The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 74, No. 1 (February) 2015: 43–67.
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Three Principles for an Asian Humanities: Care First . . . Learn From . . . Connect Histories

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In order to express what is uniquely accomplished in the field, Asian studies should be reconceived as Asian humanities and should adhere to three principles: care first, learn from, and connect histories. A review of the history and criticisms of Asian studies as a field calls for a positive theoretical articulation of what the best scholarship in Asian studies does and has done. The principles advocated here are not exclusive to Asian studies and should be extended to all area studies fields, but they are offered as a way to understand Asian studies as an essential field of the university and the academy, unique because of its content but common in spirit with the humanities generally.

The purpose of this essay is to give students something to say when they are asked, "What is Asian studies?" It results from a feeling of helplessness when teaching seminars on theories and methods in the study of Asia for undergraduates and graduates. The positive responses and contributions of students in five seminars over four years organized around the themes of this essay have encouraged me immensely. While I have had success using earlier drafts of this essay in class, its intended purpose looks outward, to other fields and to other observers who may have either a bland, generic sense of what Asian studies is or a decidedly negative impression of the distinctive value of our work. Strongly positive external perceptions of Asian studies are scarce in my experience. In particular, it is my sense that much more has been written about what Asian studies should not be and what is wrong with it than about what it might be and what its value is. Without dwelling on the negative or the defensive, therefore, I wanted to write a mission statement, even a manifesto, that would help me articulate a positive case for Asian studies for students, colleagues, and myself.

Asian studies has been in search of an identity since its inception. As an interdisciplinary field, pinning down just what one does in Asian studies has been hard. In my own experience, the methods of Asian studies never felt particularly difficult to understand. The old academic practice of reading texts, and not much else, as the way to understand Asian cultures and societies was supplemented by an additional requirement to learn modern languages and to incorporate fieldwork and empirical research into one's portfolio of interests and skills. In this way, Asian studies always felt like a higher challenge than disciplines in which either textual or empirical study dominated. Not everyone, however, agrees or sees the field in such simple terms.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Asian studies, as one of several broad domains of area studies, has come under deserved fire for its historical links to governmental interests, especially in the United States. Area studies as a set of fields was created with governmental funding in the aftermath of World War II, with the express intention to create a cadre of knowledgeable and loyal citizens of the United States who could, in time of need, assist their nation in developing foreign policy, aid diplomatic negotiation, and, when necessary, provide military intelligence. Ideally, area studies is an explicitly interdisciplinary approach to scholarship, in which students and scholars work in a variety of disciplines and languages in order to acquire a broad cultural knowledge and perspective on a single geographic region. Thus, interdisciplinarity and strong language skills have been the hallmarks of good area studies.

Criticisms of area studies came from politically opposite ends of the spectrum in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1979 provoked both a much-needed revolution, but also an unnecessary paralysis, in the study of Asia.[1] It was a watershed publication from which we may date the beginning of the current theoretical era in Asian studies. Building from Said's critiques, many scholars began to question the complicity of area studies departments and other institutional units with an aggressive neo-imperialist agenda of the U.S. government.[2] The paralysis took the form of a meta-discourse on Asian studies; scholars began to talk about how we talk about Asia instead of studying Asia directly, worrying that any research was now an assertion of power and privilege.

The response from politically "conservative" think-tanks was that Said's critique was essentially an inside joke, because the reality of his influence over governmentally funded area studies programs, particularly those funded by Title VI,[3] was such that the only thing students were being taught in area studies was how awful and evil U.S. foreign policy was.[4] Preposterous claims about the need for "balance" and "hearing both sides" in

[1]Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

[2]The criticisms of area studies influenced by Said's arguments should by now be well known to readers of this journal. I do not want to rehearse those criticisms at length here, because others have already described the limitations and problems of area studies better than I could. For surveys of and responses to the issues, see Neil Waters, ed., *Beyond the Area Studies Wars: Toward a New International Studies* (Hanover, N.H.: Middlebury College Press. 2000); Ali Mirsepassi, Amrita Basu, and Frederick Weaver, eds., *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World: Recasting the Area Studies Debate* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); and David Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[3]In 2011, Title VI program funding for National Resource Centers in area studies was suddenly cut in half. Uncertainty about whether Title VI will be eliminated altogether still plagues the field at the moment. Racism, religious zealotry, hypernationalism, and xenophobia underlie the political success of these uninformed, patently agenda-driven criticisms of governmental support for area studies. Budget concerns are the whitewash for a demonstrably anti-human agenda.

[4]The primary point of attack has been Middle Eastern studies, but that attack has affected all area studies. In the charged political environment in the United States surrounding Islam and Muslims, a veritable cottage industry has arisen around efforts to "monitor" academic discourse on the "Middle East."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

area studies formed one part of the general strategy in conservative American politics to paint universities as institutions in which debate and disagreement is disallowed.[5]

Both criticisms of Asian studies reveal important issues, one internal and one external to the field itself. Internally, the critique of Orientalism now requires a constant internal check and justification of one's research. It is no longer acceptable to claim knowledge for knowledge's sake. Externally, the image of Asian studies as a problematic field, whether because under the government's thumb or inherently predisposed to attack the government, must be changed. In my view, Asian studies needs a makeover, because the actual work being done by scholars is often of very high quality and the product of long years of training and study, while the framing of that work has been hijacked by unnecessarily simplistic and negative frames of what scholars and students in Asian studies are trying to achieve.

In spite of these criticisms, Asian studies has already achieved something remarkable: it forced an awareness of Asian people and Asian cultures into the mainstream of academia. Much work remains to be done to make certain that this achievement is not lost in the future, least of all by assuming that the better-known disciplines have integrated Asia into their work. Any disintegration of area studies or reintegration of area studies faculty and students into disciplinary departments would sound the death-knell for serious research on Asia, even if increased Asia-focused research in those departments would be welcomed. Apart from Asian studies, women's studies and African-American studies (not to mention other area studies regions) are parallel examples. Without the creation of these fields, the scholarly interests of the pedigreed departments in women, black people, and Asians would certainly have been less and less critical. More importantly, the creation of these fields enhanced academic practice and understanding in scores of other fields.[6] To suggest that the threat of marginalization in the future has passed, that those days are behind us, seems naive. In other words, the best argument for the continued existence of Asian studies in the United States is the fact that such departments and units provide a bulwark against marginalization of Asian peoples and a pressure on traditional departments to pay attention to people and ideas of Asia.[7]

Simple awareness, however, is not enough. Several fields linked to Asian studies have also tried to find solutions to the problems of disciplinary ambiguity and the overt intrusions of what Said called "the gross political fact."[8] *Critical Asian Studies*, for example, was created, according to its earliest founding statement from 1969, "in opposition to

[5]Malini Johar Schueller lays out a devastating critique of the factless claims and politically motivated *faux* expertise involved in the calls for more governmental oversight of Title VI beginning in the 1990s. Malini Johar Schueller, "Area Studies and Multicultural Imperialism: The Project of Decolonizing Knowledge," *Social Text* 25, no. 1 (2007): 41–62.

[6]For example, a lucid survey of how women's studies has improved the scholarly life of myriad other fields is provided in Elizabeth L. McNabb, Mary Jane Cherry, Susan L. Popham, and René Perri Prys, eds., *Transforming the Disciplines: A Women's Studies Primer* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Press, 2001).

[7]Hamilton Gibb once called this the "Trojan horse" role of area studies, "to awaken and stimulate with the general academic community a growing interest in and concern with non-Western civilisations in the disciplinary departments and faculties." Hamilton Gibb, *Area Studies Reconsidered* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1963), 6–7.

[8]Said, *Orientalism*, 11.

