others have also noted⁴⁰ – that we do not find in Buddhist literature any clear articulation of the notion of moral obligation, i.e. the awareness of a law or principle that *commands* one to act or not act in certain ways, which applies universally and necessarily to all rational beings.⁴¹ On the other

39 In early Jainism, the idea that all karma entails causing harm to living beings even precludes the idea of acting for the welfare of others.

40 Most recently, by KEOWN, 2005: 27f. and GOODMAN, 2009: 52.

41 One may think that this concept was not clearly articulated in Western philosophy until Kant, but already in Plato we find well developed the idea that certain actions are just or unjust in and of themselves. See, e.g. PLATO, 1914: 171 (*Crito* 49a): “Ought we in no way to do wrong intentionally (*ekontas adikēteon einai*), or should we do wrong in some ways but not in others? Or, as we often agreed in former times, is it never right or honourable (*agathon oute kalon*) to do wrong (*adikein*)?” PLATO, 1914: 173 (*Crito* 49c): “Well, then, is it right to require evil for evil, as the world says, or is it not right (*dikaios*)?”

Paul Williams, in his striking critique of Śāntideva’s argument for what he refers to as the “universal thesis,” namely, that “morality requires that if I am to remove my own pain I must (moral imperative) act to remove the pains of others without discrimination” (WILLIAMS, 1998: 104), which he sees Śāntideva to be developing in the eighth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, seems to consider the Buddhist injunction to alleviate the suffering of others (which clearly implies that one should not *inflict* suffering on them!) as a moral commandment more or less in the Kantian sense. Williams does not argue for this explicitly. He stresses, however, that this “imperative” to help others, which reflects “the disinterested nature of morality,” follows “rationally” from the considerations that Ś. cites: “the centrality of the role of rationality in the moral imperative from this Buddhist perspective is made very clear [...]” (WILLIAMS, 1998: 104f.). This is reminiscent of Kant’s emphasis on the disinterestedness of moral action and his conviction that the Moral Law is an object of Reason.

What Williams overlooks is that the topic of the eighth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is the perfection of meditation. The arguments Ś. advances for the “universal thesis” there are intended to erase the boundaries between oneself and others in order to reduce attachment to one’s self, in preparation for meditation. Here, as elsewhere, Buddhist morality has a sote-

hand, there are a number of passages that suggest that empathy, the capacity to feel what others feel, is the basis of the belief that one should not do unto others as one would not wish them to do unto oneself. (Typically, the Golden Rule in these texts is given a negative formulation, though not always.) I believe that this is the underlying message of the passages quoted above, but it is more explicit in other statements. Consider, as just one example, the following passage from the *Mahāvibhāṣāśāstra* (cited by SCHMITHAUSEN, 2000b:135–136).

When for the Buddha the great detachment is actualized, all the sentient beings of all the worlds could burn up before his eyes like dry brush; he would not perceive it. When he actualizes the great compassion, the sight of a single suffering being is enough to cause his inconceivably strong and unshakeable body to tremble like a banana leaf in a storm.

riological purpose; specifically, it liberates the practitioner from the restrictive type of thinking that hinders him/her on the Path. The idea that one should alleviate the suffering of others *just* because that is what one should do, i.e. because it is one's obligation to do so, does not come through.

Of course, Williams' main argument in his essay is that Š. ultimately undermines the ethics of compassion and “destroys the Bodhisattva path” by maintaining that there are in reality no other beings who are suffering and in need of being relieved of suffering – no others towards whom compassion could appropriately be directed! But this assumes that the Bodhisattva path is an ethical practice.

Finally, one might argue that *ahimsā* should be considered a moral imperative simply because it is one of the precepts, even though the concept of a moral imperative as such is not clearly worked out in the Buddhist writings – in the way, say, that the concept of a *vidhi*, injunction, is in Brahminical philosophical texts, as the basis of dharma. This consideration carries some weight. However, the exhortation to help, and avoid harming, all sentient beings in such texts as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, which of course is intended for the *bodhisattva*, clearly pertains to something else: a form of existence that involves, beyond just moral goodness, a purification of all defilements that removes one from the realm of form. Actions are not being recommended or forbidden there just because of the kinds of actions they are. I believe Charles Hallisey gets “Buddhist ethics” right when he writes that what it comes down to in the end is that in Buddhism “all sorts of things matter,” in different ways, for different reasons (HALLISEY, 1996: 40). The exhortation to do this or refrain from that need not always be seen as a moral imperative in order to have practical importance. Even when an action can be seen as a moral imperative, as e.g. what will bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of sentient beings (as GOODMAN, 2009 convincingly demonstrates to be frequently the case), that is not the ultimate criterion of its value. GARFIELD, 2010 (2011) is also trying to work out a “phenomenological” reading of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that avoids identifying it as matching a modern Western ethical theory.

