

Philosophy as Estrangement

JONARDON GANERI

I

When Justinian closed the school at Athens in 529 CE, a small band of philosophers made their way to Persia and lived for some years in the hospitality of the ruler Khosrau I (*aka* Chosroes Auniširavan; r. 531–579 CE). Khosrau was a patron and himself a student of philosophy, with a fascination for Indian philosophy that led him to have works translated from Sanskrit into Middle Persian, as well as to invite philosophers from India to his court. The refugees from Athens indeed bestowed on him the honour of being “Plato’s Philosopher-King”. His court was an intellectual crossroads between East and West, and many stories live on in Arabic and Islamic works, for instance attributing to him responsibility for bringing the game of chess from India to Iran. Khosrau asked one of the refugee philosophers from Athens, Priscianus Lydus, to define philosophy for him, and Priscian’s answer is fascinating. To lead a philosophical life, he said, is “to lead a pure life without contamination by matter and, at the same time, to acquire insight, without error, into true being” (*philosophari autem nihil aliud quam et vitam mundam habere et incontaminatam materia et scientiam eorum quae vere sunt non errantem*; Sol. 45,16; trans. Steel 1978: 15). Appealing to the Aristotelian principle that the essence of a thing is to be derived from its activity, Priscian argues that we can infer the nature of the self from the definition of philosophical practice. Nothing can acquire insight into true being, without error, which does not have true insight into itself. This requires that the self is able to be directed towards itself, to coincide with itself in the act of knowing. It follows from this, according to Priscian, that the self is not corporeal, for nothing made of parts can be conjoined with the whole of itself—borrowing here from Proclus, who reasoned thus: “The whole of a divisible individual substance cannot be conjoined with the whole of itself because of

the separateness of its parts, occupying distinct positions in space from one another. No body, then, is of such a nature as to reflect upon itself in such a way that the whole is reflected upon the whole” (*Elements of Theology* 15). So i. philosophy is the acquisition of true insight, ii. the capacity to distinguish truth from error requires a mind able to turn in upon itself, and iii. such a mind is not reducible to corporeal matter. The proof of the incorporeality of the self is what allows Priscian to describe any association with matter as a form of contamination.

Let us imagine that listening to Priscian’s explanation were philosophers from neighbouring India, a country to which he may have been hoping to go, as Plotinus had tried, and Metrodorus succeeded, before him (Erhart 1998). What would a sixth century Indian visitor have made of this definition of the essence of philosophical activity and of what it implies about the nature of the self? Would there have been any agreement to its central proposition, that philosophy is an exercise of alethic discrimination which demands self-knowledge, or its corollary, that the self which exercises itself thus stands apart from the world of physical matter? After all, why should an ability to turn one’s gaze inward be required for reliable judgement in worldly matters, and why should the ability to conceive of oneself as such be in conflict with naturalism? I think one can say, without too much simplification, that India in the sixth century was dominated by two competing philosophical visions. I will argue that had representatives of those two visions been in attendance in Khosrau’s court they would have been horrified by what they heard from Priscian. One would have said that in claiming that self-knowledge was instrumental in the activity of philosophy, he had it completely back-to-front. Rather, it is philosophical practice which is instrumental in the attainment of self-knowledge. The other would have said that he was right

to define philosophy as the cultivation of an ability to exercise discrimination, but wholly wrong in the significance he attached to self-knowledge. It is not a lack of self-knowledge which distorts our ability to tell true from false, but a different sort of lack altogether. And both would have said, putting their differences aside, that what is missing from Priscian's explanation is a proper account of the ultimate purpose of philosophy, which they would both have agreed consists in the cultivation of the mind and not merely in the acquisition of knowledge about it.

