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## On Method



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## Remarks on Philology

To begin with a disclaimer: In what follows I do not intend to offer anything like a unified or detailed position on how to do philology, nor on the soundness and feasibility of certain methods for providing relative chronologies for texts or text-strata via philological analysis, but only a series of remarks on what I perceive to be some of the recurring and fundamental philosophical issues which do and should come up, in one way or another, in reflecting upon what we do in the discipline of Buddhist Studies. My remarks are broadly inspired by an extensive exchange of views between José Cabezón and C. W. Huntington, Jr. in earlier issues of this journal, as well as by their present contributions to this volume. Contrary to what José Cabezón seems to advocate, however, I do not think that we can advance matters this complex through polemical arguments in defense of rigidified traditional "methodological positions." The danger is that these positions, once formulated in adversarial debate, become caricatural and without actual adherents. An honest, and useful approach, might be to look at some of the complex features of how people who call themselves philologists (and I count myself as being one) do read texts, and to make methodological remarks on the basis of what we actually do, rather than referring primarily to nineteenth century thinkers or their philosophical avatars.<sup>1</sup>

The important feature of most working philologists' approach is the conviction that by understanding in real depth the Buddhist languages, and the history, institutions, context and preoccupations of an author and his milieu, progress can be made towards understanding that author's thought and better grasping his world. This much is clearly close to essential aspects of traditional hermeneutics. And it is hard to imagine philology not having at least the above-described basic stance. Now granted, some would phrase things differently. Paul Griffiths, for exam-

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1. The present article is a sequel to my lecture at the University of Lausanne entitled "Où va la philologie bouddhique?" and appearing in *Études de Lettres*, Université de Lausanne 1996.

ple, speaks of linguistic competence and mastery of the historical context as being preconditions to understanding a text.<sup>2</sup> But the transition to talk about understanding *an author's thought* is a natural one for a philologist, and, I would maintain, it probably should remain so. Take an example of a historico-philological program which unabashedly seeks authorial intent, namely what Erich Frauwallner and Ernst Steinkellner have attempted to do in deciphering how and when Dharmakīrti's principal philosophical developments took place. Frauwallner sums it up in the deceptively simple-looking penultimate sentence of his famous article "Die Reihenfolge und Entstehung der Werke Dharmakīrti's":

Es wird eine anziehende Aufgabe sein, darüber hinaus die Entstehung und allmähliche Weiterbildung seiner Gedanken im einzelnen zu verfolgen.<sup>3</sup>

And I don't think that Steinkellner, for example, was atypical of philologists when he recently said:

As soon as we start reading Dharmakīrti on his own terms we find ourselves participating in his philosophical workshop. And the philological situation in his case is luckily such that we can literally observe him at work, taking up a theme again and again, adapting it, fitting it together with other themes he has taken up again, and welding them together so that they seem never to have been separate.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, one could say that this is always just a quaint illusion, but I think that many working philologists or historians of philosophy at a particular point do have the feeling that Steinkellner referred to of almost being able to observe their favorite philosopher at work.

Is there any real reason to say that a sentiment like what Steinkellner is speaking about is always just plain wrong? Or perhaps we should turn things another way: if we admit that, in spite of some quite considerable

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2. See his article "Buddhist Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4.2 (1981): 17-32.

3. E. Frauwallner, "Die Reihenfolge und Entstehung der Werke Dharmakīrti's," *Asiatica, Festschrift F. Weller* (1954): 154. The passage was translated by Steinkellner as: "It will be a fascinating task to trace the origin and gradual development of his thought in detail."

4. E. Steinkellner, "The Logic of the *Svabhāvahetu* in Dharmakīrti's *Vādanīyāya*," *Studies in the Buddhist Epistemological Tradition*, ed. E. Steinkellner (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften) 311.

difficulties, we often can understand the mind of one of our contemporaries or that of someone who lived in the same decade, or even the mind of someone who lived in another culture in the same century, then is there anything *in principle* all that different in the case of understanding the mind of a historical figure like Dharmakīrti? No doubt, it's harder and our rate of success is much lower. But perhaps opponents of philology underestimate just how far someone can get by spending most of his lifetime delving into texts, seeking to better understand them in their context, and thus coming to form a picture of the minds of the authors. Consider, for example, what Lambert Schmithausen has done in his historical-philological study on the Buddhist concept of *ālayavijñāna*—Schmithausen is, by his own admission, “enmeshed in the historico-philological method.”<sup>5</sup> This study is, I think, a success, and I also think that the fact that it is successful supports the view that we can go at least a significant distance in understanding how the Buddhists themselves conceived of a notion like *ālayavijñāna*. To put the argument a bit more bluntly: if it were otherwise, then what was Schmithausen doing, and what *could* he have accomplished?

