JOHANNES BRONKHORST

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN SANSKRIT SCHOLARSHIP: HOW DO THEY RELATE TO EACH OTHER?

Indologists are lucky. Unlike most other scholars who study the intellectual history of a major culture, their object of study does not exclusively consist of old texts. In India there is a living tradition of indigenous scholarship, which continues, in a more or less unbroken succession, the subjects that interest the modern scholar. It is no coincidence that the early European explorers of Sanskrit literature worked with Indian pandits, and that many modern scholars, too, draw considerable advantage from working with them. I am personally proud to have worked with several outstanding pandits in Poona, and there can be no doubt that this has been a major privilege.

Those who have worked with traditional pandits — and I repeat that I count myself among them — know that there is little hope that they will ever be able to compete with these pandits in their areas of specialisation, whether it be grammar, poetics, or one of the schools of Indian philosophy. Few modern scholars, and practically no modern western scholars, have been exposed to the various traditional disciplines of India at such a young age and in such an intensive fashion as the traditional pandit. This is a disadvantage which few modern scholars will ever completely overcome.

We arrive, then, at the following picture. The scholar of, say, early Greek thought has to reconstruct the object of his study with the help of surviving old texts, and with nothing else. There is no one around to help him (except other modern scholars who are in the same situation as he is), so that he is condemned to try to reach results on his own. The scholar of early Indian thought, on the other hand, finds that thought, those same branches of knowledge and enquiry, alive and well in modern India, and that at a level of competence which he cannot dream of attaining. This gives rise to some important questions, but perhaps not the ones that are most often asked. The question is not "What is the place of traditional Sanskrit scholarship in the study of Indian thought?", but rather: "What is the place of modern scholarship in the study of Indian thought?" or even better: "Is there place for modern scholarship in the study of Indian thought?" Is there anything modern scholarship can contribute to this field of study? Are modern scholars not doomed to be at best pale copies of the traditional scholars whom they cannot but try to imitate, normally with limited success?

It seems that some modern Sanskrit scholars do indeed think that imitating traditional scholars should be their aspiration. Others disagree, and point out that traditional and modern Sanskrit scholars do not normally study [168] the same subject-matter. Modern Sanskrit scholars — with the exception of some very few who study living traditional scholars and their ideas in their own right — concentrate on the past: on a particular period in the past, or on the development of certain ideas through a certain length of time. Traditional Sanskrit scholars, on the other hand, embody the present state of the tradition to which they belong.

This may be true, but it does not change the fact that both modern and traditional Sanskrit scholars study by and large the same texts. Moreover, if it is true, as is often maintained, that the traditional scholars are linked to the authors of the texts they study through an unbroken tradition, their interpretation of those texts will be more reliable than that by modern scholars, because it can make use of elements to which the modern scholar has no access, except by consulting the traditional scholar. Once again the question imposes itself whether anything is left for modern scholars to do beyond trying to become traditional scholars themselves.

Modern scholars may have reservations with regard to the unbroken tradition sometimes invoked by traditional scholars. In this they can draw inspiration from Dharmakīrti, the famous Buddhist philosopher who was confronted with the same argument from the side of the Mīmāṃsakas. The latter claimed that not only the Veda, but also its explanation (i.e. the interpretation offered by the Mīmāṃsakas) was not made by human or other living beings (*apauruṣeya*), because it had been handed down by an unbroken tradition (*saṃpradāyāvicchedāt*).[1] Dharmakīrti is not impressed and points out that cases are known where traditions have been changed for various reasons. That is to say, the modern scholar's sceptical attitude is not new, and the history of Indian thought itself provides examples of such an attitude.

I will use the time alotted to me to discuss some concrete examples where it can be maintained that modern Sanskrit scholarship has its mite to contribute. These examples have been taken from my own recent research, but rest assured: it does not really matter whether they convince you. They are just examples meant to illustrate a possible justification of modern Sanskrit scholarship besides traditional Sanskrit scholarship. I will begin with a general question: the question whether and to what extent it is possible to understand Indian philosophy.