And indeed, this idea seems common to the Indian Yoga tradition in general. At *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* 2.15, to mention only one other example, it is said that the *yogin* is sensitive to the painfulness of *samsāra*, to which others are blind, their minds darkened by ignorance:

Why? Because the wise person is similar to an eye-ball. Just as a cobweb placed on the eye-ball causes pain through touch, but not when placed on any other part of the body, so these sufferings [implicit in both the joys and sorrows of *samsāra*] torment only the *yogin*, who is similar to an eye-ball, not some other experiencer.⁴²

It is not uncommon for compassion or empathy to be presented as an intense feeling or sensitivity, that is, as what we Westerners would call a passion or a state, as opposed to a cognition.⁴³

But if we were to adopt this interpretation of the Golden Rule in the various texts Prof. Schmithausen considers, namely, that they are chiefly if not wholly expressions of compassion or empathy, that is, a feeling, and not consciousness of a moral law or principle that *obligates* one not to inflict pain on others, *regardless of one's feelings*, then the compatibility of the two motivations for non-violence that Prof. Schmithausen identifies, the ritualistic and the empathic one, could have to do with the fact that the intense discomfort and even mental and emotional pain that a compassionate person experiences upon seeing someone else suffer was also viewed as a kind of retaliation. It is not uncommon for someone who cares about another person to say, "It hurts me to see you suffering so." A compassionate person who, God forbid!, inflicts pain on another, as can sometimes happen by accident or ill-conceived intention, will immediately feel profound discomfort. That discomfort, as well as his sense of guilt, is partially what would deter such a person from inflicting harm on anyone. For it would be the instantaneous retaliation, as it were, for his transgression.

42 *akṣipātrakalpo hi vidvān iti. yathorṇatantur akṣipātre nyastāḥ sparṣena duḥkhayati na cānyeṣu gātrāvayaveṣu. evam etāni duḥkhāṇy akṣipātrakalpaṇ yoginam eva kliṣṇanti netaram pratipattāram.* YSBh 213–214.

43 Cf. the definitions of compassion, etc., in the commentarial literature. Compassion is like the feeling that arises in a mother when she sees her child suffering; sympathetic joy is the gladness a mother experiences when her child is happy (SHAW, 2006: 165). However, it should be kept in mind that equanimity, which is to be cultivated along with loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy, can temper and even eliminate the emotional effect of the other three. Ideally, one should feel compassion dispassionately. See MAITHRIMURTHI, 1999: 145–149 and the literature he cites.

Yet is there not a larger philosophical question that at some point needs to be addressed when discussing concepts like nonviolence, empathy, compassion, sympathy (*anukampā*), concern, and friendliness in Buddhist literature? Namely, What exactly is “the ethical”? Suppose we were to decide that the seed of empathy is already to be seen in texts that reflect the ritualistic motivation? Would that mean that there is a kind of incipient ethical thinking in those texts? Prof. Schmithausen seems to think so. It is, however, by no means obvious that empathy or compassion and the ethical are to be equated. I may recognize that by doing a certain action I would cause great suffering to another person. Feeling sorry for him, that recognition might be sufficient to prevent me from carrying out the act. But does that mean that I recognize that it is wrong (however we are to analyze that concept)? Is it ethical consciousness that prevents me, or indeed simply an inability to witness others in pain – a kind of squeamishness, if you will? On the other hand, could I know that something is wrong to do even though I feel no empathy with the person who will suffer from it?