There is a tendency to characterize philologists as adhering to an impossible program of understanding the meaning of a text by “emptying” themselves of all preconceived notions, biases, prejudices, etc. We are frequently told by critics that as getting rid of prejudices is impossible, the goal must be to become “self-conscious” of them.<sup>6</sup> Alas, it is not at all clear why we can only become self-conscious of our prejudices (as if we were condemned to doing only a kind of therapy), and not refute or come to reject them, albeit not all of them all at once. Getting rid of prejudices would indeed be impossible if we had to be free of all at some given time. Now, some philologists perhaps still do say that this is desirable and possible. But I doubt that many would want to have to defend such an extreme version of their approach. It strikes me that a reasonable position for a philologist would be to say that, at any given time, one will always have some such prejudices, but that none, or at least very few, are so intractable that they cannot in principle be chal-

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5. See his *Alayavijñāna: On the Origin and Early Development of a Central Concept of Yogācāra Philosophy* (Tokyo: 1987) vii. See also the review by Paul J. Griffiths in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12.1 (1989).

6. This is stated repeatedly in A. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship. On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (Oxford: 1990).

lenged. Granted there probably are cases, like belief in rationality itself or in the existence of other minds, etc., where, to adopt the Wittgensteinian phrase, the chain of reasons must come to an end. But accepting these types of constituent elements of our “form of life” is relatively harmless and will not, as far as I can see, in any significant way preclude our understanding what an author meant.

The fact remains that we can often get rid of mistaken ideas about what texts and authors thought by means of rational argumentation and by meticulous analysis, so that it just won't do to say baldly that we read our own baggage of cultural prejudices into a text. (For example, we can, I believe, show by textually based argumentation that Stcherbatsky's neo-Kantian understanding of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's idea of *svalakṣaṇa* is wrong, if we are staying close to the basic Kantian ideas, or meaningless if we adapt Kant to fit the Buddhist perspective.) Surely, the onus must be on the skeptic to prove his point, if he wishes to say that progress in eliminating prejudices, preconceived or mistaken notions, etc. is in principle impossible. I won't dwell on this, except to say that we could invoke the famous analogy of mariners at sea repairing their boat, an analogy which Quine so often used for describing how we can change anything in our conceptual schemes: one can replace the planks (i. e. prejudices, etc.) one at a time, but never all of them all at once. At any rate, the fact of the interpreter always having prejudices does not itself lead to the conclusion that we can never come closer to the “world of the author,” nor should it lead to a relativism where all our subjective ideas as to what is meant are as good or bad as any other ideas. Although we might not be able to empty our minds so that we have a pristine *tabula rasa* and thus a kind of unadulterated pure vision, it's surely a bad *non-sequitur* to think that this implies that any interpretation, being subject to some prejudices, is as good as any another. Prejudices can be gross or subtle, and some are seen to be quite obviously wrong. Fortunately, we can and do rationally challenge our own ideas, sometimes even the most deep-seated ones, and (as epistemologists of a Popperian bent recognize) acceptance does not exclude acknowledging fallibility.

My colleague Johannes Bronkhorst, in a review of Andrew Tuck's book on the history of Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna,<sup>7</sup> made an important remark which I should mention in this context, namely, that Nāgārjuna, about whom we all seem to write when it comes to hermeneutics, represents a quite exceptional case, where indeed we do

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7. In *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 3 (1993).

seem to “find” virtually anything we’re looking for. Nagarjuna is thus a case where arguably our interpretations are to a very large degree a function of our initial baggage of biases. But, stresses Bronkhorst, not every Indian philosopher is as maddeningly obscure as Nagarjuna: there are philosophers where we can come much closer to understanding their intent and there are texts where we can eliminate a lot of seductive interpretations to which we might otherwise be led by our current mind-set or by our cultural baggage. In short, Nagarjuna is a bit of a loaded example, and we wouldn’t want to say that we are in the same situation in trying to understand Dharmakīrti, the *Nirukta* or the *Nyayasūtras* as we are in understanding Nagarjuna. We’re often stumped because of our inadequate knowledge, bad texts, unsolvable historical problems, etc., but fortunately there are degrees of incomprehension, so that *sometimes* we do get somewhere. Let’s go back to the situation of Dharmakīrti studies: I think that after some decades of following Frauwallner’s philological program, the scholarly world understands Dharmakīrti’s thought much better than did Stcherbatsky, and not just differently.

