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REVIEW ARTICLE

*Tradition and Discipline: How should one read ancient Indian texts?**

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Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance. By D. Venkat Rao. Heidelberg: Springer, 2014, pp. xvi, 336, €129.99 (ISBN 9788132216988).

The Nay Science: A History of German Indology. By Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. ix, 512, $41.95 (ISBN 9780199931361).

Abstract

This is a review article of two recent books. The first is D. Venkat Rao's *Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance*; the second, Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee's *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*. Rao's conviction is that Indology has failed in its mandate. He claims that Indology so far has produced only European representations of India and not what should have been the choicest self-images of India's past. If Rao begins with a hostile tone towards Indology and expresses his intention to do something with India's texts without either relying on or having recourse to anything that belongs to the Indologist's ragbag, Adluri and Bagchee set out to expose what they refer to as Indology's 'pretension' to scientific method and objectivity in their *The Nay Science*, an unprecedented polemical history of German Indology. I divide this review into two parts: a critical examination of *The Nay Science*'s critique of German Indology and its commitment to a methodological reform, and a distilled critical account of *Cultures of Memory*'s approach to Indian textual traditions and the problems of such an approach. Finally, after examining the important challenges facing Indology, I'll make a case for how the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre may help

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our understanding of the nature, dynamics, and the relevance of tradition in South Asia.

Between philology and semantics

Indology is an old and venerable discipline. It came into being at more-or-less the same time as the university system and its disciplinary organization in the West began to acquire its patently modern cast and character in the late eighteenth century. From its beginnings, the study of Sanskrit—the main pillar of Indology—was a major academic interest in Europe, particularly among the Germans and the English. And for more than two centuries now, Indology has produced a colossal amount of scholarship. A range of motives often coalesced in this interest in Sanskrit: from forensic, positivist, and utilitarian interests to Romantic reconstructions of the origins of humanity.[1] However, by and large the methods and interests were philological and historical in nature rather than philosophical or conceptual. Philology often dominated, even when dealing with metaphysical or epistemological issues. This has an important consequence. Philology, at its best, is a science of reading or, more elegantly put, a mode of textual criticism that can use a range of resources to conduct its business—grammar, literary criticism, linguistics, etymology, and history. Its self-image is that of an objective science dominated by the tools and the uses that these can be put to, primarily in deciphering older texts situated deep in the historical past. In this respect it resembles the science of engineering, in that it is clearly aware of what tools work where, and how the contents of the entire tool box relate to one another.[2] However,

[1] D McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern Germany,* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison, 2009; S. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race and Scholarship,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009. These are two recent detailed historical accounts of the German Indology.

[2] S. Pollock, 'Future Philology: The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World', *Critical Enquiry,* vol. 35, 4, 2009, pp. 931–961. This is strong defence of philology by a foremost Sanskritist of our times. For an Indological perspective on the need and use of philology, see J. E. M. Houben, 'Philosophy and Philology, East and West, Need and Basis for a Global Approach', *Cracow Indological Studies: The Future of Indology,* vol. 10, 2008, pp. 88–144. This piece offers a conciliatory perspective on the uses of philology with several recommendations about how philology can help build the future of Indology. Philology is by no means restricted to oriental languages alone. The classical Greek philology is indeed a much large an affair with an equally hoary history, and subsequently every period of the Western history had its own episodes of rich

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it is not a science guided by its own ontological presuppositions about common sense and reality. Although philology primarily concerns language, it is not about how language relates to the world.[3] In other words, philology is not semantics. As a disciplinary enterprise, it helps us when studying semantics, historical or otherwise. The question of how language hooks onto the world depends on how we name, define, and classify things, using linguistic categories, at a certain point in time in history. That is the subject of semantics.[4] But philology can help us unpack the linguistic layers of a text—the text's semantic dimension—as it can aid us in unravelling how the language of a text—its categories, classes, and singular terms—hook onto reality at any given point of time in history. In this sense, like semantics, philology is also an empirical discipline. However, philology cannot offer any semantics on its own, because the job of philology is restricted to

philological explorations. It very much behoves to be recalled here that Nietzsche was a product of philology in that his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, was a response to the philology of his times. For an excellent historical account of philology and its impact on practice and research in the Humanities, from classical antiquity to modern times, albeit limited to the Western world, see J. Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2014. For a comparatist's defence of philology as a practice of reading, preparing and editing texts, see H. U. Gumbrecht, *The Power of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois, 2003. For a wide range of philological cultures from across the globe offering historical and critical perspectives—Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese, Indo-Persian, Japanese, Ottoman, and modern European, see *World Philology*. S. Pollock, B. A. Elman, and K. K. Chang (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

[3] At a time when the study of literature was moving towards 'theory' in the seventies, and away from text oriented interpretive practices like close reading, Paul de Man prophetically observed that 'the turn to theory occurred as a turn to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the *meaning* (emphasis is mine) it produces'. See P. de Man, 'The Return to Philology' in his *The Resistance to Theory*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1986, pp. 21–26.

[4] Semantics is a discipline which studies the relationship between words and objects. Such relationships are relative to how languages are empirically and contextually used, and hence they are obtained in the meaning making efforts of individuals. If a linguistic expression means something to someone, it is not because its 'meaning' becomes available to him as one permanent structure of a Platonic realm of meanings. On the contrary, 'meaning' is how agents construe the correlations of words and expressions with things and processes in the world. Thus, meaning, i.e. semantics, is about this construal, which depends on a triadic relation between language, the users of language and the world. Thus, for a philologist to unpack the meaning of an expression would amount to constructing his way to the 'construals' of the agent who produces that language. For an excellent introduction to the linguistic and philosophical issues that arise here, although at times quite technical, from a semanticist's perspective, see M. Platts, *Ways of Meaning: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1997.

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supplying the tools and methods for doing historical semantics, that is, to establish the relations between words and things as they are historically designated for the language of an older text.

Typically, the philologist approaches a text with the aim of decoding and unpacking its meaning rather than using it for a designated purpose. For example, an audience member in theatre responds to the dramatic action, and this response can be lodged in a triadic framework of pragmatics comprising the dramatist, the text, and the respondent. Similarly, a text would have its designated user, who can be a liturgist or ritualist, or a performer, or a connoisseur, or any such user. However, a philologist is none of these. He, like an ethnographer, shares with texts the relationship of being an onlooker and observer of 'the foreign, the strange, the unfamiliar, the exotic, the unknown—that is, in short, what challenges belief', because he never occupies the standpoint of an insider in the universe of a text, sharing an insider's semantics.[5] By contrast, a liturgist would have an insider's semantics of whatever he recites and does. And to any question that may be posed to him by a fellow liturgist, he responds with commensurate vocabulary and consanguine methodology. A philologist who happens to be from a different cultural background will not have this advantage and will have to work his way into the insider's world from outside, that is, from a different cultural context.

Indology, whose central arm is philology, thus was and remains a discipline of enquiry which approaches its object from outside—typically the default condition of enquiry. Does this amount to a

[5] See V. Crapanzano, 'Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description' in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus (eds), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, p. 52. He writes: 'An ethnographer ... has to make sense of the foreign. Like Benjamin's translator, he aims at a solution to the problem of foreignness, and like the translator (a point missed by Benjamin) he must also communicate the very foreignness that his interpretations (the translator's translations) deny, at least in their claim to universality. He must render the foreign familiar and preserve its very foreignness at one and the same time. The translator accomplishes this through style, the ethnographer through the coupling of a presentation that asserts the foreign and an interpretation that makes it all familiar.' Also see F. Clooney, 'Understanding in Order to be Understood, Refusing to Understand in Order to Convert', *Expanding and Merging Horizons. Contributions to South Asian and Cross-Cultural Studies in Commemoration*, K. Preisendanz (ed.), Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, Vienna, 2007, pp. 51–61. Although it is about the missionary-scholar Roberto de Nobili, who committed himself to understanding Brahmanical learning to be able to convey his Christian message to Indians, it throws light on the sort of complexities of knowing and understanding that an ethnographic perspective entails.

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problem? It might do, in the sense that it accrues to the Indologist's standpoint no great benefit in recognizing that texts per se emerge as integral products of specific traditions; and that traditions themselves embody modes and standpoints of enquiry with substantive methods and goals. Whatever the interest the texts may evince for a philologist would be purely from the point of view of their historical or philological significance. Greg Bailey tellingly captures this point, among others, when he writes: 'Indologists have traditionally become hermeneutically trapped in the texts they have studied and *have treated the text in such a way that it becomes the sole referent for its own study*'.[6] Besides such, which the critics of Indology have relentlessly pointed out as attributing various kinds of 'essences' to India and its cultural heritage, or of 'stripping' its 'agency' from its 'people' by Eurocentric academic endeavours, are very much a part of the Indological enterprise.[7] As a result, questions naturally arise as to whether Indologists, qua philologists, get their general picture right. Besides, Indology might profess neutrality and a certain presupposition-less scientific objectivity in its approach to a text.[8] But texts always refer to something, whatever its ontological status—fictional, counterfactual or real. Thus knowing accurately the semantics of the language in which the text is produced is essential for the philologist. But is it possible to get it accurately, whatever the measure of accuracy may be? A precondition for achieving such unexceptionable accuracy is that one should be an insider to the text or tradition, which is difficult and probably impossible. It is then likely that an Indologist would apply—wherever he perceives gaps in the correlations between words and things in his target language—his homebred semantics to the discourse of a text that is completely alien to those semantics. Then, in the wake of a history of roughly 200 years of a massive body

[6] See G. Bailey, 'The fundamental problems of contemporary Indology'. *Cracow Indological Studies: The Future of Indology,* vol. 10, 2008, pp 48–61. Bailey addresses some very important questions relevant to the concerns I am raising here.' Also see I. Milewska, 'Indology—An Archaic Dinosaur or a Modern Field of Studies?', *Cracow Indological Studies: The Future of Indology,* vol. 10, 2008, pp. 1–46; J. N. Mohanty, 'On Interpreting Indian Philosophy: Some Problems and Concerns' in *Essays on Indian Philosophy: Traditional and Modern,* P. Billimoria (ed.), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 207–219. Mohanty, a preeminent Husserl scholar who is historically well grounded in the Indian philosophical traditions, offers an important autobiographical perspective on Indology.

[7] See R. Inden, *Imagining India,* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2000.

[8] J. Hanneder, 'Pretence and Prejudice', *Indologica Taurinensia,* vol. 35, 2011, pp. 123–137.

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of scholarship and a relentless interest in ancient India's texts and cultures, where does Indology stand? If Indology cannot read the texts of ancient India, how do we read them? Even if one is able to read them, what preserves the relevance of these texts for us?[9]

Rao's conviction is that Indology has failed in its mandate. He claims in his original, provocative, and heterodox book, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance,* henceforth *Cultures of Memory,* that this failure reflects how so far Indology has produced only the European Judaic-Christian representations of India, which he claims is a 'paradigm of reading', and not what should have been the choicest self-images of India's past truly grounded in its own traditions.[10] This is the author's conviction, on the basis of which he lays out his sprawling and discontinuous argument that South Asian texts are best accessed and understood, in their authentic form, by knowing how drastically they differ from the cultures derived from the European heritage. If Rao begins with a hostile note towards Indology, and expresses his intention to do something with India's texts without either relying on or taking recourse to anything that belongs to the Indologist's ragbag, Adluri and Bagchee set out to expose what they call Indology's pretension to scientific method and objectivity in their *The Nay Science,* an unprecedented history, albeit a polemical one, of German Indology.[11] The authors indeed aim to prove Indology's complicity with power and religion (Protestant Christianity). Although their objectives differ significantly, both these works are motivated by a singular concern: that Indology is no good for studying India's textual heritage. Rao's efforts are reconstructive while Adluri and Bagchee's are revisionist. Rao provides case studies to show how one can and should read ancient texts; Adluri and Bagchee attempt to show why the German Indologists were wrong to read the Indian texts in the way they did it.

[9] W. Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding,* SUNY press, New York, 1988. Halbfass makes a thorough and methodologically unified case to studying ancient Indian texts from the standpoint of the German hermeneutical tradition. For a slightly different philosophical case for approaching Indian texts which is deeply informed by the substantive differences of the Indian and the Western philosophical cultures, see J. N. Mohanty, 'Are Indian and Western Philosophy Radically Different' in *Essays on Indian Philosophy: Traditional and Modern,* P. Billimoria (ed.), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 313–330.

[10] V. Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia: Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance,* Springer, Heidelberg, 2014.

[11] V. Adluri and J. Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology,* Oxford University Press, New York, 2014.

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I divide this review as follows: a critical examination of *The Nay Science*'s critique of German Indology and its commitment to a methodological reform (a more proper and discerning assessment of its main claims should be left to practicing Indologists themselves), before I turn to a distilled critical account of *Cultures of Memory*'s approach to Indian textual traditions and the problems of such an approach. Finally, after examining the important challenges facing Indology, I'll make a case for how the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre could help us in understanding the nature, dynamics, and the relevance of tradition in South Asia.

The Nay Science: Indology and the way to hermeneutics

Adluri's and Bagchee's *The Nay Science* professes to offer a history of German scholarship on India between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Their history is not simply a history of German scholarship, but what they call a genealogy of method in Indology. It is not merely a straightforward account of who wrote what and what comprised the academic concerns of those who wrote about India's textual heritage. But it is a 'genealogy of the method' that was, as the authors claim, practised by several Indologists in that it seeks to unravel motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that underlie the application of this method.[12] The book primarily addresses the

[12] There is a large body of historical and revisionist work on Indology which derives its inspiration from Edward Said's orientalist discourse. Although Indology primarily concerns India and its textual traditions, its main disciplinary goals and interests were scripted in Europe, within the context of its disciplinary matrix. This has made the 'orientalist' critique of Indology a fairly academically popular enterprise. *NS* is a latest entrant in the long list of entries. Also see S. Pollock, 'Deep Orientalism: Notes on Sanskrit and Power beyond the Raj' in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1993, pp. 76–133. Also see V. Adluri, 'Pride and Prejudice: Orientalism and German Indology', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 15, 3, 2011, pp. 253–292. For a skeptical evaluation of the claims of orientalism, see W. Halbfass, 'Research and Reflection: Responses to my Respondents I' in *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz (eds), Motilal Banarsidas, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 1–25. Halbfass' *India and Europe* was published during the heat of orientalism, and generated a lot of debate whether the Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons' can address the challenges presented by power-knowledge nexus pervasive in all cross cultural encounters. Several prominent Indologists and other scholars from across the board responded to Halbfass' proposals. See F. Dallmayr, 'Exit from Orientalism: Comments on Wilhelm Halbfass' in Franco and Preisendanz

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critical reception of one singular work: the *Mahābhārata* and its integral component, the *Bhagavadgīta*. The *Mahābhārata* was chosen because it, more than any other work, represents for the authors the quintessential motivations for 'doing' Indology. The authors promise to unravel these motivations by redescribing Indology as a search for the proto-history of Indo-Germanic people, as upholding the superiority of a martial ethic, and so on. In any case, the interest and the reception of the *Mahābhārata* in Europe stretches back to Wilhelm von Humboldt, the eighteenth- century Prussian statesman, who had an enduring interest in Sanskrit, and gave a series of lectures on the *Bhagavadgīta*. Even Hegel responded to these lectures in a written review.[13]

The Nay Science has five chapters, excluding the introduction and the conclusion. The first three chapters are devoted to the reception of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavadgīta* by successive generations of Indologists, from the nineteenth century onwards, namely Christian Lassen, Adolf Hotlzmans (both senior and junior), Richard Garbe, Hermann Jacobi, Hermann Oldenberg, Rudolf Otto, and Jakob Wilhelm Hauer. The first two chapters exclusively address the *Mahābhārata,* while the third, the longest of all, is about the *Bhagavadgīta*. The final two chapters are devoted to the method advanced by these Indologists—the historical-critical method, which the authors claim owes much to the reigning doctrine of the day: positivism.

The authors claim that the history they traced is 'the internal history of German Indology' in that it is a history that neither appears in the official accounts of Indology nor even in non-official accounts. More specifically, it is a history of the 'development of the self-understanding of German Indology as a textual science'.[14] More generally, it is a

(eds), *Beyond Orientialism*, pp. 49–70. Also see Hanneder, 'Pretence and Prejudice'; R. Grunendahl, 'History in the Making: On Sheldon Pollock's "NS Ideology" and Vishva Adluri's "Pride and Prejudice"', *International Journal of Hindu Studies,* vol. 16, 2, 2012, pp. 189–257. Also see *Sanskrit and Orientalism: Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany*, D. McGetchin (ed.), Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2004. This work is a wide ranging collection of articles addressing specific historical issues and topics.

[13] G. W. F. Hegel, *On The Episode of the Mahābhārata Known by the Name Bhagavad-Gīta by Wilhelm Von Humboldt*, Herbert Herring (ed.), ICPR, Shimla, 1995; B. Herling, *The German Gīta: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the Early German Reception of Indian Thought,* Routledge, New York, 2009. Herring's, to my knowledge, is the only comprehensive historical account of the philosophical reception of *Gīta* in the late eighteenth century Germany.

[14] Adluri and Bagchee, op. cit., p. 4.

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history of how this science of textual reading delegitimised an 'entire alternative tradition of hermeneutics', namely the commentarial exegetical tradition native to Indian intellectual cultures.[15] Therefore, one could say that this is a work of revisionist history. Since one of the grounds for undertaking a revisionist history is the recognition that there was a fairly entrenched and live commentarial tradition in India, even contemporaneously to the Indological work, one might expect that the authors would specify the constraints and redemptive features of the textual interpretation that such a tradition sanctions. But unfortunately none is offered. This considerably weakens their criticism of German Indology, even as it renders their jibes, sarcastic asides, and complaints against Indological work into merely an opinionated rant.

One of the principal objectives of these authors is to unravel the ideological complex that underlies the German Indologists' professed faith in textual science and the methodology such a science requires. The reason for their concentration on method is the rather obsessive way in which the German Indologists devoted to being practitioners of a fairly unique and systematic method which they viewed as scientific and objective. The authors suggest that the Indologists sought sanctity and true legitimacy for their practice by taking recourse in the methodological perspicuity they profess, without quite realizing that they tacitly drew their impetus for method from the all-pervasive spirit of positivism, the dominant world view in the nineteenth century. This method was primarily designed to tackle texts that are situated in distant history. The underlying point is that since there is nothing like a Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons' which link texts and the people who received them as part of the Indological work, they needed a way of reaching out to these texts. And what else would be better than a methodological rigour that allows anyone who masters the method a scientific and warranted access to the truth of these texts. The authors named this the 'critical-historical method'. Their central argument is that this method, although positivist, is also shared by the theological metaphysics of Lutheranism. The method then is an amalgam of two contradictory elements: positivism and religion. How plausible is this? If this is true, it clearly implies that the Indologists were naive and insufficiently aware of the character of their own methodological apparatus. The authors ask, rather pointedly: 'How

[15] Ibid., p. 5.

