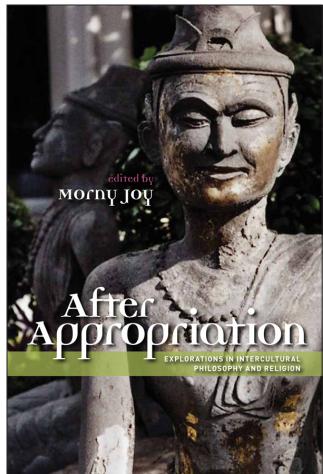




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The use of *Lakṣaṇā* in Indian exegesis

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INTRODUCTION

Lakṣaṇā is an Indian exegetical principle that permits an interpreter to revert to a less literal reading of a textual claim when the literal reading is sufficiently implausible. If the literal reading implies a contradiction or absurdity, for example, an interpreter is often permitted – and sometimes required – to understand the claim figuratively. Contemporary interpreters of Indian philosophy employ this strategy extensively, but often without acknowledging its limitations.

In this paper I argue that the application of the principle of *lakṣaṇā* by contemporary interpreters of Indian philosophy is appropriate only if at least two criteria are met. First, the premises of the argument that demonstrates that a contradiction or absurdity follows from a literal reading of the claim must be plausibly attributed to the text, author, or tradition of which the text is a part. Second, the inference from the premises to the conclusion of the argument must be plausibly attributed to the text,

author, or tradition. In short, contemporary interpreters of Indian philosophy should adopt and utilize the principle of *lakṣaṇā*, but only in accord with the criteria set forth by classical Indian philosophers.

THE PRINCIPLE OF *LAKṢAṄĀ*

One of the most common exegetical strategies among contemporary scholars of Indian philosophy is to argue that their own interpretations avoid absurd or inconsistent consequences that competing interpretations do not. This kind of strategy assumes from the outset that an interpreter should attempt to avoid contradictions of at least three kinds: (1) contradictions within the text, (2) contradictions with the broader tradition of which the text is a part, and (3) contradictions with so-called common sense.

On the one hand, there are certainly circumstances under which this strategy is justified. The alternative of simply letting apparent contradictions lie seems to amount to a denial of the original author's ability to recognize these contradictions. That is, the alternative seems to be the Orientalist interpretation *par excellence*.

In the introduction to her English translation of the *Manusmṛti*, Wendy Doniger makes this point.¹

Many scholars believe that the text of Manu is a hotchpotch of inconsistency.... This attitude has been characterized by followers of Edward Said as 'Orientalist'; it is based upon an arrogant Western assumption that 'Orientals' are radically alien even in their basic cognitive processes, that, unlike us, they do not recognize or understand contradictions when they encounter or generate them.²

Edward Said, quoting Cromer, further illustrates this assumption: "logic is something 'the existence of which the Oriental is disposed altogether to ignore'."³

Even if these texts are the result of numerous authors and redactions, or attempts to reconcile competing, inconsistent worldviews, and so on, to take apparent contradictions at face value seems to amount to a denial of the tradition's ability to recognize contradictions. The *readers* of these

texts, both within and without the intellectual milieu, “regard the product as a single text”⁴ and hence as a roughly unified document.

Arindam Chakrabarti makes this point in the context of the *Manusmṛti* and *Mahābhārata*. One might attempt to explain the apparent inconsistencies in these texts by mentioning the historical convergence of violent Vedic culture and non-violent post-Vedic culture during the period of their compositions.

But such an ‘explanation’ does not solve the moral puzzle that the *Dharmaśāstras* [a broader class of texts that includes the *Manusmṛti*] and *Mahābhārata* present. How could a Dharma-obsessed self-critical hermeneutically meticulous society internalize both of these attitudes within the same moral framework at the same time?⁵

It is difficult to see how the tradition’s interpretive and analytic competence can be acknowledged without at least attempting to explain how it reconciles the tensions that characterize its historical background and which might manifest in its texts.