This question may look surprising at first. At closer inspection, however, I assume that all of us have sometimes wondered how this or that thinker, or this or that

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[1] Dharmakīrti, Pramāṇavārttikasvavṛtti, ed. Pandeya p. 350 l. 4: *vedavad vyākhyānam apy anādy apauruṣeyaṃ saṃpradāyāvicchedād āgataṃ tato 'rthasiddhi[ḥ].*

school of thought, could have adhered to their sometimes quite extraordinary doctrines. We may doubt whether we really understand these doctrines, and what is more, we may wonder whether the thinkers [169] themselves understood them. The Sāṃkhya philosophy, to take an example, proclaims the existence of twenty-five factors (which they call *tattva*s) which somehow evolve out of each other so as to create the phenomenal world. Did individual Sāṃkhya thinkers know why exactly these twenty-five factors had to be accepted, and not any others? Did they perhaps accept these factors simply because they had been sanctioned by their particular tradition, and because early exposure lent them a degree of plausibility which they are unlikely to acquire for those who do not become acquainted with them until later in life? If this is the case, how much understanding can we, modern scholars, ever hope to attain? Are we condemned to merely record what the Indian thinkers thought, perhaps adding a historical dimension by investigating how some of these ideas succeed more or less similar earlier ones? Or a social one by pointing out that this or that position serves the interests of this or that particular philosopher and those of his group? Such investigations, which put Indian philosophy in its historical and social contexts, are certainly possible and extremely important. Historical continuities have been studied and more will no doubt be discovered. The link between at least certain philosophical doctrines and the social reality of those who accepted them deserves more attention than it has received so far.[2] But is this as far as we can go? If so, our understanding of Indian philosophy will not be very different from that of Indian mythology: a number of just-so stories which we can study in their historical and social contexts.

Advocates of Indian philosophy will no doubt object that there is much more to Indian philosophy than just this. They will point out that some of the discussions and analyses resemble, sometimes anticipate, certain discussions and analyses found in Western philosophy. Such advocates often have a tendency to take these discussions and analyses out of their original context and concentrate, say, on the development of logic in the Indian schools. There can be no doubt that logic underwent a remarkable development in India, and this still draws far too little attention outside a limited group of experts. But this logic was used — and this is too easily overlooked — to defend the basic doctrinal positions of the schools concerned. These doctrinal positions themselves are often somehow taken for granted, or even played down, by modern investigators. If we wish to give these positions their due, we are back with our original question: To what extent can we understand the thought of an Indian philosopher, not merely those

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[2] A recently complete study by Vincent Eltschinger (forthcoming) concentrates on Brahmanic efforts — strongly criticized by Buddhist thinkers — to reify caste.

aspects of it which we choose (and which we remove from their original context) because they remind us of issues in Western philosophy?
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I will argue that a deeper understanding, one that goes beyond mere historical and sociological analyses, is possible in the case of at least part of Indian philosophy. This is due to a factor which only too rarely draws the attention of modern scholars. I am speaking of the presence of a tradition of rational enquiry. I use this expression to refer to a tradition which came to establish itself in India — or at least in the main philosophical schools — and which obliged thinkers to listen to the criticism of often unfriendly critics, even where it concerned their most sacred convictions, such as those supposedly based on revelation, tradition or inspiration. Confrontations between thinkers so radically opposed to each other were no doubt facilitated by the debates organised from time to time by kings, about which we have some first-hand information from the writings of Chinese pilgrims visiting India in the middle centuries of the first millennium. Little is known about the reasons why, and the date at which, this tradition of critical debate came to establish itself in India. Its effects are however visible in the efforts made by Indian thinkers to systematise their positions, to make them coherent and immune against criticism.

