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Denkt Asien anders?

Reflexionen zu Buddhismus und Konfuzianismus in
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Inhalt

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Does India think differently?

Western scholars who occupy themselves with Indian thought sooner or later have to confront the question whether classical India thought differently. The question is legitimate, even necessary, and does not only concern logic. Sophisticated Indian thought finds expression in many forms, which we may designate with the help of Western categories: there are Indian sciences (e. g. medicine, mathematics, astronomy, linguistics, etc.) and Indian philosophies. We can call these disciplines »sciences« and »philosophies«, because they resemble to at least some extent the Western disciplines we call thus. However, there are differences, too. This raises the question whether these differences are significant. Are they due to the presumed fact that India thinks differently, or do they *not* justify such a general conclusion, being rather the result of minor historical coincidences of a kind that might conceivably also have occurred within the Western tradition of science and philosophy?

The days are long gone when one could ascribe this or that element of Indian civilisation to the Indian genius, or *Geist*. We now know that such claims have usually more to do with projected prejudices than with the culture one is studying. The temptation is yet great to maintain that there is something specifically and typically Indian in the systems of thought it has produced, and that it is possible to say something about the distinguishing feature or features.

One attempt to identify such an underlying distinctive feature has attracted some attention in recent years. It began, if I am not mistaken, with a remark by Daniel Ingalls in an article that came out in 1954. Ingalls said there:

In philosophizing the Greeks made as much use as possible of mathematics. The Indians, curiously, failed to do this, curiously because they were good mathematicians. Instead, they made as much use as possible of grammatical theory and argument.[1]

This idea was subsequently elaborated by Frits Staal in several articles.[2] Staal considers the claimed opposition embodied in two historical figures in particular, Euclid and Pāṇini. He states:

Historically speaking, Pāṇini's method has occupied a place comparable to that held by Euclid's method in Western thought. Scientific developments have therefore taken different directions in India and in the West.[3]

The idea is that, just as virtually all Western thinkers started their training with a thorough study of Euclidian geography, Indian thinkers were all trained in the Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini. Different models were, so to say, imprinted upon their minds while they were young, with the result that the thoughts they produced later on were different, too.

Staal's proposal is seductive. Unfortunately he makes no attempt to prove it. I myself have tried to test it against the evidence of Indian mathematical literature, with disappointing results.[4] If India thinks differently because its thinkers studied Pāṇinian grammar in their youth, this has not persuasively been demonstrated so far.

In spite of this, I think that Pāṇini's grammar can help us in our quest by putting us on the right track. I would like to argue that much of Indian thought, especially philosophical thought, *is* different and that one reason why this is so is *not* that all Indian thinkers had to study Pāṇini's grammar in their youth, but rather that many Indian thinkers shared a presupposition that also finds expression in that grammar. This presupposition can be formulated in very few words: it is the conviction that Sanskrit is the original and only real language, which by its nature is closer to reality than any other language (which are all corruptions of the one real language, Sanskrit). This, at least, was the position of the Brahmins.

It is perhaps not surprising that Brahmins had this conviction. They distinguished themselves from other layers of the population by their knowledge of the Veda, primarily a collection of formulas, all of them in Sanskrit. These formulas have magical power. If recited by the right person in the right circumstances they produce effects. They do so by themselves, which shows that their form, and therefore their language, is closely connected with the outside world in which they produce these effects.

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1 Ingalls 1954: 4.
2 See Staal 1960, 1965 (=1988), 1983, 1986, 1993, 1999.
3 Staal 1965: 114 = Staal 1988: 158.
4 Bronkhorst 2001.

The Indian Brahmins were not the only ones to think that there is such a thing as an original language that is closer to reality than any other language. The ancient Egyptians appear to have thought the same about their language.[5] It is also known that thinkers (and rulers) in the West have repeatedly attempted to find an original language, usually by keeping infants in linguistic quarantine and observing their first utterances. The situation in the West during most of its history was unfortunately much less straightforward than in India. Western thinkers were confronted with a number of possible candidates for the original language. The result was disagreement and confusion. The Indian Brahmins had only one candidate for being the original language, viz. Sanskrit. This was the language of their sacred texts, and this had to be the original language.