Consider, for example, Rajendra Prasad’s interpretation of *niṣkāmakarma* (desireless action) in the *Bhagavadgītā* (*Gītā*). Prasad argues as follows:

Kṛṣṇa [an incarnation of God in the *Gītā*] also speaks of giving up all desires.... As per common experience, [however,] an intentional action *X* is possible without any desire for doing *X*, if there is another desire for doing something else.... To do an intentional action, therefore, I must have at least some desire for something, or for doing something. But if I have no desire at all, if I am completely desireless, I cannot do any intentional action. Therefore ... all of Kṛṣṇa’s exhortations to [Arjuna] for doing actions without any desire ... [are] infructuous [that is, useless].⁶

Prasad argues that desireless action, taken literally, is an obvious contradiction. Since Kṛṣṇa endorses desireless action, Kṛṣṇa’s advice is simply nonsense.

If we assume that Prasad is correct that desireless action is an obvious contradiction (although see below), then we should at least consider the possibility that Kṛṣṇa's endorsement of desireless action is qualified in some way. The alternative is to say that the author of the *Gītā* was incapable of recognizing this fact of "common experience."

Perhaps the advice could be taken as an endorsement of action performed without certain desires, rather than without any desire at all. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, among others, draws the same initial conclusion as Prasad – that the advice, taken literally, is a contradiction – but then infers that "[w]e are not asked to uproot all desires; for that would imply the cessation of all activity."⁷ That is, in Radhakrishnan's view, since the literal reading of Kṛṣṇa's advice entails an obvious contradiction, the literal reading must be abandoned in favour of a less literal one.⁸

Additionally, the Indian traditions themselves see this strategy of adopting a figurative interpretation under certain circumstances as absolutely indispensable. Many of the earliest texts in the Indian philosophical tradition (the *Yogaśūtra*, *Nyāyaśūtra*, *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, and so on) were written with the expectation that a student would hear the text from a teacher, who would explain the extremely concise, ambiguous *sūtras* orally. Commentaries on these texts reflect this oral tradition and often read like the words of one's guru, explicating each term or claim with synonyms, examples, and analogies, considering alternative interpretations and objections, and dismissing them. Without employing some form of the contemporary strategy outlined above, however, it is difficult to see how one interpretation is more plausible than another. Put simply: the commentarial tradition in India has always admitted consistency as a fundamental interpretive constraint. The commentators themselves presumably thought that their own work would be interpreted in accord with this constraint as well, and wrote accordingly.

Indeed, Indian philosophers and literary critics explicitly defend this interpretive principle and outline – albeit sometimes in disagreement with one another – guidelines for its use. In these traditions, the principle of *lakṣaṇā* states that when there is an obstruction (*bādha*) of the primary meaning (*mukhya*, *abhidhā*) of a word or sentence, a secondary meaning (*lakṣaṇā*, also *upacāra*, *gaṇi*, *vṛtti*, *bhakti*) must be adopted.⁹ The principle also states that when there is no obstruction to the primary meaning of a word or sentence, it is impermissible to revert to a secondary meaning.¹⁰

The primary and secondary meanings of a word are generally explained in terms of ordinary established usage. The referent that most immediately comes to mind when the word is heard is that to which the word refers directly and primarily. The referent that comes to mind, although not immediately – usually in part as a result of an obstruction (*bādha*) of the primary meaning – is that to which the word refers indirectly or secondarily.

The term *bādha* can refer to either an immediate breakdown in comprehension or a contradiction of some sort. An immediate breakdown in comprehension might occur when a person hears, for example, that “food is life” or “he is the family.”¹¹ In these cases, it is not clear how one might so much as form a consistent image from these utterances, since food and life are clearly different – someone might die with a full stomach! – and an individual and his family are numerically distinct. Hence the first sentence means food is essential to life, and the second means that he is the head or most prominent member of his family.