These reflections allow us to identify a particularly important factor in the development of Indian philosophy. Under pressure from competitors, the Indian thinkers of the early classical period were forced to do more than just preserve the teachings they had received; they had to improve and refine them — perhaps in order to avoid becoming the laughing stock of those they might have to confront at a royal court or on some other occasion. In doing so, they created systems of philosophy that might deviate considerably from the pre-systematic teachings which they had inherited.

The history of Indian philosophy, seen in this way, becomes the story of the search for coherence and immunity against criticism, starting normally — but not always, it seems — from some form of traditional teaching. This traditional teaching is usually of a non-philosophical nature. Buddhist philosophy in its various manifestations, for example, based itself ultimately on the teaching of the Buddha, which concerned the escape from suffering and rebirth and had no philosophical pretensions whatsoever. Several centuries separate the Buddha from the beginning of Buddhist systematic philosophy, centuries during which well-meaning monks had ordered and organised the original teaching in various way. Buddhist systematic philosophy, when it finally arose, was based upon, and continued, these attempts at ordering and organising. It tries to introduce coherence and draws conclusions. In this

way Buddhist philosophy arises out of the attempt to introduce order and coherence in the received teachings. Other schools of philosophy proceed similarly.

The extent to which different schools are willing to yield to criticism varies, at least in theory. A thinker like Bhartṛhari represents one extreme. [171] Bhartṛhari was both grammarian and philosopher. In the grammatical tradition he represents a change of attitude which Madhav Deshpande (1998:20), from the University of Michigan, does not hesitate to characterise as a paradigm-shift. Unlike his main predecessors who lived a number of centuries earlier, with Bhartṛhari "an entirely new tone has set in. There is a strong feeling that the current times are decadent, and that there are no truly authoritative persons around. Grammarians in this decadent period must look back to the golden age of the great ancient grammarians and seek authority in their statements." In philosophy, too, the value of tradition cannot be overestimated. Here Bhartṛhari observes: "Without tradition, logic cannot establish virtue (*dharma*); even the knowledge of seers derives from tradition."[3] And again: "He who bases himself on tradition ... is not hindered by logical arguments."[4]

The author of the Mokṣopāya — a text of unknown date which became the kernel of a larger work, the Yogavāsiṣṭha — may illustrate the opposite extreme. We find here the following statement:[5] "Even [if it is] of human origin, a treatise has to be accepted if it teaches with arguments. [If it is] different, on the other hand, it is to be discarded even if revealed by a seer. Only logic (*nyāya*) is to be adhered to. Even [if it comes] from a child, an argued statement has to be accepted. [Every statement that is] different is to be discarded, even if it has been uttered by [the creator god] Brahmā."

It is hard to deny that Indian philosophies tended to gradually become more and more fossilised with the passing of time. To some extent many of them may have been rather rigid right from the beginning. Buddhist philosophers, for example, were not ready to abandon the words of the Buddha, even though they found various ways to reinterpret them, or even to discover and accept so far unknown, i.e. new, sermons which they ascribed to him. Bhartṛhari's unwillingness to seriously consider anything that deviated from tradition has already been mentioned. Others did try to work

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[3] Vkp 1.30: *na cāgamād ṛte dharmas tarkeṇa vyavatiṣṭhate/ ṛṣīṇām api yaj jñānaṃ tad apy āgamapūrvakam//*

[4] Vkp 1.41: *caitanyam iva yaś cāyam avicchedena vartate/ āgamas tam upāsīno hetuvādair na bādhyate//*

[5] Yogavāsiṣṭha 2.18.2-3 (as cited in Slaje, 1994:167): *api pauruṣam, ādeyaṃ śāstraṃ ced yuktibodhakam/ anyat tv, ārṣam api, tyājyam; bhāvyaṃ nyāyaikasevinā// yuktiyuktam upādeyaṃ vacanaṃ bālakād api/ anyat tṛṇam iva tyājyam, apy uktaṃ padmajanmanā//* Slaje translates: "Auch wenn es von einem Menschen stammt, muss man ein Lehrwerk akzeptieren, soferne es mit Argumenten lehrt. [Jedes] andere dagegen ist zu meiden, auch [wenn] es von den Ṛṣis stammt! Es ist nur die Methode (*nyāya*), der man anhängen darf. Sogar [wenn sie] von einem Kinde [komt], ist eine argumentative Aussage akzeptabel. [Jede] andere [dagegen] verwerfe man wie [nutzloses] Gras, selbst wenn sie von Brahmā behauptet wurde!"