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the brutal aggression of the United States in Vietnam and to the complicity or silence of our profession with regard to that policy."[9] In recent years, the scope of critical Asian studies has expanded, in ways that bring it in line more or less with other fields that apply critical theory to various disciplines. Critical Asian studies places the broader effort in critical theory to unmask power structures and institutions that overdetermine how scholars are allowed to pursue their research in the context of Asia, most often in concrete cases of much smaller scale. What critical Asian studies has done well is to insist on "criticism of the status quo" by requiring that government policy and academic monograph alike be subjected to intense scrutiny as to their motives, methods, and effects. The pragmatic and case-study orientation of critical Asian studies has helped it overcome the paralysis of inquiry that afflicted many studies of Asia centered on critical theories of Orientalism. At the same time, a positive academic engagement with Asia, as opposed to a rigorously self-critical or power-critical view, seems prohibited.

Various forms of constructive academic approach to Asian studies have also arisen in response to the critique of Orientalism, including engaged scholarship,[10] collaborative anthropology,[11] and critical-constructive groups.[12] The present essay may certainly be classified as a constructive approach that may or may not involve engagement as a part of scholarship. My focus, however, is on the theoretical underpinnings and ethical consequences of constructive scholarship. In other words, I want to argue that following the principles described here will lead to an Asian studies that is both intellectually and morally better.

The problem of disciplinary ambiguity is a perception problem, a projection of chaos onto a challenging interdisciplinarity that does not feel chaotic in practice. Furthermore, I believe we can articulate a way to hold on to the continual need for critical approaches to academic practices and institutions, while also incorporating constructive practices for studying Asia. While I have come to believe in the need for vigilant criticism, I have seen few positive theoretical expressions of what Asian studies could be that compel me both intellectually and personally. What follows, therefore, is a vision of the field of Asian studies that I would like to inhabit. Following my friend Charles Hallisey, I call it Asian humanities.

My own view of what Asian humanities means centers on the three principles described below. Asian humanities is not a distinctive discipline or a method but an orientation and a set of strategies for opening ourselves—whether we are ourselves Asian or not—to Asia, a theoretical approach to what it would mean to truly engage Asia in a

[9]"BCAS Founding Statement," *Critical Asian Studies*, March 28–30, 1969, http://criticalasianstudies.org/about-us/bcas-founding-statement.html (accessed January 8, 2014).
[10]Ernest Boyer, "The Scholarship of Engagement," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 49, no. 7 (1996): 18–33 (also appeared in a slightly modified form in *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 1, no. 1, 11–20); Derek Barker, "The Scholarship of Engagement: A Taxonomy of Five Emerging Practices," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 9, no. 2 (2004): 123–37.
[11]Luke Eric Lassiter, "Editor's Introduction," *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1, no. 1 (2008): vii–xii.
[12]John Makransky, "The Emergence of Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection in the Academy as a Resource for Buddhist Communities and for the Contemporary World," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 9 (2008): 113–54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

way that both treasures difference and permits connection.[13] What I say about Asia here, however, applies *mutatis mutandis* to all area studies fields and might be framed as learning how to study the world beyond ourselves, no matter where we begin.

Care First

The first principle of Asian humanities is to care first. By care, I mean both caring about in the sense of having a sincere interest and caring for in the sense of watching over someone and ensuring their well-being. Though I might have learned this principle from traditional teacher-disciple relationships in a host of Asian contexts, I learned it instead from Emmanuel Levinas.[14] Stated crudely, Levinas's view of the priority of ethics over knowledge is this: before you know something, you owe something. In the first sense of caring, I owe it to the people who made or make the culture I want to study to be open to being changed by them and/or their culture. In many cases, I may belong to the culture or the community in question, but the need to care first still applies, though the form it may take and the training required to show this care may be different. To come first with an instrumental agenda—I need to know x about y in order to do or to prevent z—is a recipe for mistrust, misunderstanding, and violence. I must interrogate my motives for study and be sure that they are genuine, meaning that they privilege the perspective of the Other going in. In the second sense of caring, I owe it to the people who made or make the culture I want to study to be responsible for their welfare. Are the actions that I control or influence structured to guarantee that no harm will come to the people and the places I want to study? Beyond not doing harm, is what I do or want to do going to benefit the people and the places of my interest?

In Levinas's terms, I am responsible for the preservation of the alterity of the Other. Imagine a person, any individual. Through questioning and observation, could I ever exhaust the possible things to be known about that person? If it were a text, a film, a poem, a ritual, a performance, could the many things said about those actions or materials ever be all the possible things one could say about them? This is Levinas's notion of infinity as opposed to totality, and it is his way to begin a devastating critique of the history of Euroamerican philosophy's obsession with being and knowledge.[15] Academia, for Levinas, functions within the totality, the idea that reality is finite and my knowledge

[13]One unfortunate problem that still persists in Asian studies is that Asian scholars are encouraged to close themselves off from their own or other Asian cultures and practices in order to focus on what is considered academically important. See Vasudha Narayanan, "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2004): 761–79, for her account of how lentils always seemed more important to Hindus than liberation, but not among her classmates at Harvard. The principles of this essay, I hope, apply equally to all, though what it would take to apply them will vary greatly from person to person.

[14]Ajay Skaria (167–69) has written insightfully about the affinities between Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha* and Levinas's ethics, while also exploring other positive and negative consequences of Gandhi's ideas. Ajay Skaria, "The Strange Violence of *Satyagraha*: Gandhi, *Itihaas*, and History," in *Heterotopias: Nationalism and the Possibility of History in South Asia*, ed. Manu Bhagavan, 142–85 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[15]Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, [1961] 1969).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of reality is thus also finite. The problem for Levinas is that the knowable always exceeds the known and this fact should cause me to be more humble and less assertive in my knowledge. Instead, philosophy and the academy continue boldly to assert their claims of truth, defined as adequation by Levinas, the act of making knowledge congruent with reality, like focusing a camera lens. In his words, "The correlation between knowledge and being, or the thematics of contemplation, indicates both a difference and a difference that is overcome in the *true*. Here the known is understood and so *appropriated* by knowledge, and as it were *freed* of its otherness. . . . [I]n being, a privilege is granted to the *present*, which is presence to thought, of which the future and the past are modalities or modifications: re-presentations."[16]

To care first in the context of Asian humanities, therefore, means to apply a criterion against which to measure the ethical quality of my actions, namely the preservation of alterity. Levinas is fond of calling mainstream philosophy the "imperialism of the same," an assertive, acquisitive posture of forcing things unknown to conform to what we already know. He advocates instead "the priority of care over contemplation."[17] What is different from me and from what I already know is the otherness of the Other. And, according to Levinas, "I have access to the alterity of the Other from the society I maintain with him, and not by quitting this relation in order to reflect on its terms."[18] The moment, in other words, that I stop engaging with the Other through language (the "saying") and pay attention only to what he or she has already said is the moment when I ignore and disparage the otherness of the Other,[19] the very thing that drew me in the first place.

It is critical here that I introduce a distinction between the kind of alterity of which Levinas speaks and competing notions of the Other in current scholarship. Levinas is not concerned in the first place with cultural alterity, the kind of otherness that emerges from belonging to different places and times and the usual focus of discussions of the Other. Differences in cultural practice and historical context are part of the totality and part of ontology for him.[20] Instead, Levinas emphasizes deep alterity, a form of otherness that makes two cultural neighbors incapable of fully knowing each other, even as their proximity forms an inexhaustible basis for their relationship. In Levinas's view, "before Culture and Aesthetics, meaning is situated in the Ethical, presupposed by all Culture and all meaning. Morality does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it."[21] These two forms of otherness, deep and cultural alterity, are related in ways that I will discuss in the next section, but the criterion for judging culturally inflected actions, according to Levinas, is the extent to which it preserves deep alterity.

An emphasis on deep alterity has some important and desirable consequences for Asian humanities. First, a concern for deep alterity, a criterion of meaningful and infinite

[16]Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, 75–87 (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 76.
[17]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 94.
[18]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 121.
[19]Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, [1974] 1998), 5–7.
[20]Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 41.
[21]Ibid., 57.

