

The Situated Interpreter: Questions of Method in the Study of Indian Intellectual History

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Each of the disciplines that collectively make up the intellectual culture of India has at least this in common with the others: it takes the truth to be a regulative goal. In astronomy or grammar, ritual science or jurisprudence, the measure of worth is the assessed likelihood of its being true. Fidelity to tradition was, to be sure, highly prized, but the value accorded to that fidelity was in the first instance instrumental: a respect for the accumulated wisdom of the tradition was seen to be a sensible policy in one's quest for truth in the field of one's inquiry. My own interest is in the philosophical literature of the period, and the philosophers in India occupy a position of importance within the śāstric community. Certainly, they too had truths of their own of which they were in pursuit, the truths of metaphysics, ethics and the various branches of philosophical knowledge. But the greater part of their intellectual endeavour, the part which is called *pramāṇa-śāstra*, was an inquiry rather into the general form any truth-oriented intellectual practice must take. How is a practice which is self-consciously governed by the regulative goal of truth to proceed? and what are the intellectual virtues its participants must possess? Accuracy in the accumulation of information, caution in the interpolation and extrapolation of conclusions, due care with the application of terms of art and theory, and trustworthiness in the transmission and spread of information within the intellectual community – these four *pramāṇas* stand out as the cardinal virtues, the so-called “virtues of truth.” The philosophers produced in theory an account of what others exemplified in practice, a theory of intellectual discipline.

The contemporary intellectual who attempts an examination of the work of the premodern Indian philosophers must perforce address a number of questions about method. Although strongly inter-related, I will for the sake of convenience classify them as questions of *motivation*, questions of *objectivity* and questions of *critical engagement*. ‘Motivation’ refers to the intended significance and purpose of the proposed

examination, and here the sharpest distinction is the one between the investigator who has no expectation of being substantively informed about the subject matter of the intellectual discipline under investigation, and the investigator who does indeed anticipate that the investigation will result in substantive education. The intellectual historian of the Indian astronomical sciences may expect little that would constitute an enrichment of contemporary astronomical theory; this will not form part of a conception of the purpose of the investigation. On the other hand, the historian of Indian philosophy typically will, I believe, expect the Indian discussion to be of substantive philosophical interest. In particular, there seems to be no antecedent reason that might rule out the possibility that the Indian inquiry into the nature of truth-governed intellectual discipline will not inform the contemporary investigator's conception of the structure of intellectual practices, including the practice in which they themselves participate.

What does the demand for objectivity require of the intellectual historian of India? That question cannot be treated in independence from the question of motivation: what counts as objective in interpretation must depend on the purpose the interpretation is intended to serve. Little remains now of the nineteenth century conception of the requirements of objectivity as calling for a complete elimination of interest or perspective. Even an investigation that conceives of itself as the mere chronicling of facts presumes a deliberate selection of facts deemed to be worth chronicling, not to mention the many difficulties with the supposed distinction between matters of fact and matters of theory, well attested in much work on empiricist philosophy of science (for example, the Duhem-Quine thesis). It is a good question, and one indeed which the contemporary intellectual historian of the Indian systems profitably addresses, to ask after the Indians' own conception of the requirements and burdens of objectivity, both in theory and in practice. Comparable studies are now being done of the origins of