In contrast, a contradiction might occur when a person hears that “the village is on the Ganges.” In this case, it is not as if it is impossible to construct an image of a village floating atop the Ganges – there is no immediate breakdown in comprehension. It’s just that villages cannot in fact be constructed upon rivers.¹² That is, the utterance, taken literally, contradicts common sense. Hence the sentence states that the village sits on the bank of the Ganges.

The examples that are most widely discussed in the literature on *lakṣaṇā* are of the relatively straightforward sort just outlined. They are usually isolated utterances of a single speaker and face a *bādha* in virtue of their own content. In the context of textual exegesis, however, the strategy is extended, so that a secondary meaning can be adopted even if the claim being interpreted is perfectly sensible on its own.

The prevalence of this strategy among classical Indian philosophers cannot be overstated. Consider, for example, the opening passages of the most well-known and influential commentaries on the *Bhagavadgītā* – those of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Śaṅkara begins his commentary with verse 2.12, which reads:

Certainly I never did not exist, nor you, nor these lords of men /
And never will we not all exist henceforth //¹³

He explains that the word ‘we’ (*vayam*) should not be taken literally to refer to an actual multiplicity of selves because this is inconsistent with the non-dualism of both the *Gītā* and the *Upaniṣads*. Instead, ‘we’ refers to the merely apparent multiplicity of selves. Śaṅkara argues that the primary meaning of the claim should therefore be abandoned for a less literal one.¹⁴

Rāmānuja begins his commentary with the same verse, only to dispute Śaṅkara’s argument for the non-literal reading. He insists that the word ‘we’ must be taken literally, since Kṛṣṇa uses the word ‘we’ “at the time of teaching the eternal, ultimate truth, as a means to eliminating the error due to ignorance.”¹⁵ If Kṛṣṇa’s goal is the elimination of ignorance, then why would he speak in a way that, taken literally, reinforces what Śaṅkara takes to be the fundamental error that results from ignorance – namely the error of believing that there are a multiplicity of selves? Instead, according to Rāmānuja, in order to avoid further confusion, Kṛṣṇa surely speaks literally and means to imply an actual multiplicity of selves.¹⁶

So this fundamental metaphysical disagreement between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja amounts, in large part, to a disagreement over which authoritative claims should be taken literally. Rāmānuja in turn must interpret less literally claims that, taken literally, seem to endorse non-dualism.

Elsewhere, Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja agree to dismiss more literal readings of passages that imply that determinism is true. *Gītā* 3.33, for example, reads:

Even the wise acts according to his material nature /
Beings follow [their] material nature. What will resistance do? //

Both authors point out the contradiction between the literal reading and scriptural injunctions. Scriptural injunctions imply free will. If it is true that I ought to act in a spirit of devotion towards God, for example, then presumably I am free to do so if I choose. Free will and determinism are inconsistent. Hence *Gītā* 3.33 does not state that determinism is true. Instead, *Gītā* 3.33 should be taken to say that agents are determined by desire and aversion (*rāga* and *dveṣa*), unless they resist their force.¹⁸

In some cases, the defence of one interpretation over another amounts to a circuitous argument. The Naiyāyikas, for example, take the Upaniṣadic claim that *mokṣa* (liberation) is eternal *sukha* – literally: happiness – in its

secondary sense, to mean that *mokṣa* is eternally (and entirely) devoid of pain. They argue against the Vedāntin, who takes the claim literally, to mean that in *mokṣa* the eternal bliss of the true self is manifested. This means that, when a person attains *mokṣa*, he or she becomes aware of the bliss of *mokṣa*. If this is right, then some explanation must be given for what causes the awareness of bliss to arise. One option is to say that there is no cause of the awareness of the eternal bliss of *mokṣa*. It is simply eternal. If the awareness were eternal, however, then everyone would always experience it, and there would be no difference between the liberated person and the unliberated person. This, the Naiyāyikas claim, is absurd, however. If, on the other hand, the awareness of the bliss of *mokṣa* is caused, then it cannot be eternal because whatever is caused is non-eternal.¹⁹ Anything that comes into existence inevitably ceases to exist.²⁰ Instead, then, the claim that *mokṣa* is eternal *sukha* means *mokṣa* is perfectly devoid of *duḥkha* (pain).²¹