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responsibility for the Other, clarifies what is accomplishable in academia and what is not. The totalizing pretensions of academic knowledge are constantly undermined by the unending surplus of meaning that results from social encounter and proximity. Moreover, it is precisely that part of another person that I cannot fully capture in a statement of knowledge about them, what Levinas calls "the face" of a person, that compels or commands me to be responsible for them.[22] This is the person denuded of cultural ornament whose vulnerability in that state resembles that of a helpless infant. While Levinas would acknowledge that no one actually appears in life without the protections of cultural armor, he insists that thinking of a person as being more than just their cultural identity is the only way to ground a truly ethical engagement with the Other. Since I cannot know everything and can never completely describe another person, much less another culture, I should accept the humility and the responsibility that comes from the sense of sheer "height" that I feel on encountering the Other.[23]

Second, the preservation of deep alterity begins from an analysis of the very ordinary experience of two people being near one another. It does not begin from rarefied abstractions about justice, categorical imperatives, equality, social contracts, and the like, that is, from a generalized postulation about a universal morality. Levinas intends to convict us all of substituting representations of people for sociality with them. To do this, he emphasizes the idea that, regardless of how good one's representations are of the ontological situation of another, that other person is always still there, always has proximity to us.[24] That irreducible nearness forms the basis of my social obligation to the Other. The point is that this ethical position gives us a vocabulary that does not begin from the ivory tower and its traditions, but from descriptions of ordinary life in a new perspective.

More specific to Asian studies, Levinas provides a critique that questions all of academia, rather than singling out Orientalism for its special ethical failures. To the extent that academics prioritize knowledge over relationships, traditional scholarship is unethical. Beyond questioning knowledge for knowledge's sake, what I called "caring about" above, Levinas argues that scholarship always entails an obligation or a responsibility to care for the people it proposes to thematize. Whether any academic discipline can live up to this admittedly impossible ethical standard is doubtful. In order to escape the paralysis of Orientalist critique, however, it is at least comforting to think that a different, even deeper problem than the complicity of power and knowledge afflicts the humanities, indeed scholarship in general.

The composite message of a concern for deep alterity is that I have no inherent right to be; rather, I must justify my being.[25] When I think that my efforts to know are innocent or simply assert my position in the world as, like everyone, another person, I fall into a trap of converting my mere existence into a kind of imperial right to possess the world around me through knowledge. In Asian studies, in spite of Said, we still tend to assume the inherent legitimacy of our work. To care first in Asian humanities means to

[22]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194–219.
[23]Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 11–22.
[24]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 81–98.
[25]Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 86; Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality Has Weight," in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

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put myself into question at the beginning: by what right do I do what I do and know what I know? Caring first, then, requires me to provide and to articulate a justification for my work, rather than assume its legitimacy, and to do so as part of my research.

If I accept the challenge to put ethics before scholarship, to care first, then what are some concrete forms that this care would take in the practice of Asian humanities? First, I must learn languages well. It is a travesty that for too many people language learning has become mere skill acquisition. It is my belief that language teaching and learning are the single most important things that not only Asian studies departments but also universities as a whole do. Ethically, the importance of language, of talking, derives from the fact that it is a mode of social engagement in which the alterity of the other is maintained through the act of speaking, the unending process of saying.[26]

In practice, however, there are languages, not language, and the kind of transcendence that Levinas points to is found in the small, scary acts of trying to speak another language and listening to the "absolutely foreign." Language learning provides exactly the kind of humbling awe in the face of an infinite unknown that causes people to care for the Other by caring for his or her language. Without learning languages, I have not earned the right to speak about others; I have not justified my being. Of course, language learning is not an all-or-nothing skill. Thus, the justification, and the responsibility, grows larger as my skill in languages grows.[27]

A probably indispensable corollary to learning languages well is to live in the part of Asia where the language is spoken or used. There is no better way to encounter the face of the Other in Levinas's sense than to see their physical faces and to speak to them directly. Very few people can learn a language well without spending time in a place where it is spoken. Just as important, however, when language is embodied in real people and practical situations, it helps to generate a sense of caring for both the cultural and deep alterity of individuals and communities. Neither language skill nor living in a place is any guarantee that a person will show care, but both enact a commitment that make not caring much more difficult.

A second concrete form of caring first in Asian humanities is to study the intellectual traditions of a place as a first guide to my own understanding. One of the most insidious aspects of Orientalism is the ease with which existing Asian intellectual traditions are disparaged and dismissed. To care first means to start by thinking that Asian scholarship on

[26]Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73. John Nemec's defense of translation as an indispensable mode of scholarship, for example, argues that "the unbroken translation requires the scholar to honor the intellectual prerogatives and indeed the intellectual vision of the author" (774). Translation in his sense strikes me as the best way to preserve the otherness of a written text, that is to care for its "saying" and not just what is says. John Nemec, "Translation and the Study of Indian Religions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 4 (2009): 757–80.

[27]It is important to point out that even, perhaps especially, the study of classical languages requires special attention to the "saying" over the "said" for at least two reasons. First, no study of classical languages is ever an unmediated encounter with a decontextualized past. The contemporary legacies of classical cultures and particularly the intellectual burden of their study is continually passed down to us in ways that we must investigate. Second, the philological examination of "dead" languages is always best pursued with as much contextualization as possible, that is, an attempt to discern and imaginatively experience the saying of a text. Just studying texts and language is, in itself, no guarantee of caring first.

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the traditions, practices, or ideas that I am interested in is critical precisely because it contains perspectives and insights that are foreign to me and that challenge the "imperialism of the same." Failures to appreciate and to learn from Asian intellectual traditions afflict both classical and modern studies. In fact, the problem may be even more acute in studies of the modern period. The bibliographies of too many works on modern religion, performance, politics, social stratification, law, etc. in Asia make insufficient reference to scholarship in the language of the place they study, when they refer to it at all. Therefore, we all must ask ourselves this question: have I spent as much time tracking down the scholarship on this subject in Malayalam or Indonesian or Japanese as I have for English?

Now, presuming that I have learned languages well and done the hard work of finding and reading scholarship from Asian intellectual traditions, I may find that some aspects of an Asian culture strike me as wrong, abhorrent, or oppressive. If I have properly justified my work and my right to be a student and scholar of Asia, then my criticism will carry weight. However, the concrete form of my criticism must always focus on cultural alterity, not on deep alterity. In the face of the latter, I am responsible even for those I find ignorant or evil because of their basic humanity.[28] In regard to cultural alterity, by contrast, criticism can be a mode of caring for others, provided that I have earned the right to criticize by doing the difficult work above and by searching first for what is beautiful in a culture before I proceed to attack parts of it.

One final form that caring first can take in practice is to regularly question my own motives and my right to study anything. If I cannot articulate a justification that would satisfy both a mentor and a subject, then perhaps I should rethink my project or avoid it altogether. One question not seen on many grant or fellowship applications is: what right do you have to undertake the research described? Putting the question this way, however, seems to emphasize the negative, assuming that, if given the chance, people will exploit and appropriate subjects in ways that we must protect against. While Levinas certainly argues that knowledge without ethics is in itself an imperializing act of grasping and appropriating, his view of "ethics as first philosophy" actually turns common philosophical and theological views of the innate evil of mankind on their head. Given half a chance, people will do good, and Levinas often alludes to underappreciated and surprising gestures of goodwill in ordinary life.[29] As he puts it:

> It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?[30]

[28]Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 88–91.

[29]Two of his favorite literary references are to Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, "each of us is guilty in everything, before everyone, and I most of all" (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky [New York: Knopf (1880) 1992], 289), and Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006).

[30]Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillipe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 80.