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did a method that was radically theological in its origins capture the imagination of Sanskritists around the globe and become identified with the ideal of objective, scientific investigation into Indian texts *tout court*?'[16]

Adluri and Bagchee claim that the interest the Germans had in the *Mahābhārata* can be explained by their belief that the core of the epic is an archaic proto-Aryan Indo-Germanic 'Ur'-epic which can unravel the truths about an ancient Aryan race. This they claim was one of the founding assumptions of German Indology. Thus, studying the *Mahābhārata* would enable one to reconstruct this proto-epic. The authors also tell us that for the Indologists the *Mahābhārata*, in its current form, is actually the result of several phases of improvisation credited to the evil genius of the Brahmans, supposedly the priestly class of ancient India. According to this argument, subsequent versions are significantly different from the original version. The original version is the story of warrior clans and a martial culture—the culture of the *kshātras*. The Brahmans came along much later and foisted on the original epic, with malicious and selfish motives, their ritual-based Vedism and its belief systems. And in due course, they changed the epic completely. As the authors tell it, this thesis ran in different forms from Lassen to Garbe, albeit with significant variations. It was believed that the Brahmans actually changed the original, which celebrated martial values, by infusing the epic with ritual and its associated ideology for their own selfish motives—to establish their clout and supremacy in the social order of their times. The Indologists claimed that the Brahmans' aim was to establish an asymmetric dependence between themselves and the *kshatriyas* who, by birth and right, wielded the sceptre. It is very well known that the Indologists were adversely disposed towards the Brahmans. It would be interesting to know why Indologists arrived at a hypothesis of this kind. But *The Nay Science* does not do much to explain this, aside from saying that these hypotheses spring from the already prejudicial and racist persuasions of the Indologists. Clearly, the Indologists argued for this hypothesis on the basis of a particular textual interpretation, however mistaken it might have been. For Indologists the *Mahābhārata* was a text that went through several phases of reconstruction and, in due course, it must have witnessed several moments of struggle and competition against the backdrop of massive sociological changes and

[16] Adluri and Bagchee, op. cit., p. 6.

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the reorganization of political constellations in ancient India. Unless, for them, the text warranted the feasibility of such an argument, they would not have developed their argument with so much ardour. The authors' criticism may be right that German Indology was selective in how it read Indian texts. And the best thing would be to show and evaluate how this evidence was selected. But no such evidence is offered.

The authors of *The Nay Science* are not in favour of this interpretation. One of their claims is that the German Indologists used their work on the *Mahābhārata* to form and reinforce a proto-Aryan Germanic identity of their own race. As a result, for these authors, Indology acquires noticeable overtones of racism. Now, on the face of it, the Indologists believed that their interests in the *Mahābhārata* were motivated purely by a forensic desire to unravel the truth behind the text. Subsequently the reader might question these efforts, reading against the grain, and attempt to unravel the motivations which are not overtly stated but assumed to be present nevertheless. There may be instances here and there when one can detect motivations of this sort, but in a scholarly exercise, the primary emphasis should be on whether what someone is saying applies truthfully to whatever is the target of such a claim. Whatever the motivations one might have, extrinsic to their scholarly activity, they are surely of interest and value. But their value must not be judged from the standpoint of what the scholarly activity entails per se. To explain that in the nineteenth century the Germans did Indology because they had very fanciful ideas about the archaic history of their racial origins may well be a valid motivational reason. But it is hardly sufficient to judge the quality and character of Indology as such. Indology will not become false or meretricious or fraudulent just because the people who practised it were motivated by fanciful ideas. Are all Indologists guilty of this offence? Unless we can prove that Indology has been systematically motivated by beliefs of this kind, and that such beliefs substantively interfered with the actual research when either assessing a piece of evidence or building an argument or defending a hypothesis, it would be difficult to make a strong case for the argument that Germans got it wrong. This is not, however, to vindicate the Indologists and their assumptions about Indian history or texts, nor is it to suggest either that there has been no foul play or malicious intent. For example, where the authors show what they understand to be the infiltration of concepts from a Protestant outlook and its system of beliefs into textual interpretations of Indian works are essentially cases that tend

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more towards an attempt to gain semantic ascent rather than cases that tend towards complete misinterpretation or wilful wrongdoing.[17] To view something as an instance of total failure is to call into question the very need for the existence of an institution like Indology.

Many a time, Adluri and Bagchee object to the Indologists' translations. For example, *pashāṇḍa* is rendered as '*ketzer*' in German (that is, a heretic).[18] Here they maintain that the Indologists were erring on the side of making Protestantism speak for a concept whose meaning had its genesis in a conceptual framework that explains Vedism and its commitment to ritual in conduct. The authors are correct. However, it must also be admitted that while it could be a problem of either an unwillingness on the part these Indologists to transcend their homebred semantics or a desperate will to dominate and impose, it could also show their helplessness in the face of words and sentences the semantics of which is so recalcitrant and alien to their native conceptual scheme. This is not to suggest that there was no such will to dominate, but the grounds the authors provide as an evidence for this will to dominate, of mistranslation, and misinterpretation, do not really warrant the ascription of any wilful wrongdoing—and surely not the sort of wilful foul play that Adluri and Bagchee suspect to be at work in, say, Adolf Holtzmann's 'indiscriminate use of *ketzer*' which for them 'seems to have been designed to suggest a connection between Brahminism and Catholicism'.[19] Similarly, one can find numerous instances, as the authors tell us very informatively, when there has been little concerted effort and circumspection on the Indologists' part in attributing pantheism, devotionalism, or a multifold ontology to the doctrines expounded in the *Bhagavadgīta*. In fact, extant disquisitional sections in the *Śānti* and the *Anuśāsanika parvas* of the *Mahābhārata* seemed 'peevish

[17] I borrow this phrase from W. V. Quine which in my view captures very well the dynamics of making sense between two culturally disparate classes of interlocutors. Quine writes perspicuously: 'The strategy of semantic ascent is that it carries the discussion into a domain where both parties are better agreed on the objects (viz., words) and on the main terms concerning them. Words, or their inscriptions, unlike points, miles, classes, and the rest, are tangible objects of the size so popular in the marketplace, where men of unlike conceptual schemes communicate at their best. The strategy is one of ascending to a common part of two fundamentally disparate conceptual schemes, the better to discuss the disparate foundations. No wonder it helps in philosophy.' See Quine, W. V. O., *Word and Object,* Cambridge, MIT Press, 1960, pp 272.

[18] Adluri and Bagchee, op. cit., p. 109.

[19] Ibid., p. 110.

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and boring' to Holtzmann. Clearly, neither he nor the others who followed in his footsteps, had the necessary background to appreciate either the anthropological value or the philosophical merit of these sections. However, this did not prevent them from making bold and categorical evaluations.

Surprisingly, the authors themselves hardly show any sensitivity to the complexity of translational semantics in that they freely, and uncircumspectly, buy into an ontology without quite verifying whether the text per se warrants the application of such ontology. For example, the authors charge Richard Garbe of being plainly unmindful of various 'gradations of being' in the *Gīta*, namely that Krishna is Brahman (they translate as Being) and also Yogesvara (Lord), even as he exists 'in universal, fourfold, and mortal forms'.[20] Apart from these, the text also contains many other words corresponding to what the authors call various 'ontological levels': 'Supreme person, Nature, the Unmanifest, the Indestructible and so on'. Now, what is the basis to grant each one of these terms a distinct source of ontology? How can we be sure that the text actually commits to a scheme which admits clear ontological distinctions which in turn correspond to different 'gradations of being'? Besides, the authors freely resort to terms like 'empirical' and 'transcendental' and 'ideal' as though they are unequivocal equivalents of corresponding Sanskrit terms.

The authors can also be faulted for the cavalier manner with which they treat scholarly arguments. Let us, for the sake of argument, admit that the Germans had very outlandish views on Indian epics. The opinions themselves may seem outlandish, indefensible, and counterintuitive, but just by virtue of believing that they are such does not mean that they become untenable. Clearly, the Indologists relied on their interpretations of the evidence that was available to them. Unless one actually traces the semantic connections between the beliefs of Indologists and whatever was the evidence for holding such beliefs, and thereby prove that a particular interpretation is either right or wrong, the criticism will not hold. The authors wax very eloquently about what they think is wrong with German Indology, but they hardly even bother to say *why* they think the Germans were wrong. By making an oblique critique that the method itself is positivistic, and is theological, hardly strengthens one's argument. I am not suggesting that German Indology is a problem-free enterprise. Even if one has to

[20] Ibid., p. 214, note 244.

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point out that something is not up to the mark in German Indology, it must be done demonstratively, and such a case should be made against the backdrop of a more entrenched and coherent framework of semantics and interpretation.

It is true that German Indologists read a whole battery of ideas, both sound and unsound, into the *Mahābhārata*. Some appear genuinely counterintuitive and amusing, whether or not they are plausible. Consider the following hypotheses: that the Brahmans made a case for their superiority and precedence in the Indian social order and therefore became complicit with the *kshatriyas*; that the epic was composed at several points in time; that there was something like an original epic, in that one can actually identify in the existing version of the *Mahābhārata* the portions of the original epic which belonged to the archaic Indo-Germanic people; that Buddhism had a certain role to play in the construction of the epic; that the *Mahābhārata* in its current form is actually the reversal of an original epic in which Pāndavas were the villains and the Kauravas the wronged; and that subsequently the Brahmans changed this order and made Krishna a hero and infused Brahmanical ideas into his teachings and discourses; that the Brahmans were the cause of the absence of historical consciousness or the distortion of historical sense in India; that Buddhism was a sane, rational, and enlightened religion as opposed to the ritual-obsessed, sacrificial, and violent cults of Vedic belief systems in that they viewed the former as being persecuted by the latter; that there are clearly affinities between Protestantism and Buddhism in that the Brahmans' persecution of Buddhists was understood in terms of Catholic persecution of Protestants; and so on. There are many other ideas that the Indologists read into the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavadgīta*.

The Nay Science provides a lucid account of these in great detail under appropriate sub-headings. In fact, many of these ideas may not even be plausible; they may all be wrong. But they are not wrong just because somebody believes them to be wrong; or because they were formed under a cloud of unscholarly or prejudicial motivations. They are wrong because they do not meet the scholarly standards of what is a warranted and truthful interpretation of a work. Speculative overreaches may be considered charitably even when they do not concur with the hard-headed empiricism of a philologist. But one should deal with them, not circumvent them by taking refuge in talking about methods. It is also true that subsequent researchers, to date, depend on some of the hypotheses and theories of these Indologists. In

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other words, academic research is of such a nature that it is rectified by and by, as it happens, across time. That is the way in which research progresses in any discipline. Of course, durability is not proof of truth all the time. But surely it is proof that certain claims are tenable. It must be conceded that many scholars have relied on some of these assumptions to reconstruct their way into the world the *Mahābhārata* depicted. The authors of *The Nay Science* do not quite spare even those contemporary researchers, like Kevin McGrath and James Fitzgerald, who, according to them, perpetuate some of the ideas which had their provenance in German Indological scholarship.[21] Fitzgerald began to complete the translation project of the *Mahābhārata* which was left only partially done by Van Buitenen in the 1970s due to his untimely death.

Although beset with problems, I am broadly in sympathy with the critique of the historical-critical method and what the book calls its 'pretension' to scientificity. In the last two chapters the authors have laboured intensively to make their case against the 'method' to prove that Indology is no science after all (hence the title *The Nay Science*). In particular, they have made special efforts to demonstrate the debt that the Indological method owed to the reigning positivism of its day. The chapters could have been much shorter: numerous repetitions, elaborate distractions, and poor arguments mar readability. On the positive side, whatever the specific claims the book makes about Indology and its multiple debts to religion, theology, and different forms of prejudice, toward the end it advocates that responsibly conducted hermeneutics can provide tenable models of a truly 'secular Indology'.[22] The authors must be given their due for the service they did to Indology by giving a pellucid account of a massive work which still remains mostly untranslated. The third chapter on the *Bhagavadgīta* is a valuable account in that it is one of the very few such treatments available.[23] The sections on Rudolf Otto are particularly worth mentioning in this regard, given the role he played in creating an interface of comparative thought between the East and the West.

The Nay Science does not recognize that scholarly opinion is a matter of arguments which progress in a dialectical fashion, engaging in a

[21] See K. McGrath, *Jaya: Performance in Epic Mahābhārata*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2011. Also see K. McGrath, *The Sanskrit Hero: Karna in Epic Mahābhārata*. Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 2004.

[22] Adluri and Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, p. 9.

[23] See E. J. Sharpe, *The Universal Gīta: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gīta*. Duckworth, London, 1985.

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dialogue with each other over time. Naturally, the extent of knowledge about any particular domain or object of investigation undergoes changes, which are either periodic or abrupt. And often these changes contribute to a cumulative history of knowledge or opinions. The book is rash, not to say amateurish, because it clearly does not recognize this process. If one wishes to write a work that is polemical, the best of strategies would not recommend a reduction of the opponent to a straw man and make him an easy target. More importantly, there is not even a scrap of evaluation of the evidence provided by the Indologists for their own explanations. The book is by-and-large an account of what has been said in a particular book at a particular time, from the vantage point of someone who believes in the total wrongness of Indology as a metaphysical article of faith. This makes the book an opinionated, and less critical, narrative of the different phases of Indological work in the last two centuries. It is an insufficiently straightforward account too because it is funnelled through a prejudicial lens that Indology per se is positivist and theological, and therefore wrong. But, why do the authors call their book a history of German Indology, after stating explicitly that this is not a book of history in the conventional sense but a genealogy? The authors owe us an answer. It is surely a history in the sense that it gives a fairly exhaustive account of how several scholars of Sanskrit have received and interpreted the *Mahābhārata* and the *Gīta*. No doubt *The Nay Science* is an intellectual history, albeit an unreliable one given its own adversarial stance and polemical vigour.

The book ends with a note on Gandhi's reception and appropriation of the *Gīta,* which for them is an instance of a well-grounded and a locally situated hermeneutic exercise. Indeed, this ending seems more like a coda than a conclusion. The implication here is far reaching: Gandhi, as a political activist and *satyagrahi*, has a better understanding of the *Gīta* than the numerous Indologists who have worked on it. The suggestion is that we should look to Gandhi to learn lessons about reading Indian texts. Is this a viable suggestion? Gandhi was no academic in the modern sense, nor did his reading of the *Gīta* conform with the academic nature of the traditional debates surrounding it. His use of the *Gīta* was an eclectic and creative appropriation of an intellectual resource for his own purposes of self-clarification and moral guidance. But this has nothing in it in terms of methodological or substantive advice concerning how one may approach ancient Indian thought and texts in a disciplined fashion. This suggestion seems to me to be innocent of the conformity and submission that disciples themselves require. There will be more on this in the final section.

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Whatever may have been the specific motivations for writing the book, *The Nay Science* raises a general problem of the utmost importance: how should one read Indian texts? And its answer is a straightforward one: practise hermeneutics. Admittedly, Sanskrit philology is like an 'exact science' for Indologists even now, in that training in a 'respective philology' is considered indispensable 'for studying ancient or foreign cultures', for it is believed that philology provides incontrovertible methodological aid against error and wilful deception.[24]

Cultures of Memory: an alternative to logos?

Far from these methodological quibbles, Rao takes the problem of reading texts to a novel level: he wants philology to be replaced by theory. In *Cultures of Memory* he advocates that any interest in India and its texts and cultures must recognize the 'radical heterogeneity' of its cultural formations in the first place.[25] By calling India's cultures 'heterogeneous', he means that they are 'radically different' from cultures that have their origins and heritage in the Judaic and the Christian cultures of the West. A constant motif that runs through the book is that Indian millennial cultural heritage and its intellectual bases cannot be measured with the same yardstick as one would use to measure Western traditions. Rao believes that such recognition would have drastic implications for research in the Humanities as it would enable undistorted access to the native cultures of India. He sets for himself what he calls two 'critical tasks'. He sets out first 'to reconfigure European representations of India' because the European paradigm of reading is essentially historicist in that it considers 'the genetic relation between the text and the context' as crucial for any practice of reading, Second, he charts the 'menocultural response' to 'textual' inheritances'. The assumption here is that the 'cultures of memory in South Asia', as opposed to the cultures of the West, 'moved on with forms of symbolization that are verbal and visual, acoustic and gestural, which are embodied and enacted'.[26]

According to Rao, all South Asian cultures—oral and literate, highbrow and lowbrow—share an overall pre-conceptual basis in that

[24] Hanneder, 'Pretence and Prejudice', pp 123–137.
[25] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 8.
[26] Ibid., pp. 8–9.

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they are cultures based on the operations of memory. There are two interconnected assumptions here. First, memory surreptitiously animates all expressions of culture across history, either through speech or gesture or action, from Vedic chants and hymns to popular folk art and performances. He therefore calls them 'mnemocultures'—cultures of memory. Since it is assumed that such cultures have a different source to Western cultures (namely memory), for Rao they lay out a system of vocabulary that differs radically from the Western systems of thought. Hence, they are sourced from a non-Western 'episteme'.[27] Secondly, although Rao does not explain what this difference entails for a theoretical understanding of mnemocultures, *Cultures of Memory,* as a whole, is conceived with a plan to show which features set mnemocultures apart—as oral cultures—from the cultures that are not similarly based. The contrast here is with cultures that construct memory along the lines of objective modes of recording and preserving, such as inscriptions, archives, and so forth, which Rao urges (without argument) are particularly the legatees of the Greek-Judeo-Christian tradition. If this is true, and it is undoubtedly an intriguing proposal, one would find in India embodied vehicles of memory, such as reciters and performers, who stand as Indian equivalents for archives, texts, and museums.

Cultures of Memory addresses an eclectic array of subjects and texts, all premodern, albeit mostly from the Classical period, both in Sanskrit and Telugu. While *The Nay Science* had its focus singularly invested in Indology, *Cultures of Memory's* choice of subjects is fairly diverse. It is written in eight chapters, excluding the introduction and the conclusion, distributed into three parts. Part I has two theoretical chapters on memory-based cultures. Part II has three chapters, devoted to the following subjects: the subject of the 'literary' in the Sanskritic traditions; the *Pañcatantra*; and the idea of art in ancient India. Part III again has three chapters: two on the *Mahābhārata* and one on Yogi Vemana, the Telugu Advaitic poet-sage. In spite of *Cultures*

[27] Although Rao does not define 'episteme', for the ancient Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle, '*epistêmê*' constitutes true and scientific knowledge. Knowledge is true and genuine because it is the knowledge of ultimately essential natures of objects obtained through logically necessary principles and truths. Thus, 'episteme' designates the foundational assumptions about the basis of knowledge. By claiming for ancient India a different 'episteme', Rao implies that the basic assumptions—the standards of truth and rationality of the Aristotelian conception of knowledge—do not apply to the knowing procedures of the ancient Indians. See J. Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 209–264.

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of Memory's eclectic choice of subjects, an integral programmatic vision runs throughout the book about how one could undertake what the author calls 'Indic' studies. If the book is viewed as an intellectual history of ancient India's intellectual traditions, it differs significantly from the established, that is, Indology-based, models of the history of ideas in its disavowal of historicist and 'genetic' methods of reading. The book is indeed a heady mix of numerous things: it displays evidence of great learning and is also an ambitious book. It does not hesitate to pose several big and bold questions, and deploys large arguments and global presuppositions. I intend therefore to give only a distilled version of Rao's central thesis—that the ancient Indian 'episteme' is fundamentally different from the Western one—and critically examine its principal proposals and arguments.

The book mainly suffers from two major flaws. First, it fundamentally misreads tradition by creating an artificial rivalry between memory and philosophy, reason, and knowledge by implicitly hypothesizing that there is no place for philosophy, in the Western sense, in ancient Indian traditions. This misreading, given its axial character for the entire argument, casts doubt on many of its subsidiary arguments. Second, in spite of its ambition to create an alternative theory, *Cultures of Memory* fails to provide any theory. This is partly because it does not operate with a theory of tradition, and partly because the book's general approach itself is unsystematic. Enumerating the ways in which ancient India was different from the West does not add up to a systematic theoretical framework.