This one conviction — the belief in Sanskrit as the original and only real language — explains a number of features of classical Brahmanical thought which are, as far as I can see, without parallels in the West. However, the presence of this unreflected conviction among traditional Brahmins does not explain why it came to find expression in sophisticated philosophical systems. Vaiśeṣika ontology, to give but one example, is built on the assumption that there is a close correspondence between (Sanskrit) words and things. The appearance of such systems of Brahmanical thought was linked to external events: Brahmanism found its ideas challenged by outsiders, primarily Buddhists.

All I have said so far about the special status of Sanskrit was of no concern to the Buddhists. Buddhism arose perhaps in the fifth century before the Common Era and did not use Sanskrit until half a millennium later. It used other languages, but did not look upon any of these as being the original language (even though it started to do so in later centuries). Buddhism during its early centuries was engaged in the scholastic activity of collecting and ordering key concepts in the teaching of the Buddha. At first sight, this religion was not predestined to develop specific ideas about language. Political events were probably responsible for the fact that it eventually did.

Recall that the North of India was for the first time politically united under the empire of the Mauryas (ca. 320 – 200 BCE). Recall further that its mightiest emperor, Aśoka (ca. 268 – 233 BCE), well-known for the numerous inscriptions he left, felt strongly attracted to Buddhism. Legend may be correct in stating that under this emperor Buddhists moved to remote corners of the empire, among these the far Northwest of the subcontinent. Other political events — the conquests of Alexander of Macedonia just before the establishment of the Mauryan empire — were responsible for the presence in that region of considerable numbers of Greeks. Archaeological finds indicate that these Greeks remained culturally attached to their homeland and continued Greek traditions. This was

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5 Borgeaud 2004: 50.

the cultural ambiance in which the Buddhists of Northwest India found themselves.

We have very little information about the contacts between Buddhists and Greeks during that period. However, what we do know is striking enough to allow some tentative conclusions. The Buddhists from that region (situated in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan) reworked their scholastic lists of key concepts so as to arrive at a vision of the constitution of the world. They developed an elaborate ontology that may be considered the first indigenous philosophical system of the Indian subcontinent. This system was far from perfect. After all, these Buddhists had to work with building blocks they had inherited from their scholastic tradition. What is more, they claimed (and perhaps even believed) that they did no more than correctly interpreting the words of the Buddha. In spite of these difficulties, they sought to create a coherent ontological system.

I cannot discuss the details of this system in this lecture.[6] Briefly put, these Buddhists claimed that they had an exhaustive list of all that exists: these are the so-called *dharma*s, items from the ancient canon diligently collected by their scholastic predecessors. These *dharma*s were now given the new function of being the ultimate elements of existence. It was claimed that all objects that are familiar to us from experience — including we ourselves — are nothing but accumulations of *dharma*s. Since these accumulations are not themselves *dharma*s, they do not really exist. Houses, chariots, and even persons like you and me do not really exist. If we think they do, it merely shows that we are misled, misled by our language. We believe in the reality of these objects because there are words for them.

At this point we have to raise some important questions. First, why did Buddhists in northwestern India bother to create a more or less coherent system of thought, where their coreligionists elsewhere saved themselves such trouble? And second, what is the link between creating a coherent system of thought on the one hand, and residing in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent on the other?

These two questions, I believe, allow of one single answer: These Buddhists attempted to create a coherent system of thought because they lived in a milieu in which Greek culture played an important role.[7] One feature of Greek culture which continued into Hellenistic times is public debate. In a public debate people defend their opinions against others who disagree with them but are obliged to listen to arguments. Incoherent views cannot be defended with arguments. People can live with incoherent views, but they cannot defend them

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6 See Bronkhorst 2000: 76 – 127, Bronkhorst, forthcoming.
7 Bronkhorst 1999, Bronkhorst 2001a.

with convincing arguments. If they have to, their incoherent views are soon replaced with other ones which introduce coherence where there was none, while yet preserving earlier notions where possible.

Putting two and two together, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the first coherent system of thought in India was a Buddhist system, created in Northwest India under the influence of Greek culture. Note that I do not say that it was created under the influence of Greek thought! I know of no Greek elements in Buddhist thought, nor indeed in any other school of Indian philosophy. I admit that this may be due to my ignorance. The thesis I present here has nothing to do with Greek philosophy, or with Greek thought in general, but only with a Greek habit: the habit of debate, often public debate.