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My regular inventory of motivation and justification, therefore, takes shape not as a statement of the bad I am not doing, but rather of the good that I am doing. Caring first means that scholarship can and should be expressed in terms of the way it liberates us from the restraints we have placed on how good we could be to each other. My concern for deep alterity and my humility in the face of the infinity of that alterity drive me to the good and to caring for the welfare of others. Where knowledge comes first, scholarship degenerates into competitive acts of possession and appropriation within the desire for power. Where ethics comes first, scholarship is one tool for fighting against power's push for knowledge shaped according to its needs and for the creation of a society that unlocks the chain around human goodness.

Caring first is not easy, however, and requires courage. In a senior seminar structured around these principles, we were discussing the following quote from Roy Mottahedeh's *Mantle of the Prophet*: "Also, he was determined to prove that no matter how reticent some old scholars has been about politics, learning was not the enemy of action and the tradition of Shiah higher education could be maintained by the kind of men who felt that, as Ferdowsi, said, 'Two hundred words do not amount to half a deed.'"[31] I confessed that in my own life it had been all too easy to hide in the proverbial ivory tower and constantly postpone action until certainty about what to do had emerged from learning and reflection. Learning, I suggested, was often the enemy of action, as Mottahedeh's character Ali feared. During the break, a student pointed out that uninformed action seemed as dangerous as learning something first, if not more so. More importantly, she argued that every action, no matter how informed or well intentioned, has unintended consequences that must be anticipated, but are not. So, how does one find a balance between learning and action that neither delays acting too long nor encourages acting without knowledge? My only response to this complicated problem was that, if it meant anything at all, caring first had to mean being willing to suffer the consequences of both acquiring knowledge and taking action right along with those at the center of study. When knowledge is the priority, the relationships that one has to establish to acquire that knowledge can be easily forgotten, severed by simply retreating to the safe house of an academic institution. Caring first means putting a relationship first, showing love, before *and* after knowledge. If the relationship is broken, then the knowledge is tainted.

Learn From

The second principle of Asian humanities is to learn from. The biggest problem with Asian studies as a scholarly approach is that it was set up as a learn-about system. Asian studies came into existence at a time when empirical social science, particularly anthropology, was at its zenith and was providing a much-needed critique of static cultural representations, especially classical texts, as the basis for a fixed civilizational identity. As Charles Hallisey has put it in a number of public lectures, anthropology, by virtue of putting the lives and experiences of the most humble and marginalized people at the

[31]Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1985), 254–55.

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center of academic inquiry, became the "great moral tradition of the twentieth century." However, like many fields, anthropology modeled itself too closely on the imagined objectivities of pure science. From its inception in the late nineteenth century until the 1960s, even into the 1980s, anthropologists generally pursued a method designed to capture in words the truth of social structures and to create a vocabulary to compare those structures cross-culturally. A good, or maybe bad, example is the still operating Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), a project begun by behavioral scientists at Yale in 1949. The current maintainers of the HRAF describe it as an "ethnographic database [that] is unique because each culture or ethnic group contains a variety of source documents (books, articles, and dissertations) that have been indexed and organized according to HRAF's comprehensive culture and subject classification systems."[32] Without disparaging the wealth of information available in the HRAF, I do want to hold it up as a model of substituting new forms of representation, the ethnographic account and its attendant meta-classification systems, for cultures themselves. The HRAF is a repository of what "we" have learned about a huge number of cultures and subcultures not "our own." You will not find white, Texan, university professor, or upper-middle-class American dad—some of my cultures—among the huge list of cultures in the HRAF. The distance between scholar and subject that social science used to postulate unabashedly still survives in spite of severe critiques of anthropological objectivity.

The problem, however, also started in the setup of Asian studies itself. After World War II, the United States felt a need common to imperial powers to acquire knowledge of potential military rivals and threats, to learn about them in order to set policy and to gather intelligence. The instrumental interest here was and is no secret.[33] For its purposes, the U.S. government—I would say legitimately—desired to learn about other nations in order to protect its national security and to promote its national interest. This is what governments do and are designed to do. In order to actually learn about these other places, however, the U.S. government needed to create experts. From this perceived need arose the early centers of area studies and, in 1959, Title VI of the Higher Education Act, which funded and continues to fund numerous centers for area studies, including many focused on East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Without that funding, Asian studies as we know it would not exist and fifty years of often brilliant scholarship would have been undermined.

In these centers, the old search for scientific objectivity in the social sciences found an institutional and governmental approval for learning about places and people that had been previously ignored in the academy altogether. When in the 1960s and 1970s anthropologists and scientists started to write against the so-called objectivity of empirical scholarship, they exposed the unintended aggressiveness and acquisitiveness of merely

[32]"About HRAF," *Human Relations Area Files*, n.d., http://www.yale.edu/hraf/about.htm (accessed January 8, 2014).

[33]See the U.S. Department of Education, "The History of Title VI and Fulbright-Hays: An Impressive International Timeline," January 21, 2011, http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/iegps/history.html (accessed January 8, 2014). For a statement from near the inception of area studies, see Wendell C. Bennett, *Area Studies in American Universities* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1951), 5: "The principal problem which faces the universities is how they can serve the government's expanding need for personnel and the requirements for specialized area training programs without disrupting the highly important function of training research scholars."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

learning about people and cultures. Power was driving knowledge, though few consciously thought in such terms.

Even casual discussion among students reveals how deep the institutional problem with area studies currently is. With all sincerity to be "global citizens" or plain good people, students will write in their papers, course evaluations, applications for study abroad, and the like how wonderful it is to "learn about" other cultures. Students should not be blamed. They absorb their ways of speaking from authoritative sources, including media and faculty. We are teaching them to speak and think in this way. The problem is that I think we mean it. We are and have been in the business of learning about Asia, but all too rarely learning from Asia and Asians. The goals of antiquated social scientific empiricism and governmental policy conspired to set up the terms of how we are allowed to talk about Asia. In Foucault's terms, it created a discourse that has proven difficult to dislodge.

As scholarly views moved toward deconstructive and postmodern critiques of objectivity and truth, the goals of many academics diverged more acutely from those of the government. Infamously, postmodernism has proven to be good at demolishing scholarly certainties, but bad at offering viable alternatives that move beyond meta-commentary, that is, talking about how we talk about Asia and never getting to the subject itself.

Cognizant of both the benefits and limitations of empirical study, government money, and postmodernism, I offer in this section the principle of learning from in Asian humanities as a constructive way forward that works within the existing structures of the academy. The humanities are premised upon the transformation of the knower, the possibility that I might change my views, my actions, or my ways of thinking, from reading a text, listening to a concert, viewing a painting, or talking to a farmer. For too long, Asian studies has structurally limited learning from Asia. In the liberal arts outside of area studies, the humanities has always sought to teach students how to both learn about and learn from its subject matter. One reads Plato not merely to learn about ancient Greece or the quaint customs of another place and time, but to learn from Plato how to think and rethink politics, art, and metaphysics today. We almost never do the same with Kauṭilya, though his *Arthaśāstra*, like Plato's *Republic*, contains an equally majestic vision of polity and statecraft.[34]

In my case, this issue came to a head during the debates over "who gets to speak for Hinduism?" The criticisms of some active and knowledgeable Hindus, primarily in the United States, questioned the right of non-Hindus to teach the religion in the academy.[35] It was a fair question insofar as no one had ever bothered to justify their right to speak for or about Hinduism. In wrestling with this dilemma personally, I at first felt indignant about having to justify myself. I was just an academic interested in knowledge of Hinduism for its own sake. As the criticism sank in, however, it became clear that, at the practical level, a university job was at least as important to my interest in Hinduism as Hinduism itself. At the same time, I felt all along that there was

[34]Patrick Olivelle's new translation of the *Arthaśāstra* will make such ignorance harder to sustain. Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[35]The issue is reviewed from the academic perspective in the special issue on "Who Speaks for Hinduism?" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 4 (2000).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

something more going on. I had, at that point, invested some fifteen years of my life learning languages of India, spending nearly three years there studying and living, writing about the history of religion and law there, and then teaching about it. Did all this mean nothing because I do not call myself Hindu? I realized then that the effort I put in to learn about Hinduism and Hindu law had changed how I thought about religion and law generally. My viewpoint on these is inextricably bound up with what I have learned from Hindu traditions. I now think of law in terms of *dharma*, as well as vice versa. My views are not solely a product of some pure Hindu perspective, but I could not help but be changed by the tradition I studied because of the way I was taught and because of the attitude I had going in. To that extent, I would go so far as to say that my views are Hindu, though not exclusively so, as if anyone's could be. Something like this miracle still happens when students manage to learn from Asia in spite of the structural obstacles preventing it.