II

The work of two philosophical giants dominates the philosophical landscape in early sixth century India, Vasubandhu (c. 316–396) and Vātsyāyana (c. 450). Vasubandhu is among the first to put Buddhism on a firm philosophical footing, and his work will be commented on, improved and revised over the next two centuries. Only with Dharmakīrti (c. 600–600) does his influence begin to wane. The be-all and end-all of philosophy, Vasubandhu considers, is the mind's turning in upon itself, in order to scrutinize every moment of its own activity. The point of this self-scrutiny is to try to catch the mind out in its tricks and delusions. The mind is like an animal that needs to be tamed. The most powerful delusion of all is one about the mind itself, and one which bears directly on what it is for a mind to turn in on itself. The delusion in question involves the idea of ownership. What Vasubandhu claims is that the picture in which this turning-in on itself consists in the self attending to its own states—surely the picture at work in Priscian—is itself a delusion. Allowing the self-attention model to gain a hold is a symptom of being in the grip of a deep philosophical illusion. It is a form of alienation, because it stops one from being able to turn in on oneself in a true and genuine way. The right picture eliminates the idea of ownership altogether, and replaces it with a picture in which the mind consists in a stream of mental occurrences, some of which are directly conscious of others in the same stream, but none are directly conscious of others in other streams. Mental occurrences do, it is conceded, present themselves as “being mine”, but exactly this phenomenology is the deep delusion. It tricks me into thinking that my thoughts belong to someone, and so, obviously, that there is a someone, myself, who is their owner. As long as one is prey to that illusion one is alienated from oneself. For the idea of ownership implies, among other things, that one is in control of one's thoughts, that one is their agent, and can choose to think them or not, choose to acquire,

retain or dispose of them at will. This, for Vasubandhu, is dangerous nonsense. What happens in one's mind is the result of conditioning, habit, and the residual influence of past thoughts, and if one wants to change one's mental profile, for example, eradicate unpleasant feelings and unwholesome thoughts, one will never achieve it as long as one is in the grip of a false picture which encourages the idea that this is just a matter of an exercise of inner will. In sum, philosophy as estrangement is the elimination of a false phenomenology of ownership which leads to delusions about self-control. Alienated from a true view of one's mind, one is left impotent. And the alienating picture is exactly the one Priscian seems to envisage with his talk of an incorporeal soul directing its attention upon itself.

For sensibilities nurtured on the intuitions about the mind which shaped the philosophy of Priscian, that would already be a radical enough idea. But the Vasubandhu goes further. His Buddhist position is that there is no self. I think we should understand that as stating a policy not as describing a fact, a policy which goes back to the Buddha's celebrated declaration that it is a fundamental mistake ever to identify oneself with any of the mental happenings in one's mind. In our terms, the idea is that there is indeed such a thing as a first person stance, the position from which I am inclined to say that my desires and preferences “are me,” as opposed merely, as it were, to discovering them occurring within me. The policy advice is that we should not adopt this stance, there is something erroneous about it, and that we do much better, in fact, to adopt a spectator's view with regard to our mental lives. Vasubandhu executes the programme by analysing with exceptional insight precisely what the distinction between a first-person and a spectatorial position consists in, so as to locate the precise nature of the error involved. Philosophy's role is then to provide justification for the normative claim that assuming a spectator's stance on our mental lives is better than adopting the first-person stance, the stance naturally expressed in the words “they are we.” If philosophy is to have any practical consequence, it must also demonstrate that there is a way to alter the stance we adopt, that this stance is not necessitated by our very nature. It would be naive to think that it is entirely voluntary; clearly, I cannot simply choose to look upon my thoughts as if they are all alien presences (not least because, I could not regard that choice itself in the same way). So Buddhism implies that philosophy is dependent on the existence of techniques which are not themselves philosophical.

If the ambition of philosophy is to recommend that we assume a spectatorial or third-person stance on our own mental lives, then one promising idea is that what

is distinctive of a first-person position is that thoughts are associated with a detachable phenomenology of agency. In normal cases, I experience my thoughts as things I have thought myself, rather than things someone else has thought and put in my mind. In Vasubandhu's model of the mind, when we make present tense self-ascriptions, we do so on the basis of a pre-existing sense of ownership that attaches to our thoughts. So the operative notion of ownership is not itself that of self-ascription. Vasubandhu accepts that our thoughts occur within our own internal boundaries, and that they are first personally accessible; so again, neither of these notions refer to the notion of ownership in play. A plausible way to make sense of Vasubandhu's position is therefore to take it that what he recommends is the detaching of a sense of agency from our thoughts. Ownership, Vasubandhu states explicitly, is a causal relation, a matter of how it is generated and not what its entitlements are (AK 1975: 1217). To own a thought is to be its author, and since thoughts don't have authors they don't have owners either: there is no self.