a distinctive conception of objectivity and objective inquiry in seventeenth century European thought, for instance in the thought of Francis Bacon.¹ An important resource for the contemporary intellectual historian of India is Amartya Sen's recent elaboration of the idea of "positional objectivity", outlined in his Abha Maiti Memorial Lecture "Interpreting India's Past", and developed more fully in a series of articles published in his book *Rationality and Freedom*.² Sen argues that an objective assessment of India's past does not require that the interpreter seek (vainly) to assume what Thomas Nagel has called the "view from nowhere".³ There is, he claims, a clear sense in which situated interpretations – views from somewhere – achieve objectivity. To give a simple analogy, an observation that the sun and moon appear the same size is objective (that is, true for any observer positioned on the earth's surface, irrespective of subjective differences between observers), but positional (dependent on the observer's having a certain spatial location). Such observations have a legitimate place in geocentric observational astronomy. Sen cites as an example the interpretation of India's intellectual past advanced by the Indian nationalist movement, which was, as is well known, selective in its choice of materials and single-minded in the use to which it put them. In particular, it was reasonable for the Indian nationalists to give weight to themes of synthesis and convergence in Indian intellectual history, given the colonial use of supposed communal and ideological discord as a justification for the superimposition of colonial rule. Sen's idea, I take it, is that the description of the "facts to be explained" by a theory depends on the spatial, social or cultural position of the theorist, in ways that are not accountable for simply in terms of a notion of subjective bias. The practical reasonableness of such an interpretation, the fact that it is, as we might say, what anyone would think in those circumstances and presented with that data, commends the interpretation as an objective one, albeit positionally objective. (It is important, of course, not to confuse the objectivity of an interpretation with its truth; a perfectly reasonable interpretation of the available data might, nevertheless, be false. Positionalism in objectivity does not entail relativism in truth. There are, moreover, positionally objective illusions, such as the appearance to any suitably located observer of a half-submerged stick as bent: not to see the stick as bent could only be explained with reference to subjective anomaly.)

Here it would seem that the contemporary intellectual historian of India is profitably employed in seeking to establish the Indian philosophical self-conception of the requirements of objectivity in a pluralistic intellectual milieu, when all interpretation is situated interpretation;

and the motivation for such an inquiry would consist in part in the fact that we ourselves are situated interpreters. A further theoretical resource we might draw upon here is the important new study of truth-oriented practices by Bernard Williams, in his book *Truth & Truthfulness*.⁴ Williams recommends what he calls a method of "vindicatory genealogy". A vindicatory genealogy has two parts. One part derives from an imaginary State of Nature story a functional account of the virtues and values associated with truth-governed practices in terms of an inevitable or very probable development of purely 'human needs, concerns, and interests' (e.g. cooperation in the pooling of information requires members of the community to be largely accurate and sincere). The second part speaks of the development of those virtues in ways that situate them in a larger matrix of value, a process of development that is contingent and historical, and confers upon the values an intrinsic worth in the intellectual community which endorses them. The aim of a vindicatory genealogy is to give a nonreductive explanation of the intellectual virtues, and the form the explanation takes is that of an imaginary history, which displays the utility of the virtue to a population not yet possessing it, and shows how, once introduced, it achieves what Williams calls "stability under reflection" within a larger array of interrelated values. Stability under reflection requires that "the agent has some materials in terms of which he can understand this value in relation to other values he holds, and this implies, in turn, that the intrinsic good, or rather the agent's relation to it, has an inner structure in terms of which it can be related to other goods".⁵ It is a consequence of Williams' view that intellectual virtues have histories: –

For us to get clear about trustworthiness as an intrinsic good, we need to answer two kinds of question. First, we have to decide what disposition or set of dispositions trustworthiness is; as we might also say, what it needs to be. Second, we have to see what those other values may be that surround trustworthiness, values that provide the structure in terms of which it can be reflectively understood—That [structure] has been differently understood in differing cultural circumstances. Everywhere, trustworthiness and its more particular applications such as that which concerns us, sincerity, have a broadly similar content—we know what we are talking about—and everywhere, it has to be related, psychologically, socially, and ethically, to some wider range of values. What those values are, however, varies from time to time and culture to culture, and the various versions cannot be discovered by general reflection—Sincerity has a history, and it is the deposit of this history that we encounter in thinking about the virtues of truth in our own life. This is why at a certain point philosophy

needs to make way for history, or, as I prefer to say, to involve itself in it.⁶

This then is one constructive proposal for how an investigation into truth-directed practices can affirm the situatedness of both the practitioners and the investigators, through an acknowledgement that there is always a story to be told, in any particular cultural circumstance, about how an attachment to an intellectual virtue is sustained and manifested; and indeed, that it is in telling that story that the intrinsic worth of the virtue is rendered intelligible and so “vindicated”. (The contrast is with the “vindictive” genealogies of Nietzsche, which aimed to expose the sordid origins of Christian morality.) Williams’ account helps us to make sense of the idea that the intellectual virtues are simultaneously objective goods and positioned goods. It is interesting, incidentally, to find in the *Śāntiparvan* Yudhisthira asking precisely the two questions Williams says need to be asked, and to hear Bhīṣma answering by situating the value in question (here truth) within a framework of values and emotions that help to make sense of it as something of worth –