independently of any particular tradition (with more or less success). I have the impression that Vaiśeṣika started off in this way. But Vaiśeṣika, too, [172] became a system whose doctrines were meant to be defended, not thoroughly revised.[6]

An ideal history of Indian philosophy — which should include the story of the search for coherence and immunity against criticism — will have to deal in detail with the ways in which various early teachings were transformed into coherent systems of thought. This is of necessity a somewhat technical endeavor, which I do not plan to undertake, at least not in this lecture. I will however cite some observations by Ben-Ami Scharfstein which seem to me appropriate in the Indian situation (1998:522): "[The] progress [of every tradition of philosophy] depends ... on its necessary elaboration. This in turn depends on the answers given in the course of debate within the tradition itself and debate with external opponents, not to speak of the assimilation of useful fragments of other philosophies. If its historical continuity is unbroken, each philosophy is provided with successively better answers to its rivals and goes on building its structure higher, more firmly, and more elaborately. Given time, philosophical structures become fully elaborated, that is, worked out in the full detail that enriches and individualizes their culture. They then become summary expressions of these cultures, like the great Christian cathedrals, or the great Muslim mosques, or the great Hindu or Chinese temples or Buddhist stupas." But, "although it has progressed, [each philosophical school] appears no closer to victory over its rivals, which have also progressed" (p. 523). The history of Indian philosophy as I see it is the history of the elaboration of the different systems conditioned by the ongoing critical questioning by their rivals, and by the confrontation with other issues that threaten their internal coherence.

In their search for coherence and immunity against criticism Indian philosophers were confronted with the question to what extent their doctrines were compatible with certain convictions shared by all, or practically all, of them. Such shared convictions existed. I mention two of them in particular. Practically all philosophers of classical India believed in the doctrine of karma, and in the close connection between language and reality. The reflective analysis of these two convictions exerted a profound influence on the doctrines of the various schools. Some of these doctrines can indeed be looked upon as the direct outcome of this intellectual challenge.

The doctrine of karma exerted its influence at different times, and in different ways. It determined to a considerable extent the way in which the Brahmanical philosophies (to be distinguished from the Buddhist and [173] Jaina schools of thought)

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[6] A noteworthy exception is Raghunātha Śiromaṇi who, though in the tradition of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, demolishes a number of Vaiśeṣika categories; see Potter & Bhattacharyya, 1992:529 f.

were initially formulated, and raised again new questions centuries later. Let us first consider the earlier period.

The doctrine of karma, it may here be recalled, states that the deeds of living beings lead to punishment or reward (depending on the nature of the deeds) in this life or in a next one. Those who accept this doctrine are most often depicted in the Indian situation as looking for ways to escape from the resulting cycle of rebirths. Some do so by trying to abstain from all activity whatsoever; they practise asceticism in ways that cannot be considered at present. Others are convinced that their innermost self is different from all that acts; knowing one's true inactive nature implies being separated from one's deeds and freed from the effects of those deeds. In other words, knowledge of the self equals, or leads to, liberation.

Most Brahmanical philosophies are based on this vision of a totally inactive self which somehow interacts with the rest of the world which is constituted of everything that moves or acts. This division into two fundamentally distinct realms — an inactive but conscious self (*puruṣa*) and an unconscious but active rest of the world (*pradhāna* / *mūlaprakṛti*) — is the basis of the Sāṃkhya philosophy. The other major Brahmanical ontology of early classical India, Vaiśeṣika, adopts basically the same division, be it in a more sophisticated garb. Most other Brahmanical philosophies stick to the same basic scheme, so that it is possible to maintain that most of them are, at their very basis, responses to the challenge posed by the doctrine of karma.