At one level, getting around the limitations of just learning about Asia means simply applying the disposition and openness that already characterize the humanities to Asian materials. Learning from Asia should be no harder than learning from Europe. The difference lies in the process of academic acculturation in which the heirs of Athens and, more recently, of Jerusalem are held up as "our" intellectual ancestors.[36] One has to acknowledge the Greek pedigree of modern universities, though the family tree is much more complicated than this label allows.[37] On the one hand, we should unmask this allegedly universal tradition as parochial and intellectually restrictive.[38] On the other hand, we should hold fast to its virtues by expanding its base and changing the language of academic acculturation.

A productive vision of how to do this can be found in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer, it must be said, had little or no interest in anything without a Greek pedigree, though calling him ethnocentric seems to shut down the conversation before it starts. Instead, we might follow Wilhelm Halbfass, who some time ago expanded Gadamer's own horizons to Asia:

> What we need is not sheer 'neutrality' and 'extinction of one's self,' but 'the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices': 'The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text' – and why not an Indian text? – 'may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.' Should Gadamer's concepts of 'hermeneutical conversation' or 'dialogue' and 'fusion of horizons' . . . not also be pertinent to the interpretation of Indian thought and its literary documents?[39]

[36]See Leo Strauss's famous essay and the ensuing commentary on it: Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections," *Commentary* 43 (1967): 45–57.

[37]Levinas, too, acknowledges and approves of this link of Greek philosophy with the dominance of ontology and totality: "theorizing, is Greek . . . when we think, we speak Greek even if we do not know this language" (Levinas, "Reality Has Weight," 161).

[38]Simon Critchley, "Black Socrates? Questioning the Philosophical Tradition," in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought*, 122–42 (New York: Verso, 1999).

[39]Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 165 (citing Gadamer).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In many ways, Gadamer picks up where Levinas leaves off, namely at the point of being situated in the totality with a host of culturally inherited prejudices. Levinas has given me the tools to make my initial approach to scholarship ethical insofar as possible, by forcing me to justify my representations, my being, against the measure of deep alterity. Gadamer, in turn, takes up the question of understanding after I am are "thrown" into the world in Heidegger's sense.[40] For Gadamer, hermeneutics characterizes human existence in both its authentic and its inauthentic modes (again in Heidegger's sense) or in both the phenomenological and natural attitudes (in Husserl's). I understand the world from a position of always already being a being-in-the-world. I cannot escape to a value-free point of objectivity. Hermeneutics, therefore, is the at least fourfold movement to allow a text to lay a claim on me, to insist that present prejudices are the ineluctable starting point for evaluating that claim, to ascertain its historical contexts of meaning, and only then to judge critically its validity, usefulness, or appropriateness (in the sense of *Ideologiekritik*).

Setting aside these ethical questions, Gadamer explains how we understand things once we are in the world. Stated briefly, history in the form of tradition conditions our approach to any new subject through the prejudices it forces upon us. In Gadamer's words:

> In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being*.[41]

Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice as the unavoidable starting point for all understanding defines his approach to hermeneutics. To learn from in Asian humanities must also start from the fact that students and teachers will inevitably bring their own prejudices to bear in how they understand and react to Asian cultures and people, including the "prejudice" of being Asian oneself.

The good news, according to Gadamer, is that it does not matter where one starts. Prejudice can never be eliminated, only refined, through the process called *Bildung*, that is, "keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view."[42] Gadamer calls what we can understand at any given moment our "horizon."[43] The capacity to move beyond our horizon and to be transformed is the very heart of the humanities.[44] Gadamer describes the process as "the fusion of these horizons suppos-

[40]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, [1960] 1989), 262.
[41]Ibid., 276–77. Italics in original.
[42]Ibid., 17.
[43]Ibid., 302.
[44]Ibid., 111.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

edly existing by themselves."[45] Or, in terms that would make Levinas cringe, "It seems, rather, to be generally characteristic of the emergence of the 'hermeneutical' problem that something *distant* has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now."[46] The fusion of horizons sounds like the "imperialism of the same." Is there a way to reconcile Levinas's ethics with Gadamer's hermeneutics?

It is important to remember that Levinas never denies the validity or reality of the world as a totality. For Levinas, "human life is a unity of totality and infinity."[47] The simple solution here is to say that when Gadamer speaks of "a certain strangeness overcome," he refers to cultural alterity. Unlike the asymmetry of deep alterity, cultural understanding can be mutual and can cross over otherness in a way that is impossible for deep alterity because the latter does not exist in the same way; it is "otherwise than being." Asian humanities should start with the acceptance of the responsibility of deep alterity, but its procedure in the world should be to learn from that which is culturally other. In this way, deep alterity becomes the gateway to cultural alterity. When I learn from, and not just about, Asian cultures and people, I incarnate or enact the responsibility of deep alterity.

Deep alterity then is the yardstick for evaluating cultural alterity, what Gadamer would call other horizons, including historical ones. Deep alterity is both unalterable and irrevocable because it is beyond being and thus not subject to the kind of transformation through hermeneutic encounter that Gadamer describes. The openness that Gadamer calls for, however, is necessary for limiting our infinite responsibility in the domain of totality, that is, in the real world. Even for Levinas, traditional philosophy and hermeneutics are essential for judging between the infinite responsibilities that I bear toward all individuals.[48] The ethics of the most simple social encounter, the face-to-face, should always remain the standard against which competing claims for our responsibility are evaluated. Justice emerges when I correctly ascertain or prioritize the urgency and depth of my responsibility to the oppressor and the oppressed, and this discernment requires knowledge.

Hermeneutics as a mode of understanding cultural otherness and a fusion of horizons occurs in the domain of being. Here the "return to oneself,"[49] which, for Gadamer as for Hegel, is only possible through a transformative process, is not the "imperialism of the same" in Levinas's sense unless it is mistaken for an assimilation or understanding of the deep alterity of the Other (which it often is). In other words, what I know about people can never substitute for what I learn from them through real relationship. The intellectual journey of Asian humanities is instead to myriad realms of cultural alterity from which one can only return changed at a cultural level. What is transformed can, for Levinas, only be the cultural makeup of the knower, again because one's true humanity is not fixed as an essence, but rather is constantly created in the domain of

[45]Ibid., 306.
[46]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 22.
[47]Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 113.
[48]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 157ff.
[49]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

otherwise than being. The Other can never be appropriated through interpretation, but his or her cultural presence in the totality can be understood, at least partially. Gadamer certainly overstates our potential to understand everything through hermeneutics and understates our potential to misunderstand people and their cultural expressions in many contexts, no matter how much goodwill or openness we have.[50] Nevertheless, personal transformation is possible through cross-cultural understanding, regardless of its imperfection, because our cultural identities are mutable in a way that our deep identities are not.

The key question here is the relation of transformable cultural identity and alterity to non-totalizable, non-representable deep alterity. In my view, Asian humanities should take up Gadamer's hermeneutics as the technique within the realm of being for constantly leading back to the face-to-face and to the claim of infinite responsibility. In this way, cultural alterity also becomes the gateway to deep alterity.