Yudhisthira said, “When it comes to morality, the gods, the fathers and the sages all commend truth. I want to learn about truth – tell me about it, O Grandfather. What is the indicating mark of truth, O King, and how is it to be secured? What might truth obtain, and how? Tell me this.” Bhīṣma said, “For the good, truth is always morally right, truth is the morality constant for all (*sanātana*). One ought submit oneself to truth alone, for truth is the highest path. Moral duty is truth, as is austerity (*tapas*) and mental discipline (*yoga*); brahman is truth, constant for all. Truth, it is said, is a high ritual. On truth, everything stands. Having spoken thus of the customary forms of truth, I will now describe in sequence its indicating marks. And you must also hear about how truth is secured. Bhārata, among all people, truth is of thirteen kinds. Without doubt, truth is impartiality indeed, as well as self-control; it is freedom-from-envy, toleration, modesty, patience and freedom-from-spite; it is renunciation, contemplation, nobility, steadiness, perpetual calmness and non-violence – these, O King, are the thirteen aspects of truth. Truth is thus indeed imperishable, eternal and unchanging. Not in conflict with any moral duty, it is secured by means of mental discipline (*yoga*).” [12.156.3–10]

The pursuit of truth is made sense of in the *Śāntiparvan* within a framework of virtues that puts great weight on steadiness of mind. The steady mind is the one that will be objective and impartial, unbiased by its own needs. Sincerity is related to the idea that one should not use words to inflict ‘harm’ on others, where this means not doing something that would precisely, threaten another’s hold on the truth.

Michel Foucault advanced as a meta-methodological principle that the specific methods of investigation into some aspect of a system of thought must be constructed anew each time, tailored to the particular object of study (Aristotle similarly used the image of a flexible ruler, used to measure the varying shapes of pillars). There is no overarching single correct methodology in the human sciences. For the student of the *pramāṇa-śāstra*, the application of this important idea is complicated by the fact that the object of study is itself a methodology of inquiry. To what extent should the inquirer into the *pramāṇa-śāstra* permit their investigations into that methodology to affect the methods being employed to study it? This is one aspect of the third question I itemised, the question of critical engagement. At the very least, the great sophistication of the Indian theory implies that it would be incautious not to be willing to learn from their methodological investigations, when so much attention had been paid to the problem of intellectual practice in a pluralistic intellectual environment. (This is particularly so if the interpretations of the intellectual historian are perforce situated, and their objectivity positional.) More strongly, however, one might argue that the methods of investigation into the intellectual world of a culture must draw upon the conception of reasoned inquiry articulated by that culture itself, that the critical apparatus and standards of evaluation should be immersed rather than external. Let me call this the “immersion thesis”. Whether or not it is true, what seems clear is that this is a central question for any reflection on the methods of study in the intellectual history of India.⁷ Part of the answer, however, seems to me to rest in the notion of participation. To the extent that the interpreter of Indian intellectual history is a participant in an extended intellectual community, it is appropriate to draw upon the critical resources of the tradition itself. Philosophy, I have argued, is a special case, for here the boundary between subject and object of study begins to dissolve, and the investigator is of necessity more conversation partner than observer.

I will pursue the question of immersion by way of an examination of John Newman’s important discussion of the problem of development within a tradition.⁸ Newman’s analysis provides the contemporary interpreter with a flexible account of the distinction between development and corruption within a tradition, and might also be seen as the beginnings of a theory of “immersed” rational interpretation. A recent commentator has said of Newman’s account that “although specifically dealing with theology and the Church, Newman’s essay is a profound analysis of the continuity through discontinuity present in any long-lasting tradition, with implications for any field of human