So much for what I take to be the important and inescapable preoccupation which we, as philologists, have with authorial intent. While all this has been, I hope, a reasonable depiction of how philologists proceed, it is also I think important to stress that, if we take a narrowly restricted sense of “intent,” nobody limits himself to only that. Indeed, what makes a good theory of interpretation so difficult to come up with are a number of tensions in our practice, tensions which unfortunately we try to eliminate by choosing one or another side in current philosophical polemics. As I argued earlier, most of us quite naturally feel that we try to understand authorial intent, that we try to see how, when and why an author came up with his ideas and that we have to try to understand the author’s own thought processes, “what was going on in his head,” and this in his historical context and in terms of philosophical concepts which would have been basically familiar and acceptable to him. Not only do we try, but we sometimes really do seem to have some success. On the other hand, we are not content, or perhaps better, *we should not be content* to understand a philosopher *merely* in this way. Failure to interpret in terms other than those mirroring the internal discourse of the author, is a fast track to translations and studies written in that rather hermetic idiom which Paul Griffiths has so aptly called “Buddhist Hybrid English.”<sup>8</sup> We can and should defend textual interpretations which use

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8. See Griffiths, *op.cit.*

terms and concepts which would have been unknown to the author himself—"unknown" in the sense that he didn't have anything at all like equivalents to those terms in his vocabulary (and might well have considerable reluctance in accepting what we are attributing to him). And when we do this, we like to think that we're not modifying or adapting our philosopher's thought so that it becomes palatable, chic or relevant to our contemporaries. We like to think that we're doing more than just useful falsifications or pleasant half-truths: our new characterization in author-alien terms is (in some sense), after all, what he himself thought.

Arguably, this tension, or something quite like it, is what is at the root of people's feeling that they have to choose between the traditional idea of philologists, now defended by E. D. Hirsch et al. (i. e. the *mens auctoris* is the objective meaning of the text, all the other contemporary stuff just has to do with the text's "significance" for us) and more radical approaches, like so-called "textualism," which happily dismisses authorial intent altogether as depending upon a "metaphysics of presence." José Cabezón, in a recent article in this journal, seems to speak of a dilemma between accepting "objective meaning" or just inventing meaning subjectively, and leans towards the position of Hirsch; Huntington, in embracing Richard Rorty's position, is closer to textualism à la Jacques Derrida.<sup>9</sup>

I think that *some* of the black-white starkness of this dilemma, at least amongst orientalists, may well be due to an insufficient analysis of what we mean by "thought of an author," and, in general, may be due to an

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<sup>9</sup>. See J. Cabezón, "On Retreating to Method and Other Postmodern Turns: A response to C. W. Huntington, Jr.," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15.1 (1992): 141-142:

As an aside, it is interesting that much of E. D. Hirsch's critique of Derrida has focused on this very issue: what I am calling hermeneutical relativism, and what others have called subjectivism. In his *American Religious Empiricism*, William Dean paraphrases Hirsch's criticism as follows. He says that if Derrida is right, and "the objective meaning of a text is gone, the text is meaningless—or, to say the same thing, the meaning of the text is simply invented in the subjectivity of the reader." It should be obvious that Huntington sides with Derrida on this issue, and I with Hirsch, and that the debate is by no means a new one.

Cabezón's article is a response to one by Huntington in the same issue of *JiABS*. See also the introduction to C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness* (Hawaii: 1989).

insufficiently clear picture of the logic of “knows,” “believes,” “thinks,” “intends” and other such propositional attitudes which have two types of uses. Something similar to the medieval distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* modalities applies to contexts with the verbs “know,” “accept,” “thinks,” etc., so that we have cases where “John knows a proposition P” demands that P is in terms familiar to John, and others where this is not needed at all. This is also very well-worn ground in modern logic, but it is probably worth repeating. Let me give an unoriginal presentation.

There are indeed many epistemic statements which we accept as true, but which cannot be taken in anything but the second way, that is, as saying something unfamiliar, unknown, or even completely unacceptable, to the thinker himself. For example:

- a) Boris thinks his yacht is longer than it is.
- b) Boris thinks that his pregnant girlfriend is a virgin.

To put things more exactly, a statement like b) may be true if analyzed along the lines of “There is someone who is Boris’ pregnant girlfriend and Boris thinks she is a virgin.” It is no doubt false if we take it as: “Boris thinks that there is someone who is his pregnant girlfriend and is a virgin.” (*De re / de dicto*, “transparent” / “opaque,” turn on where one puts the quantifier “there is . . .,” either outside the scope of “believes” / “thinks,” or within it.) For our purposes, instead of speaking of *de re / de dicto* or using the Quinean terms “referentially transparent” / “opaque,” let’s just speak of taking belief-statements in author-alien modes and in modes which are author-familiar, all the while understanding the fundamental logical differences at stake. The point of all this is that it is an ordinary feature of “thinks . . .,” “believes . . .,” “accepts . . .,” “knows . . .,” “wishes . . .,” “intends . . .,” “hopes . . .,” and all other propositional attitudes, that both modes exist.

