

Locating Philosophy in the *Mahābhārata*

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The nine papers presented here were contributions to a small conference on “Philosophy in the Epic *Mahābhārata*” held at Brown University in April of 2010.¹ The purpose of the conference was to try to find new ways to focus scholarly efforts to come to terms with the vastness and complexity of “philosophy” in the epic. “Philosophy” was understood broadly as serious intellectual expressions found in the epic in the form of either the ideologies and themes that structure and animate the epic as a whole or the many crafted tracts of theology and philosophy, *sensu stricto*,² that are either embedded within the epic’s narrative or contained in its large *saṃhitās* [“anthologies (of worthy utterances)”] of instruction (*anuśāsana*). There is

¹ The conference enjoyed the generous support of the Dean of the Faculty, the Office of Provost, the Program in Early Cultures, and the Departments of Classics and Religious Studies of Brown University. Other participants who presented papers were Ashok Aklujkar, Peter Scharf, and Fred Smith. Dr. Elizabeth Cecil and Professor Amy Langenberg were participant observers.

² There are of course many hotly contested characterizations of philosophy *sensu stricto* and I am not proposing to enter those debates. As is clearly implied already, I am using the term philosophy as a term of ‘family-resemblance,’ as a cross-cultural comparative filter to select and interrogate various texts, themes, and arguments of the *MBh* that resemble some of the broad range of what has gone under the name of “philosophy” in the history of the civilization that coined the term. When, within that broad set, I distinguish “philosophy *sensu stricto*,” I am referring to texts that are, to start with, characterized by self-consciously abstract formulations, rather than anthropomorphic ones (i.e., *not* mythic narratives) about fundamental realities and a consciousness that one’s assertions require warrants, whether these are offered explicitly or left implicit. Accepting the need to furnish warrants leads eventually to the critical examination of types of argumentative discourse (logic, *nyāyāśāstra*) and of the types of warrants for knowledge-claims (*pramāṇas*; epistemology, *pramāṇāśāstra*). As was pointed out by Malinar (2017b, between notes 34 and 35 and in her concluding thoughts just before and after note 39), a number of epic texts that are philosophical in this sense do exhibit one stage or other of the development of these

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a large gap between these two forms of intellectuality, and it may not be productive, ultimately, to embrace both of them at once. On the other hand, the written Sanskrit *MBh* was a deliberate, intellectually ambitious undertaking in the first place: an old narrative appropriated and modified to espouse an ideological agenda that included, at its foundation, arguing the value of the teachings of philosopher-sages (*r̥ṣis*). It would be premature to attempt to sequester philosophy *sensu stricto* from the epic's overall project to showcase the value of 'the men of *brahman*' (i.e., *brāhmanas*) to people generally and kings in particular. The epic's philosophy *sensu stricto* is part of the epic's philosophy *sensu lato*.

The conference discussed "philosophy" in both perspectives: Johannes Bronkhorst opened things up with a wide-angle discussion of the *Mahābhārata* as an adaptive cultural creation that helped "Brahmanism" transform itself from a regional priestly elite facing difficult economic and political circumstances into a thriving elite guiding rulers generally in the recently unified political landscape of post-Mauryan India.³ Angelika Malinar's keynote contribution then offered a multi-faceted review of how philosophy that is found in the epic—philosophy *sensu stricto* as well as philosophy *sensu lato*—has been conceived and discussed in Western scholarship.⁴ She pointed out critical ways in which past approaches have been superseded, and she offered a number of suggestions for more nuanced approaches to Indian philosophizing found in the *MBh* narrative. She advised readers to attend to the epic's philosophical presentations in terms of particular editorial and rhetorical choices made by the creators of the epic as they tailored their text for their non-expert audiences. She made especially valuable suggestions about the two-way connection between cultivated philosophical teachings and cultivated narrative traditions. "The epic use of philosophy seeks to learn what it is that philosophical doctrines have to say to specific issues, and, sometimes, how they affirm or reject certain arguments and prove their points or fail to do so" [in the middle of the penultimate paragraph of the paper]. And reciprocally, "[I]n the epic, philosophy and philosophers are also suitable for literary treatment—tales of teachers and philosophical terms and ideas occur and they need not necessarily be serious moral or didactic tales. Some epic philosophical texts also have critical and even satirical undertones, or are constructed to furnish an occasion for criticizing aspects of philosophical reasoning deemed detrimental to 'well-being' ... or to threaten established (chiefly Brahminic) authority" [*idem*]. On the following two days different papers posed one entrée or another into the dense forest of epic thought, but only one of them brushed up against any aspect of Bronkhorst's broad approach to matters of the ideology and design of the epic as a whole. Alf Hildebeitel's "*Mokṣa and Dharma in the Mokṣadharmā*,"⁵ discussed the functioning of the final three sub-texts of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (the account of Śuka's birth

Footnote 2 continued

technical discourses—e.g., the *Manubr̥haspatisaṃvāda*, 12.194–199 (Fitzgerald 2017b), the *Pañcaśikhavākya*, 12.211–212 (Malinar 2017a), and the *Sulabhājanakasamvāda*, 12.308 (Fitzgerald 2002).