endeavour which manifests creative interplay between inherited tradition, rational reflection and the wider social circumstances in which it is located— Newman shows that the success of a tradition is related to its ability to assimilate new data, while conserving its past principles and achievements, and also to its ability to develop complex sequences of thought and practice while anticipating future development. He brings to the study of tradition a subtlety and a comparative perspective often lacking in the blanket statements of self-professed traditionalists and antitraditionalists alike”.⁹ Newman conceives of the development and corruption of Christian doctrine as akin to the growth and decay of a living body. Just as, in the case of a body, there is a “process towards perfection” followed by “the reversal and undoing of what went before”, where “till this point of regression is reached, the body has a function of its own, and a direction and aim in its action, and a nature with laws”, so too one may “discriminate healthy developments of an idea from its state of corruption and decay”.¹⁰ The marks of a healthy development are summarised as follows:

There is no corruption if [the idea] retains one and the same type, the same principles, the same organisation; if its beginnings anticipate its subsequent phases, and its later phenomena protect and subserve its earlier; if it has a power of assimilation and revival, and a vigorous action from first to last.¹¹

By the ‘type’ of an idea is meant something that underlies whatever particular form in which the idea finds expression. Newman comments, on the one hand, that “ideas may remain, when the expression of them is indefinitely varied,” and, on the other, that “one cause of corruption in religion is the refusal to follow the course of doctrine as it moves on, and an obstinacy in the notions of the past.”¹² This amounts to an important criticism of fundamentalist readings of tradition – the ossification of an idea is the sign of unhealth and decay. Fidelity to a religious belief implies an acknowledgement of its underlying idea, but this is in no way antithetical to a respect for ways in which the articulation or “external image” of the idea can change. How we identify the underlying ‘type’ of an idea is a problem of epistemology Newman does not explicitly address, but it is certainly consistent with his position that the later developments of the idea are in fact our best evidence for the underlying type, and that would point to a second reason why fundamentalism is mistaken– the original expression of an idea might be a poor indication of its true form.

Newman’s idea that a vital tradition anticipates its own future development is extremely insightful. Newman says:

Since, when an idea is living, that is, influential and effective, it is sure to develop according to its own nature, and the tendencies, which are carried out on the long run, may under favourable circumstances show themselves early as well as late, and since logic is the same in all ages, instances of a development which is to come, though vague and isolated, may occur from the very first, though a lapse of time be necessary to bring them to perfection—and it is in no wise strange that here and there definite specimens of advanced teaching should very early occur, which in the historical course are not found till a late day.¹³

If the genuine development of a tradition consists in the ‘perfection’ of its underlying idea and its principles, and if the possibility of such a perfection has existed from the first, then we might well expect to find, albeit in an inchoate and undeveloped form, anticipations of such later developments in the earlier strata of the tradition. On the other hand, of a shift in the tradition which is not a fulfilment of its underlying idea, there will be no antecedent anticipation. This idea provides a powerful rationale for a strategy of legitimisation which is prominent in the Indian literature: a later author will justify an innovation by seeking to demonstrate that the new idea was anticipated in the earlier literature, for example by referring to a sūtra as a “proof text.” The strategy is evident, for example, in the work of later Navya-Nyāya, where the followers of the innovative thinker Raghunātha wrote commentaries on earlier Nyāya works, including even the Nyāya-sūtra, with the explicit intent of showing that Raghunātha’s ideas were the perfection of doctrinal implications already implicit in and anticipated by the earliest texts. For example, Viśvanātha Nyāyasiddhānta Pañcānana concludes the Nyāyasūtravṛtti, which was written in Vṛndāvana in 1634, with the statement that the commentary is written “in pursuance of the interpretation of Śīromani, who is a devotee of the lotus-like feet of Lord Śrīkrṣṇa”.¹⁴ This, indeed, is an interesting indication of a concern to demonstrate a compatibilism between Raghunātha and the tradition, and so to consolidate the entitlement of his school.