To learn from as we learn about means to search first for the beautiful in the Other.[51] In our time, some part of the beauty of Asia is as likely to be next door as in the geographic space called Asia.[52] Asia is not just "over there." To seek out this beauty wherever it is found is the first concrete form that learning from takes in Asian humanities. The learn-about approach is premised on the notion that difference is bad and must be overcome through knowledge. In learning about, I assume, with Gadamer, that the knower's perspective is always broader, "more universal" than that of the known. This assumption, however, is arrogant and privileges the knower, and this is why I must care first in Asian humanities. By contrast, in the learn-from approach, difference is held to be good. To learn from means that the knower must first give of himself or herself to the Other and in so giving form a relationship that is the basis of legitimate understanding. Cultural difference is not overcome or assimilated; it is given value as something that everyone can learn from.

The second concrete form of learning from is to modulate or transform one's own understanding of general or analytic categories. Definitions in the humanities always cause problems, not matter how limited the cultural context to which they are meant to apply. Nevertheless, to accept one language's or one culture's idea of something as the fixed definition of that phenomenon not only privileges a parochial view of human life but also prevents comparative discourse. It also leads to exoticizing that preserves not the alterity of the Other, but his or her inferiority. In various ways, for example, India has been denied history, religion, law, politics, and economics. To qualify such denials with "in the usual/Western/our sense" is to learn about, not to learn from. Instead, every academic inquiry should be seen as an opportunity to refine and reconsider the categories through which I think. Modulation of my current categories is more

[50]William Rasch, *Niklas Luhmann's Modernity: The Paradoxes of Differentiation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 56–58.
[51]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 477–87.
[52]Diana Eck's study of the religious diversity of the contemporary United States, particularly of Asian religions, testifies to the proximity of Asia. Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

than just the reflexive moment in academia, because it is also checking in with the Other in an ongoing conversation about whether I have got things right.

A third manifestation of learning from builds upon the second by insisting that we must speak first of the human and second of the cultural. Asian humanities takes shape as research into the lives and cultures of Hmong, Mongolians, Tibetans, Farsis, and many others, but it seeks to care for them first as human beings and not as tokens of an ethnic, national, or religious identity.[53] Asian humanities seeks to preserve both deep and cultural alterity because the two lead back to one another, but academic writing about Asia must cease to depict Asians in purely identitarian terms. Strict identitarianism denies, or at least resists, the mutability of cultural identity and thus precludes categorically learning from another culture. More challenging to me is the possibility, even the probability, that identities are as unstable as categories and that sustained engagement with something different makes you more like that thing and less like you started out. People assert their identity when their cultural alterity is being destroyed. An assertion of identity is like a cry for help, a statement not of who, but of where, someone is in their development as a human being. Within that cry is also a denial of humanity, as people confuse their deep identity with their cultural identity. An identity is a claim to permanence and fixity within a recognized framework that denies the possibility of either internal change or external understanding. Identitarianism is the necessary condition of the humanities, but it is ultimately anti-human. It is easy for privileged white males like me to criticize claims to cultural identity as mistaking cultural alterity for deep alterity, but the fact remains that my privilege derives in great measure from my ability to ignore and destroy deep alterity by treating people only according to their fixed cultural identities and convincing them that that is all they really are.

Cultural alterity is a partial translation of deep alterity in the world, in the knowable realm of being. What is deeply and infinitely other in a person is always good and desirable, while what is culturally other can be bad and undesirable. One task of Asian humanities is to make judgments about what is good and bad in the cultural alterities of Asia but to let those judgments condemn us first for failing to be responsible for the evil suffered by another. If Gadamer is correct, then the preservation of cultural alterity involves also a process of discernment and judgment about what is worth preserving culturally. Such judgment, however, can only come after a lengthy process of seeking the beautiful in another culture and learning from it.

Lastly, one of the hardest things to do in life is to learn from someone or something you despise. The final concrete form of learning from, therefore, is to cultivate the ability to learn from even the most oppressive, hate-filled, ignorant, and insidious people and cultural practices. Of course, this means learning negative lessons from the mistakes and misdeeds of others. More difficult, however, is learning to discriminate between

[53]Compare L. L. Zamenhof in a letter from 1895: "I was educated as an idealist. I was taught that all people were brothers; meanwhile on the street and in the courtyard, everything at every turn caused me to feel that people did not exist: only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews, etc." L. L. Zamenhof, *Originala verkaro* [*Collected original works*], ed. Johann Dietterle (Leipzig: Ferdinand Hirt, 1929), 418. Afsar Mohammad quoted to me an Urdu *ghazal* of Josh Malihabadi (d. 1982) expressing the same sentiment: "*Insān kahāṅ hai kis kurre meṅ gum hai / hindū hai koī, aur musalmān koī*." (Where is the Human? In what pit does it hide? Here is a Hindu, there a Muslim.)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the evil of someone's cultural face and the good that lies in the infinity of their deep alterity. I rush to say that I only wish I could do this more personally, but I have witnessed extraordinary people who can find a goodness in the most terrible and detestable people, statements, and ideas—not necessarily a goodness that the latter themselves see or intend in what they write or do, but a goodness derivable or discoverable through care or love. In such cases, in spite of the fact that cultural alterity masks deep alterity and discourages us from respecting and showing responsibility to the culturally monstrous Other, I find a way simultaneously to see something good in the infinity of that Other's face, to condemn their cultural persona, and to seek out and care for those affected by the evil they do.

Connect Histories

The third principle of Asian humanities is to connect histories. Asian studies can only be viable as an intellectual field if it develops a coherence beyond artificial and arbitrary geographies, including "Asia" itself. The idea comes from a seminal essay by Sanjay Subrahmanyam.[54] Just as the study of Asia should be about relationships, about caring first and learning from, so also is the history of Asia (and indeed the world) itself a story of connections, and of connected histories. The final principle, therefore, demands that I connect these histories, and not just compare them. The research and writing necessary to connect histories in a broad sense is the practical work of Asian humanities and the tangible instantiation of caring first and learning from.

Subrahmanyam rightly prefers to spend his time actually producing connected histories over talking about their value as a method. Nevertheless, he sets his approach against the common flaws he sees in area studies:

> There is thus a warning to be sounded at the very outset. Area studies can very rapidly become parochialism, and we often see an insistence, taken to the limits of the absurd, concerning the unity of 'Southeast Asia', 'South Asia' or whatever one happens to study. . . . It is as if these conventional geographical units of analysis, fortuitously defined as givens for the intellectually slothful, and the result of complex (even murky) processes of academic and non-academic engagement, somehow become real and overwhelming. Having helped create these Frankenstein's monsters, we are obliged to praise them for their beauty, rather than grudgingly acknowledge their limited functional utility.[55]

Traditional comparative history in area studies assumes basically airtight cultural zones that scholars can then compare to each other along thematic lines: the economy here and there, this religion and that, etc. One alternative to the basically civilizational approach of area studies is "to take the geographical units as given from the conventional wisdom, and then proceed to a higher level of comparison using these very units as

[54]Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes toward a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997): 735–62.
[55]Ibid., 742–43.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

building-blocks," as seen, for instance, in the work of Victor Lieberman.[56] Unfortunately, this approach still leaves the rigidity of fixed areas and, by implication, fixed identities intact. Connected history, by contrast, insists that "geographical canvases" are "mere contingent devices."[57] More importantly, connected history requires that any choice of contingent geography for consideration be first justified through the tangible links it has to other places. We thus highlight connection and context as constitutive factors in the uniqueness of a place and time. In this way, both dynamic appropriation and influence and cultural agency are recognized simultaneously.