Does this mean that these Buddhists did not think differently from thinkers in the West? I would not draw this conclusion in a hurry. The system which these Buddhists developed was quite remarkable, and may have nothing resembling it in Western thought. And once again, their ideas about language stand out. Remember that these thinkers denied the existence of the objects that are familiar to us from everyday experience. Houses, chariots and persons are nothing but names. In other words, language plays a gigantic trick on us.

With these Buddhists, a second set of ideas about language enters the scene. Beside the Brahmins, who thought that their sacred language and the world we live in were somehow closely connected to each other, these Buddhists from the Northwest claimed that the world is not at all the way we think it is, and that we are misled by language into believing that it is.

Unlike the Brahmins, these Buddhists had a coherent system of thought, and an acquired habit of discussing points of view in public debates. What is more, Hellenistic influence in Northwest India lingered on for several centuries after the disappearance of the last Greek kingdoms. We may assume that the tradition of public debate continued under subsequent rulers, and even spread over a wider geographical area, including regions with a strong presence of Brahmins. This assumption is confirmed by more recent evidence which shows that the tradition of public debate had taken roots.[8] Brahmins and Buddhists were henceforth condemned to confront each other in debate, with predictable consequences: both created systems (if they did not yet have one) which they then went on refining in ever greater detail. Indian philosophy was there to stay, and derived henceforth much of its impetus from the confrontation between thinkers with different convictions, primarily Brahmins and Buddhists.[9]

This long story of traditional Brahmins and travelling Buddhists was necessary to show that Indian philosophy, both in its Brahmanical and Buddhist

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8 Bronkhorst 2007.
9 For details, see Bronkhorst 2008.

manifestations, was right from the beginning concerned with language. This is not to say that Indian philosophy is somehow philosophy of language, but rather that it is based on certain assumptions about language. These assumptions were not the same for Buddhists and Brahmins, but strangely the thinkers of both these currents had certain ideas in common. Both believed that the world of our everyday experience is intimately connected with language. The Brahmins added that the language concerned was not just any language, but Sanskrit. The Buddhists from their side specified that the world of our everyday experience, though intimately connected with language, does not ultimately exist, at least not in the form we think. But in spite of these differences, Buddhist and Brahmanical philosophers shared some important presuppositions. These shared presuppositions explain that Indian philosophers from all schools — whether Brahmanical, Buddhist, or even Jaina — came to spend an enormous amount of effort on a set of problems that barely figures in the history of Western thought.

These shared presuppositions, let me remind you, concerned the relationship between language and reality. In its simplest form, they concern the relationship between words and things. We have already seen that the Brahmins were convinced that there had to be such a relationship. Their philosophers might therefore argue that such and such a thing must exist, because there is a word for it. (Do not forget that Sanskrit is an, or rather *the* eternal language, which does not allow the creation of new words.) The Buddhists would agree that there was such a relationship, with this difference that for them the designated objects do not really exist.

However, the postulate of a close relationship between language and reality took also a less benign form, claiming an equally close relationship between statements and their contents. Vedic interpreters concluded from this that the statements of the Veda, which are eternal and have no author, being pure speech, have to be correct, i. e., true to reality. This applies even to the injunctions contained in the Veda: these are objectively valid commands, which anyone exposed to them has to carry out; they express objective obligations, which are independent of anyone's will or desire.

But even outside the circles of Vedic interpreters, even among those who attached no value whatsoever to the Veda (such as the Buddhists), thinkers were convinced that there is a close relationship between statements and what they say. They held on to this conviction, even when it became clear that it leads to serious difficulties. One simple sentence can illustrate the nature of these difficulties. The statement »the potter makes a pot« describes a situation in which there is a potter, there is the activity of making, but there is no pot. Somehow all Indian philosophers of the period concerned were convinced that there had to be a pot in that situation, and that the absence of a pot was irregular and in need of explanation.