³ See within: "The *Mahābhārata* and the Revival of Brahmanism".

⁴ See within: "Philosophy in the *Mahābhārata* and the History of Indian Philosophy".

⁵ See within under the same name.

and his gaining *mokṣa* [12.310–15 and 316–20], the *Nārāyaṇīya* [12.321–39], and “The Story about the Way of Gleaning” [12.340–53]) within the broader narrative argument of the *MBh*: that is, the education of the king, Yudhiṣṭhira. Those three episodes “mark an ‘artful curvature’ that shapes the outcome of King Yudhiṣṭhira’s philosophical inquiries of Bhīṣma into a ‘return’ to this world to take up the topic of the fourth anthology, a King’s generous giving, in the *Anuśāsanaparvan’s Dānadharmaparvan*” [from the abstract]. This “return” of Yudhiṣṭhira from the philosophy of *mokṣa* to the king’s patronage of worthy brahmins meets Bronkhorst’s interesting suggestions about the *MBh*’s concern to solicit patronage for Brahmins.⁶

The other papers confined themselves to particular texts, themes, or ideas of varying degrees of generality or specificity. The most general of these was André Couture’s suggestion of a previously unnoticed tension inherent in Brahmin discourse from the *Rg Veda* to the *Purāṇas* and beyond. Starting from observations of a recurrent complementarity of *krātu* (“deliberative power” or “intention”) and *dākṣa* (“skillful realization of thought in action” or “execution”) in the approach of Vedic poets and ritualists to their compositions and their rites, Couture made an argument that this complementarity is emblematic of a deep-seated polarity in Indian thought between reason and praxis. His reflections bear upon philosophy in the epic through the frequent juxtaposition of the epic analogs to *krātu* and *dākṣa*, namely *saṃkhyā* (“which means not only ‘numeration, calculation,’ but also ‘deliberation, reasoning, reflection, reason, intellect,’ and even ‘discrimination’” [in the second sentence after note 25 of the paper]) and *yoga* (“sustained effort”), which eventually became the “two specific systems of thought (*darśanas*)” *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*. Couture argued that this polarity—and its necessary integration—was used for the understanding of other general phenomena of Indian culture, particularly the opposition and complementarity of *brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas*. He supported his reflections with an interesting analysis of the epic account of the role of Kapila, the *sāṃkhyayogapravartaka* (“the founder of *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*,” see Couture’s text following note 25 for his discussion of this ambiguous compound), in the salvaging of the King Sagara’s failing Horse Sacrifice and the rescuing of Sagara and his 60,000 sons from hell.

More narrow in scope and more technical in method are the five other papers published here. Two deal with the close study and annotation of two of the philosophically most important and intransigently difficult texts of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (Fitzgerald #2 on *buddhi* in the *Manubrhaspatisaṃvāda*, *MBh* 12.194–99, and Malinar #2 on the *Pañcaśikhavākya*, *MBh* 12.211–12). Two survey important words or word-families (Bailey on the \sqrt{vrt} family of words and Fitzgerald #1 on non-technical uses of the word *buddhi*). Finally, Peter Schreiner’s paper is a multi-faceted set of reflections on all aspects of the *MBh*’s presentation and discussion of its theory of *karman*—the epic’s “*karman*-theory.”

Greg Bailey has examined the presentation of major ethical themes of the *MBh*—particularly the performance of prescribed rites and other pious actions (*pravṛtti*) to

⁶ I discussed some of the effects of the economic and political needs of brahmins on the nature and design of the *MBh* and its didactic *saṃhitās* in Fitzgerald (2006, esp. pp. 277–284).

ensure eventual life in heaven as opposed to the renunciation of all forms of pious action (*nivṛtti*) in order to gain some kind of ultimate beatitude—using the distribution of words that are forms and derivatives of the verbal root \sqrt{vrt} , a root “normally designating a dynamic state of existence within a clearly defined circumstance or set of circumstances” [Conclusion, second sentence]. Bailey suggests that this level of generality makes this root very well suited to express the fundamental ethical choice posed by many epic authors. “The addition [to unprefix forms of the root] of the two fundamental prefixes *pra-* and *ni-* summarize choices arising out of this dynamic state of existence.” By the use of the prefix *pra-* one expresses his “movement onward within this and the next life..., thus reflecting the semantics of continuity associated with unprefix \sqrt{vrt} , and with *samsāra* in general. When *ni-* is utilized, on the contrary... [it] can be seen to imply ‘activity’ that is not goal oriented (with *mokṣa* being unachievable, if it is aimed at as a specific goal) and instead involves cessation of activity with continuing existence, still standing within the frame of unprefix \sqrt{vrt} ” [Conclusion, final sentence of first paragraph].