Jacques Derrida is admittedly a potent influence on Rao, for his work can be seen as an attempt to show, using Derrida's critique of logocentrism, that the melopoeic cultures of South Asia (because they are assumed to be based on speech, song, and gesture)—right from the Vedic corpus, *smṛti* texts and *purāṇas* to *kāvyas*—are immune to the work of deconstruction. In Rao's words, Derrida's 'strategies' of deconstructing the inheritance 'disregard the *alithic* accents of memory'. Chapter 2 'Configurations of Memory' is entirely devoted to this thesis. Although *Cultures of Memory* distinguishes between two forms of memory: lithic and alithic (that is, one inscriptional and the other non-inscriptional), Derrida allows no such distinction. For him the very work of language is an indication of the operations of logos. Language by itself implies inscription and materiality, whether it takes supplementary lithic forms like writing or not. Inscription is a built-in

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feature of the human conduct.[28] I wonder if Derrida would accept the exclusion of 'alithic accents of memory' especially when speech is seen to serve a privileged role in Indic cultures. And mnemotexts are *alithic* in that they do not presuppose the availability of objectified material on which inscriptions can be recorded. Such texts contrast with the texts of those cultures, namely *lithic,* which have developed external and material instruments of inscription like stone, parchment, and clay tablets. As Rao understands it, when bodies become the vehicles of performance, say of a folk storyteller or a Vedic reciter, the bodies themselves become the subjects and objects of inscription. While this should be true for any performative tradition (at least in a qualified sense depending on the specific variable details of the tradition under discussion, whether Eastern or Western), for Rao this captures the peculiarity of mnemotexts, which are exclusive to South Asia. Unless there is an argument to demonstrate that such texts could not be found in the West, the hypothesis of mnemotexts will not be a convincing one. It is indeed well documented that the peculiarity of the oral textual tradition of ancient India is particularly due to 'its ability of performance in respect of' the reliability of the transmission of inheritance in that any slip or miss in the chain of handing over can cause the loss, or at least significant mutation, of an entire tradition.[29] This implies that memory has a preeminent role, of a technical sort, in organizing and preserving the elements of tradition. However, being *alithic* is no proof that certain cultures escape being inscriptional because the function of memory already presupposes suitable models of inscriptional technology in the form of mnemotechnical devices. Besides, mnemotextuality is too general a condition, even if true, and meant to be applied to vastly disparate entities that it is hardly precise, especially because these texts are so variegated and diverse in form, content, and their historical sources of origin. Even if one restricts oneself to scribal 'texts' in the conventional sense, what we term

[28] J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, p. 280. Derrida writes: '... language cannot be truly born except by the disruption and fracture of that happy plenitude, in the very instant that this instantaneity is wrested from its fictive immediacy and put back into movement. It serves as an absolute reference point for him who *wishes to measure and describe difference within discourse* ... All language will substitute itself for that living self-presence of the proper, which, as language, already supplanted things in themselves. Language *adds itself* to presence and supplants it, defers it within the indestructible desire to rejoin it.' [Emphasis mine.]

[29] See E. Frauwallner, *History of Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, New Delhi, 1973, Chapter 2, 'The Tradition', pp. 19–23.

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'manuscripts' (excluding oral texts, performances, and their like), are of far too many kinds: the speculative poetry of Vedas (written down in the post-Vedic periods), philosophically dense Jain and Buddhist texts, Vedantic and other philosophical texts, commentaries, *dharma śāstra* texts, fairly pervasively found poetry and panegyric in inscriptions, theoretical texts on poetry, syncretistic *bhakti* texts, and many more.[30] All that we can know about ancient India is not about the pre-inscriptional Vedic period and other oral cultures alone. The subsequent periods also had vastly diverse and pervasively available techniques—tantra—and instances of 'inscriptional' textuality, such as edicts, rock and metal inscriptions, public declarations, *praśastis*, the production of manuscripts, and so on.[31] I would think that the idea of non-inscriptional mnemocultures can be entertained as a plausible hypothesis only after demonstrating that what seem to be prima facie instances of graphic representations are indeed not instances of inscription.

What is Rao's argument for mnemocultures? For Rao, memory and philosophy are rivals. According to him Plato's *Ion,* which *Cultures of Memory* briefly discusses, dramatizes this rivalry quite early on in the history of Western philosophy, namely the incommensurability between the rhapsode's poetry and the philosopher's knowledge, in that the former is viewed as a product of divine inspiration (a product of biocultural endowment called memory) while the latter is seen as produced by a certain discursive capacity to produce propositional knowledge. Both these instances of behaviour are seen as two different and non-commensurate modes of individual performance. According to Rao, speech and gesture should not be seen merely as instances of conscious verbal behaviour. They are instead rooted in the deeper pre-conscious structures that hardwire and determine an individual's conduct. Thus, on the one hand there is linguistic behaviour which happens at the level of conscious rational control, and at another level there is behaviour that is remotely present

[30] There are still many organizations, both public and privately funded, which house several lakhs of manuscripts in India which sometimes are more than a thousand years old. This itself is indicative of the robust culture of literacy in premodern India. See S. Pollock, 'Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India' in *History of the Book and Literary Cultures*, S. Eliot, A. Nash and I. Willison (eds), British Library, London, 2006, pp. 77–94.

[31] See the chapter on inscriptions and inscriptional discourse in S. Pollock, *The Language of Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2006, pp. 115–161.

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in the pre-structures of an individual's cultural moorings encoded into his body—the physical bearer of the code. Rao christens these moorings variously as 'epigenetic' and 'biocultural'. Now, at the social level, individual behaviour would be understood in terms of a pre-reflective internalization of codes of behaviour. This would imply, pending further clarification, that premodern South Asians had little use for the resources of reason because the social order in which they lived already hardwired them in ways sanctioned by tradition or the cultural milieu. A close scrutiny of this argument would reveal its implications for another important issue, namely the problem of legitimation in premodern South Asia: the social order hangs together because individuals' behaviour is predetermined by their cultural order. I will return to this problem shortly when addressing the issue of the mnemotextual character of South Asian texts.

In this rivalry between memory and philosophy, Rao maintains that the latter happens to be the winner most of the time. Although this is only a presumption, it guides Rao's entire programme of memory-based cultures. Thus it seems to me that for Rao knowledge as a corpus of a logically related system of beliefs is something that came into being by pushing into the background, rather violently, a more primordial relationship with reality which is not mediated by conscious cognitive structures like beliefs. Memory then belongs in that direct contact, probably of a pre-cognitive relationship of immediacy with reality, and therefore it is considered superior to subsequent modes of explaining the process of knowing, namely philosophy. Given that philosophy and memory are rivals in this scheme of things, at least notionally the standpoint of philosophy can be made dispensable and memory can take over the vacant position left by it. Now, this view is directly connected to the larger claim that Rao makes about South Asian cultures: that they share a different 'episteme' in that they have not come along the two-way divide between 'philosophy' or rational knowledge, on the one hand, and art and its encoding in the body, on the other hand.[32] Therefore, they produce 'mnemotexts', the default condition of textuality in South Asia. So, this entails that the central feature of the Indian 'episteme' is that its organization does not admit the duality of philosophy and its foundational assumptions about knowledge, and its 'other', which happens to be memory in this case. I will miss a few steps to hasten to the conclusion: it is that

[32] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 67.

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the South Asian cultures are innocent of the violence of philosophy, and are therefore pre-lapsarian. In other words, its 'episteme' has no scope for 'philosophy' in the Western sense. This is indeed a radical view, but much of this argument is based on sweeping and unarguable ahistorical assumptions about the relationship between art/literature and philosophy.[33]

It follows for Rao that the 'classically agonistic relation that literature and philosophy has had in the Western heritage' is hard to come by in the Indian context.[34] Rao builds his case by examining what he construes as a non-agonistic relationship between *kāvya/śāstra,* proposed in a prominent ninth-century text of Alaṃkāra Śāstra, *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā,* authored by Rājaśekhara.[35] Rao discusses this text extensively in Chapter 4 'Learning in the Double Bind'. This is an argument worth serious consideration for at least two reasons. First, effectively, it entails that whatever the typology of literate compositions belonging to the premodern South Asia—as *ṛk*, *purāna*, *kāvya*, *prabandha*, *ākhyāna*, *sūtra*, *itihāsa*, and so on—they do not fall under a more primordial genre and textual distinction, namely the literature/philosophy divide. Alternatively, they are mnemotexts. *Cultures of Memory* is entirely designed as a treatment of texts which admittedly share this ambiguity of identification. And secondly, Rao claims that there is a direct textual sanction for this view in the *alaṃkārika* tradition.

If the first reason holds, then, a work of philosophy can be as literary as a literary work can be philosophical, or neither. This means that the literature/philosophy distinction would mean nothing to mnemotexts. This is quite different from saying that there can be philosophical and argumentative aspects to literary works, and vice versa, more deeply interpenetrating than ever. Thus, for example, if Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma Sūtras* is considered a mnemotext, then it would be neither philosophy nor literature—or may be both at once. It is difficult to imagine what sort of an entity that would be. What is at stake here is how do mnemotexts explain the nature of discursivity specific to each genre

[33] See C. Janaway, *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998. Janaway offers an analytically sharp account of the dichotomy between art and philosophy in ancient Greece. See also G. R. F. Ferrari, 'Plato on Poetry' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 1: Classical Criticism,* G. A. Kennedy (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 92–148.

[34] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 12.

[35] Rājaśekhara, *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā*, C. D. Dalal and R. A. Sastry (eds), Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1934.

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of texts, whether they are speculative, or normative, or narrative, especially because mnemotextuality is elevated to the highest level of generality regarding any South Asian text.

One can push the question further: in what way do explicitly commentarial genres like *kārikas*, *vyākhyānas*, *bhāshyas*, *vārtīkas,* and *ṭīkas* become mnemotexts? It is a central feature of the Sanskrit tradition that its texts were frequently divided into key texts, contrary to Rao's assumption that there was never a 'canon' of texts in the Sanskrit culture, followed by numerous commentaries of varying depth and appeal. The set of key texts does not form a canon, but there has always been a good consensus regarding the relative importance of a text within the discourse of a subject or *śāstra*. And a commentary, or any of its sub-genre, is typically a hermeneutic exercise premised on expanding the scope of the intelligibility and discursive treatment of any text or proposal or problem. In fact, the case of *Dharma sūtras* and *smṛti* texts presents newer problems because their discursivity often interpenetrates into the aspects of customary practice, power, and legitimation in social life (like guiding decisions pertaining to *adhikāra*, *vidhi*, *niṣedha*, *paddhati*, *ācāra*, *prāyaścitta*, and other such injunctive practices).[36] If such texts are considered mnemotexts, it must be because of a misinterpretation of the nature of these texts. The misinterpretation is that they ought to be construed *only* as an *ex post facto* expression of the modes of legitimation that already essentially characterize liturgy, ritual, and a custom-bound practice of social life in premodern South Asia. Indeed, it is a standard view that the *śāstra* and *sūtra* texts regarding *dharma* are textualized 'records of custom'.[37] But for texts to be construed as mnemotexts, the customary social practice, which includes behavioural norms, ritual sanctions and actions, rules of procedure, legal methods, punishment, and penances, must be something like inveterate and pre-theoretical practice, because texts only record and articulate what this practice is all about in terms of well-laid-out rules and injunctions. Thus, practice by itself is construed as inviolable and occupies a pre-discursive and

[36] For a recent and thoroughly scholarly treatment of the complex *Dharma śāstra* jurisprudential tradition, see D. R. Jr. Davis, *The Spirit of Hindu Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010. Also see R. Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1973. Lingat's is an earlier classic treatment of the entire *Dharma śāstra* tradition in a compact format.

[37] See R. W. Lariviere, 'Dharma śāstra, Custom, "Real Law" and "Apocryphal" Smrtis' in *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious History*, Patrick Olivelle (ed.), Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2009, p. 190.

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supposedly pre-rational space of ritualized behaviour, hence for Rao the accent on memory in South Asian cultures.

However, contrary to Rao's beliefs, the relation between texts and social practice was far more complicated. Custom was frequently interpreted and reinterpreted to suit the beliefs, constraints, and preferences of practitioners. There was nothing like any original *ur*-memory of custom which survived unchanged across time. Even the oldest traces of custom that survive in their earliest forms in diurnal practice are necessarily subjected to contemporary modes of intelligibility. Hence, *mīmāṃsā* developed as an important hermeneutic discipline, which employs *yukti* or reasoning, among other things, to interpret custom and its alignment with the unassailable authority of the Veda, the *śruti*. Thus, *smṛtis* may be records of what is customary, but their presence and importance in social life is not subservient to the inveterate and non-textual sanctions of customary practice. Besides, we cannot discount the role these texts would have played in contributing to the formation of socially entrenched ideologies, assumptions, and imaginaries and the resulting sociological complexities. In fact, I would think a foretaste of this complexity will show up if we examine the crucial role that *smṛti* texts have played as instruments of fostering legitimation by effectively drawing up the picture of a durable social order along with its myriad internal demarcations.[38]

The argument for the second reason in particular harks back to the age-old and well-worn antagonistic relationship between philosophy and literature, widely thematized by Derrida in his sustained critique of metaphysics.[39] What is this conflict between philosophy and literature? The vocation of philosophy, as defined by the Platonic tradition, is to methodically hunt for the essences of things. Therefore

[38] This point has been insightfully argued by S. Pollock, 'The Revelation of Tradition: śruti, smṛti, and the Sanskrit Discourse of Power' in *Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia,* Federico Squarcini (ed.), Anthem Press, London, pp. 41–61.

[39] Book X of Plato's *Republic* contains the first comprehensive and uncompromising attack on poetry in the Western tradition, setting up what seems to be an irreconcilable agonistic relation between philosophy and literature. See E. Belfiore, 'Plato's Greatest Accusation against Poetry', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy,* vol. 13, 1983, pp. 39–62. Also see A. Nehamas, 'Plato on Imitation and Poetry in *Republic X*' in his *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 251–278. For Derrida's extended treatment of the challenge that literature poses to metaphysics, see J. Derrida, *Acts of Literature,* Derek Attridge (ed.), Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 33–75; J. Derrida, *Dissemination,* The Athlone Press, London, 1981.

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it coincides with metaphysics. Plato in fact used a variety of closely related methods in investigating metaphysics, but each time he used a particular method he emphasized its unity in order to achieve the stated philosophical goal of finding essences. The essence of an object corresponds to whatever is irrevocably 'definite', trenchantly immune to destruction and variance, and hence timeless—the 'ground'—of that object.[40] Now, there is built into literature an element of congenital subversion in that it can show up as something that altogether lacks what can appear as the essence of an object. What does this mean? The classic definition of literature, courtesy of Book X of Plato's *Republic*, is that it is a product of imitation—mimesis. Broadly construed, mimesis has a range of cognate meanings: imitation, verisimilitude, resemblance, similarity, expression, presentation of what is within oneself, and representation. It then follows that the meaning, or the 'signified', of the mimetic literary work is anchored in what gets expressed, imitated, represented and so on through it—the intentional content. If you take the picture of a deer in the forest, whatever the picture may mean necessarily depends on what the deer in the forest, as a physical and dynamic living object, looks, moves, and feels like. The 'meaning'—the intentional content—of the picture, as an imitation of the deer in the forest, would be dependent on the external object. Then, the 'signifier', that is, the imitating object or the representation has no intrinsic value attached to it, for the imitating object gets such value only from what it imitates or represents. This is potentially subversive because the imitating phenomenon can relinquish its relationship with the imitated and represented, thereby becoming 'meaningless' and lacking any unity of meaning and essence, even as it maintains its formal, that is, structural, integrity by 'being' something which does not mean anything. Then, *to be* something does not amount *to mean* something. This was precisely what Mallarme tried to achieve in his graphic poem *Un Coup de Dés,* and succeeded, in the wake of modernity and the crisis in representation it produced, in prompting Derrida to say that 'there is no—or hardly any, ever so little—literature'.[41] This means that literature can subvert the very agenda of metaphysics by showing up as something—lacking

[40] See M. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, pp. 81–84.

[41] See S. Mallarme, 'Poeme: Un coup de des jamais n'abolira le hasard' in *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, pp. 139–160; For Derrida, see Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 72 and pp. 110–126.

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essence—that philosophy can never grasp. This is solely because of the fundamentally mimetic character of literature. And for this very precise reason Derrida thematises the literature/philosophy divide as endemically a problem that cuts deep into the heart of the Western metaphysics. However, Derrida's intention, as Rodolphe Gasche captures it, is not to annul this distinction, nor to view them as two incommensurate standpoints, much as Rao conceives the divide between philosophy and memory, 'but rather to understand them [philosophy and literature] within a system' of conceptual organization 'to which they are blind'.[42] This stands in contrast with Rao's reading that these are two incompatible standpoints, implying that each is governed by its own exclusive matrix of ontological postulates. But for Derrida there is only one large system, which is non-metaphysical and he calls it 'infrastructure' that organizes the conduct of its components and creates different modalities of blindness and vision on their behalf.[43] Gasche further says: 'Without the general text (the system) as that which inscribes philosophy and literature within that angle that marks them from a certain outside, no philosophy, no logocentrism, no authority of being would be possible.'[44] One could ask, how is this 'general text' organized for the emic *kāvya* and *śāstra* division? But there is a misreading here on Rao's part which I'll discuss below.

The assumption behind this question is that the *kāvya/śāstra* divide corresponds to the literature/philosophy dichotomy, as categories of equivalence, which even Rao implicitly assumes. However, *śāstra*, for Rao, unlike philosophy, is something that can fully grasp the essence of *kāvya* and determine (*nirdeśa*) how it can be put in place. But would *śāstra* be equivalent to philosophy? Let us grant, for argument's sake, that *kāvya* is equivalent to literature. What distinguishes philosophy is its unity of an enquiry- bound standpoint and it typically asks questions which are at least apparently without presuppositions. With any modern discipline, one will find a philosophical standpoint at its basis, asking questions like: what is the essence of something? In contrast, *śāstra* has no one specific method-bound disciplinary vantage point. It is instead a framework of organizing distinct classes of entities which in turn subsume numerous other entities, disciplinary or otherwise. *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā* initially divides *śāstra* into *pauruṣeya*

[42] R. Gasche, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 260.
[43] Ibid., pp. 142–154.
[44] Ibid., p. 261.

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(humanly produced) and *apauruṣeya* (non-agentially produced), and each subsequently into various *śrutis* (Vedas) and *smṛtis* (dharma-related texts), and further into *itihāsas* (epics), *ṣaḍaṇgās* (the six parts of the Veda),[45] and so on; and further into *vārtā* (the science of wellbeing), *ānvīkshikī* (critical reasoning/philosophy), and so on.[46] Thus, *śāstra* as such does not profess any explicit, strict, and uniform methodological standpoint in the way philosophy does. It is instead, on the face of it, like a classificatory system which confers distinct forms of identification on various modes of enquiry, forms of knowledge, normative guidelines, injunctions, prescriptions for social life, and texts. Hence, it would include, among other things, different enquiry-bound standpoints, which typically do not resemble philosophy in terms of their methodological commitments because their aim is often not to grasp the essences of things. These standpoints may implicitly assume philosophical stances with their own assumptions about essences. And, more generally, it denotes any body of knowledge and instruction concerning any field or activity that is legitimated by the tradition. In the same scheme of things, Rājaśekhara proposes that to the *ṣaḍaṇgās* (six parts) *alaṃkara śāstra* must be appended as the seventh *aṇga* (part). More importantly, he recommends that one must know *śāstra* even before one begins to understand or compose *kāvya* (*kāvyānam pūrvam śāstreṣvabhiniveśita*).[47] In this respect, *alaṁkāra śāstra* is a codified body of principles, ideas, and insights into the art of composing *kāvya*, and *kāvya* is no particular genre, but is the largest class, which includes in it all forms of imaginative creation.

Knowledge of any sort, practical or otherwise, is produced in response to the needs, questions, purposes, curiosities, opportunities, and biases that a particular order of the world brings into being for an individual or a community. But, in due course, the discursive character of this knowledge could set it off as a system of knowledge with some formal relation among its constituent elements—theory, in our parlance. The character of *śāstra* in the traditional scheme of things converts what is thus discursively produced into an autonomous code of rules and injunctions which are meant to guide practice. The *śāstra* is conferred with an unvarying precedence over practice because it is typically cast in the order of something that anticipates all situations of

[45] The six parts of the Vedas are grammar, lexicography, metrics, astronomy/astrology, and sacrificial methods (*karma*).
[46] Rājaśekhara, *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā*, pp. 2–4.
[47] Ibid., p. 2.