Be all that as it may, the idea that compassion is the fundamental principle of morality is definitely a minority view among ethical theorists today. Schopenhauer argued for it forcefully in his essay of 1840 – though I consider his view in certain respects different from the attitude expressed in the Buddhist texts I have cited⁴⁴ – but it has not been defended much since then. And of course there are trenchant critiques of pity and compassion as virtues in modern Western philosophy, especially in Spinoza and Nietzsche.⁴⁵ Even in certain In-

44 Schopenhauer, in his *The Foundation of Ethics*, argues that one’s action has moral worth only when it is motivated by the “weal or woe” of another person. This does not by itself imply that one must feel pity or empathy with another, yet Schopenhauer immediately draws that implication: “Obviously only through that other man’s becoming *the ultimate object* of my will in the same way as I myself otherwise am and hence through my directly desiring *his* weal and not *his* woe just as immediately as I ordinarily do only *my own*. But this necessarily presupposes that, in the case of his woe as such, I suffer directly with him. I feel *his* woe just as I ordinarily feel only *my own*; and, likewise, I directly desire his weal in the same way I otherwise desire only *my own*” (SCHOPENHAUER, 1994: 204). He goes on in the same passage to introduce compassion as “the real basis of all voluntary justice and genuine loving-kindness” (*loc. cit.*).

45 One should not neglect the role sympathy and empathy, “the social feelings of mankind,” play in sanctioning the principle of utility in Mill’s utilitarianism; see MILL, 1966: 188–191 (*Utilitarianism*, Chap. 3). That means, however, that sympathy toward others itself is not a moral obligation but one of the motives for carrying out our moral obligations, as determined by the principle of utility. For Mill, as for Kant, the principle of morality is an object of cognition, an assertion that admits of “proof,” not a feeling.

dian texts, especially in epic literature, pity and compassion are sometimes seen as problematic. In the *Bhagavad Gītā* Kṛṣṇa admonishes Arjuna, when the latter is “filled with pity (*kṛpayāviṣṭa*)” for his kinsmen, whom he must slay in a righteous war,

Where does this weakness in you come from, Arjuna, at this time of crisis? It is not fitting in a nobleman. It does not gain you heaven. It does not bring you any honour.

Don’t give in to this impotence! It doesn’t belong in you! Give up this petty weakness, this faintness of heart. You are a world conqueror, Arjuna. Stand up!^{46,47}

46 BhGī II.2–3, THOMPSON, 2008: 8. *kutas tvā kaśmalam idam viṣame samupasthitam / anāryajuṣam asvargyam akīrtitam arjuna // klaibyam mā sma gamah pāriha naitat tvayy upapadyate / kṣudram hrdayadaurbalyam tyaktvottisṭha parantapa //*

47 And of course we cannot neglect to mention the Mīmāṃsā rejection of *ahimsā* as a moral imperative; see HALBFASS, 1983:1–26. In the context of our discussion, Halbfass’ summary of Kumārila’s defense of the permissibility of blood sacrifice in the *Codanāsūtra* chapter of his *Ślokavārttika* bears quotation at length.

“Kumārila rejects the idea of a universal cosmic causality, a general law of retribution which would cause the pain or injury inflicted upon a living creature to fall back upon its originator. This magico-ritualistic notion of cosmic retribution, which is based upon the presupposition of universal balance and reciprocity, is obsolete for Kumārila. He tries to give a ‘rational’ refutation of such a notion, which seems to play a considerable role in the texts quoted by Schmidt, which has been preserved and developed in the traditions of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, and which, closer to Kumārila’s own time, is well documented in Vyāsa’s *Bhāṣya* on Patañjali’s *Yogaśūtra*. There is not only no scriptural, but also no perceptual or inferential evidence for the idea that somebody who causes pain or injury during a sacrificial performance is liable to a corresponding retributive suffering. Trying to infer suffering for the actor (*kartur duḥkhānumānam*) from the fact that the sacrificial victim has to suffer (*himṣyamānasya duḥkhītvam*) is nothing but a logical fallacy, based upon false analogies. If reciprocity were indeed the foundation of dharma and adharma, of reward and punishment, how could this apply to such obvious, though ‘victimless’, violations of norms such as illicit drinking? And if benevolence and the production of well-being or pleasure were dharma, would a sexual act with the wife of one’s guru, a ‘mortal sin’ (*mahāpātaka*) according to the *dharmaśāstra* rules, not be an act of dharma? One should leave aside the criteria of pleasure and pain in trying to determine what is right and wrong in the sense of dharma and adharma. The only source which can teach us about dharma and adharma are the injunctions and prohibitions (*vidhi, pratīṣedha*) of the Vedic ‘revelation’. They are specified according to the occasion of the act and the qualification of the actor, and they cannot be translated into or reduced to general, commonsensically ‘reasonable’ rules and principles concerning pleasure and pain, violence and non-violence (HALBFASS, 1983: 3–4).”