III

Vātsyāyana, in his great commentary on the Nyāya-sūtra (NBh. *infra* 1.1.1–2), begins, just as Priscian, with an explicit definition of philosophy (*anvīkṣikī*). Philosophy is the genuine use of reason (*nyāya*), as distinguished from its bogus use (*nyāyābhāsa*), in pursuit of such true insight (*tattvajñāna*) about the self (*adhyātma-vidyā*) as is instrumental in achieving what is the ultimate end of philosophy, freedom (*apavarga*). Philosophy belongs to the same type as other rationally conducted disciplines, like agro-economics or statescraft, but with its own methods, its own sorts of truth sought, and its own ends. In philosophy, the genuine use of reason consists in an inquiry conducted with the gathering, weighing up, and exchanging of evidence, and the defence of one's conclusions in open public debate. A lack of true insight (*mithyājñāna*) is the source of one's alienation, and always consists in mistaking what is bogus for what is genuine: suffering for pleasure (cf. 4.1.47), a false cure for a genuine one, what is not oneself for what is. Such mistakes leave the mind trapped in a quagmire of lies (*asatya*), hate (*īrṣyā*), greed (*lobha*), and delusion (*māyā*). Hatred, for example, is the belief that someone is preventing one from obtaining something one needs. It is based on the mistaken idea that the things one's soul needs are things that someone else can prevent one from obtaining. It is said that "someone with true insight, while he still lives, is freed from delights and troubles" (*jīvanneva hi vidvān saṃharṣāyāsābhyāṃ vipramucyate*; quoted by

Uddyotakara NV 1997: 22, 3)—so the freedom aimed for by philosophy is not some higher theological state but an immersed condition of ease with oneself in the world (the point is made by Uddyotakara himself).

Vātsyāyana explains (*infra* 2.1.20) that philosophical practice leads one to know what is one's own self and what is not, to discriminate in self-knowledge, and he denies that this leads to an infinite regress of higher order self-awareness. One who is alienated from oneself leads a life of confusion, malice and greed, because they fail to discriminate accurately in the matter of ownership. Vātsyāyana agrees with Vasubandhu that there are delusions involving the notion of ownership, but does not follow him in the extreme view that ownership itself is a delusion. Vātsyāyana's more moderate view is that we are all too easily persuaded that motivations, desires and ideas are ours when in reality they have nothing to do with us, and it is to philosophy that we must turn to save ourselves from the vortex of confusion and suffering into which these acts of mis-appropriation lead us. The most fundamental form of this confusion is taking to be myself what is not myself, a false self-identification, an "I am" (*kiṃ punas tanmithyājñānam iti anātmanyātmagrahaḥ | ahamasmīti moho 'haṃkāra iti*; NBh. 1997: 258, 10–1; *supra* 4.2.1). But someone who looks on pain and suffering and sees it just as pain, just as suffering, without identifying with it, understands it and, so understood, it becomes estranged (*prahīṇa*) from one (*yastu duḥkhaṃ duḥkhāyatanam duḥkhānuṣaktam sukhaṃ ca sarvaṃ idam duḥkham iti paśyati sa duḥkham parijānāti, parijñātam ca duḥkham prahīṇam bhavati*; NBh. 1997: 258, 15–17; *supra* 4.2.1). A life led judiciously discriminating between what is oneself and what is *outside* of oneself or *merely* internal (a phantasm) is what is said to be a life lived freely (so 'ayam adhyātmaṃ bahiṣca viviktacitto viharan mukta ity ucyate; NBh. 1997: 260, 1–2, *infra* 4.2.2). Freedom is judging for oneself the reach of one's inner space. If the lengthy discussion about our knowledge of the external world which immediately succeeds this intriguing observation is anything to go by, the idea seems to be that one finds out what thoughts are one's own by attending to the world itself. To discover what one believes, one needs to attend to how things really are.