Subrahmanyam judiciously limits his focus to early modern Eurasia and the many connected histories that he, with an enviable knowledge of ten or twelve languages, can discern from atypical concatenations of sources in, say, Portuguese, French, and Dutch with those in Persian, Telugu, Urdu, and Tamil. We find few theoretical statements of how to do connected history in Subrahmanyam's work, however. The most we get are allusive encouragements to "not only compare from within our boxes, but spend some time and effort to transcend them, not by comparison alone but by seeking out the at times fragile threads that connected the globe."[58] Or, a little more specifically, "There may be moments when it makes more sense to read the history of parts of Bengal together with that of coastal Burma and Thailand, rather than with that of Gujarat."[59]

In taking up Subrahmanyam's idea of connected histories, I will be rather less cautious than he, because I think connected histories are not phenomena of any particular period, but of all periods, and not of any particular place, but of all places. Connecting histories means more than finding connections between places and histories in Asia. It also means understanding how transformations in Asia have affected and were influenced by Africa, South America, Europe, and beyond. The notion that the world has ever been anything but connected has been largely exploded, thanks to the work of archaeologists for the ancient world,[60] philologists for classical periods,[61] and world historians for the medieval and early modern global system.[62] Of course, it is never that everyone is always connected to everyone else and in the same measure, but insularity is a rare exception in human existence and in cultural evolution. Mobility and flows between areas and over long periods of time have been at the core of both change and stability in Asian history.[63] In fact, connected history questions whether anything can ever be purely local. As a result, it makes little sense, except provisionally or heuristically, to

[56]Ibid., 743.
[57]Ibid., 743.
[58]Ibid., 761–62.
[59]Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "On the Window that Was India," in *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*, 1–16 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.
[60]Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization* (Karachi: Oxford University Press and American Institute of Pakistan Studies, 1998).
[61]Sheldon Pollock, *The Languages of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
[62]Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[63]David Ludden, "Presidential Address: Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 4 (2003): 1057–78.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

isolate social phenomena as if they had no connection to other phenomena past or present.

The idea that we are always connected strikes me as another way to say that the Other is always proximate to us in Levinas's sense. Whether we call it proximity or connection, we are talking about relationships that we are thrown into rather than choose to enter, that are given to us before we are conscious of them. Connections entail relationships, and relationships require ethical grounding. Connected history thus encodes a recognition of the ethical claim in any relationship to care first for the Other. Moreover, connected history also makes manifest the irreducible infinity of the Other by insisting that connections of infinitely greater or smaller magnitude are possible in the attempt to understand any person, group, or tradition. Just as we can never exhaust the possible things to say or to know about an individual, so also we can never reach the end of the possible connections between one person, one cultural phenomenon, or one tradition and another. Connected history thus preserves the alterity of the Other by claiming that no one story of connection is ever the whole story.

Beyond relationships, connections also suggest unknown or unrecognized influences. If we acknowledge that the world is connected, however tenuously, then we must break down the idea that some histories are a part of *our* past and some are not. I do not suggest that all connections are equally significant in the experienced lives of people, rather only that denying the constitutive relevance of Asia's past to the past of every other part of the globe and to the present day (and vice versa) is fallacious and conducive to ethnocentrism. Connected history works under the assumption that all pasts are part of a human history, in spite of the fact that some pasts are more salient for some people than others. To connect history is, therefore, to learn from the previously unseen or unexplored connections that exist between others and between others and oneself. Connection prohibits us from distancing ourselves from any past.

A good example—led by Asianists—of how connected history demands that we learn from others because we are connected to them is the study of colonialism. By now, it is clear beyond doubt that so-called Western culture as we now experience it would not be what it is without colonialism. Until very recently, however, the emergence of Europe from the Dark or Middle Ages was with all sincerity called the Age of Discovery and the consolidation of modern nation-states the Industrial Revolution. That both of these periods, not to mention the periods in between, were fundamentally shaped and/or enabled by colonialism is now well known thanks to connected histories of the Atlantic slave trade, bonded Asian labor, and the transnational corporation. However, the very idea that *our* way of life was made possible through the suffering and exploitation of others is still unfathomable to many, in part because we are disallowed to learn from Asia. Connected histories force the issue and build an irrefutable case for recognizing connections that require us to learn from the past and the present, no matter how alien we have defined it to be. Not coincidentally, such recognition also bears a deep claim to be responsible for that past.

One general thrust of Subrahmanyam's work is "to argue for the contamination of neat categories."[64] The concrete forms of connected history all thus share a drive to

[64]Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories," 759.

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question solid geographical, religious, political, and other cultural boundaries. The first tangible form of connected history in Asian humanities is to focus on geographies and cultural entities that are both bigger and smaller than those current in mainstream scholarship. We should do so not because other formulations are wrong, but rather because they are inappropriate or unhelpful for certain kinds of study. Relying solely on standard geographies in Asian studies tends to force us into mental boxes and blocks us from seeing and respecting a limitless alterity of the Other, when seen from different perspectives. The move toward regional histories in South Asia, for example, drew from this same insight, namely that the civilizational perspective on India provided almost no viable basis for discussing the political or economic history of the places under that label. The focal points for historical research, therefore, had to be smaller in order to glean a more accurate and illuminating picture of the connections between polities and cultural areas in South Asia. Conversely, following Willem van Schendel, James Scott's christening of Zomia as a distinctive cultural zone of highland areas cutting across several standard Asian geographies is a compelling, if not entirely convincing, instance of connected history.[65] In this case, a much larger configuration of culturally related areas enables us to see connections between upland societies that were previously connected by scholars primarily to their lowland counterparts. The infinity of possible configurations of connected history (two families, three villages, two regions, five countries, two cultures, etc.) mirrors the elusive infinity of deep alterity. We can never exhaust the possible connected histories to be told, and this fact helps to remind us of the priority of humble care over assertive truth.

The second concrete form of connected history is to put connection before reflexivity. In other words, we should attend to what something means to others before we think of what it means to us.[66] In this case, the effort is to attend to the connections expressed in the sources themselves as the first-order links that mattered most in the consciousness of people in a given time and place. Learning from does not mean learning what is in it for me. It means, in part at least, seeking out the connections between the Other and the others as a necessary preparation to situating oneself in a meaningful world beyond

[65]James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009). Criticism of Scott's work on both factual and conceptual grounds has come quickly, though always with a tremendous debt to Scott for exactly the kind of provocation that has forced others to take up new connected histories between Southeast, South, East, and Central Asia. See Leif Jonsson's review and Victor Lieberman's review in a special issue of the *Journal of Global History* devoted to Zomia studies: Hjorleifur Jonsson, "Above and Beyond: Zomia and the Ethnographic Challenge of/for Regional Histories," *History and Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2010): 191–212; Victor Lieberman, "A Zone of Refuge in Southeast Asia? Reconceptualizing Interior Spaces," *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 2 (2010): 333–46.

[66]Justin McDaniel, for instance, demonstrates in relation to conventional understandings of Buddhist religious images "that sifting through the pile of stuff that accumulates around or on major images reveals a history of response and relationships that can tell us more about a piece of art than the name of the artist or the style of the period." Justin McDaniel, "The Agency between Images: The Relationships among Ghosts, Corpses, Monks, and Deities at a Buddhist Monastery in Thailand," *Material Religion* 7, no. 2 (2011): 242–67 at 246. The significance of relationships and of fun to the religiosity of image worship among Thai Buddhists is only seen by attending first to their own expressions of what images do. The relationships between these images and between images and people are a form of connected history at a micro-level.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fixed cultural identities. Privileging connection prevents understanding from becoming aggressive and assimilative.

A third form of connecting history is simply to read more widely. There is a necessary tendency in contemporary scholarship to narrow one's academic focus to the point of identifying a manageable scale of expertise. The narrowing process is an important part of graduate school education, but it nearly always flies in the face of teaching expectations after graduation. The principle of connected history asks us to set the bar higher for ourselves from the beginning. To study medieval South India without at least reading up on medieval north India and medieval Sumatra and Java is to miss critical political, military, economic, religious, and other cultural connections. Reading outside one's field can feel initially like a misuse of time, but over time it stimulates questions that one may not have otherwise asked and connections that one might have overlooked. In this respect, connected history is a never-ending challenge never to settle for the first connections one happens to find but always to seek out new ways of connecting ideas, events, and stories one knows well with others that are still known only in part.