I do not wish to dwell for long on this early period, but rather leave the doctrine of karma for the time being aside and turn to the other shared conviction I mentioned: the belief in the correspondence between language and reality. This belief has roots both in Vedic religion and in certain developments inside Buddhism, but since this lecture concentrates on the attempts at systematisation in response to challenges rather than on the origin of the challenges, I will not explore this issue here (cp. Bronkhorst, 1996).

Correspondence between language and reality means first of all that the objects in the phenomenal world correspond to the words of language. This may sound innocent enough, but was given quite amazing twists by certain thinkers. Many Buddhists, for example, had come to believe that the objects of our phenomenal world do not really exist. What are they then, and why do we tend to think they exist? The answer is: they are nothing but words, or if you like: notions imposed upon reality by the words of language. Most Brahmanical thinkers disagreed with the imputed unreality of the phenomenal world, but agreed that there is a close connection between words and things. Some of them went to the extent of analysing the use of words in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of objective reality.

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All these developments, though important, cannot be dealt with in this lecture. However, the belief in the correspondence between language and reality was, during the early centuries of the common era, extended from a mere belief in the correspondence between words and things to something more encompassing which includes the conviction that also *statements* correspond to the situations they describe, or more precisely: the words that make up a statement correspond to the "things" that constitute the situation described. Once again this conviction looks relatively harmless at first sight. After all, a statement like "John eats an apple" might be taken to describe a situation which is constituted by the three elements John, the apple, and the act of eating. Many, perhaps most, statements are such that they do not necessarily clash with this conviction, but some do. Take "John makes a vase". This statement describes a situation in which John and the act of making have their place, but the vase is not yet there. In other words, the words that make up the statement "John makes a vase" do not correspond to the "things" that constitute the situation described. The same difficulty arises whenever statements are made about making something or about coming into being. If we say "The vase comes into being" there is clearly nothing in the situation described corresponding to the word "vase".

I am sure that many people nowadays would conclude from statements like "John makes a vase" and "the vase comes into being" that apparently the words of a statement do *not* always correspond to the elements that make up the situation described. This would certainly be my reaction. Interestingly, to the best of my knowledge all Indian thinkers of the first five or more centuries of the common era did not draw this conclusion. I have studied the question in some detail and considered the writings of authors belonging to practically all currents of philosophy belonging to the three major religions of that period: Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. The results of this investigation have appeared in a recently published monograph (Bronkhorst, 1999). To my growing surprise I found that all these thinkers held on to this position and tried in various ways to resolve the difficulties it gave rise to. All of them believed that the words of a statement correspond to the elements that make up the situation described, also in the case of statements like "John makes a vase" and "the vase comes into being".

I will discuss in a minute some of the solutions that were offered to the problems that arise in this manner. First however I wish to deal with a question that may cross your minds at this point. Why did the Indian thinkers of that period, all of them, hold on to a conviction that is so obviously in contradiction with everyday experience? Is this another example of intellectuals accepting a position whose absurdity is visible to a child? Is this one more case of philosophers gone haywire?

I am not at all inclined to draw any such conclusions, and I would like to draw attention to two factors which no doubt encouraged the thinkers of [175] that time not to give up their position simply because it seemed to contradict everyday experience. For one thing, a number of thinkers, most notably the Buddhists, had already for other reasons come to the conclusion that the phenomenal world is not ultimately real. A contradiction between phenomenal reality and the conviction they cherished could not, therefore, endanger this conviction. Equally important is the the presence in India at that time of a tradition of rational enquiry, which I mentioned earlier. Philosophers had become convinced that their reasons and arguments were entitled to being taken seriously, as seriously or even more so than tradition, revelation, and insight. We know that in ancient Greece some thinkers, the Eleatics, did not hesitate to reject perceived reality on the basis — not of tradition, revelation, or special insight — but of mere argument. The early Indian thinkers, too, proceeded on the basis of their newly acquired confidence in the power of human reason. Those of us who feel superior to them might do well to recall that our phenomenal reality, too, hides a plethora of entities that deviate widely from our experience — molecules, atoms, subatomic particles — the existence of which we willingly accept on the basis of reasons provided and experiments carried out by others.