What Vātsyāyana's hypothetical disciple at the court of Khosrau would have said to Priscian is this: you imagine that all that happens within your mind, all that you discover when you turn your attention inwards, is you, that inner access and ownership are one and the same. But this picture of the mind is quite false; much that presents itself as me in fact is not me, and that precisely is why philosophy is required as a practice of

estrangement, training oneself when it is right to assume a first-person stance, and when better a third-person perspective, in regard to what one has introspective access to.

We still need a way to explain the difference between a philosophical disavowing of a thought and the dysfunctional lack of avowal which characterizes alienated thinking. Vātsyāyana argues that we must distinguish between the conscious, rational, self and a level of unconscious mental activity which he calls subpersonal 'mind' (*manas*) (*infra* 1.1.6, 3.2.19–31, 3.2.38, 3.2.56–59). The fact that this is exactly the same term which Vasubandhu uses for the source of a sense of ownership is not accidental, for what both theories do is to make it possible to separate ownership from introspective access. This is what pictures of the mind in which everything that happens in the mind is transparent to it cannot do, and why such pictures are empirically inadequate. The cunning feature of Vātsyāyana's model (which he develops out of the epigrammatic sūtra literature of Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika) is that the very same subpersonal mechanism both mediates between conscious thought and the activities of the sensory faculties, and also is responsible for the mind's ability to turn in upon itself. A common subpersonal mechanism is responsible for both sensory monitoring and self-monitoring, and so, in normal cases, the sense that one's thought is owned is generated by the very same process as generates the thought itself, which is as it should be. Thought insertion is a malfunction in which the mechanism mixes up its twin roles, and a self-monitored thought is mistakenly ascribed to an external source. It seems to the subject as if the thought has come from the outside.

A Hellenist author from the sixth century, who wrote a commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* under the name 'Philoponus' (and may or may not be Philoponus himself) moved considerably towards Vātsyāyana when he argued that there must be a separate part in the rational soul, which he called the 'attentive' (*prosektikon*) part, and which is able to turn back upon itself:

For there ought to be one thing apprehending all, since the human being is one. If one laid hold of these and another of those, it would be, as he [Aristotle *De Anima* 3.2, 426b17–21] himself says elsewhere, as if you perceived this and I that. It must then be one thing, and that is the attentive part. This attentive part roves over all powers, cognitive and vital [...] Besides, it is absurd that the same sense should know that it sees. For it must be by turning (*epistrephēin*) back on itself after having seen the colour that it gets to know that it sees. But if it turns on itself, it also has an activity which is separate, and what has a separate activity has a separate essence, and on that

account is eternal and incorporeal. So someone who says in an ambiguous way that the non-rational soul is immortal will be shouting out plainly that the non-rational soul is immortal; which is absurd. The senses are not eternal, and for that reason do not turn back on themselves. And if they do not turn back on themselves, they do not apprehend their own activities. For a thing's turning on itself is nothing other than its apprehending its own activities. So Aristotle does not speak rightly, but, as we said, it belongs to the attentive part of the soul to get to know the activities of the senses. ('Philoponus' in *De Anima* 3, 464,30–466,29; trans. Charlton, quoted Sorabji 2006: 253–4; cf. Caston 2002: 803).

Distinguishing, within the rational soul, a separate part that roves over the sensory and cognitive activities, and by means of which the soul can turn back on itself, is what would enable 'Philoponus', unlike Priscian, to separate the idea of introspective access from that of ownership. But he still finds himself having to choose between classifying the attentive part as bodily and corporeal or as incorporeal and internal to the rational soul. Vātsyāyana positions his *manas* in between the two, and so is able to articulate a theory of subpersonal psychological mechanisms responsible for the sense of ownership. When the subpersonal mechanism malfunctions, subjects find themselves able to access thoughts whose phenomenology lacks a sense of ownership: such thoughts are experienced as alien presences, as not part of the self. Philosophy, on the other hand, works as it were from the top down: the rational soul commands the subpersonal mechanism to deprive a sense of ownership to those thoughts which the executive use of reason decides should be excluded from one's self.