So obviously what is going in a) and b) is that we are phrasing Boris’ thoughts in ways which he would not: indeed he will vehemently contest our formulation of what he thinks about his girlfriend. Nonetheless, the statement that he thinks his pregnant girlfriend is a virgin may well be true, and we can certainly argue about its truth or falsity. Now, something similar to a) and b) in logical structure is going on when we make statements like “Nāgārjuna accepted inference rules like *modus ponens* and *modus tolens*,” or “Buddhists thought that logical quantification applied to existent and nonexistent items.” These too turn on the author-alien mode of “accept” and “think.” In brief: we do of course try to

understand what a philosopher thinks, but the words “think,” “know,” etc. involve two approaches inherent in the logic of belief, thought and propositional attitudes in general. When it comes to understanding Dharmakīrti, Dignāga, Nāgārjuna and co., I think we can say that we should pursue both. When contemporary writers speak of “understanding an author on his own terms” or “being truthful to the original meaning,”<sup>10</sup> I, of course, have no opposition to these formulae, but the nagging doubt remains that they have been rather insufficiently clear slogans generating more heat than light. The same ambiguities as those which I have discussed remain here, for it should be obvious that it’s a short step from “understanding him on his own terms” or “being true to the original meaning” to “understanding what the author himself thought or intended.”

A final remark. There is probably nothing particularly surprising in the fact *that* philologists, like other human beings, will make author-alien attributions of thoughts, that is to say, they will attribute thoughts to a person which in a certain sense never entered the fellow’s head and which he might himself vociferously disavow. Indeed, this is not a practice which a thinking philologist should banish in dealing with Nāgārjuna or Dharmakīrti any more than in dealing with his friend Boris. The real difficulty is how to *evaluate* these types of attributions.<sup>11</sup> This is genuinely difficult and will admit of no algorithm-like criteria, but nonetheless whatever we attribute will have to be confrontable with textual evidence. Can we then even speak of correctness or incorrectness, truth or falsity, or should we just adopt a pragmatism along the lines of Richard Rorty, as C. W. Huntington would seem to suggest in his book *The Emptiness of Emptiness*? To put things another way, if we don’t go along with the idea that there is just one correct interpretation of a text—i. e. correspondence with authorial intent taken in, I suppose, the author-familiar mode—, then do we have to accept that “anything goes,” or at least that “anything useful or interesting goes”? I personally don’t think

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10. Cf. Steinkellner’s use of “on his own terms” in the passage which I quoted above. Cf. also Steinkellner’s review of M. Sprung in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102.2 (1982): 412: “A translator has to present the original in his chosen language in a manner which is at once truthful to its original meaning, and dear to its new readers. That is all.”

11. Cf. Cabezón’s remarks on page 153 of his review of Huntington’s *The Emptiness of Emptiness* (JIABS 13.2 [1990]): “. . . I do believe that there are evaluative criteria that can be employed to decide questions of authorial intent.”

so. But equally it has to be said that this is a hard, and even a highly technical, issue about theories of truth which has challenged some of the best minds in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. It would be out of place and presumptuous to argue for a position on these issues here. Suffice it to say that the general thrust of Hilary Putnam's arguments with Rorty is that our practice of interpretation involves notions of true, false, correct and incorrect, and not just usefulness or interest. The technical part of Putnam's and Nelson Goodman's philosophies consists largely in showing that "true," "false" etc. can be applicable only in a determined context or "version": other "versions" with truth criteria internal to them remain possible.<sup>12</sup> While I'm certainly not in a position to rule out a *sophisticated pragmatism*, what I would like to stress forcefully here is that Rorty's rhetoric, like that of Derrida with whom he is in sympathy, has an obvious potential for being taken in a very anti-intellectual way by people who wish to seek primarily to maximize the importance of their own ideologies. (Let me add that this remark is of a general nature—I do not think that C. W. Huntington should be accused of this at all.) Hopefully, if we opt for Rorty's pragmatism it will be in a sophisticated version which accommodates philological rigor, and not in one which dishonestly exploits Rorty's provocative phrases about "beating texts into shape" and "systematic misreadings" as being a license to bypass learning Buddhist languages properly or to avoid the difficult enterprise of reading texts in their historical context. Buddhist Studies insufficiently grounded upon, lacking, or even contemptuous of philology is an unpalatable, albeit increasingly likely, prospect for the future. It would add insult to injury if mediocre scholars justified or hastened this unfortunate turn of events by invoking postmodern buzzwords.

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12. To take a favorite example of Putnam, if we have  $x, y, z$  on a page, we can get right or wrong answers to the question "How many things are there?," but only if we know whether we are accepting sum individuals or not. If not, then the answer is three; if so, then we have seven things viz.  $x, y, z, x + y, y + z, x + z, x + y + z$ . For Putnam's internal realism, see e. g. *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), and, more recently, *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1990). Goodman's classic account is in his slim but all-encompassing *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978). Quine himself admitted affinities with Goodman's account, but with some significant reservations. See e. g. his informal article on Goodman in the *New York Review of Books* 23 November, 1978.