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change and contingency and accordingly frames regulae. This implies that *śāstra* is complete in all respects in that it is always available with both retrospective and prospective effects. Of course, the issue is more complex than that which I present here because *śāstra* is not a standalone concept. It is weighed down by, for the lack of a better word, an entire theology for making *śāstra* speak for the transcendental authority of the Vedas.[48]

Now, by construing the *śāstra*'s directive role with regard to *kāvya* as a conciliatory relation between the two, rather than an antagonistic one, Rao is implicitly hypothesizing that the Indian 'episteme' is not borne by the violence of metaphysics. But this lack of antagonism is only superficial because *śāstra* is not an equivalent for philosophy. At any rate, this is a very bold hypothesis, and if made at all, it should be made with reference to a careful examination of the metaphysical presuppositions that govern ontological postulates in texts, provided they warrant such a reading. However, Rao limits himself to making general statements, premised on just one consideration: that *kāvya* and *śāstra* are not antagonistic. Indeed, the *alaṁkārika* tradition is replete with assumptions and notions which have the semblance of unvarnished metaphysical concepts. For example, look at how *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā* defines literary study: *sāhitya vidyā: sabdārthayoryathāvatsahabhāvena vidyā sāhitya vidyā*.[49] 'Literary' is the product of the mutual agreeability of the word and its meaning. What is Rao's argument: that *artha*'s semantic horizons are not determined by Platonic assumptions about meaning and essence? If the thesis is that *artha* is non-metaphysical, it must be demonstrated with reference to the infrastructural postulates (as Derrida would have it) that designate it as a token that corresponds/refers to the complex and non-ideal (in the phenomenological sense), meaning making processes of an agent. And when an *alaṁkārika* like Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka recommends *bhāvana* as something that hermeneutically constitutes the aesthetic experience, due 'to a conceptual transformation of literary elements', what makes such an experience anti-metaphysical?[50] Outside the domain of poetics, what is 'relation' in grammar and semantics?

[48] For an extended treatment of this issue, see S. Pollock, 'The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 105, 3, pp. 499–519.

[49] Ibid., p. 5.

[50] See S. Pollock, 'What was Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka Saying? The Hermeneutical Transformation of Indian Aesthetics' in *Epic and Argument in Sanskrit Literary History*, S. Pollock (ed.), Manohar, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 143–184.

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What would be the ontological status of *pramāṇa* in epistemological contexts and moral discourse? And what about 'number', an essential ontic category of the Vaiśeṣika system? Hence, I would assume, before altogether ruling it out on a priori grounds, that the Indian schemes of thought, much like any other systematic endeavour of thinking, embody axiomatic structures of ontology.

It is well documented that the Vaiśeṣika exponents proposed theories of reality built out of very basic ontological categories. The 'categories' (*padartha*)—there are six primary ones in total—are the correlates of cognition, or alternatively the divisions of reality, namely *dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (quality), *karman* (motion), *viśeṣa* (particular), *sāmanya* (universal), and *samavāya* (inherence). These are further subdivided into distinct classes of substances, qualities and so forth, forming a rich speculative system. All this is clearly a testimony to the rich source of ontological thinking available in ancient India, which is, much like Greek thought, conceptual and representational.[51] In fact, one can find distinct points of resemblance between the basic tenets of the Vaiśeṣika and Plato's later metaphysics. Therefore, I would assume that there are aspects of the Indian tradition which are as amenable for the work of deconstruction as are the Western works, given what seems to be the evidence of, at least prima facie, the extant availability of notions which are through and through ontological.[52]

Now, in the wake of the assumption that there is a different 'episteme' to India, how would one characterize the 'general text' that underpins the *kāvya/śāstra* division? And since this text would not

[51] See E. Frauwallner, *History of Indian Philosophy, Volume 2*, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2008. Frauwallner expressed despair that what he calls the reserves of 'natural philosophy' (when referring to the development of Vaiśeṣika in the post-Vedic and post-Buddhist periods) 'degenerate into hollow scholastics'. The counterpoint for his comparison is that the Greek beginnings in the study of ontology have been better served in European intellectual history. He also blames it partly on the lack of systematic research into the subsequent developments of ontological thinking in Indian traditions. There is no doubt greater interest in Vaiśeṣika and Nyaya, especially due to B. K. Matilal and his disciples. For Frauwallner the ancient Vaiśeṣika epitomized the Indian counterpart of the ontological speculation in Greek philosophy in terms of its lack of emphasis on soteriology and a formidable interest in 'pure striving for philosophical knowledge'. Also see J. L. Mehta, 'Heidegger and Vedanta: Reflections on a Questionable Theme' in *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, Graham Parks (ed.), University of Hawai'i Press, Manoa, 1990, pp. 15–45.

[52] See W. Halbfass, *On Being and What There is: Classical Vaiśeṣika and the History of Indian Ontology*, Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1992. This work is one of the few studies in Indian ontological traditions which offers plenty of evidence against Rao's claim that Indian traditions escape metaphysics.

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admit either philosophy or literature as its structural components, what would take their place? *Kāvya* and *śāstra?* But since *śāstra* does not entail any methodological unity in the way that philosophy does, the so-called 'general text' will have little use for it. Or, does this text altogether dispense with the architectonic of a system that configures its structural makeup in terms of philosophy and its delimitations? Would this 'general text' be less general than a higher text which is even more general? Or will it stop being general at its mere generality admitting no further abstraction? Or where does the abstraction stop? *Cultures of Memory* does not foresee the possibility of these questions, which acquire salience, especially in view of Rao's argument that South Asian cultures constitute altogether a different base text, forming a system of its own kind, which contains the basis of all its conceptual possibilities.

An important feature of cultural life in premodern India, which *Cultures of Memory* neither recognizes nor acknowledges, is that a good extent of its productions of the Sanskrit-based culture flourished in a totally pre-secularized environment. In other words, the so-called mnemotexts, even including those of the so-called materialist, divinity-spurning schools of thought like *ājivikas*, were produced in a climate dominated by a certain pre-secular moral order. When I say Sanskrit-based culture it encompasses a range of things cutting across languages, historical periods, sects, cults, religions, and traditions, from strands (*āstīka*) that accept the authority of the Vedas to those (*nāstīka*) that do not, along with various other 'materialist' and semi-materialist schools, to bhakti-based 'folkish' devotionals, the antinomian Tantric schools, the various forms of asceticism, and so forth. Genetically and historically a good extent of diversity characterizes these large number of schools and systems. On a side note, *Cultures of Memory* could have tested its mnemocultural framework against texts produced by this extremely rich diversity of traditions across history and their intellectual bases and biases, especially in view of its ambition to chart a different course of intellectual history.[53] This

[53] In view of the disciplinary colonization of different research domains, such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and so on, most studies address specific research areas and questions. Therefore, there are fewer detailed studies, aside from general introductory works, that cover the historically and geographically diverse intellectual currents of the sub-continent under a single framework. Still, Surendranath Dasgupta's multi-volume history of Indian philosophy is one of the best and comprehensive sources of information that covers all schools of thought. For a short and synthetic treatment of various philosophical perspectives, which is sensitive to the

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I consider to be an important drawback of the book because the so-called mnemocultures, whatever may be their respective differences from the literate and oral cultures of other traditions, were an entrenched part of South Asian history. Thus they must be understood in the context of the historical peculiarities of South Asia. Indeed, *Cultures of Memory* is acutely aware of several such peculiarities, namely the absence of historical texts in South Asia, the presuppositions about translation between Sanskrit and other vernaculars, the extraordinary intensity with which texts were produced, and so on. In contrast, if the author believes that the mnemocultures are borne by very different theoretical presuppositions about history and historical consciousness, he should foreground and defend these presuppositions.[54]

One general feature that is commonly shared by this diversity of cultures and traditions, what Pierre Bourdieu would call the habitus of a pre-secular moral order, has clear implications for the problem of philosophy/literature in South Asia. The habitus 'is an infinite capacity', of individuals as social agents, 'for generating products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning'.[55] Consider

conceptual diversity of different schools of thought and practice across the spectrum, see J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000. Also see *The Hindu World,* Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (eds), Routledge, London, 2004. This is an impressive work organized in the format of various articles covering most of the historical and thematic aspects of the Hindu order, broadly construed. Finally, Pollock, *The Language of Gods*, is a work which takes Sanskrit as its framework to provide an intellectual history of the rise and fall of a whole range of intellectual cultures connected with Sanskrit. One salient feature of this approach is that it is able to transcend the usual disciplinary divisions and gives a large perspective on South Asian history of the last two millennia.

[54] See A. Nandy, 'History's Forgotten Doubles', *History and Theory,* vol. 34, May 1995, pp. 44–66. Also see S. Pollock, 'Pretextures of Time', *History and Theory,* vol. 46, October 2007, pp. 366–383.

[55] See P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity Press, Boston, 1992, pp. 54–55. Bourdieu writes further: 'This system of dispositions—a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices, an internal law through which the law of external necessities, irreducible to immediate constraints, is constantly exerted—is the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism sees in social practices without being able to account for it.' For a philosophically well-informed account of habitus, see J. Bouveresse, 'Rules, Dispositions and the *Habitus*' in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader,* R. Shusterman (ed.), Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1999, pp. 45–63.

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kinship, matrimony, ritual action, norms of etiquette, forms of worship, and liturgy, or any such ethnological aspect of cultures. Agents exhibit a tendency to behave with a certain measure of regularity in view of the unchosen choices that they make, say of greeting, acknowledging the presence of another person, obeying a norm, honouring a liturgical practice, or participating in a ritual. Here the regularity of behaviour is not based on any nomological certitude because habit is not 'deduced from a legislative principle'; thus an unformalizable 'vagueness and indeterminacy' become coterminous with agents' behaviour. This is the work of the habitus.[56] Such modes of behaviour presuppose that agents operate with a systematic web of dispositions in order to spontaneously act in ways which seems natural and *sui generis* to them. Indeed, the presence of dispositions implies the necessary co-occurrence of congruent beliefs, modes of thinking, categories of perception, and assessment. The habitus, then, broadly construed, is a 'system of dispositions' that social agents acquire in terms of how they act, think, imagine, perceive, assess, behave, believe, judge, censure, praise, understand etc., in the contexts of everyday practice of life. No individual invents his own devices and categories of habit and thought. In this respect, the habitus 'is embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history', amounting to an 'active presence of the whole past' in an individual's life.[57] Thus agents, under the impact of a certain habitus, act spontaneously, as though 'without consciousness and will', for subjective intentions simply do not matter for the habitus to function; their actions stand, as intermediaries, between the order of an ahistorical and ingenerate 'mechanical necessity' of things and that of a complete deliberative and rational freedom.[58] Hence, the habitus constitutes a subcutaneous capacity of individuals which enables them to fashion themselves as social and historical agents with appropriate modes of behaviour.

But the work of the habitus is not simply to behaviouristically pre-ordain the organizing principles of individual action, which can thus become inveterate, 'natural', and mechanized for agents. The habitus presupposes that a certain mental furniture is already in place in terms of dispositions, beliefs, attitudes, tacit endorsements, perceptions, and judgements. It is therefore that it acquires the

[56] See P. Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 73.
[57] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 56.
[58] Ibid.

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expansive character of determining the shape and character of individuals' mentalities at any given moment. In premodern South Asia, the pre-secular moral order that was formed out of kindred sotereological schemes—of the *carturvidha puruṣhārthās*, karma theory, the cyclical assumptions about time, the *āśrama* system, the theory of world ages (*yugas*), the theory of *mukti* and so forth—supply the required mental furniture for the agents. These indeed can open up a certain dimension of the pre-secular habitus, which is evident in the manner in which the intellectual and literary productions across millennia were marked by the accents of this pre-secular moral order. There are two things here. First, unless we assume that a durable 'system of dispositions', along with corresponding vocabulary—moral and practical—was schematically 'deposited' in how individuals think, perceive, and act in specific habits and ways, the habitus created by this moral order would not become tangibly discernible. Second, these depositions 'tend to guarantee the "correctness" of practices' and protocols, literary or otherwise, 'and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms'.[59]

What distinguishes the order of things which we call secular from that which we call non-secular is the substance of morality each order admits. This has been the burden of Charles Taylor's argument in his monumental *A Secular Age*.[60] A strong flavour of teleological vocabulary extensively pervades the atmosphere of a typical non-secular *Weltanschauung*. And this vocabulary percolates into its highly abstract soteriological and eschatological frameworks. In the case of South Asia, the teleology is evident in the general deliverance/liberation-based (*mukti*/nirvaṇa/*mokṣa*) soteriological schema that is common to both the *āstīka* and *nāstīka* systems, for this schema gives the agents a set of fixed value places even as it places inviolable teleological constraints on their thought and action. Such value schemes typically acquire the character of being worthy of an individual's habitus because they contain what can become answers to certain fundamental questions that the agents face regarding their own relationship with the various elements of their sociocosmic reality like nature, society, community, fate, divinity, transcendence, ultimate values, and afterlife. In other words, the moral order makes available the raw materials needed for the answers that a particular system might give. And whatever may be the specific scheme of answers that a particular soteriological system

[59] Ibid., p. 54.
[60] See C. Taylor, *A Secular Age,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

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accepts, they enable the agents to perceive, think, and act in specific ways which seem very spontaneous to them.[61]

Consider the scheme of the *puruṣārthās* (the four goals of man): *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*.[62] Typically this scheme of values is considered to be binding for all the *āstīka* systems.[63] A particular school may or may not accept all these values. It may only accept some or would find other candidates in the place of those it does not accept; or may interpret the meaning of the values in a particular way. As it happens, the moral order, which reigns beyond all the scholastic divisions, makes available the necessary teleological vocabulary. And each system, whether *āstīka* or *nāstīka*, deploys values from this reserve according to whatever suits its model of conceptual economy and soteriological emphases. Such an order bequeaths upon an individual a well-organized vocabulary and dispositions—the habitus that enables him in integrating different segments of his conduct. Now, to produce the subject of the 'literary' in such an order of things would presuppose that the individual's habitus tacitly accepts the constraints that flow from the pre-secular dispensation and its scheme of perceptions and evaluations, say, of the *puruṣārthas*. What people think and value, and how they think, are potently marked by the vocabulary of teleology. Then, the mimetologism cannot get as radical as to forego its claim on the 'signified' or meaning altogether because at least a part of the content of the signified would be determined by teleology and what it requires of the agents. The meaning of a work in such a scheme of

[61] For an Indolgists' outsider's view on the role of soteriology in Indian traditions, see Halbfass, *India and Europe,* pp. 263–286.

[62] *Caturvidha puruṣārthās* are the four goals of life designated by the Hindu tradition: dharma, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*. Dharma, narrowly construed, refers to a sociocosmic understanding of order; *kāma* and *artha* are concerned with what individuals want to pursue in this world as objects of desire and satisfaction; *mokṣa* is liberation from the world. While the former three are of this world, the latter is not of this world. Together the four goals are absolute benchmarks, set in terms of highest abstraction, for what is humanly achievable for all agents. Therefore, together they encompass a teleological scheme of ultimate values. See M. Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 41–68. Also see C. Malamoud, 'On the Rhetoric and Semantics of Puruṣārthā' in *Way of Life: King, Householder, Renouncer, Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont,* T. N. Madan (ed.), Vikas, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 33–54.

[63] The seventeenth-century Advaitin, Madhusudana Sarasvati, in a short work called *Prasthānabheda*, conceived as a commentary on the seventh stanza of Śivamahimna stotra, writes: 'vedabāhyatvatteshām mlechhādiprasthānavat paramparyāpi purushārthanupayogitvād upekshaniyatvaeva (The systems of thought which are outside the Vedic fold, like those of the *mlecchas*, have no use for the *puruṣārtha* scheme of values)'. See Madhusudana Sarasvati, *Prasthānabheda*, Sri Vani Vilas Press, Srirangam, 1912, p. 2.

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things cannot be so 'unpredictably novel' as to altogether lack essence, as Mallarme's poem does. The reigning moral order of his times did not impose constraints on Mallarme's thoughts and intentions of the sort that a pre-secular order typically would have imposed on the mind of its inhabitants. In other words, the intentions of the denizens of the pre-secular world cannot be pried apart from the conditions set by the respective teleological constraints.

For instance, in the pre-secular scheme of things, someone may be a *śṛauti*, a Vedic ritualist, belonging to a specific branch of Vedic scholarship and practice, and simultaneously a poet too who specializes in writing intricate erotic poetry.[64] Both the Telugu poets of the *Āndhra Mahābhāratamu,* Nannaya and Tikkana, of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries AD, were *somayājis* even as they were poets. *Cultures of Memory* has an entire chapter on the Telugu *Mahābhārata* as a test case to show that translation is essentially a Judaic category, and that it is alien to South Asia. We shall discuss this shortly. These poets conducted extensive ritual activity even as they wrote exquisite narrative epic poetry. And in the self-referential moments of their poetry, they do refer with pride to their being *hotas*, that is, being the principal conductors of the Vedic ritual. Thus, in their evaluative system, their karma and *śāstra* learning on the one hand, and their poetic efforts, on the other hand, fit into a coherent schema. In their self-images they do not see any split between being a *śṛauti* and *karmiṣthi* and being a poet simultaneously—one being the other at the same time is a well-motivated phenomenon in their eyes. This would be possible only in a world in which a certain pre-given value hierarchy,

[64] A Vedic ritualist typically is someone who is an exponent of Vedic ritual-based texts and a performer of ritual activities associated with those texts. The most crucial aspect of his vocation is that he is bound by a peculiar metaphysics of obligation in ritual contexts which is incongruent with what is recognized as general registers of diurnal behaviour in day-to day-conduct. A ritualist is bound by an obligation (*vidhi*) to perform and obey without seeking any reason for why he does it. The paramount concern of ritual texts is to prescribe a sort of coherent order upon speech, actions, and the objects which are worked upon, while performing a ritual. The normative content of what one does simply resides in what one is prescribed to do. The meaning of ritual here is found in the perfect unison of speech and action brought about by the performer's well-aligned inner nature towards the incredibly numerous rules and meta-rules. Interestingly, each ritual cycle forms a system within itself, with a set grammar that will decide the behaviour of its constituent elements, which includes the performer himself. Therefore it is a closed system, and makes no exception for anything that is alien to it, thus making one instance of performance unexceptionally homomorphic to any other. See C. Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient Thought,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 1–7.

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and a shared teleological vocabulary—the normative infrastructure—informed, arranged, shaped, and ranked their thoughts and intentions in a certain scheme of action in relation to the assumptions about ultimate values and sanctions of the concerned soteriology, namely that of the *puruṣārthās*. What lends meaning and value to a person's action in that world is not individual volition and goal-directed pursuits alone, disconnected from the moral climate, but a total complex of capacities, beliefs, attitudes, constraints, and background assumptions—the habitus— about the place of his action in the sociocosmic-soteriological order of things. Even for the *śāstra,* the *alaṃkāra śāstra* here, and for the horizons of its vocabulary, so as to formulate its directives, prescriptions, recommendations, insights, summarily its 'theory', would be delimited by the possibilities offered by soteriology. Therefore, there cannot be an antagonism between *kāyva* and *śāstra*, and this is quite in line with, as discussed above, the general structure and character of *śāstra* in the traditional scheme of things. Indeed, Rao's argument misses out on this complex dimension of how deeply cultural products are marked by the influence of moral order in premodern South Asia.

On a related note, *alaṃkāra śāstra* is also prescriptive not just of aesthetic criteria but clearly also of moral stances that literature should espouse. However, in Chapter 4 'Learning in the Double Bind', for Rao what decisively sets the *alaṃkāra śāstra*'s notion of the 'literary' apart from the Western notion is that for the former the literary work should not be morally efficacious. On a side note, Rao repeatedly uses the term '*lākshaṇikās*' instead of '*alaṃkārikas*' for such usage is notably rare within the tradition.[65] This is very unusual for someone who assumes the authentic spokesmanship of tradition. Rao's point in this chapter is that although literature in Sanskrit cultures calls for an involvement with the world (*loka*) as an important prerequisite, it does not impose on itself the burden of having to improve the world, which for him is a feature of the Judeo-Christian, that is, Western, heritage. The implication here is that there is an explicit absence of any accent on the 'social' in the relevant moral sense in the literary discourse of the *kāyva*. It is arguable, on the evidence of distinctively extravagant and complex literary flourishes often found in many *kāyvas*, that there is a sanction in the tradition for de-natured and some kind of a supra-realistic poetic practice. However, it is hardly the case that *kāyva* and

[65] V. Raghavan. 'The History of Lakshana' in his *Studies on Some Concepts of the Alaṃkāra śāstra,* The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Chennai, 2009, pp. 1–52.