Of course, the clarity of this criterion for a genuine development is always in danger of being clouded by what we might call creative hermeneutics, and it is for this reason that the criterion is hard to apply in practice. But the principle, that a tradition has a proleptic unity, is an important one. The thought behind the idea that a tradition acts conservatively on its part, is another expression of the principle that genuine developments are perfections and “illustrations” of the basic principles of the tradition.¹⁵

Finally, according to Newman, it is the very essence of a healthy tradition that it has the ability to absorb new

ideas from outside itself. He says:

[M]athematical and other abstract creations—are solitary and self-dependent; but doctrines and views which relate to man are not placed in a void, but in the crowded world, and make way for themselves by interpenetration, and develop by absorption. Facts and opinions, which have hitherto been regarded in other relations and grouped round other centres, henceforth are gradually attracted to new influence and subjected to a new sovereign. They are modified, laid down afresh, thrust aside, as the case may be. A new element of order and composition has come among them; and its life is proved by this capacity of exansion, without disarrangement or dissolution. An eclectic, conservative, assimilating, healing, moulding process, a unitive power, is of the essence — of a faithful development.¹⁶

And again,

The stronger and more living is an idea, that is, the more powerful hold it exercises on the minds of men, the more able is it to dispense with safeguards, and trust itself against the danger of corruption. As strong frames exult in their agility, and healthy constitutions throw off ailments, so parties and schools that live can afford to be rash, and will sometimes be betrayed into extravagances, yet are brought right by their inherent vigour.¹⁷

These are among the finest statements in Newman's work. Healthy traditions are not insular; rather, they are able to absorb and assimilate external influences. The reason is surety in their inner principles, which are then brought into relationship with ideas from outside the tradition. Outside influences do not corrupt a healthy tradition but rather assist it in its development: "that an idea more readily coalesces with these ideas than with those does not show that it has been unduly influenced, that is, corrupted by them, but that it has an antecedent affinity with them".¹⁸ A healthy tradition finds in the wider social environment a rich source of nutrition, from which it draws strength in the process of perfecting its internal principles. A development, then, in Newman's account, is a change in the body of the tradition that can be seen as following logically from the fundamental principles of the tradition, even if it is not brought about by causes internal to the tradition; it is a change consistent with those principles, and a fuller expression and articulation of them.

I find resonances between Newman's discussion and the Nyāya description of truth-oriented practices, their emphasis on the place of established background principles (*siddhānta*) and paradigmatic examples (*drstānta*), as well as their use of suppositional reasoning (*tarka*) from hypothetical premises. These all seem to me to be an acknowledgement that truth-seeking practices

are situated, or positional in the sense of Amartya Sen, that such practices achieve objectivity though, or through, having cultural and historical location. I also find in Newman's suggestion that a vital tradition can absorb influences from outside itself, when those influences are consistent with its own internal principles, a constructive answer to the question of critical engagement.

My proposals in this essay have been first that the requirement of objectivity in interpretation is that the situated interpreter achieves positional objectivity in his or her interpretations, and second that immersed interpretation is positionally objective to the extent that the interpreter's situation is one of participation rather than observation. I have suggested further that the contemporary intellectual historian of India's philosophical traditions is situated within a tradition of inquiry into the form of truth-governed intellectual practices, but outside of a tradition of metaphysical and ethical speculation; that is, he or she is both participant and witness to the Indian intellectual traditions. Finally, I have mentioned the work of Amartya Sen, Bernard Williams and John Newman as important resources in thinking about the methods of study of the Indian intellectual traditions.

NOTES

1. See Julie Robin Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
2. Amartya Sen, "Positional Objectivity," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993), pp.126-145. Reprinted in *Rationality and Freedom* (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2002), pp. 463-483.
3. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: OUP, 1986).
4. Bernard Williams, *Truth & Truthfulness* (Princeton University Press, 2002).
5. *Ibid.*, p.92.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.92-93.
7. For an endorsement of the thesis, see Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, "Internal criticism and Indian rational traditions," in Michael Krausz ed. *Relativism* (Notre Dame 1989).
8. J. H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 1845; reprinted (London: Longman Green, 1890).
9. Anthony O'Hearn "Tradition and traditionalism," in E. Craig ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).
10. *Ibid.*, p.171.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, pp.176-177.
13. *Ibid.*, pp.195-196.
14. Umesh Mishra, *History of Indian Philosophy* (Allahabad: Tirabhukti Publications, 1966),
15. *Ibid.*, p.199.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 187.