The point of this kind of example is to show that the standards for consistency can be extremely high. Prasad charges the author of the *Gītā* with saying something that directly contradicts a supposedly obvious truth. If he is right, then, at least according to the classical Indian traditions, an interpreter is not only justified in reverting to a less literal reading but is required to do so. Commentators on the *Nyāyasūtra*, in contrast, charge the Vedāntins with saying something the falsehood of which is discerned only through careful, extensive, and perhaps obscure reasoning (if it is at all). Nonetheless, in this case too, the classical Indian traditions say that the interpreter is justified in reverting to a less literal reading.

While all of this suggests that the contemporary strategy of avoiding contradiction is justified, and even unavoidable, there are also reasons for hesitation. It might be objected, for example, that the use of the exegetical principle of *lakṣaṇā* by contemporary scholars amounts to a different form of Orientalism, since it licenses the interpreter to impose her own concepts, values, and truths on Indian texts.²² As Doniger and Smith warn, “there is always the danger that the coherence is in the eye of the beholder, that we project upon the text a pattern that is not of its making.”²³

It seems that, if contemporary scholars apply the principle of *lakṣaṇā* as rigorously and extensively as classical commentators do, they will mistakenly conclude that the Indian Law Books are consistent with liberalism, that Indian ethics is a species of utilitarianism (or deontology, or

virtue ethics), that Indian metaphysics is realist, and perhaps physicalist, and so on, just because they take some of these positions as obviously correct. Indeed, the analyses of *niṣkāmakarma* that I mention above (and almost every other contemporary analysis of the doctrine) assume that Indian moral psychology is fundamentally Humean in that it accepts the so-called ‘desire-belief’ account of motivation – an account that has only recently become the preferred view in the West. (Hume himself begins the famous passage in which he defends this view by characterizing the opposing view – according to which reason can motivate action without the help of desire – as a philosophical dogma of his day.²⁴⁾

THE APPLICATION OF *LAKṢĀNĀ*

So the question is: How do we reconcile these demands and dangers? Not surprisingly, I want to argue that the Indian exegetical principle of *lakṣāṇā* should be used but that it should be used very carefully. To begin with, it’s worth drawing a distinction between what might be called the ‘unrestrained’ application of the principle of *lakṣāṇā* – the kind exhibited by the Nyāya argument against a literal reading of the claim that *mokṣa* is *sukha* – and what might be called the ‘restrained’ application.

The unrestrained application of the principle seeks to make a text consistent at any cost. Fundamental to this strategy is the assumption that the text is both perfectly consistent and entirely true. The strategy does not allow the option of simply ascribing an inconsistency or falsehood to the text under analysis. Neither Śaṅkara nor Rāmānuja dismisses a claim of the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahmasūtra*, or *Bhagavadgītā* as simply false. They apply the principle of *lakṣāṇā* without restraint.

The restrained application, in contrast, does not accept the assumption that the text is perfectly consistent and entirely true. It admits both that the author or authors that composed the text might have overlooked inconsistencies, and that the tradition that accepts the text as authoritative might have overlooked inconsistencies as well. It admits that the author or authors that composed the text might have asserted things that were untrue, and that the tradition that accepts the text as authoritative might have overlooked these falsehoods.

We see the distinction between these two applications of the principle in the Indian traditions themselves. When an author comments on a text

that he takes to be authoritative, he applies *lakṣaṇā* in an unrestrained way because he assumes that the author of the text is infallible, and hence that every word of the text is true, and every claim of the text consistent with every other. Indeed, under the assumption that the author of the text is infallible, this kind of strategy is justified.