Peter Schreiner has brought his logical acumen to the question of a modern scholar’s search for a putative philosophical “theory” of *karman* developed by epic thinkers. “In what follows, “*karman*-theory” [abbreviated KT, jlf] is used as a nonspecific umbrella term, or tag, inherited from both Indological and everyday parlance, to refer to everything and anything that has to do with teachings or reflections or illustrations of (human) action and, as well, to the totality of axioms, theorems, theories, questions and answers that the *MBh* may contain, but which cannot be defined in advance or anticipated” [from the last two sentences of the second paragraph of “Delimiting the Topic”]. After consideration of a number of perspectives and parameters bearing upon recognizing such a theory or components of it in the epic, Schreiner observed: “KT has turned out to be a topic that does indeed tell us something about the *MBh*. The *MBh* contains KT where it talks about salvation or liberation (*śreyas*, *mokṣa*). KT is the pivotal point for many passages that have been considered to contain philosophy” [beginning of Conclusion]. Further: “... KT in the *MBh* is a problem worth pursuing. KT has turned out to be a collocation of elements which occur in theoretically connected ways, but which are also mentioned separately and independently of each other. Logically (if not also historically) this makes the elements into something prior (if not older) than their collocation. The elements may answer different questions when considered in isolation or when used in a composite theory” [just after note 28 in the Conclusion].

Angelika Malinar has contributed a major research paper to the volume in addition to her keynote address. She has completed a detailed, annotated study of the *Pañcaśikhavākya*, *MBh* 12.211–12, which is also a very thoughtful demonstration of one of the major points her keynote contribution made regarding the presentation of philosophy *sensu stricto* in the epic setting: the narrative dramatization, the “enactment,” of philosophical instruction. She writes that “12.211–12 is not only a philosophical text, but also a tale about philosophical discourse in general and about how Sāṃkhya philosophy is taught to a non-expert audience. Seen from this perspective the text is significant for the way in which

philosophical terms and issues are dealt with in the epic and adjacent non-expert texts, such as the Purāṇas” [from the end of the Abstract].

My own presentation at the conference focused upon the *Manubrhaspatisaṃvāda* and words for, and concepts of, knowledge found in that text, which bristles with such words. This paper was narrowed down into a series of studies of the word *buddhi*, two of which are presented here and the other is (Fitzgerald 2015). Fitzgerald #1 is a wide-ranging survey and profiling of the use of the word *buddhi* in early Sanskrit literature (apart from *adhyātma* usage), from its earliest appearances up to about 500 CE. Fitzgerald #2 studies the word *buddhi* in a major *adhyātma* exposition, the *Manubrhaspatisaṃvāda*, *MBh* 12.194–99, and does that within a fairly close presentation of the central argument of that important text.

Besides the papers published in this volume, John Brockington offered a perceptive exploration of the highly complex *Jāpakopākhyāna*, “How *japa* Changed between the Vedas and the *bhakti* Traditions: The Evidence of the *Jāpakopākhyāna* (*MBh* 12.189–93)”⁷; it was published soon after the conference (Brockington 2012).⁷ Other interesting papers were also presented: Ashok Aklujkar read a paper on “Language Philosophy in the *Mahābhārata*”; Peter Scharf discussed “Advaita Sāṃkhya in the *Mahābhārata*,” and Fred Smith contributed “Non-Sāṃkhya Constructions of the Person and Body in the *Mahābhārata*.”

Conclusion

As I look at the papers the conference produced I would say they highlight nicely two broad directives pointing to what will be the most fruitful results in future work on ‘epic philosophy.’ First, we all need to pay close attention to the narrative medium which the authorial agents of the *MBh* used for their philosophizing and in and against which they set and framed the philosophizing of others. Secondly, with much less sparkle on its surface, we need to add to the basic research of earlier generations of scholars on the contents of the text: systematic and methodical surveys of words and ideas and careful study of each textual construction for itself. The digital resources we have at our disposal today make this basic research and study much more convenient than it was in the past, but the fundamental requirement is still the meeting of human minds that must occur ‘in real time’ as sentence after sentence is read and argument upon argument is slowly pondered.

Abbreviations Common to Several Papers

BhG *Bhagavad Gītā* (*adhyāyas* 6.23[1]–40[18] of *MBh*)

Manu Mānavadharmasāstra. See under Olivelle (2005).

MBh *Mahābhārata*. See under Fitzgerald, Smith, Sukthankar, and van Buitenen.

MDh *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, the *Mokṣadharmā* (*adhyāyas* 12.168–353 of *MBh*). See under Belvalkar.

Rm *Rāmāyaṇa*. See under Bhatt and Shah.

⁷ I must confess that responsibility for the great length of time it has taken to prepare this volume for publication rests entirely with me. I regret the delay and thank my colleagues for their patience.

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