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the social sphere are conceived of as being mutually exclusive. For example, *dhvani,* or the justly famous theory of literary suggestion, is premised on a fairly advanced account of social pragmatics and its necessary dependence on sociality and its common sense. Besides, a concept like *aucitya* would have been unthinkable if the *alaṃkārikas*' constant reference was not to the prevalent proprieties of the social discourse and its moral sensibilities. The concept of *rasābhāsa* (a spoilt and malformed display of emotions) is deeply accented by moral interests. And, more importantly, *vyutpatti,* the moral formation of the poet, which for Sheldon Pollock is equivalent to *bildung,* directly contradicts Rao's thesis that *kāyva* simply does not aim to produce moral agents. Oddly enough, *Kāvya Mīmāṃsā* has an entire chapter on *vyutpatti*.[66]

The argument in the fifth chapter, 'Fables of Identity', that *Pañcatantra* hardly makes a case for an impersonal and categorical system of morals, is for Rao a symptom of the Christian heritage. His point is that the narrative in *Pañcatantra* is repeatedly punctuated by what he calls 'non-narrative' sections, primarily inserted to dispense advice in a moralizing tone, often spiced with sagacious and shrewd adages. The advice here is practical, geared toward aiding a person cope with an essentially unstable world which is perennially at the mercy of irrevocable contingencies.[67] However, it would not be possible to extract a calculus of sorts from these pieces of advice, given their emphasis on what Max Weber calls the 'ethics of responsibility' and the text's vocal advocacy of methods and strategies that are apparently 'immoral'. The text as such is not devoid of moral interests at all.[68] This is surely an interesting and important claim. Indeed, these moral interests lie in the priorities such conceptions of politics

[66] S. Pollock, 'The Social Aestheic and Sanskrit Literary Theory', *Journal of Indian Philosophy,* vol. 29, 2001, pp. 197–229. Also see, K. Krishnamoorthy, *Essays in Sanskrit Criticism,* Karnatak University, Dharwar, 1974. Although dated, this volume contains informative articles on several key issues in Sanskrit literary theory, such as *rasābhāsa*, *dosa*, *svabhavokti*, and *dhvani*, which have an important bearing on the subject of *kāvya*'s relationship with the moral discourse.

[67] *Pañcatantra* is one among the most studied works of ancient India. It has a complex narrative structure. There is one big story in which several stories are embedded. If the central plot is a big circle, there are several circles within it, and several within those smaller circles. Although the multiple plots and subplots appear to have been loosely organized, they are very well motivated toward each other. Contrary to the dominant scholarly perception, it is arguable that *Pañcatantra* has a tight structure.

[68] M. Weber, *Political Writings,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 366.

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envisage, namely the preservation of power and dispensation of justice—dharma. I would think it would be very fruitful to know what lends uniqueness to this kind of thinking about morals than to know what about it makes it unChristian. Besides, what Rao takes to be emblematically Western about morals is indeed a legacy as recent as that of the Enlightenment, most cogently expressed of course in Kant. To collapse a large narrative of interconnected systems of moral thought, in which the likes of actors as diverse as Aristotle, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Montaigne, Hume, and Mill feature, into one unitary conception of morals premised on inviolable Christian sensibilities is grossly historically inaccurate.

Rao's argument about ethical life in premodern South Asia, as mnemopraxial life—a mode of life that demands a total immersion in the very practice of living it—is also similarly borne by his caution about the Western heritage. Rao urges that the narrative profusion in a text like the *Mahābhārata* is 'singularly and collectively oriented to affect singular beings to enable them to act and decide in situations of crisis and decision'.[69] This is because for Rao the narrative progress of the epic always reflects an awareness of the fundamental existential issues that affect human life and conduct. The addressee of the *Mahābhārata* therefore is a *sādhaka* (a seeker) who in Rao's scheme of things is someone who leads a 'mnemopraxial' life. What enables a person to lead a mnemopraxial life? Rao says 'action-knowledge'.[70] This is a knowledge which is irreducible to the axiomatics of any theory that makes action possible 'in the specific instantiations of existence'. For example, it will consist in the sort of therapeutic knowledge that Yudhiṣṭira acquires in the *śāntiparva*, after the eighteen-day war, overcome with grief and despair, to cope with his own intense sorrow and remorse. But what sort of knowledge is 'action-knowledge', and what is its theoretical structure? Aside from suggesting that such knowledge is 'unconceptualizable and non-totalizable', *Cultures of Memory* makes no theoretical proposal. Indeed, the theory is crucial to make the idea of mnemopraxial life a sustainable proposal. It seems to me that a mnemopraxial life would not admit a split between the acting self and the knowing or judging self (Aristotle's prohairetic self), implying that a conflict-free unity of judgement and action characterizes such life. But this explanation, even if provided with all the needed psychological elements, must properly account for the role

[69] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 204.
[70] Ibid., p. 216.

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of deliberation in a person's life, for deliberation defines the character of moral agency. There is an unavoidable risk in emphasizing the self's immersive aspect for it might only give a historically partial account of ethical agents. Besides, immersion is too monolithic a category, being too close to a monastic ideal of life, ill-suited to describe and explain the practical ethics of *jñāna* and karma yogas of the *Gīta* and the *Mahābhārata* at one end and the antinomianism of tantra, of the moral subversions of mystics, sufis and yogis at the other end. If one recalls, this conception of immersive agency is in line, at least superficially, with Rao's initial argument that in mnemocultures behaviour is controlled from the pre-structures of the consciousness.

Most of the book's arguments are similarly motivated by this sense of an extreme exclusivity to ancient India. Rao argues in the eighth chapter that anything that one might see as a translation into any Indian vernacular from Sanskrit, say *The Mahābhārata*, is actually to err on the side of the Judeo-Christian tradition because translation for him is impossible outside the fold of the Abrahamic heritage. Rao's argument is that the Telugu *Mahabharata*, written by three people in the span of two centuries—Nannaya, Tikkana, and Errana—is not a work of translation but a case of 'responsive reception'. At the turn of the first millennium, when vernacular languages were acquiring some shape and political identity, their cultural efflorescence happened under the flaming shadow of Sanskrit poetic traditions. In a way, their development was owed to how pervasively Sanskrit tradition functioned as a reckonable force in the premodern social order. As Rao understands, any act of dealing with the inheritance (Sanskrit poetics here) with the motive of appropriating it for a newer order of creative endeavours, for vernaculars here, would constitute an instance of responsive reception. Although I recognize that 'responsive reception' better captures the complex dynamics involved in borrowing and appropriating sources from earlier textual and speculative traditions than translation does, it is not clear why translation per se should be Judaic, and therefore alien to ancient India. Translation and Buddhism, for instance, is a vast scholarly subject not just for the Sanskrit culture but also for a large spectrum of religious cultures of that period. Many Buddhist texts were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese and Tibetan, and vice versa.

One of Rao's central assumptions in this chapter and elsewhere in the book, which indeed is in keeping with the general tenor of this argument, is that the Sanskrit tradition has nurtured a 'cultivated indifference' to whatever is of foreign provenance by not letting

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anything outside the Sanskrit culture to be translated into Sanskrit. In effect, this implies that the Sanskrit tradition as a whole is a self-contained and a self-enclosed one evincing no interest in anything that is not of its kind. But what is this Sanskrit tradition? What are its historical and geo-spatial contours? Would *Cultures of Memory* count Buddhism, Jainism, and the materialist anti-Vedic schools as part the Sanskrit culture and for what reasons? What makes the *alaṁkāra śāstra* a part of the Sanskrit tradition? The complementary question would be: what is the 'outside' for this tradition? Rao clearly prefers to talk in the lingo of mnemocultures than to talk about Sanskrit traditions. Then, he should explain the choice of his subjects and arguments which are mainly focused in the Classical period, and ignore a vast portion of the premodern Indian cultures, from the poetry of early India to Buddhism, Jainism, and their difficult relationship with the Hindu world, and numerous other religiosities and their robust textual traditions and performative practices.

As it appears, Rao works with a simplified picture of how traditions either assimilate and incorporate or resist influences. How do mnemocultures change over time? And how does one theoretically understand the implications such changes would have for individuals? In fact, in the place of a theory or account of tradition what one comes across is an implicit understanding of tradition as an unchanging given, a mnemoculture, something that one first encounters at the very outset of an enquiry as the primary datum. For example, Rao explains Sanskrit's indifference to other traditions by a theory that non-Sanskrit languages are not equipped to capture the modes in which the Sanskrit tradition has developed the *parā-apara* matrix, which I circumspectly render as the empirical-transcendental matrix.[71] He picks this dichotomy straight from how it presents itself in the annals of tradition, much as he does with the *kāvya/śāstra* dichotomy, without inquiring into the picture of the metaphysics it presupposes, nor recognizing the soteriological context within which it acquires significance. It is a point to be noted that Rao gives no equivalents for the many Sanskrit terms he employs. And the caution springs from the belief that no English equivalents that do not retain the residues of the Judeo-Christian tradition can be given for these words. It is a question of acute anthropological significance that the complete semantic transference of certain concepts does not

[71] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 246.

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take place across languages. This needs to be explained. But Rao simply presupposes, without argument, that certain concepts do not lend themselves to any form of translation. *Parā* and *apara* are key aspects around which the pre-secular mind of certain soteriological persuasions conceptually organized its understanding of the empirical/material and spiritual/transcendental dichotomies. Rao's account of the problem does not evince anything that is anthropologically important about such a division. In fact, this lack of anthropological sensitivity characterizes several arguments presented in the book. The assumption is that these modern disciplinary standpoints do not quite capture how, for instance, the *parā-apara* matrix made sense to premodern Indians. This is true to a certain extent. But how does Rao manage to capture this 'making sense' of the premodern agents? This needs a convincing answer. There is here a naive assumption that it is possible to subvert modern disciplinary vantage points, such as those offered by anthropology and its like, to capture something that is ungraspable from such disciplinary standpoints. Rao asks: 'Are they [the Humanities in India] in a position to measure their inventive response to the epistemic question of being human beyond the calculus of (un-thought) disciplinary rationality (say, of folklore, history, ethnography)?'[72] This, in my view, is an instance of wishful thinking because it will in time land us in a morass of profound methodological confusions, of the subject/object divide, the fact/value dichotomy, and other deeper conceptual problems, in which there is a clear danger of reading our motivations into the object of research. Besides, as we shall discuss in the next section, disciplines, as producers and keepers of knowledge, are deeply marked by modernity and its global presuppositions about history, transcendence, and the future of humanity. This indeed constitutes the habitus of the disciplines. However, conforming to this habitus does not entail that we would be insensitive to the problems created by disciplinary structures and their vantage points. We no doubt become aware of the limits of disciplines, but I cannot think of a way of surpassing the disciplinary boundaries while still being able to produce knowledge meant for academic consumption. Even before anything else, the first task is to theoretically prefigure what a non-disciplinary mode of accessing the object of knowledge would be like and qualitatively measure its difference from disciplinary modes of

[72] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 27.

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producing knowledge. This will clarify many things as far as our motivations to produce knowledge are concerned. Simply undertaking the subversion of disciplines on the grounds that disciplines are inadequately configured to capture certain domains of reality will not do. Hence, if there were a tradition as posited by *Cultures of Memory*, this must be an object that is irredeemably ahistorical and anthropologically inaccessible.

I would think that the problem does not merely stop at the sort of untranslatability that Sanskrit presents, or its resistance to any tradition. The problems extends far deeper into the very heart of how certain traditions configure their relationships with their roots—here the Sanskrit tradition is conceived of as a whole, along with its root structure. For example, Madhusudana Sarasvati, the sixteenth-century Advaitin, who was aware of Akbar's ecumenical endeavours, resisted talking about Islamic theology, despite being aware of some telling similarities between his own ideas and those of the Islam of his times. However, he engaged widely in polemical dialogue with Dvaitins, vigorously invalidating Dvaita's numerous arguments, and wrote about other systems that were within the Vedic fold. The Vedic root lends to the Hindu order a particular conceptual organization in that the many things that are essential for a dialogue between two schools of thinking are already made available in the form of essential ground rules, basic philosophical commitments, commensurate vocabulary, soteriological priorities, and so on. However, none of these facilitating factors exist in the case of a dialogue between Islam and Advaita.[73] This explains, at least partially, why disparate traditions cannot easily enter into a dialogue.

The book concludes by making a forceful case for what the author calls 'critical humanities'—research and enquiry from a standpoint that prima facie admits the heterogeneity of cultural formations. As has become evident by now, *Cultures of Memory* is a heady mix of numerous things. However, meticulous argumentation and attention to detail are not its virtues. Sometimes there are far too many things presented at once, making it difficult for the reader to accommodate all that has been said or argued. As a result, the prose frequently gets opaque and obscure, and the argument becomes murky and distracted by a wealth of other irrelevancies. If viewed as an intellectual history

[73] C. Minkowski, 'Advaita Vedanta in Early Modern History' in *Religious Cultures in Early Modern India: New Perspectives*, Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook (eds), Routledge, London, 2011, pp. 105–143.

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of ancient India's textual traditions, it mostly provides tendentious descriptive accounts of various texts and the issues they generate. There is no dithering when it comes to making a point. Therefore the book displays great conviction in enviable proportions. On the whole, anyone who is of the persuasion that Indology can be done more imaginatively, more resourcefully, and more correctly would find this book useful.

Cultures of Memory's main thesis that the ancient Indian 'episteme' is fundamentally different from the Western one is principally motivated by two goals—what the author calls 'the critical tasks'. First, it aims to describe and explain a whole range of phenomena concerning ancient India's textual cultures. And it fully accepts the guiding principle that the description should be grounded in the vocabulary of the object domain—the mnemocultural tradition—it seeks to describe so that semantic and epistemological misfits, and unwarranted encroachments, are avoided. The endeavour is to be true to the character and spirit of the object domain, to extract the theories of signification that such a domain warrantedly possesses. Secondly, *Cultures of Memory* proposes an alternative to Indology, and deriving from the Western tradition, to work from the very standpoint of the specific cultural formation, and its conceptual organization, which constitutes an 'episteme' unto itself. Rao aims to capture this 'episteme' through his interventions, according to him well grounded in the vocabulary of the tradition. And each time he read a text, he echoes this exclusivist caution by showing what he thinks are the elements of *differentia specifica* in the Indian texts, of course mostly in relation to those distinctive elements which are present in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

I consider the first goal, of grounding descriptions and explanations in the vocabulary of the very object domain, as eminently pursuable whether or not one subscribes to Rao's thesis about the exclusivity of ancient India. This for me is a way of 'catching up' with the tradition. But such descriptions ought to be systematic, and should be according to an entrenched axiomatic framework with a well-defined basic vocabulary, that is, a framework with its own metaphysical presuppositions. This is an unavoidable prerequisite for descriptions to acquire the shape of a theory. For instance, to take Derrida's case, phenomenology foregrounds this philosophical framework, with basic axioms and definitions about being, knowledge, and action, which enabled him to unpack a range of issues and arguments, from Plato to Mallarme, even to unravel the limits of metaphysics as they were

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fixed by the Greek tradition. In fact, such a framework is indispensable for no coherent description would be possible, in the first place, in its absence. Indeed, most of the time what *Cultures of Memory* offers are only descriptions, whether they are about mnemopraxial life, or the absence of translation, or literature/philosophy divide, or mnemotexts, whose systematicity owes to what the author configures as the decisive division between Christian and non-Christian cultures than to a systematic set of metaphysical presuppositions about how cultural differences emerge, develop, and are sustained. I say this in view of *Cultures of Memory*'s avowed ambition to inaugurate a theory, an alternative to the Western 'episteme', which captures the image of the human from the other side of the West. Hence, oddly enough, most of what he characterizes as typical features and attributes of the Indian traditions, texts, and practices are in fact only an obverse of what he identifies as features of the Judaic and Christian 'heritage', the implication being there is nothing that can positively characterize the Indian traditions.

Rao repeatedly employs a good number of words and composite words, both in English and Sanskrit, avowedly theoretical, such as action-knowledge, heterogeneous, repetition, force-fields, actional beings, *parā, apara, vivarta*, freedom, difference, and many more. What are the ontological presuppositions of these terms? I would assume that the author is using them, as concepts, to capture particular modes of being of objects, processes, domains, events, dispositions, and attitudes that are not captured in normal English phraseology. And the assumption is that these words would be more faithful to the dynamics of the Sanskrit tradition than words that are unscrupulously used. For Rao the exceeding sense of caution is about erring on the side of choosing words whose semantics are Judaic and Christian. But, what is the proof that his version of tradition is truer than any other one? If the objective is to unearth, or even construct, a *system* of thought, that is, give a theory, then the progress of our enquiry must also be systematic. This will reveal the layout of coherence—the systematic character—among the concepts that one uses. Concepts necessarily admit systematic relationships forming a framework of interrelated ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions. This is an elementary fact about how concepts behave in thought. The task is to extract this architectonic of each text or argument that one tackles and extend the conversation using the same vocabulary as the framework sanctions. Thus the conversation retains its ground in the very vocabulary of the text. Regretfully, *Cultures of Memory* follows

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no discernible (what one would call) technical apparatus. In fact, even the copious descriptions that Rao offers happen within a large framework, but he is mischaracterizing this framework as something that is unique and peculiar to the intellectual cultures of ancient India, which shares nothing with any other framework, namely the Judaic and the Christian one. I find this idea of disparate frameworks incoherent, because there is no convincing argument about it yet, and there can be none in my view. I will give my argument shortly. Besides, one of the collateral effects of this approach is that there will be no standard against which the veracity of a description can be checked. Therefore, the book instead abounds in descriptions which are far less systematic and therefore eclectic, sometimes prejudicial, and idiosyncratic. This will result in a double failure. On the one hand, tradition remains untouched and untapped; on the other hand, there is no systematic theory.

Now to the second objective, which in my view is incoherent, and here I offer my reasons. The nineteenth-century Indologist Paul Deussen wrote in his *Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie,* quoted in J. L. Mehta,

> One purpose will surely be served when the Indian world view becomes known. It will make us aware that we, with our entire religious and philosophical thought, are caught in a colossal one-sidedness, and that there can be found yet a quite different *way of grasping things* than the one which Hegel has construed as the only possible and rational way. [Emphasis mine.][74]

One can hear in Rao's critical call of unearthing a different 'episteme' a clear and distinct echo of Deussen's sanguine, but naive, hope of knowing 'the Indian world view'. What grounds does one have to assume that there is an Indian world view? The ground is Deussen's unexamined Kantian presupposition, through Schopenhauer, that what can be known is relative to one's modes of cognition as though there is nothing that is fundamentally real that can be known on its own terms. Whatever one grasps depends on how one understands things from within the vantage point of his perspective and conceptual limits. This is the Kantian presupposition. Here the 'colossal one-sidedness' implies that what is knowable by anyone is relative to his conceptual scheme, and Western philosophy and religion together form a gross image of one such scheme, which invariably happens to be institutionally legitimate and dominant. This further implies that there is another side to what this scheme reveals, as yet undisclosed

[74] Mehta, 'Heidegger and Vedanta', p. 25.