In other cases, however, commentators are willing to attribute mistakes to those texts on which they comment simply because they do not take the authors of the texts to be infallible. In these cases, they apply the principle of *lakṣaṇā*, but not in an unrestrained way. They utilize the restrained application of the principle.²⁵

This is most obvious in cases in which an author considers an opponent's position. If the author utilizes the unrestrained application of *lakṣaṇā* in these circumstances, there would be no disagreements left to resolve. The Vedāntin, for example, would simply state the Nyāya view in a way that reflects innovative interpretation on the part of the Vedāntin. Instead, however, the Vedāntin notes the differences between the Vedāntin and Nyāya view and argues for the falsity of the latter.

This brings us back to the matter of how contemporary scholars should apply the principle of *lakṣaṇā*. The first point I want to make is that, since the unrestrained application of the principle is appropriate only under the assumption that the original author was or is infallible, contemporary scholars will rarely apply the principle in this way just because contemporary scholars tend not to operate under this assumption. So only the restrained application of the principle of *lakṣaṇā* need be addressed here.

In order to utilize the restrained application of *lakṣaṇā*, at least two criteria must be met. (These criteria are not meant to be exhaustive.)

- (1) The premises of the argument that demonstrates the contradiction or absurdity that follows from the literal reading of the claim must be plausibly attributed to the text, author, or tradition of which the text is a part.
- (2) The inference from the premises to the conclusion of the argument that demonstrates the contradiction or absurdity that follows from the literal reading of the claim must be plausibly attributed to the text, author, or tradition.

In order to justify reverting to a non-literal reading of a claim, an interpreter must argue that the literal reading of the claim entails a contradiction or absurdity. The first criterion states that the claims that constitute the premises of the argument that demonstrates the contradiction or absurdity must be plausibly attributed to the text, author, or tradition of which the text is a part.²⁶

Consider an example. Radhakrishnan, whom I mentioned above, argues for a non-literal interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's advice to act without desire in the following way:

Premise One: Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to act without desire.

Premise Two: Desire is a necessary condition of action.

Premise Three/Conclusion One: Hence taken literally, Kṛṣṇa's advice is a contradiction – he advises Arjuna to both act and not act, or to both act without desire and act with desire.

Premise Four: If Kṛṣṇa's advice, taken literally, entails a contradiction, then the advice should be taken non-literally.

Conclusion Two: Hence Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to act without certain desires. Other desires are permissible.

The argument is convincing, however, only if premise two is plausibly attributed to the *Gitā*. If premise two is true but cannot be plausibly attributed to the text, then, all other things being equal, the most plausible interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's advice is the literal – and inconsistent – one. Kṛṣṇa advises Arjuna to act without desire even if he is mistaken in some way in doing so. Hence Radhakrishnan's argument is not convincing as it stands. Some further argument is needed for the claim that premise two is plausibly attributed to the *Gitā*.

Some of the authors who offer a similar argument argue that, since a number of other seminal Indian texts and traditions accept the claim that desire is a necessary condition of action, the *Gitā* does as well.²⁷ Radhakrishnan and others,²⁸ however, seem to want to say that, since this claim is obviously true, the *Gitā* must accept it. So there are at least two different strategies for justifying the attribution of a claim to a text. The first is to find the claim in the text or tradition of which it is a part.²⁹ The second is to say that the claim is self-evident and hence that the original

author must have accepted it, even if there is insufficient textual evidence to support the claim that the original author accepted it.