What solutions did the Indian thinkers offer to the difficulties they thus encountered, and which we might be tempted to consider to be of their own making? What does the word "vase" refer to in the sentences "John makes a vase" and "the vase comes into being"? The literature concerned contains a variety of answers, as I said earlier. Here I will concentrate on only two of them.

Perhaps the simplest and in a way most obvious answer was adopted by the Sāṃkhya school of Brahmanical philosophy, mentioned earlier in this lecture. We have various sources that contain information related to the early history of this school, even though the correct evaluation of this material by scholars has not so far been fully successful. In spite of this, most elements of its classical teachings figure in early works, such as the great epic of India, the Mahābhārata, and other texts.[7] One important element, however, is never mentioned in these earlier accounts, and must have been a rather recent innovation. I am speaking of *satkāryavāda*, the doctrine according to which the effect is present in its material cause. Very concretely this means that the situation described by the statement "John makes a vase", or "the vase comes into being", contains already a vase, be it that the vase at that moment is not yet visible.

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[7] For recent discussions of Sāṃkhya in the Mahābhārata, see Bisschop/Bakker, 1999 and Brockington, 1999.

Satkāryavāda becomes an essential part of classical Sāṃkhya philosophy, is taken over by some schools and vehemently combated by others. [176] The scholastic debates about this issue in later texts make one easily forget how profoundly strange this doctrine really is — not only for modern Western readers. They may have as a further effect that the doctrine becomes familiar, and that one stops being surprised by its extraordinary content. Familiarity is easily mistaken for understanding. A better understanding, I submit, can be obtained by becoming aware what specific problem the doctrine was meant to solve. In the case of *satkāryavāda* — I maintain — this problem was the direct consequence of certain ideas regarding the relationship between language and reality shared by all thinkers of that time.

The problem was shared by all thinkers, but they did not all propose the same solution. An altogether different solution was proposed by a particularly famous thinker, Nāgārjuna. In order to understand his solution we have to take into account that Nāgārjuna was a Buddhist. The Buddhists of his time, as I pointed out earlier, had come to believe that the phenomenal world does not really exist. This belief had not been part of the message taught by the historical Buddha. It was rather the result of subsequent elaborations and reinterpretations of the early teachings. Whatever the details of this development — with which we cannot deal at this moment — the Buddhists had come to *believe*, on the presumed authority of the Buddha, that the phenomenal world does not really exist; they could not prove this. This changed with Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna could prove what many Buddhists of his time were convinced of at any rate, viz., that the phenomenal world does not exist. It does not exist, because it cannot exist. And it cannot exist because it is self-contradictory.

The basic argument to prove this has already been sketched above. The statement "the vase comes into being" describes a situation which must contain a vase. It does not, however. The statement is therefore contradictory and nothing comes into being. I will cite one verse from Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā which deals with this particular problem. It states:[8] "If any unproduced entity is found anywhere it could be produced. Since that entity does not exist, what is produced?" In the case of our vase this means: if there is a vase at the time it is going to be produced, it can be produced. If there is no such vase, the subject of "the vase is produced" has nothing to refer to, and the statement is empty. This is true if we assume, as did apparently Nāgārjuna, that the terms of a statement have to refer to something that is there in the situation described.

Nāgārjuna proved, with this and similar arguments, what a number of Buddhists had already believed before and without him. He did however more. By introducing

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[8] MadhK(deJ) 7.17: *yadi kaścid anutpanno bhāvaḥ saṃvidyate kvacit/ utpadyeta sa kiṃ tasmin bhāve utpadyate 'sati//.*

these rather nihilistic arguments into Buddhist philosophy he created his own school of philosophy which, known by the name [177] Madhyamaka or Mādhyamika, survived for a long time in India and to this day among Tibetan Buddhists.