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and unknown, which can offset the monopoly of a singular world view—*weltanschaung*. Now, why should anyone bother to know the undisclosed Indian *weltanschaung*, not in the least to prove that there are multiple world views? There is no easy answer to this question because, as J. L. Mehta tellingly puts it, Deussen's Indian world view 'remains an alternative image for mere aesthetic contemplation and it is an image which is in itself largely a projection of these (Kantian) presuppositions'.[75] The only way out of this impasse is the argument that the implicit foundations of logos are not relative to any conceptual scheme or Kantian presupposition. It is the singular logos that gets expressed in 'different ways of grasping things'. I'll close *Cultures of Memory*'s analysis with a defence of this argument.

So long as the motive is only to describe, of course in a language that is not the language of the object domain, a caution and an accompanying sensitivity about the plausibility of translation would suffice. But, when an object domain warrants such a caution and sensitivity, what does this imply? It implies that the ground rules which connect the elements of its vocabulary, and its ontological postulates are very different, that it therefore would need a different semantics. That is fair enough because semantics is about ontology, and translation is about getting the semantics right and tight, at least as much as possible.[76] There can be failures of translation, but a total failure is inconceivable.[77] Although we may fail to match two systems of vocabulary completely, some matching undoubtedly happens because of shared pre-theoretical backgrounds. But, would an arrangement of concepts and their relative priorities in a particular scheme of thought be so radically different that another system of concepts would not be able to render those concepts intelligible within its own scheme? There are two ways of approaching this question. It is one thing to say that Indologists are getting things wrong, as indeed Adluri and Bagchee argue, because they are unscrupulous about their usage of words. It is quite another thing to say that the words of a particular domain are of such a kind that they do not lend themselves to translation. Often the drift of the argument in *Cultures of Memory* suggests the latter approach. This is because the core argument is premised on the thesis that there

[75] Ibid., p. 25.

[76] E. Tugendhat, *Traditional and Analytic Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 21–34.

[77] See D. Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of Conceptual Scheme' in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 183–198.

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is something exclusive to India's cultural formations, construed as 'heterogeneous' to the Western scheme of things, which is essentially incomparable and incommensurable with another system or tradition. And the basis of attributing heterogeneity is the assumption that the semantics of the Indian tradition are untranslatable, and therefore transculturally incommunicable, in particular buttressed by another assumption that scores of Indologists have so far succeeded, while reading Indian texts, only in Christianizing them. If this thesis were to be true, it would entail, as Deussen's argument would, that there are fundamental differences, not derivative, in the very constitution of reality. Let me explain how.

Any culture, literate or oral, would have its own concepts to make sense of human experience. This means that the agents should possess a view of the self-image of their cognitive capacities and propositional behaviour. This is a universal feature across cultures. This self-mage, even as it is permeated by pre-theoretical intuitions, is adaptable to a range of systematic vocabularies. Logos metonymically represents one way of capturing this fundamental fact of being human and the derivative fact of possessing a corresponding self-image. This was how the Greek philosophical beginnings captured the sense of being human: that to be human is to be capable of making rational inferences, to be discursive, to be seeking the pure essences of things, to be capable of conceptual and representational thinking, and so on. Some other culture may capture it, motivated by a different set of theoretical goals and resources of thought, using some other set of interrelated words. What is logos in one scheme of things would have a different name in another scheme. But what is logos in one scheme will not be something else in another scheme. This is because logos corresponds to such fundamental facts—the self-image of being human and the associated capacities like believing, knowing, discerning, drawing inferences, answering a question, coining a metaphor, punning, what we summarily call intelligent behaviour—that any talk of an alternative to them would risk the talk of an alternative to the humanity. Logos, or whatever can take its place, is essentially something that has the character of a system in which various of its components work in a coordinated fashion under the stewardship of a controlling agency. I refer to W. V. Quine's telling metaphor of 'the web of beliefs' to make my point clearer.[78] The

[78] W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief,* McGraw Hill, New York, 1978.

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subject of this system is human conduct. Hence logos is something that subsumes the entirety of human behaviour under the governing matrix of its concepts and intuitions. Now, how do we make sense of postulating a non-Western 'episteme', as Rao unscrupulously does, that totally resists translation?[79] This implies that there is a non-Western governing matrix of concepts and intuitions—a system—which fundamentally differs from the Western one, and which does not partake in the structural character of the Western logos. This is an awful hypothesis because it can be defended only if one can lay out the structural cast of this non-Western system and view it in relation to the Western logos. If it truly were to be done, it will lead to another absurdity. If we are working with two or more entities, which may be cultures, or beliefs, or concepts, or anything that admits countability, they must be part of a systematic understanding. As it happens, systems here necessarily refer to individuals who make use of them in all their cognitive endeavours. We are not simply talking about systems in abstraction but about a certain dyadic relation between individuals and systems. Therefore, if the Western logos and its non-Western counterpart are defined and characterized with reference to each other, they must already be part of a larger system. Now, what is this larger system? How should one account for it? *Cultures of Memory* is simply blind to this systemic imperative. My own view is that the Sanskrit tradition has its own version of the logos, which is logos nevertheless, with a vocabulary that is coherent by its own standards to describe human conduct.[80] The task is to lay it out. Now if this argument is pushed to its logical end, then the defence of mnemocultures as it is put up in *Cultures of Memory* would be untenable, for the original claim is that mnemocultures embody something that is an alternative to logos.

How did the book, with so much of an impassioned interest in ancient India and an admirable plan, come to err so fundamentally? Methodologically *Cultures of Memory* can be seen as following an inductivist strategy. This means that for Rao the enquiry begins with the perception and assessment of differences in cultural formations. On the basis of what is perceived as different, inferences

[79] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 42.

[80] W. Halbfass, 'Man and Self in Traditional Indian Thought' in his *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought*, Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 265–289. Halbfass's approach can be seen as a cautious attempt in the direction of unearthing the logos of the Sanskrit tradition.

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are drawn as to what sort of foundational conditions would yield something that is so essentially heterogenous in relation to something else that is endogenous. All differences are relative to each other. Rao characterizes each difference of culture as an instance of 'heterogeneity', indeed a robust and strong term. Heterogeneity entails a deep ontological difference. A signifier is always heterogeneous to a corresponding signified. The difference, as it appears, is so radical that it is simply unbridgeable. A signifier is a material entity and, in contrast, the signified is non-material and ideal. Now, why did such a system come into being which weds two heterogeneous elements into a singular bind, the sign? That was the ultimate question of metaphysics for Derrida. So, heterogeneity is a relation of elements within one system. In other words, the system already presupposes a relation of a certain kind between its elements. Now, for anyone this relation is an entity that is unexceptionably given in perception and understanding, and only a philosopher would want to show us how this relation came into being, or is constructed, in its current form in our conceptual scheme. In the course of it he might tell us that the appearance that the 'given' assumes is an illusion, perceptual or conceptual, or is borne by an overdrive of a will to power. One might call this 'deconstruction' or an 'operation of archaeology'. Thus, for 'deconstruction' to happen, there must be a system which admits certain kinds of relations between its elements. Now, for two disparate cultural formations to entail a difference of the kind that we can call heterogenous, they both should be part of a system that organizes them in a relational scheme. An inductivist strategy is blind to this systemic requirement, as most of *Cultures of Memory* is. This blindness springs from its supposition that one can reconstruct one's way back to the basis of a phenomenon, a scheme of differences and identities, by noticing and theorizing its observable peculiarities. It will produce an empiricist fallacy that the observable peculiarity entails a corresponding system which shares in the peculiarity of the observables, or as Rao calls, an 'episteme'. What proof does one have to infer the possibility of such a thing or basis? None, whatsoever. All we can say is that the phenomenon that we observe or read or understand, as a text, would have a system unto itself. This system would necessarily partake in the logos because fundamentally it always presupposes human conduct, either as agents within a text or as agents who make sense of the text. And this system would differ or agree with another system for very precise reasons. And the moment we compare systems, both become ensconced in a

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higher system. Therefore, the system here is a fundamental need for anyone to make sense of anything.

Looking back over my response, if my reservations are sometimes strong it is only because the book is itself punchy and richly provocative. The true significance of a work of labour and passion, as this one surely is, does not lie in being right and correct about everything, as one judges, but in prompting more durable thinking to take place.

'Catching up with tradition': problems and prospects

Indology, like many other similar disciplines—Sinology and Assyriology—is a peculiar product of the disciplinary bind called the modern system of knowledge and research. It is peculiar because the motivations for studying a foreign culture are not very clear all the time in comparison with the ones that are at work when studying something close to hand in any domain of knowledge. The modern disciplinary system came into being as part-and-parcel of the steady evolution of a knowledge-valorizing culture that is thoroughly infused with a secularized ethic and a broadly naturalist outlook. Naturally, a positivist and forensic attitude is generally in tune with this disciplinary model.[81] As it happens, Indology was born out of this culture. And its salience lies in the fact that it tries to broker a relationship with a past that is long dead. The brokering assumes significance in view of the paradigm-clinching break engineered by modernity. It is a fact worth noting that Indology rarely positions itself alongside the lines of continuity that still proceed from this hoary past and reach into tradition as it is contemporarily experienced and understood. I would like to view both *The Nay Science* and *Cultures of Memory* as lateral expressions of an anxiety to 'catch up with tradition' in the wake of what Rao poignantly calls 'postcolonial

[81] For a philosophical assessment of the relation between the evolution of the Humanities in the last 200 years and its disciplinary character, see R. Geuss, 'Origins, Goals and Disciplines' in his *A World Without Why*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2014, pp. 1–21; C. Geertz, 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought' in his *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, Basic Books, New York, 2008, pp. 19–35. Geertz throws much-needed light on what it entails for disciplines to share each other's territory. For a systems theory perspective on disciplines, see D. Wellbery, 'The General Enters the Library: A Note on Disciplines and Complexity', *Critical Enquiry*, vol. 35, 4, 2009, pp. 982–994. Also see R. Post. 'Debating Disciplinarity', *Critical Enquiry*, vol. 35, 4, 2009, pp. 749–770; A. Abbot, *Chaos of Disciplines*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2001.

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destitution'.[82] *The Nay Science*, even as it attempts to show the problems of sidestepping the tradition, advocates that a responsibly executed non-scientistic and hermeneutic approach would constitute the best model for reading India's ancient texts. *Cultures of Memory*, in contrast, makes a serious attempt to 'catch up with tradition', albeit with no clear thesis on what tradition itself is. But both the books fail to appreciate that disciplinary structures pose problems far more serious and deep than a responsible hermeneutics can hope to resolve.

Now, when we look towards India's intellectual past, we should note that Indology represents a profound disciplinary break. We operate largely in the context of the Humanities research and pedagogy which is defined by certain well laid-out standards of academic impersonality and objectivity, and, more importantly, a secular ethic. We look to the past, purposefully, to know about its truth. And its truth must be formulable in our language, and must pass muster by the global standards set by the academy. These disciplinary constraints are so strong, powerful, and all-pervasive that they often force us to forget that, with respect to ancient India, we are dealing with certain intellectual formations of the past which had their own disciplinary matrices and axiological priorities.[83] For example, *mīmāṃsā* aims to establish the authority (transcendental) of the contents of the Veda, which are inaccessible to perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference/thought (*anumāna*), purely on rational and argumentative grounds. And the authority of the Veda is about laying down the sphere and influence of dharma in the conduct of an individual, particularly as it concerns the practice of ritual and its entwinement with the life of an individual. But the assumptions of rationality are not freestanding presuppositions here; they are intimately tied up with what *mīmāṃsā* counts as valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and valid modes of enquiry, in turn strictly conditioned by an a priori assumption that what the Veda expounds is beyond the empirical sanctions and reach of sense perception and understanding. Thus, a *mīmāṃsāka* can conduct his reasonings only if there were available in an entrenched framework which is committed to a stable set of metaphysical postulates about how things and human beings are really real, and on what grounds things are considered as

[82] Rao, *Cultures of Memory*, p. 6.

[83] See J. Bronkhorst, 'Traditional and Modern Sanskrit Scholarship: How Do They Relate to Each Other?' in *The Pandit: Traditional Scholarship in India*, A. Michaels (ed.), Manohar, New Delhi, 2001. Although Bronkhorst provides some important observations in this regard, he is far from recognizing the real problem.

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empirically knowable and unknowable, and how the logic of dharma applies to those things and agents. These postulates do not distinguish, much as we do, between facts and values. Such postulates, which entail axioms about what really exists and what is valuable, together constitute the contours of *mīmāṃsā*'s disciplinary framework. And hence, understandably, the distance between a traditional *mīmāṃsāka* and a modern researcher at one level is simply unbridgeable because of the irreconcilability of their respective disciplinary frameworks and goals.

The name of Wilhelm Halbfass should deservedly be mentioned here. What distinguishes his approach, which was largely influenced by Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, is that he endeavours to retrieve aspects and themes of tradition from a standpoint that does not relinquish, unlike *Cultures of Memory* avowedly does, the hermeneutic situation made available by the modern disciplinary system.[84] He redefines the goals of Indology in line with what is inevitable and indispensable about the inquirer's (typically Western) standpoint, namely the inquirer's 'prejudices' and 'fore-meanings' in approaching a text, particularly those which concern the disciplinary requirements of knowledge production. For him 'understanding ancient Indian thought' does not amount to 'becoming like ancient Indians'; it is instead a 'hermeneutical conversation' which occasions a 'fusion of horizons' between two necessarily disparate conceptual backgrounds.[85] The truth of a past text can only articulate itself in the 'effective consciousness' of a contemporary inquirer. There is no other alternative to this. But a text may 'present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings' if one were circumspectly aware of her 'biases' and 'prejudices'.[86] For instance, when Hermann Jacobi attempted to interpret the concept of *ānvīkshikī* as the 'proper equivalent' of 'philosophy' in the Western sense, as Halbfass suggests, his attempt reflects an ingrained Eurocentric prejudice. This is because *ānvīkshikī*, as adopted by Nyāya, although

[84] See F. Squarcini, '*India and Europe:* At the Dawn of a New Hermeneutic Era' in Preisendanz (ed.), *Expanding and Merging Horizons*, pp. 3–21.

[85] Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 164. Also see, J. L. Mehta, *India and the West: The Problem of Understanding*, Scholars Press, Chicago, 1985. Mehta provides a thorough and philosophically rigorous hermeneutic attempt at what a dialogue between India and the West entails, both in terms of problems and prospects. Mehta was a well-regarded Heidegger scholar as well as being deeply versed in the traditions of Vedanta.

[86] Ibid.

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cautiously translated as 'investigative' and 'reflective' science, is not without its presuppositions about soteriology and clear axiological accents which are very different from those of 'philosophy'. Therefore it is not a concept equivalent to 'philosophy' in the sense in which the latter is construed as 'emancipatory and anti-traditional'. However, Jacobi's approach reflects his own background as a scholar trained in the European humanist methods with critical investments in Indology. This is his 'prejudice', no doubt an important and essential 'heuristic device' in devising ways and means of approaching ancient India.[87] If extended, Rao's equivalence of *kāvya/śāstra* dichotomy with the poetry/philosophy antagonism also betrays a similar Eurocentric 'prejudice', albeit with its own productive dimensions. It foregrounds a framework which enables certain preliminary modes of comparison and understanding to happen in the first place. Hence, hermeneutics is an excellent recipe for any outside inquirer, especially because Gadamer, as a philosopher of the logos, offers his method against the backdrop of an entrenched understanding of the relation between language, reason, and logos in human discourse.

Additionally, one must note that in studying India's intellectual pasts, it is not an individual inquirer who is trying to know the form and content of a particular tradition, but it is a disciplinary formation, which is contemporarily alive and active, laying claim over another disciplinary matrix that is dead and gone. It is also like one structure, with its own enclosure of 'horizon', laying siege over another structure with a very different 'horizon'. All that there is between them is that they are structures, and nothing more. It is hardly like a dialogue between two consanguineous entities. And inquirers, however hard they may try, and however skilfully they may apply the hermeneutic method, cannot fully outgrow the epistemological modes—'prejudices'—that control and organize their work, particularly if it is a past whose metaphysical presuppositions are not easily obtainable because most of the intermediary steps that enable one's access to them are either erased, or smudged, or shredded. Even in cases where such resources are available, our largely secularized sensibility fails to grasp them entirely, or reconcile them to our 'horizons' and disciplinary goals, for the world on the other side, among other things, is a thoroughly pre-secular past. It is a past in which a disambiguation of motives as secular, worldly,

[87] Halbfass, *India and Europe*, p. 277.

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other-worldly, theological, sacred, and profane would be unfeasible, at least in the sense in which we consider such a disambiguation to be possible. The belief that such a disambiguation is indeed the natural order of things is our prejudice. However, there is no assurance that knowing our prejudices well will lead to the truth of this past. There are limitations in the extent to which hermeneutics can negotiate and settle the disciplinary and temporal divides, especially if the disciplines are separated by unbridgeable differences of culture and time.

As it happens, Gadamer's hermeneutic enquiry is predominantly one-sided in that its enquiry-bound standpoint does not relinquish its grounding in the standpoint of its contemporary 'horizon' (the prejudice)—indeed, the emphasis is on it. One moves in time, along with the enclosure provided by his cultural 'horizon'. As a result, the prejudices and biases are never fully overcome. They in fact serve as structural prerequisites for texts and ideas, belonging to culturally and temporally distant horizons, to open up. Consequently, no endpoint of enquiry, in which the 'metaphysical presuppositions' of the other framework are fully worked out, is even theoretically conceivable because there is no way one could ever overcome one's prejudices. Gadamer views this ever renewing open-endedness of enquiry as structurally inevitable; the inquiring standpoint gets constantly renewed and reaffirmed with its latest biases.[88] This is by no means to suggest that hermeneutics is less efficacious in understanding cross cultural issues. As argued above, it makes us acutely aware of the epistemological gaps that history opens up for an inquirer. However, the main limitation is that its framework does not admit a standpoint of enquiry that is not limited by the empirically specific subjective vantage point of an inquirer. As a result, the inquiring subject becomes locked in the present with limited authoritative means to know, judge, and imagine the substance of the past.

In fact, issues pertaining to traversing disciplinary divisions across time crop up in Western intellectual history too. Nobody reads Plato to defend the theory of Forms in his own terms, nor Aristotle to argue that there are four different types of causality—this in spite of our well-acknowledged understanding that our primary definition of philosophy, namely the rational and disinterested pursuit of 'pure'

[88] I owe my point on the one-sidedness of enquiry to A. MacIntyre, 'On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer' in *Gadamer's Century*, Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald and Jens Kertscher (eds), MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 157–172.

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and essential knowledge, is more or less still the same as that of the Greeks. What students of philosophy and intellectual history are trying to capture are the motivations that led Plato and Aristotle to do what they did. The idea is still to articulate those intentions and motivations from a forensic distance, as becomes feasible for us, and less to see how their world unfolded for them from a standpoint that articulates their modes of intelligibility. In this endeavour, our current 'prejudices' and 'fore-meanings' determine the scope of our investigation and understanding. One such prejudice is the assumption that intentions can be forensically extracted from a disengaged standpoint for all explanatory purposes. Gadamer's own work on ancient Greeks, on Plato in particular, is a testimony to how historical distances are mediated by our own assumptions about the past.[89] At any rate, the availability of commensurate philosophical vocabulary across history—with its central axioms about human nature, the nature of existence, the character of knowledge, the presuppositions of enquiry, and, more importantly a fairly continuous, if not steady, disciplinary history—enables an inquirer to capture those motivations to a certain extent without letting the disciplinary siege do much damage to either Plato or Aristotle or even Augustine and Aquinas. This is not to suggest, however, that there is no scope for misreading or mischaracterizing by way of reading contemporary motivations into ancient ideas.