The point I am trying to make can be put this way: Compassion would appear not to have ethical significance if it is a mere feeling. If, on the other hand, it does have ethical signifi-

The main point I wish to make here, however, is the following: At a certain point it becomes appropriate and even necessary to ask about the philosophical value of the teaching of *ahimsā*. Is it really what we would call an ethical idea? Does it hold out any promise of advancing our understanding of what the ethical consists in, and do the Indian texts provide that? Is it just the product of a kind of pre- or proto-ethical thinking that has little relevance for us? Or, indeed, does it really pertain to a different sphere, not to the realm of human relationships, to meeting the demands of the “other,” but (as I suspect) to spiritual practice, the effort to transcend the human condition altogether?⁴⁸ After all, it is with India’s great traditions of renunciation – Buddhism, Jainism, and Yoga – that the teaching of nonviolence is chiefly associated. Merely by suggesting that, in certain texts, it is a truly ethical doctrine, even so careful and rigorous a historian as Prof. Schmithausen has tentatively set foot onto philosophical terrain.⁴⁹ Even if he would probably not want to venture any farther,⁵⁰ it seems natural and even inevitable that others more philosophically inclined have wanted to do so.

4

In this essay I have attempted to offer a justification for the philosophical engagement with Indian philosophical texts. The justification has been two-fold: *de facto* and *de jure*. The *de facto* justification attempts to explain, and thus to an extent *excuse*, the Anglophone historian of Indian philosophy for being particularly inclined to reflect critically on Indian materials – more so perhaps than scholars in other parts of the world. For his professional training and circum-

cance, then it seems it would have to be grounded on some deeper principle. What Kumārlila appears to be disputing here is that there is any such deeper principle.

48 If the ethical pertains to the human sphere, and has fundamentally to do with fulfilling one’s purpose as a human being among others, then a teaching that urges us to transcend our human circumstances may well not be properly ethical.

49 Richard Gombrich is another historian who makes free use of the term “ethical” in his interpretation of Buddhist ideas. See GOMBRICH, 2009: especially 29–44, where he argues that the theory of karma as introduced by the Buddha “ethicized” the already established theory of rebirth.

50 Nevertheless, Prof. Schmithausen’s work on the implications of Buddhist attitudes toward nature, e.g. SCHMITHAUSEN, 1991, is itself deeply philosophical in that it attempts to sketch an environmental ethics consistent with Buddhist principles. On every page, Prof. Schmithausen’s acute sensitivity to the suffering of the environment and living beings is evident.

stances in part determine him/her to be so inclined. We should therefore be tolerant of him, humour him, if you will, and listen to what he has to say and try to understand why he is so excited, why he thinks he has stumbled onto a gold mine of philosophical theories and arguments in these texts! But there is a *de jure* justification as well: one has a *right* to, and certain individuals, at least (not necessarily everyone, of course – there can be an appropriate division of labour) *ought* to engage philosophically with Indian philosophical texts, because it yields certain benefits. Not only is it essential to understanding those texts in their historical context, *as works of philosophy*. It complements our quest for historical truth with reflection on the great questions of reality and human existence which Indian texts, just as much as those of our own tradition, certainly pose. To justify the philosophical engagement with these texts, of course, is not to declare that it is always appropriate or acceptable. Like any other practice, it can be done well or poorly. And as for any other methodology of knowledge, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Only if, over time, we feel that it advances our understanding of these materials, yields insights that seem to disclose aspects of the true nature of Indian philosophical thought, will it find acceptance as a *bona fide* practice of knowledge, as indeed philosophical engagement with historical materials has become an accepted part of the study of the history of Western philosophy.

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