My reflections so far have shown, I hope, that at least two crucially important doctrines held by different schools of Indian philosophy found their historical origin, not in meditative experience or supernatural revelation, but in the need to deal with difficulties arising from positions taken. The *satkāryavāda* of Sāṃkhya and the nihilism of Madhyamaka are both to be understood as responses to a conviction, shared by all thinkers of that time, concerning the relationship between language and reality which at first view would barely seem to justify such encompassing metaphysical conclusions.

Let me say a few more words about the doctrine of karma. We have already seen that this dogma profoundly influenced the fundamental shape of several Brahmanical schools of thought. We now turn to some later effects of this dogma on Indian thought.

I have already several times mentioned the tradition of rational enquiry without which the history of classical Indian philosophy cannot be correctly understood; I think this is a point that cannot be sufficiently emphasized. The classical Indian schools of thought could not afford to present a mere bunch of incoherent ideas. They had to deal with inconsistencies and other blemishes, and somehow iron them out. This critical, and therefore self-critical, approach could not but force them to confront the question as to how karma is supposed to work. If the deeds I carry out in this life bring about results in a next life, by what mechanism do they do so? The question became particularly difficult for those thinkers who were of the opinion that the deeds of living beings literally shape the future world. Texts like Vasubandhu's Abhidharmakośabhāṣya — one of the most important dogmatic texts of Indian Buddhism during the classical period — leave no doubt about it that the shape of the world is determined by the deeds that living beings have carried out in an earlier world period. How should we imagine this process to have taken place?

Time does not permit me to discuss the issue and the solutions offered in detail. It seems however likely that Praśastapāda introduced the notion of a creator God into Vaiśeṣika precisely in order to explain the mechanism of karmic retribution. And Vasubandhu, the Buddhist thinker who turned to idealism later in his life (if the legend about his life is to be believed) did so in order to make the link between deeds and their effects intelligible: both now found their place in the mental continuum of a person, and karmic efficacy was no more puzzling than the occurrence of a dream.

Both Praśastapāda and Vasubandhu took radical decisions which were to have consequences for the further development of Indian thought. They did so because they

saw no other way to account for a dogma which they accepted as certain: the dogma of karmic retribution.

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After these examples of major doctrines that can be understood, or even *have* to be understood, as reactions to challenges which their authors had to face, I would like to consider one of these, the *satkāryavāda* of the Sāṃkhyas, somewhat more closely. This doctrine, even though originally an answer to a challenge, gradually became one more dogma characterising the Sāṃkhya school of thought. From a solution to a dilemma it became another truth one had to accept if one wanted to be a Sāṃkhya. The original problem is slowly forgotten and seems to gradually attract less attention in the philosophical literature.

Compare now our understanding of the doctrine of *satkāryavāda* with that of a Sāṃkhya thinker for whom this doctrine is no more than a simple dogma, who is no longer aware of the original problem which this doctrine was meant to solve. In such a case it can plausibly be argued that we understand this doctrine better than the Sāṃkhya thinker concerned, in the sense that we know — supposing that the explanation I have proposed is correct — something which this Sāṃkhya thinker does not know. We presumably know why this doctrine was introduced in the first place, while he doesn't. Some of his predecessors did, of course. The Sāṃkhya thinkers who introduced *satkāryavāda* knew why they did so, and so did some later Sāṃkhya thinkers, though perhaps less clearly.