But, given that India's intellectual past hardly has any relation of either continuity or commensurability with the present disciplinary goals and history, even a hermeneutic method will work only to such an extent as facilitated by our contemporary horizons. What is the way to approach the argumentatively intricate *mīmāṃsā* dialectics and apologetics and their role in legitimating a certain order of things? More importantly, how do we account for the reasons and causes that *mīmāṃsā* provides for agents? And how about what seems like a theology-infused Vedantic metaphysics? What are its enquiry-bound standpoints and their methodological presuppositions? How do we extract its central metaphysical questions and axioms? Is the Buddhist theory of no-self borne by no ontological presupposition at all? Is there a way in which a conception of ethical life can be extracted from the *dharma sūtra* and *śāstra* texts? Why do we not often find questions

[89] See H. G. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980; H. G. Gadamer, *The Beginnings of Philosophy*, Continuum, London, 1998.

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inquiring into the essences of things in South Asian texts? And what are its implications for the idea of *śāstra*? What would be the character of empirical phenomena? Is *prāmāṇa* (means of knowledge) empirical all the time? And there are many more questions. Now, we are able to ask these questions because there were conditions and modes of enquiry—the standpoints of intelligibility—in South Asia, the traditions—which produced durable intellectual products. We cannot hope to even partially answer any of these questions unless we know how traditions, grossly identified as *mīmāṃsā*, Buddhism, Vedanta, and others, work from inside, along with a deep knowledge of their conceptual bases and disciplinary goals. Even as we attempt to answer, say a question about *mīmāṃsā*, we know that we will not answer the same question as *mīmāṃsakas* do. As inquirers, we do not occupy the subjective standpoint of a *mīmāṃsāka* whose employment of practical or theoretical reason is determined by his practical beliefs, values, purposes, and goals. This is an unsurpassable impossibility for the modern inquirer. Gadamer obliquely exhorts us about this through his theory of tradition and prejudices. Given the limiting conditions of our disciplinary habitus, knowing how traditions work is not about knowing the empirical and historical particulars of what we identify as objects, texts, practices, and modes of transmission alone, nor is it restricted to how the practitioner of a tradition experiences and understands the effects and symptoms of what he identifies as tradition. What we need is a theory of tradition that, first, acknowledges the differences between historically disparate disciplinary frameworks and their respective goals and, second, works out the standpoint from which an earlier or non-contemporaneous disciplinary stance articulated its enquiry -bound standpoint.

It seems to me that Indology, as a modern discipline, is not often bothered by these difficulties of understanding tradition.[90] Although Halbfass simultaneously engages both the general and the specific aspects, thematic or otherwise, of tradition, he does not operate with any explicit theory of tradition. Of course, he endorses Gadamer's view of tradition, which is implicitly present in his general approach. Gadamer defends tradition in the wake of the Enlightenment's forceful attack on it. For him there is nothing in tradition that is inimical to the essence of reason and its operations in human beings. Genuine traditions do not survive, diminish or develop like how natural

[90] Bronkhorst, 'Traditional and Modern Sanskrit Scholarship', pp. 179–180.

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things do. They are upheld, embraced, nurtured, and preserved amid continuously changing historical and social conditions. For Gadamer, preservation (even in its conservative sense) is always an act of reason because preservation presupposes the voluntary endeavours of individual agents. Therefore, tradition embodies a unique form of authority and provides the desirable diet for an agent's intellectual formation.[91] However, what is needed is a theory that tells us why tradition is necessary and indispensable for individuals—in fact, what we need is a rigorous extension of Gadamer's theory of tradition. Individuals need theories to make sense of their own experiences. These theories are always historically made, unmade, and remade in accordance with how the theory producing conditions of history and society undergo changes. In a way, the idea of tradition is unthinkable without the agents who are perennially engaged in projects of rendering their own experiences of things intelligible for themselves because tradition constitutes the primary intellectual milieu within which intelligibility takes place. All texts, narratives, theories, and arguments are implicitly about how they enable someone to make sense of something, whatever that may be. Thus tradition stands, as an intermediary, between individuals and whatever they endeavour to make intelligible for themselves. Thus any narrative of traditions would be one that documents what is trenchantly continuous about the diachronically varying modes of intelligibility, across history, albeit often punctuated by discontinuities, incompatibilities, supersessions, syntheses, and rejections.

It is difficult to say if there is any tenable motivation to reach out to the sources of tradition in South Asia, outside the academic world, which has not already become a prey to the expedient motives of cultural chauvinism and civilizational supremacy. It is more than likely that India needs its Oswald Spenglers and Stefan Georges to create such a motivation. Besides, one needs imaginative and suggestive interpretive aids to capture the theoretical basis of a mode of thinking which found its articulation amid traditions of ritual and argument. For instance, B. K. Matilal provides a stellar example of someone who reads contemporary motivations, aside from judging past philosophical positions from contemporary vantage points, into something that is historically far removed. On what grounds could one interpolate our notions of realism, built into our

[91] See H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* Continuum, London, 2004, pp. 277–290.

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conceptual schemes, tempered with naturalism and science infused common sense, into somebody else's notion of realism whose beliefs about reality were shaped by very different conditions of sensory exposure, at a very different point of time in history? This, at its best, reflects anthropological naivety. Besides, Matilal unwaveringly and uncircumspectly states—dharma being the issue under discussion—that the tradition's 'formulation of issues are primitive and dated', and the counterpoints to his comparison were decision theoretic procedures, Arrow-Sen impossibility theorem, and Pareto optimality.[92] And for Gadamer the content of our prejudices determines what is relevant about the past.

On the one hand, there is Indology, where intellectual history often closely follows the footsteps of philology and, on the other hand, there are the likes of Matilal who deny any axiological relevance for the past. Is there any hope, given the constraints, of understanding why studying ancient Indian traditions and their texts may be relevant, or may be interesting in their own right?

In my view, an examination of Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of tradition, developed by him in a series of books beginning with *After Virtue,* and the derivative narrative of a continuity of commensurate traditions of enquiry in the West, would be very instructive for how we may understand the nature, dynamics, and relevance of tradition in South Asia.[93] This is for three very good reasons. First, MacIntyre works with a theoretically robust account of tradition. Secondly, for MacIntyre, the enquiry into tradition is premised on the assumption that there is in principle one large foundational scheme of human intelligibility which accommodates in it all conceivable forms and criteria of intelligibility, past, present, and future. One may not be able to delineate this scheme in its entirety ever. In fact, the point is not to delineate it either, but to start with it as a theoretical framework with the required metaphysical postulates

[92] See B. K. Matilal, 'Dharma and Rationality' in *Indian Ethics: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Challenges*, P. Billimoria, J. Prabhu and R. Sharma (eds), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2008, p. 101.

[93] See A. MacIntyre's *After Virtue,* Bloomsbury, London, 2013; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?,* University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1988; *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1991. These are the three important works in which MacIntyre develops his view of tradition over a period of roughly two decades. Also see J. Porter, 'Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre' in *Alasdair MacIntyre,* M. C. Murphy (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 38–69.

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about agency and intelligent behaviour, which helps us understand how different forms of intelligibility across history share indefeasible consanguinity.[94] In contrast to this, for Gadamer the hermeneutic enquiry will saturate only when the truth of the past is completely revealed. However, such a revelation, of a text, a scheme of ideas, or a mode of behaviour, will never happen until the 'prejudices' and 'fore-meanings' are completely overcome. The structure of 'prejudice' is typically such that, on account of keeping things behind the veil of certain biases, it may lead to the possibility of incompatible paradigms of intelligibility. Therefore, from a Gadamerian perspective, texts and arguments could appear outré or alien. Thirdly, MacIntyre's theory of tradition opens up possibilities of transcending the stances and modes of intelligibility which issue from our respective disciplinary vantage points. This is because of an explicit recognition that disciplinary goals are essentially plural and that each disciplinary formation should be understood from the standpoint of its articulation and the mode of intelligibility it opens up.

What is the benefit of MacIntyre's approach? First, this would tell us how our current modes of intelligibility are related to any other mode that was either historically true or may become true in the future. This is how tradition could become relevant for us because we would be in a better position to measure our distance from an earlier mode of intelligibility even as we understand and evaluate how anthropological conditions fashion the thought and conduct of individuals at different points of time in history. Hence, this framework has clear anthropological implications. In other words, the premise is that there is one distinctly identifiable mode of human intelligibility across time which does have different modes of manifestation under different anthropological conditions and disciplinary dispensations. The differences and incompatibilities that exist between, say, the Indian and the Western modes of thought, or the ones that exist within one culture, must be sought at the level at which historically specific constellations of anthropological conditions produce empirically different tracks and articulations of intelligibility, supported by congruent disciplinary scaffoldings. Thus, the divergence among the goals of disciplines only reflects divergence in articulations

[94] See D. Davidson, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality' in *Philosophical Essays on Freud*, R. Wollheim and J. Hopkins (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 289–305. Davidson provides a defence of an indefeasible relation between rational behaviour, intelligibility, and agency.

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of intelligibility. If our theory of intelligibility is sound, then there is a good chance that we can retrieve the contents of traditions without much damage. Second, this approach will also throw light on why certain traditions stop or become irrelevant for agents, and are duly supplanted by newer replacements. They stop being either relevant or meaningful because they lose their intelligibility for agents.

In a recent volume on tradition in South Asia, the editor Federico Squarcini offers what he calls a 'tripartite model' of tradition premised on the key assumption that 'handing over' (*tradere*) is essential for the continuity of tradition. While the *'traditum'* (the particular object or content) is handed over, it concerns both the giver and the taker—the one who 'performs the act' and the one who is 'affected' by it. The giver, the taker, and the transmitted content together constitute the structure of tradition. Thus, tradition is about how the transmission of the *'traditum'* happens across time and what sort of normative considerations preserve the identity and integrity of what is transmitted. Admirable as this model is, however. It crucially misses how traditions are often very closely intertwined with the very conditions of agents'—givers and takers—self-identity and intelligibility.

Squarcini's is primarily a descriptive framework, and therefore has no scope for explaining how the talk of tradition acquires plausibility only with reference to agents. This is a very Cartesian framework because the assumption is that tradition is something that can be accessed from the standpoint of a disengaged inquirer as a set of objects, interrelations, practices, and so on. In a way, most approaches to tradition in South Asia thematize tradition as an object, or a set of objects—interrelated or not, static or dynamic, concrete or abstract—that are out there to be described and explained rather than something that acquires a mode of being and becoming only in relation to the meaning-making efforts of agents.[95] On the contrary, any sound theory of tradition presupposes an account of agency in the first place because tradition is about how individuals are able to make their experience of the world and themselves intelligible, whether it is through a rationalization of their actions, that is, by construing their reasons as causes, or by adjusting their beliefs in the face of a recalcitrant experience. This means that any inquirer

[95] Squarcini, (ed.), *Boundaries,* pp. 16–20. Also see L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India,* Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1967.

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into tradition should get into the engaged standpoint of the agent who participates in that tradition. This enables the inquirer to find a point of access into the mental and the physical world of that agent, and the vantage point from which his world picture is articulated—his reasons, beliefs, purposes, goals, attitudes, judgements, interests, capacities, infirmities, and prejudices. From the ethnographer's point of view, this is a very valuable exercise. What MacIntyre offers, while being deeply aware of the Cartesian pitfalls, is an approach to tradition from the standpoint of an engaged agent. Let us look into it.

MacIntyre has a complex and multidimensional theory of tradition, which is pivotal to his ongoing critique of cosmopolitan liberalism. Although his primary insights, formulated in his early articles and *After Virtue,* have not changed, there are several refinements and extensions that he subsequently added to his basic stock of ideas. Hence, I'll present a concentrated version of his account under four different heads: Rationality is constituted by tradition; Tradition is a narrative form of enquiry; Tradition is articulated in the form of an argument; and Tradition creates for agents basic conditions of intelligibility.

First, MacIntyre believes, probably anachronistically, that one can understand the shortcomings of Enlightenment modernity from the vantage point offered by the Aristotelian tradition.[96] It may seem like an evaluation of modernity from the standpoint of tradition. However, although for MacIntyre the standpoints of tradition and cosmopolitan modernity are certainly at odds with each other, they do not form a coherent opposition in which the latter displaces the former. As we shall soon note, tradition can insistently continue even in conditions of external change because the defining character of tradition is predicated upon the participating agent's inherent capacity for making things intelligible for himself. Hence, being an embodiment of the past in an individual's life, tradition has an irreplaceable epistemological role. Therefore, all endeavours of intelligibility across history presuppose the work of tradition. But tradition is at odds with modernity with respect to the latter's central characteristic belief that all phenomena of any particular culture are 'translucent to understanding', and hence capable of being translated into any language. The perspective of a tradition is typically grounded

[96] MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* pp. 172–191.

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in the peculiar formation of a 'contingent circumstance', and it reflects the problems and perplexities of its social order, articulated in languages and idioms which resist effortless translation.[97]

The Aristotelian tradition, based in robust teleological accounts of human nature, considers human agents as being naturally capable of moral and political life, endowed with a capacity for sound deliberation and wise judgement. Agents are cast as naturally gifted with intrinsic capabilities, proportionate to their natural talents and shortcomings, and as possessing the *techne* (craft) of virtue which enables them to discern and recognize what is practically good for them. Thus, the salience of this tradition lies in how best it accounts for human diversity. In contrast, the predicament of modernity for MacIntyre lies in its attempt to reduce human diversity to a substratum of a singular and invariant essence, namely the procedural rationality of the individual. And for Aristotle the diversity—of capacities, temperaments, adaptations, dispositions, attitudes—is the essence of being human. This diversity is often a reflex of the pluralist character of the social order. In contrast to this, the Enlightenment proposed that 'rational justification was to appeal to principles undeniable by any rational person and therefore independent of all those social and cultural particularities'. Then justification would be no more than 'the mere accidental clothing of reason in particular times and places'.[98] Thus, diverse particularities of cultural and social life presuppose a core rational ability on behalf of persons on whose behalf it was considered possible to arrive at universal presuppositions, not in the least about argument and enquiry alone, but about substantive goals in life that no rational person could deny. In effect this implies that an individual's bearings in common sense, which depend on his social embeddedness, is bound to be irrelevant from the standpoint of rationality. If this were true, there should only be consensus and unanimity, for all normative theories of good would be built on the foundations of incontrovertible presuppositions. Notwithstanding, disagreement is rife everywhere, which seems to be the de facto condition for all rational argumentation, because such founding presuppositions of argument have not been found yet. This implies that whatever Enlightenment promotes as the rational self-image of an individual is a myth. Then, what is the locus of rationality? Rationality, for MacIntyre, is less about individuals'

[97] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality*, p. 327.
[98] Ibid., p. 6.

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fixed cognitive abilities and common standards, and more about how traditions and cultures diversify standards and criteria, pertaining to evaluation, intelligibility, and understanding. Then, each instance of rationality, each instance of its embodiment in a particular tradition and community as a mode of enquiry, would have its own first principles and final goods. Hence, there would be multiple rationalities constituted by different traditions.[99]

Secondly, as a committed practitioner of the Aristotelian tradition, MacIntyre has an enduring interest in the Thomist doctrine and practice. In particular, the later refinements of his theory of tradition largely owe to his studies of Thomas Aquinas. For MacIntyre theory and practice are not two different things. Theoretical enquiry proceeds from questions posed by inquirers who already assimilate a range of intellectual goods from the inherited culture. If the inquirers are the readers of Aquinas, 'like his original hearers, both enact the narrative of their own enquiry and make that narrative a continuing part of a larger narrative of enquiry in which they are only the latest actors, who also understand that what they are able to contribute will lead on beyond them'.[100] And such a narratively structured enquiry produces theoretical goods and conceptions, such as an account of the *telos* and its relationship with the right action, the definition of virtue, theories of laws and the state, and so forth. Such goods and conceptions invariably become part of a culture and its institutions, and get transmitted down the generations, becoming a part of how individuals conduct their lives. Thus, any agent, theorist or not, will conduct enquiries for the sake of clarification and justification. But to be able to live a practically happy and well-ordered life, as farmers, artisans, or fishermen do in communities such as those of the city, the clan or the tribe, what one needs is to be able to 'embody' conceptions of good life which one understands and justifies to oneself in the course of making those enquiries. Thus, moral life 'is the life of embodied moral enquiry'.[101] What farmers and fishermen embody may not expressly have the character of what the theorists' craft produces, namely theory, but it is a theory nevertheless, whose axioms are built into the conduct of moral agents as embodied structures of thought and judgement. These embodied lives become the vehicles of traditions—moral, religious, political or intellectual—of communities. Individuals contribute to the

[99] Ibid., pp. 349–369.
[100] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions,* pp. 79–80.
[101] Ibid.

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advancement of traditions through narratives because no embodied enquiry is free from an entrenched narrative structure.

Thirdly, tradition for MacIntyre is always referential in that it refers to a fairly large number of closely interrelated things and practices, such as objects, injunctions, routines, methods, rules and meta-rules, ritual-bound diurnal practices, and values, which structure the different domains of thought and actions of someone who inhabits that tradition. However, tradition is not simply these objects and events; it is instead something that is about an agent who finds these objects and events intelligible in his scheme of understanding. Hence, MacIntyre calls it an argument. Tradition is an argument because it is about agents and the coherence of their beliefs about a range of functions and things, from the past and the present, like objects, beliefs, needs, purposes, customs, practices, attitudes, and so on. Tradition makes someone an agent with a specifiable mode of self-identification: say, as a Brahmin, or Jew, or Muslim, including those circumstances of that person's life which prompt him/her to reject earlier self-identifications. The continuities may not be obvious all the time. But it is the job of tradition to set the tracks of continuum for the agent because only in such a continuum would a person be able test his conditions of intelligibility—to see what combinations of his beliefs seem coherent and what seem gratuitous and incoherent. A tradition then is a 'continuous argument' that is narratively 'socially embodied' over what it is for an agent to be identified as what they are, and what they do or are capable of doing, until and even after the conditions change for such identification to stay valid. When does a person stop being one such agent? In conditions when one rejects or gives up, what does it entail for one to be, say, a Brahmin? What is it about that agent that still continuously gives him intelligible modes of self-identification? It is tradition.[102]

Fourthly, any theory of tradition that is not pivoted around a theoretical conception of agency—the *telos* of being an agent—is no theory at all. This is because, as argued above, tradition creates the basic conditions of intelligibility for agents, like who they, and what is their relationship with the things of past, present, and future. A natural corollary of this argument is the first point made above: that individual rationality, which is nothing but an abstraction of

[102] See A. MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science' in his *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Vol. 1*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 3–23.

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basic forms of intelligibility, is something that traditions constitute. This stands in sharp contrast with Matilal's use of the notion of rationality, a tradition-transcendent notion, which remains invariant across different forms of social embodiment. Modes of intelligibility change from time to time in relation to the anthropological conditions of thought. Therefore, for MacIntyre, the Western tradition is not a monolith, but is something like a scheme of interrelated and interacting traditions, a narrative in which different modes of intelligibility find their expression, sharing an overall philosophical basis, with a largely commensurate vocabulary.

No doubt earlier traditions themselves were rational enquiries, even as they were socially embodied practices, because they bequeathed upon the participating agents criteria of intelligibility and resolved their puzzles and conundrums, metaphysical or theological. Until cosmopolitan liberalism gradually and peculiarly acquired the character of a tradition by displacing the lineaments of the preceding Aristotelian tradition, Western intellectual history is a narrative of interlocked episodes of different paradigms of intelligibility. Often old problems and their solutions surfaced in newer forms in response to the latest problems produced by the contingent circumstances of the social and political order. This, in short, is MacIntyre's theory of tradition.