The final point to be made about connected history is that if you are studying something or someone, you are already connected to it or to them. The act of scholarship is itself a connection that should not be left unexamined or taken for granted. Anthropologists suffered the consequences of this point in acute and direct ways that other fields find easier to ignore, but the truth is that scholarship can affect the lives of real people. Not only can it impel governments and armies to perpetrate violent acts directly, it also can trap people under the weight of collective representation, when scholarly accounts of cultural alterity substitute for deep alterity. We should think, rather, that whenever we write about something or some people, we have first to imagine the possible consequences of our writing. Our academic writing must bear the same responsibility to the Other that our personal acts do. Our writing is, after all, a part of our actions.

The weakness of comparative history is its inability to make a place for the frequent causal linkages between different cultures. Connected history asks us to investigate the extent to which the strong and weak links of culture contributed to the changes we can see in historical periods or in contemporary circumstances. Such linkages are easier to document for modern periods, and connected history must, therefore, guard against assertions that all global and transcultural connections are a modern phenomenon. Comparative history still has an important role to play, especially in situations where similarity arises from nonhistorical factors—that is, where common human problems find similar cultural expression, even though connections between the two are impossible to determine or just plain impossible.

In review, connected history works under the assumption that the strong and weak ties between societies, communities, and individuals are the bedrock of both expressions of culture and changes to culture over time.[67] It thus builds upon the notion that our proximity to others precedes our knowledge of them. The relationship and the responsibility that proximity implies take methodological shape as connected history. And those connections are tangible, if indirect, links between the Other, the others, and ourselves.

[67]See Mark Granovetter's classic essay on the "strength of weak ties" as a way to conceptualize how even small connections can have a big social impact: Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Connected history thus helps us to learn from by recognizing the history of others as *our own* history and tradition.

Conclusions

The good news—as I have tried to note throughout—is that there are a lot of people and lot of scholarship that already exemplify the principles advocated here. The purpose of this essay was, therefore, not to suggest that we have been doing everything wrong, but rather not to leave unexamined or undertheorized those core principles that ground the humanistic contributions of Asian studies. Moreover, the point is to demonstrate the integral nature of Asian humanities to the liberal arts generally.

Levinas's emphasis on ethics as first philosophy enables us to speak simultaneously of both the deep alterity of humanity and of the cultural alterity of social identity, not to mention the relationship between the two. Caring first consists in the cultivation of a basic ethical orientation in Asian humanities that should inform everything we do. Levinas elegantly summarizes this orientation: "The human is the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to *mauvaise conscience*, to its capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it."[68]

One important consequence of the principles advocated here is the obliteration of the insider-outsider dichotomy. If we follow Gadamer in learning from, when do we as human beings ever leave the inside? Each of us carries our prejudices to our relationships and to our efforts to know. The interrogation of those prejudices is an integral part of both our responsibility and our knowledge, but the process only shapes prejudice into a new form. As Kirin Narayan taught us some time ago, a scholar identified as Asian does not have fewer prejudices than others.[69] Identity is no guarantee of wisdom.

The principles outlined here, therefore, are not intended to be relevant only for white, male academics like myself, but to all scholars.[70] Remember that prejudice in Gadamer's sense is a positive. The disabilities of some identities and the advantages of others are hereby invited to contribute their distinct voices to Asian humanities. We are all impoverished by the exclusion of a view that any particular prejudice helps to generate in scholarship. This works in ways that are both easily affirmed and difficult to accept. Easy: what does a Hindu scholar think about caste? Difficult: what does a white racist think about caste? More interesting: what would happen if more black feminists studied caste? We can never leave the inside.

Finally, Asian studies includes a large contingent, perhaps even a majority, of scholars who might rather call themselves social scientists. The intent of this essay is not to drive a

[68]Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 85.

[69]Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3 (1993): 671–86.

[70]Whether my motivation for writing this essay stems from some form of "white guilt" remains a possibility, but this too is one of the unavoidable prejudices that helped me, and specifically me, formulate the essay in the way that I have. Of course, I hope others may learn from my prejudiced theoretical analysis of Asian humanities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

wedge between humanists and others nor to suggest that social scientific methods are inherently unethical. The problem, rather, lies in the specific history of our field and in our way of expressing what it is to others. There is nothing in the principles of this essay that undermines or devalues social science as a commitment to empirical study, to the demand for evidence, to quantifiable knowledge, or to policy advocacy. In fact, the three principles of Asian humanities can only enhance the pursuit of social science, even though they emphasize the social over the scientific as "first philosophy."

This point broadens even more in the context of the latest "crisis in the humanities" debate. Instead of identifying special abilities nurtured by humanistic study[71] or investigating incompatibilities between modern technological institutions and the stubbornly archaic university,[72] let us insist that the humanities is the context for the pursuit of knowledge as such, because it is always humans that are doing the knowing. Humanities is in part the study of ourselves and what we become as we strive to know and to grasp the world and those around us. Indeed, a major new role of the modern university has been to serve as a voice for the oppressed, with scholars as advocates. But, rather than promote these principles at a scale and a level of abstraction not likely to make a difference, I think we should begin where we are in Asian studies. In pursuit of that goal, let us build an Asian humanities that is irresistible because of the good that it accomplishes. Others will follow, if we do.

In the end, the principles of Asian humanities are perhaps better exemplified than described. A simple example from the Jain religious tradition is the concept of *anumodana*.[73] Literally, this Sanskrit term means to "take joy alongside (someone for something that they have accomplished)"—in other words, to admire and feel joy in someone else's good work and to praise them for it. This idea takes a specific ritual form for Jains, but the idea captures a mode of human interaction that extends well beyond religion and speaks to the nature of such intangibles as friendship and love, as well as to the mission of a university and its component units. From bottom to top, we in Asian humanities want to create a culture and a habit of *anumodana* in the successes of the diverse people that we study and of ourselves. That habit allows us to participate vicariously in their success and to transform our own actions through a deliberative ethical habit. To leave *anumodana*'s significance to the Jain community exclusively and to disallow it to inform our own actions is to quarantine Asian ideas and institutions so as to prevent them from contaminating the well-established lineages of humanistic thought in the academy. To care first about Jains and the Jain tradition, to learn from *anumodana*, and myriad other things, and to connect it to our own world truly opens the meaning of what is human and meaningfully internationalizes our understanding of the world around us. The study of Asian humanities, by naming and embodying a conscious

[71]Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[72]Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010).

[73]*Anumodana* is an important idea in Buddhist traditions, too, but I learned it from studying Jains. For a Buddhist perspective, see Richard Gombrich, "'Merit Transference' in Sinhalese Buddhism: A Case Study of the Interaction between Doctrine and Practice," *History of Religions* 11, no. 2 (1971): 203–19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cultivation of *anumodana*, offers the academy, the government, the corporation, and the household an awareness and mindfulness of the crucial role of deliberative public praise in both ordinary and professional life.

Multiply this simple example a thousand times or more, and one may see the promise of Asian humanities and the role it will play in providing students and the community a way of thinking about and making sense of the most immediate and most frequent events of day-to-day life. Just a little positive affirmation goes a long way, and if some people learn that from the Jain tradition, how much more quickly will the barriers of language and identity between people fall? From my perspective, this kind of humanities needs no defense. It is the essence of education as such. The capacity to determine what is really important in life lies at the root of the humanities' mission and at the heart of Asian studies.

Acknowledgments

Above all, this essay was inspired by and is dedicated to Charles Hallisey, who helped me to learn from. More recently, Anne Hansen has been my main conversation partner about Asian humanities, and her affirmations and hesitations improved my ideas greatly. Others who provided useful feedback and assistance include: Manu Bhagavan, Roger Black, Veena Das, Anna Gade, John Nemec, and Mary Rader. Lastly, I must thank several years of seminar students whose curiosity and passion made this essay possible.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673 Published online by Cambridge University Press