Consider with this in mind the following criticism of the historical approach, exemplified in a passage formulated by Gerald James Larson almost twenty years ago (1980:305): "Quite apart from the merit or lack of merit of an historical interpretation, it appears that South Asians themselves seldom if ever used such an explanation. ... [B]y providing historical interpretations of South Asian thought and culture modern interpreters are more or less talking to themselves. There is nothing wrong with the latter enterprise, for at some stage in our work we as modern interpreters of South Asian culture must 'encompass' (in Dumont's sense) what South Asian culture represents in our experience. The crucial methodological issue, however, is that the 'encompassed' can never pass itself off as an adequate characterization of an indigenous interpretation. In other words, to put it directly, historical interpretation is *ours*, not *theirs*! In a South Asian environment, historical interpretation is *no* interpretation. It is a zero-category." This passage suggests that modern scholarship in an important way misses the point, and cannot claim to add anything to the understanding of Indian thought beyond an attempt to adjust it to our experience. If Larson is right, a traditional scholar cannot

possibly learn anything from modern scholarship, except perhaps an understanding of how *we* think.

Let us stick to the example of *satkāryavāda*. Our historical interpretation maintains that this doctrine was introduced to answer a specific problem, which I have tried to identify. The modern Sāṃkhya-pandit supposedly is [179] no longer aware of this problem. He knows *his* Sāṃkhya and is not looking for a historical understanding of its doctrines. Does this mean that our historical interpretation is only *ours*, not *theirs*, as Larson maintained? I hope you will agree with me that our historical interpretation, assuming it is correct, may not be that of the modern adherent of the Sāṃkhya system, but is nevertheless very much *theirs*, in the sense that those who introduced *satkāryavāda* did it for the reasons which our historical method has tried to rediscover. If, then, modern interpreters of Sāṃkhya are more or less talking to themselves, as Larson puts it, then for the simple reason that the creators of classical Sāṃkhya have been dead for a long time, and because today's Sāṃkhya-pandits are not interested to know why the doctrine of *satkāryavāda* was created in the first place. Let me add immediately that this example is hypothetical. I do not know whether today's Sāṃkhya-pandits are or are not interested in this question, and what is more, I am not sure there are nowadays traditional scholars in India who adhere to the Sāṃkhya tradition.[9] If there are, and if they share our interest in the question why the doctrine of *satkāryavāda* was created, they will join us in our research, and provide historical interpretations of South Asian thought just like *us*. Of course, Larson is right if he maintains that historical research will not help us much to understand a modern pandit who is not interested in the how and why of his received beliefs. But he is wrong if he thinks that historical research cannot answer questions that anyone, including a traditional pandit, may ask.

Let me, by way of conclusion, return to the question of the relationship between the modern academic study of Indian philosophy and the still living traditions of philosophy in present-day India. I know from experience that many traditional scholars — whose numbers, unfortunately, are dwindling — have a mastery over their particular fields which few scholars who have not already in their childhood had the advantage of a traditional training can hope to attain. I am therefore deeply convinced of the value of the Indian traditions, and of the importance to learn from them as long as this is still possible. But this does not mean that modern scholars should have as principal aim to become imitation pandits. In some ways modern scholars may never understand Indian philosophy as well as traditional scholars do. In other ways, they may understand it

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[9] K.C. Dutt's *Who's Who of Sanskrit Scholars in India 1991* enumerates, to be sure, twenty-two names under the heading Sāṃkhya (p. 560-61). But they all have other areas of specialisation besides this one, and Dutt's book says nothing about the personal allegiance of the scholars mentioned.

better. They may understand it better by bringing in the historical dimension, by taking into consideration the context [180] in which the various schools of thought arose and survived, and by bringing to light the problems which the central doctrines of the philosophical schools were meant to solve. Traditional scholars are of course more than welcome to join and contribute to a better understanding of the thought of their spiritual and philosophical ancestors, and it is very rewarding to see that a number of them actually do so. There can and should in this way be no question of *us* against *them*.

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ABBREVIATIONS:

MadhK(deJ)   Nāgārjuna, Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ, ed. J.W. de Jong, The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras 1977
Vkp   Bhartṛhari, Vākyapadīya, ed. W. Rau, Wiesbaden 1977.