If Western tradition has an underlying singular philosophical basis, it does not entail that a singular world view follows such a basis. The basis is about an interconnected vocabulary that the tradition made available for the agents at the time of its beginning. But the interconnections between words will not remain stable and fixed for all times to come. They do change for various reasons, even as some could retain their fixed character. Hence, I will go a step further and say that there is nothing like an overarching Western tradition in the sense in which the geo-philosophical category assumed in its name has an unchanging matrix of relations between its core concepts. Interestingly, the central intellectual problems of this culture often show up in radically incommensurable forms. MacIntyre, more than anybody else, did much to lay out this sort of an agonistic picture of the Western intellectual history in his beautiful book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* He argues that in the history of the West there has never been a firm agreement about how one should define justice, nor has there been much agreement about defining the role of practical rationality in moral thinking. This was because the larger philosophical basis, laid out by the Greeks, subsequently splintered

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into multiple incompatible traditions of rational enquiry under the impact of changing conditions of social and institutional orders. This divergence can be traced to the motivations that animated each tradition of enquiry within the larger scheme of the common philosophical basis and which provided commensurate semantics for all of them. These motivations were not purely philosophical all the time. They were in turn inflected by various other kinds of conditions and motivations, of either theological or political or soteriological or even eschatological provenance. For example, the goals of moral enquiry for St Augustine are not the same as those of Thomas Aquinas, although both share a massive conceptual background. Newer situations threw up newer possibilities of answers to old questions, and new syntheses of established positions. There is little salience in insisting that there is anything like a monomorphic view of metaphysics from Plato to Hegel and further.

If one looks at how traditions unfolded in South Asia, right from the Vedic times to Indology, things would not look differently at all. No text or argument or description or performance would have been produced without an enquiry-bound standpoint at the point of its origin. This is not the standpoint of a presuppositionless Cartesian enquiry, but a mode of knowing that is implicit in all forms of human transaction. It is typically enacted in a narrative form because any act of questioning entails that there is an engaged investigator with a certain perspective and comprehension of basic matters; and questioning leads to answers, and further to more questions and answers, and so on. There are always agents who join in this continuing process until the criteria of intelligibility endemic to that tradition break down for agents. Thus, tradition accordingly presupposes an enquiry-bound vantage point and a narrative form of progress. And, typically, any tradition would invariably feature as part of a larger narrative of traditions, contiguous or not, because at no point is it possible to find just one single tradition. A tradition becomes what it is, will acquire the character of its identity for an agent, only in the context of other traditions differing from it. And traditions here include all durable products of a culture, both practical and intellectual, with a certain propensity to continue over time. Traditions thus typically differ from each other, depending upon the space they occupy in the diurnal life of an agent; traditions also can be grouped and classed into different genres and kinds in accordance with the kinship relations they share. Sometimes the differences can be visibly radical, profound and incommensurable, especially if the traditions generate intellectual products like concepts and theories.

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Often, if not always, traditions that happen to share an overarching semantic basis in terms of basic vocabulary tend to diversify on account of several contingent circumstances of social life.

For instance, one can arguably extract a fairly coherent philosophical vocabulary from the ritual-centred texts of the Vedas in spite of the divergence of genres and ideas they accommodate, which has all the elements needed to explain human conduct in all its comprehensiveness.[103] As Charles Malamoud insightfully put it: 'of all the animals capable of *being* sacrificial victims, man is the sole creature who is capable of performing, of *doing* the sacrificial act'.[104] For Malamoud, if the human *telos* for Aristotle is equivalent to being capable of political life in the state, for the Vedic world picture the definition of the human is built on an agent's intrinsic capacity to be an engaged agent in the sacrificial rite. Such an agent acts, that is, employs his practical reason, from the vantage point of being someone whose world stands organized for him in terms of numerous empirically specifiable prescriptions and objects invested with symbolic value, on the one hand, and on the equally numerous contingent features of his experience, such as needs, desires, purposes, and judgements, on the other hand. This vocabulary captures the way in which a certain people found their world intelligible in terms of how the image of their *telos* was mapped onto being a sacrifice-performing agent. But this vocabulary in turn was shared by many traditions within the multifarious world of the Vedic ritual systems. Thus, any two parallel traditions would share discernible semantic common ground. However, the common ground does not necessarily guarantee common questions, problems or agendas.

An important element of this Vedic world picture, which gives agents universal concepts—universal from their respective points of view—and justifies for them their beliefs and actions is dharma. Dharma is at the core of these Vedic agents' intelligibility of their role and position within their social order, belonging to many traditions within the Vedic culture. And, this intelligibility was premised on how they understood themselves and their *telos*, as ritualists of particular orders of ritual conduct, as housewives, as kings, or as sages, in relation

[103] See W. Halbfass, 'The Presence of the Veda in Indian Philosophical Reflection' in his *Tradition and Reflection,* Satguru Publications, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 23–50. Also see J. L. Mehta, 'The Hindu Tradition: The Vedic Root' in his *Philosophy and Religion: Essays in Interpretation*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 100–120.

[104] Malamoud, *Cooking the World,* p. 5.

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to their role and position within the systematic picture of the world that they collectively shared. As a matter of fact, this vocabulary, even as it distinctly pervades almost all the intellectual traditions that flourished in South Asia in the post-Vedic period, is not uniformly deployed across traditions like Buddhism, Jainism or *mīmāṃsā* or in the numerous *dharma sutra* and *śāstra* texts subsequently, thus accounting for the fact that even acute differences between traditions is built on a shared basis of vocabulary. For example, there is no semantic precision comparable to a universal concept to dharma. It does not feature as an unexceptionable univalent term in all systems and traditions, although most of its usages admit potent kinship relations. Each system deploys it with its own unique semantic standards and demands.[105]

MacIntyre's deployment of the phrase 'moral enquiry' has a larger meaning than the narrow construal of being a modality of reflection and investigation. Enquiry here is not limited to being an academic activity. It is something that anyone conducts for his own personal clarification and guidance. For him, the fall of the Aristotelian tradition, and the subsequent rise of cosmopolitan liberalism, marks the moment when the hold of the earlier moral tradition on communities began to thin down and a sustained academic interest in moral matters began to emerge in the name of 'moral philosophy', the Enlightenment model of the standard academic template. Thus, talking about moral life began to move from the public life of communities to departments of philosophy. This is the major difference between moral traditions as they are narratively enacted in communal life by engaged and 'embodied' agents, and the forensic academic endeavours of explanation and clarification. Here MacIntyre is not dismissing the academic stance nor the disciplinary mode, but only suggesting that there are other stances and narrative vantage points outside academies, with their own criteria of intelligibility, which are also essential to understand how agents systematically think and act. As a matter of fact, as opposed to scientific traditions, moral traditions admit greater and wider latitude of commensurable enquiries across the board.

If 'enquiry' for MacIntyre has been primarily motivated by the goal of charting tracks of continuity in traditions of what he calls 'moral enquiry', from Plato to Aquinas and much later, frequently punctuated by irresolvable discontinuities, it indeed is also a feature of

[105] See A. Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion and Narrative*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011.

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capital importance in South Asia that whatever was resiliently ongoing about the Sanskrit- based and Sanskrit-derived intellectual culture was not a monochromatic and serial continuity of one monolithic continuum. Was it then a dogmatic historical continuity where things never changed? On the contrary, it was a millennial period incredibly rich in vast diversity of schools, disciplines, sects, creeds, and opinion, albeit with an overarching theoretical basis. The shape and character of tradition in this diversity must be sought in resolute forms of continuity, available as embodied forms of intelligibility, which survive historical and anthropological changes. Most importantly, this diversity was primarily of traditions sustained over centuries, not by forensic and disengaged inquirers of 'pure' knowledge, but by 'embodied' and engaged communities of inquirers motivated by their respective conceptions of knowledge and highest good. It is hence the preponderant emphasis on soteriology in ancient India. And, as a matter of fact, some of the intensely soteriology-borne 'enquiries' like nondualistic Vedanta, in spite of a pervasive motivation for 'absolute liberation' across traditions, have made seminal contributions to questions of ontology, prompting Halbfass to insightfully coin the term 'soteriontology'.[106] Just consider how intense and productive were the intellectual productions of Kashmir Śaivism or even of the different Vaiṣnava schools across the sub-continent, and how spectacularly varied the different cults were, be it Śakta, Gāṇapatya or Pāśupata! Indeed, in ancient India there were unusually bright episodes of intellectual dialogue and achievement across centuries, within traditions and also across traditions, largely because there were patronage systems and networks that nurtured communities of inquirers. These embodied inquirers were rarely isolated individuals, unless they had opted out of the obligations of the social order, or had turned antinomian. Enquiry always happened within communities and circuits, under the dispensation of a certain soteriological habitus, along with the intellectual and practical advantages that typically communal life secures for inquirers. It is mainly for this reason that MacIntyre's theory of tradition is very salient for understanding the role of tradition in premodern South Asia. If one recalls, Rao's idea of mnemopraxial life hardly captures this complex dynamics of living in a social order which had experienced vigorous modes of communal life.

[106] Halbfass, *On Being and What There Is*, pp. 38.

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Now, a true understanding of a tradition entails an articulation, of course from our inevitable historical distance, of the engaged standpoint of the agents who sustained and developed that tradition. This is crucial. By way of an example, understanding the Aristotelian tradition would mean articulating the embodied character of moral enquiry in the lives of individuals whose mentalities and practical actions were well-informed and guided by Aristotelian precepts and insights. One does not understand this tradition by merely grasping the essentials of Aristotle's moral theory, nor by knowing how solutions can be worked out for problems from an Aristotelian perspective. It can only be known by articulating the engaged standpoint of an agent who was a part of that tradition, and for whom the world unfolded in a historically particular manner. When the Aristotelian hold on communities had collapsed, the tradition associated with it also stopped, leaving only its remnants to continue as part of a different tradition—the cosmopolitan liberalism. Hence, tradition accounts for the entirety of the achievement of a people, including both the highs and the lows. Consider the case of *dharma śāstras*. They were about the organization and maintenance of a particular social order with certain emphases and stipulations in that the agents in that order lived with certain beliefs and persuasions. It is arguable that these beliefs are ideological in character. But these agents were also vehicles of embodied capacities, of perception, of enquiry, and of understanding. Therefore, *dharma śāstras* articulate traditions of 'moral enquiry', with their own high and low points, arguably comparable to the ones that the Aristotelian tradition has founded and sustained. Then the task of any contemporary inquirer into the *dharma śāstra* traditions would be to understand their achievement with respect to how the agents engaged in those traditions were able to conduct 'enquiries' and lead lives of completeness and coherence. Completeness and coherence define the standards of ethical life for these agents. And the ways in which these standards drastically differ from those of ours, of the cosmopolitan liberal view of ethical life, reveal how our standards and criteria of intelligibility are different from theirs. This difference is best explained, not by listing out the incommensurables, but by systematically contrasting the standards of intelligibility between traditions. Such a systematic contrast takes place within a framework of comparison that will admit some basic and preliminary descriptive categories, and their coordinates, of action and being. This account, aside from giving an enriched perspective of how the standpoint of tradition is articulated from an engaged perspective, can tell us how

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traditions stop being meaningful for agents. Traditions lose their hold on agents when they fail to offer suitable standards and criteria of intelligibility. This can explain why premodern India seems so very far and disconnected from the horizons of our intelligibility.

At this stage these are only sketchy remarks and observations. However, given this framework, there can be important empirical questions of historical, literary, textual, and anthropological significance about how traditions articulated and defined themselves even as they shared conceptual inheritances in premodern South Asia. Any change in the social and political order, whatever may be the cause, would call for a corresponding change in the mentality of the agent. This will reflect primarily in how the agents witness a change in their standards of what they hold to be true and reasonable, and therefore intelligible. A consequence of this is that a part of what they earlier believed, or an earlier generation believed and understood, will no longer seem plausible or coherent, hence will become unintelligible. As already argued, tradition in a certain sense is always about how agents find their world intelligible, and hence become capable of coping with it. Tradition is about how this intelligibility of 'coping' continues to be efficacious for the same agents until some sort of change, either gradual or sudden, alters their conditions of intelligibility. MacIntyre refers to this change as an epistemological crisis, for in 'such crises the criteria of truth, intelligibility, and rationality' pertaining to any given regime of tradition and common sense 'may always themselves be put in question'. And, further, 'the new forms of understanding may themselves in turn come to be put in question at any time' in future.[107]

Indeed, it would be a very fruitful endeavour to study the sort of epistemological crises that would have happened in South Asia, not in least the one that both *The Nay Science* and *Cultures of Memory* relentlessly excoriate, namely the one engineered by colonial modernity. If the Buddhist thinkers have turned away from the orthodoxy of Brahminism while borrowing crucial conceptual machinery from the Vedic corpus, and if Śankara, moved by what he saw as the beleaguered state of *his* tradition, had fought with the giants of Buddhism, on the one hand, and Pūrvamīmāṃsā, on the other, to fortify a certain ultimate understanding of reality, none of these could have come about without crises of intelligibility catalysing

[107] MacIntyre, 'Epistemological Crises', p. 5.

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the powerful thought and imagination of these historical personages. By way of an example, how did the Pūrvamīmāṃsā gradually lose its hold and intelligibility for a whole range of practitioners and the Uttaramīmāṃsā gain a greater acceptance in its place? How did this come about? Both the traditions of the Mīmāṃsā were rational inquiries in their own respect because they articulated forms of intelligibility that agents developed with respect to how the use of practical reason is guided so that a range of issues, puzzles, and problems of practical life may be resolved. Indeed, very frequently the notion of dharma is the point of contention which forced many a thinker to revise and rearticulate their schemes of beliefs. One can get a sample sense of how this may have happened argumentatively in Appayya Dīkshita's *Pūrvottaramīmāṃsā,* a translated version of which appeared in a recent volume on the semantic and religious history of the concept of dharma.[108] Dīkshita was a maverick seventeenth-century Advaita intellectual from South India who is credited with having written over 100 books on a large number of issues. In this short treatise, Dīkshita examines a range of proposals about whether the object of dharma in the Pūrvamīmāṃsā sense—the 'ritual action' based on the Vedic injunctions—is also the object of brahma, the ultimate metaphysical referent of the Uttaramīmāṃsā. He draws a conclusion against the unity of dharma and brahma, refuting the inherited position, pointing out at a sharp and unbridgeable divide between the two Mīmāṃsās. What led him into seeing this incompatibility? Is this merely a matter of arguing for a position? Arguments are only instruments through which deeper and subtler changes in persuasions are articulated and conveyed. It is not simply through arguments that changes are effected; they presuppose changes, in fact, changes of the sort that we could call epistemological crises. And these crises often lead to newer modes of making older problems intelligible. Once the crisis stands resolved, a new mode of intelligibility comes into being, with its own criteria of truth and rationality. To take this argument further would require an extended treatment of the entire issue which is beyond the scope of this article. Unless the premise is that tradition is essentially a narrative of

[108] S. Pollock, 'The Meaning of *Dharma* and the Relationship of the Two Mīmāṃsās: Appayya Dikshita's "Discourse on the Refutation of a Unified Knowledge System of Pūrvamīmāṃsā and Uttaramīmāṃsā"' in *Dharma: Studies in its Semantic, Cultural and Religious Histories,* P. Olivelle (ed.), New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2009, pp. 347–389. This is a varied collection of articles on dharma from a range of perspectives, covering almost all the concerned South Asian intellectual traditions.

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different regimes of interlocked intelligibilities, neither the talk of crisis nor its resolution makes sense. And this is enough proof to suggest that the story of tradition in South Asia can only be told as a story of constant revision and revaluation, across history, of the basic criteria of rational intelligibility of agents. This idea parades against the idea that tradition is memory-based and mnemocultural on many different levels because any sound account of tradition must explain how agents think, deliberate, and use their intellectual capacities for all kinds of practical and theoretical purposes.

Hence, what one would call the Sanskrit tradition is no massive monolithic, but a continuous narrative of several consanguineous traditions of commensurate vocabulary with their own configurations of intelligibility, punctuated by crises and dramatic resolutions. But there is something interesting about this inheritance: the terms shed some of their semantic features even as they retain some old ones and acquire some other new ones, depending on the needs of the concerned system's conceptual economy. Again, the example of dharma is a strong case in point. Dharma, however one might choose to translate it, as law or justice or order, had its contexts of genesis and preliminary application in the Vedic ritual-based thinking. Subsequently, it successfully entered the sotereological vocabulary of the Jain and the Buddhist systems; and later, into *dharma sastras*, the epics, and others.[109] However, each instance of its use had its semantic character determined by the anthropological and theoretical needs of the system that chose to deploy it as a seminal concept. Thus each claimant of the term had special uses and purposes designated for it. Dharma being just one example, this transfer and reappropriation of terms from one system to another applies to the entire range of seminal vocabulary: *guṇa*, *svabhāva*, *prakrti*, *kāma*, *mukti*, *jñāna*, *vrtti*, karma, *kaivalya*, to name just a few. How does one understand this transference? One way to look at it is to suggest that these terms, especially the key ones, correspond to the 'answer positions', to use Hans Blumenberg's perceptive phrase, of each system.[110] This implies that each system has a fixed number of positions for concepts to fit

[109] Olivelle (ed.), *Dharma*.

[110] H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern World*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 65. Blumenberg's is an unrivalled work of scholarship and understanding, in terms of insight, perspective, and vigour, on how modernity acquires its 'legitimacy'. It argues against a range of proponents of the 'secularization' theses. His argument is that modernity is not about 'the transposition of authentically Christian convictions into secularized alienation from their origin, but rather ... the reoccupation of *answer*

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in. Concepts may vary but the positions remain fixed. This is true to the extent that all the theories shared a general structure. The point is that theories come with fixed structural positions because each system faces the same kind of questions like 'What is it for an individual to attain salvation, liberation or mokṣa or its like?', or 'What is the absolute value or the ultimate existent?' However, another way is to look at each instance of a deployment of concept as a distinct case of semantic gain which reflects in the enhanced intelligibility of agents vis-à-vis their latest experience. As is well known enough, a good portion of the nondualistic metaphysics, and its multiple strands, have potent Buddhist influences. One way to understand this process is to interpret this influence in terms of how it enabled the agents to attain newer modes of intelligibility of certain metaphysical problems, whether of *māya* or *avidya*.

These traditions, say Buddhism, Jainism, Mimamsa, different types of Advaita, Tantra, and so on, came into being as a way of meeting the intellectual demands of individuals produced by the changing circumstances of social and institutional life. And each tradition becomes what it is because it embodies a unique form of rationality, a narratively embedded argumentative standpoint, and an open possibility of narrative continuance. The uniqueness of rationality depends on how the agent is able to deploy the available criteria of understanding to solve the problems that he finds intelligible from within his standpoint. Hence rationality refers to the mode of intelligibility the agent displays. Each mode of intelligibility interprets concepts, whether it is Sanskrit's dharma or Pali's dhamma, as entities with a unique semantic content capable of speaking to the concerned agents directly. Then each text would have the character of something that is borne by the intelligibility of agents who may have either produced or consumed that text for their own purposes, practical or theoretical. Therefore, much as MacIntyre concludes about the absence of uncontested first definitions, of justice, virtue, practical reason, and so on, there has never been much agreement, nor a rigid stability, across the spectrum on what dharma should be in spite of the general preference for the same lexical unit as the preferred name; nor was there consensus about how soteriological concepts like *mokṣa* or *jīvanmukti* should be defined, nor indeed was there unanimity about the methods and modes of rationality to be applied.

positions that had become vacant' in the aftermath of events that consolidated the hold of modernity in Western Europe.

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Although I have only presented a bare outline of my position, given the limitations of my mandate, it is sufficient to see my point that MacIntyre helps us to appreciate what is philosophically relevant about tradition in South Asia: that it is an immensely rich narrative of competing intelligibilities. What we now require is an articulation of the standpoints from which these multiple intelligibilities sustained traditions across history.

Conclusion

In spite of their ardour and ambition, regretfully neither *The Nay Science* nor *Cultures of Memory* offer any concrete answer to the question of how one should read ancient Indian texts. They fail to take notice and appreciate the problems that disciplinary structures pose for studying ancient India. Although *Cultures of Memory* promises to offer a theory that is premised on what is exclusive about ancient India, it only succeeds in offering an ahistorical essentialization of South Asian cultures as mnemocultures. Besides, neither book takes the problem of tradition in South Asia adequately seriously. Finally, I have suggested—and duly offered an argument as to why—MacIntyre's robust and anti-Cartesian theory can be instructive about understanding the dynamics and relevance of tradition in South Asia.

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