IV

We have three conceptions of philosophy before us. One says that it is the job of philosophy to return the individual to what is truly theirs, not their corporeal body but the self which owns their interior life. The second says that philosophy recommends freedom from self, meaning freedom from the grip of ownership of an interior life. The third says that it is the duty of philosophy to cultivate and exercise discrimination between that which one genuinely owns and that which one does not. We have two Indian conceptions of philosophy, distinct from Priscian's. According to one, philosophy is the cultivation of an ability to detach a sense of agency from our thoughts. We no longer experience them as generated by us, but do not experience them as produced by someone else either. We assume a theoretical stance with respect to our mental lives, observing the flow of thoughts,

desires, and preferences, but without any sense that “they are we.” Breaking a sense of self is breaking away from the deliberative stance of a reflective agent. According to the other conception, philosophy is the cultivation of discrimination in matters of ownership. Of many thoughts, desires, preferences, we do rightly think that they are we. We endorse them; we treat them as providing guiding reasons and not merely explanatory reasons. In the case of many other features of our mental lives, however, philosophy tells us that we must train ourselves to see through the pretence that they are we. We do not detach from them any sense of ownership at all, because in this conception all thoughts are owned by someone. Rather, we cultivate the ability to detach a sense of authority or entitlement. We exclude them from our personal space of reasons, and break their claim to give us justifications in anything else we think or decide to do. Since this is all about the breaking or maintaining of evidential relationships, the techniques of philosophy are exactly the ones which Vātsyāyana describes: the gathering, weighing up, and exchanging of evidence, and the defence of one’s conclusions in open public debate. According to this second conception, Priscian is right to speak about leading a pure life but wrong to blame matter for contaminating the soul. The source of the contamination is not matter, but our failure to discriminate between what should be treated as bearing on our judgement and what shouldn’t be.

Priscian advised that philosophy should teach us how to become estranged from our corporeal bodies, and turn inwards upon ourselves, and his understanding of ownership is one of inner perceptual access. Vasubandhu relates ownership to a sense of agency, and says that giving it up is the only cure for self-pride. Vātsyāyana connects ownership with rational endorsement, and provides a conception of philosophy that makes room for the autonomy and authenticity of the individual. Is philosophy a life led in pursuit of an estrangement from our corporeal being? Or is it the advice to seek a psychological training that will culminate in our estrangement from a sense of agency in the first-person stance? Or should philosophy be the path by which we estrange ourselves from the attitudes and emotions we decide not to make our own, an affirmation of our freedom to shape the contours of our modes of living? Estrangement is then the removal of rational endorsement from attitudes, preferences or values we choose no longer

to identify ourselves with. Among our resolutions, preferences, commitments and intentions, there are some from which we want to distance ourselves. We do this by making them into objects of consciousness, and thereby “not self”, opening them to the deliberative question “shall I make them mine?”. What I have tried to show is that to decide between these three historically great comprehensions of philosophy, Hellenic, Buddhist, and Nyāya, is to decide between three rival accounts of what makes a thought, a feeling, an act of will, or a desire one’s own.

WORKS CITED

- Caston, Victor. “Aristotle on Consciousness,” *Mind* 111 (2002) 751-815.
- Erhart, Victoria. “The Context and Contents of Priscianus of Lydia’s *Solutionum* ” *ad Chosroem*,” <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Medi/MediErha.htm>.
- Sol, Priscianus Lydus. I. Bywater (ed.) *Solutiones eorum de quibus dubitavit Chosroes Persarum rex*, in *Supplementum Aristotelicum* I, 2. George Reimer, Berlin (1886) 39–104.
- Sorabji, Richard. *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2006.
- Steel, Carlos. *The Changing Self: A Study of the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblicus, Damascius, and Priscianus*. Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Brussels 1978.
- Uddyotakara: *Nyāya-vārttika*. Anantalal Thakur (ed.). *Nyāya-vārttika*. Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Delhi 1997.
- Vasubandhu: *Abhidharmakośa* with *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣya*. (1) Prahlad Pradhan (ed.): K.P. Jawaswal Research Institute, Patna 1975. 2nd Revised Edition with Introduction and Indices by Aruna Haldar. (2) Louis de la Vallée Poussin (transl.). English translation by Leo M. Pruden, 4 vols, Asian Humanities Press, California 1988–90.
- Vātsyāyana: *Nyāya-bhāṣya*. Anantalal Thakur (ed.) *Gautamīya-nyāya-darśana with Bhāṣya of Vātsyāyana*. Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Delhi 1997.