If you have problems figuring out what exactly the difficulty is in this example, then you are close to understanding in what way Indian philosophers thought differently from you. Thinkers belonging to all schools of Indian philosophy (with the sole exception, it seems, of the so-called materialists)[10] were perplexed by this difficulty, so much so that they introduced major changes in their systems of thought whose main or perhaps sole purpose was to resolve it.[11] This led to a variety of new doctrines, from among which every philosopher had to make a choice. I enumerate some of these:

1. *satkārya-vāda*, »the doctrine according to which a product (the pot) exists already before it is produced«: According to this doctrine there is, contrary to appearance, a pot in the situation described by »the potter makes a pot«.
2. *śūnya-vāda,* »the doctrine according to which everything is empty«: Neither pots, nor anything else, can exist.
3. *ajāti-vāda*, »the doctrine according to which nothing can come into being«: Since no pot can be made, it cannot come into existence; this applies to everything else as well.
4. *anekānta-vāda*, »the doctrine according to which reality is manifold«: In one way the pot exists while it is being made, in another way it does not exist at that time.
5. *apoha-vāda,* »the doctrine according to which reference takes place through exclusion«: Since words do not directly refer to things, the requirement that there has to be a pot in the situation described by »the potter makes a pot« is no longer valid.
6. *sarvāsti-vāda*, »the doctrine according to which past and future objects exist«: It follows that there is a pot in the situation described, even though it is a future pot.

The last of these six doctrines, *sarvāsti-vāda*, probably existed already before thinkers started paying serious attention to statements like »the potter makes a pot«. *Sarvāsti-vāda* is yet entitled to a place in this list, because it came in handy once this difficulty became the object of serious reflection.

Other solutions to the same difficulty were proposed, too, but the above list is enough to illustrate my point.

Each of these doctrines offers a solution to the difficulty encountered in the statement »the potter makes a pot«, and many, perhaps most, were created in order to solve this kind of difficulty. These doctrines, be it noted, are not marginal to philosophical reflection in ancient India; they are central to it. The

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10 Bronkhorst 2007a: 363 – 366.
11 Bronkhorst 1999a, Bronkhorst, forthcoming a.

names of some of these doctrines are even used to designate philosophical schools: *Anekānta-vāda* is the philosophy of Jainism; *śūnya-vāda* is the philosophy of the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. One exaggerates, but only little, by stating that an important part of Indian philosophy consists of answers to the difficulty encountered in »the potter makes a pot«.

I know that anyone who has ever struggled with an Indian philosophical text and has been struck by the sophistication of its arguments will wish to disagree with what I have just said. Let me clarify that it is not at all my purpose to denigrate Indian philosophy in any of its forms. It should also be clear that no Indian text states in terms similar to mine that their purpose is to solve the difficulty connected with »the potter makes a pot«. This does not make my analysis less appropriate. Complicated and sophisticated thought can hide less than certain elements, not only in India. Bringing those elements to light may make them look outlandish, but this was precisely my intention.

Let us return to what I said earlier: If you don't quite get what difficulty there is in the statement »the potter makes a pot«, then your lack of comprehension testifies to the fact that Indians do indeed think differently. To be more precise: Indian philosophers, during a certain period, thought differently. They thought differently, not because of their different genius, nor because of different genes, but because they were part of a philosophical tradition in which certain assumptions were taken for granted which were not taken for granted (at least not in this same shape) in the Western tradition of philosophy. Note that no different logic is involved. It is very simple to formulate the shared presupposition of Indian thinkers of that period in such a way that their difficulty becomes logically understandable. It is sufficient, for example, to attribute to them the belief that the words of a statement must correspond to elements of the situation described by that statement. This belief runs into trouble in the case of statements like »the potter makes a pot«. We for our part might be inclined to modify the belief, whereas Indian philosophers were ready to modify their understanding of the world. Logically both solutions are fine, of course. The difference between us and them is not a matter of logic.

How did it happen that such for us implausible assumptions came to be unquestionable presuppositions for thinkers from milieus as different from and opposed to each other as Brahmanism and Buddhism? The answer to this question cannot but be historical. I have tried to sketch some of the developments which led to the remarkable convergence of Brahmanical and Buddhist ideas about the relationship between language and reality. History might not have taken this course and this convergence might not have taken place. In that case the history of Indian philosophy might have taken a different shape altogether. Indian philosophers might still have thought differently, but differently

in a different way. All that did not happen and we do not need to speculate about it.

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