I want to leave the first strategy aside and focus on the second, since relatively little has been said about the second. Obviously, the fact that a claim is now widely accepted does not entail that it was obviously true or self-evident to the author of an ancient text.³⁰ It seems forbidding, however, to try to codify all of the additional conditions that would have to be met in order for an interpreter to be justified in attributing a claim to a text on this basis. Instead, I want to point out a single additional condition, the violation of which is the basis for many mistakes in Indian exegesis: the claim that is attributed to a text on the basis that it is self-evident must at least be true.³¹

Consider another example. Ian Whicher argues that verse 1.2 of the *Yogasūtra* (*yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ*) should not be taken literally to read: “*Yoga – yogāḥ – is the cessation – nirodhaḥ – of the modifications (that is, states and activities) – vṛtti – of the mind – citta.*” Instead, it should be taken non-literally to mean: “*Yoga is the cessation of [the misidentification with] the modifications (vṛtti) of the mind.*”³²

One of the arguments that Whicher offers for this conclusion goes as follows:

Premise One: Assume *nirodha* (cessation) is the ontological elimination of mental modifications. (This is what *Yogasūtra* 1.2 says, if taken literally.)

Premise Two: If *nirodha* is the ontological elimination of mental modifications, then it is the willful suppression of mental modifications.

Premise Three: If *nirodha* is the willful suppression of mental modifications, then *nirodha* is a *rajasic* and *tamasic* state (a state characterized by aggression, laziness, and delusion).

Premise Four/Conclusion One: Hence if *Yogasūtra* 1.2 is taken literally, *nirodha* is a *rajasic* and *tamasic* state, which is absurd.

Premise Five: If *Yogasūtra* 1.2, taken literally, entails an absurdity, then *Yogasūtra* 1.2 should be taken non-literally.

Conclusion Two: Hence the advice in *Yogasūtra* 1.2 to eliminate the modifications of the mind is just the advice to eliminate the identification with the modifications of the mind.³³

Whicher seems to want to say that premises two and three are self-evident. He doesn't cite the *Yogasūtra* or any of its commentaries in their support. Whicher assumes, in premise two, that in order to eliminate a mental state or activity, one must suppress it straightforwardly. This would seem to be false, however, in light of the following example.

In a related context, Paul Williams points out that the Buddhist *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* repeatedly describe the bodhisattva as without discursive thought. Williams points out that to take this to mean that the text advises "simply cutting discursive thought, making the mind a blank" straightforwardly, however, amounts to the fallacy of "confusing the result with the cause." Instead, a practitioner should first extend her analysis of reality as a means of deepening her understanding of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). As an eventual but not immediate result, discursive thought ceases.³⁴

Likewise in the context of yoga, the practitioner should eliminate the *kleśas* (defilements) by means of morality, dispassion, and concentration (rather than simply trying to suppress the mind directly). As an eventual but not immediate result, mental activity ceases – that is, there is an ontological elimination of the mental modifications. If this is right, then premise two of Whicher's argument is false. If the premise is false, then it cannot be plausibly attributed to the text (author and so on) on the grounds that it is self-evident.³⁵

Thus, in summary, the first criterion states that the claims that constitute the premises of the argument that demonstrates that a contradiction or absurdity results from a literal reading of a textual claim must be plausibly attributed to the text. In order for a claim to be plausibly attributed to a text, at least one of two conditions must be satisfied. Either (a) there must be sufficient evidence from the text or tradition, or (b) the claim must be self-evident. If an interpreter attributes a claim to a text on the basis that it is self-evident, then minimally the claim must be true. Sufficient textual evidence is a sufficient condition for attributing a claim to a text. The truth of a claim, however, is merely a necessary condition. Indeed, it is a rather meagre condition. Nonetheless, failure to meet this condition accounts for many mistakes in the interpretation of Indian philosophical texts.

The second criterion for the application of the principle of *lakṣaṇā* states that any inference within the argument that an interpreter offers to justify reverting to a non-literal reading of a claim must be plausibly attributed to the text, author, or tradition.³⁶ Suppose an interpreter offers an argument for a non-literal reading of a claim, and each premise of the argument is plausibly attributed to the text. It still might not be the case that the argument as a whole is plausibly attributed to the text. In addition to whatever evidence makes the attribution of the claims plausible, further evidence is typically needed for the plausibility of attributing to the text the combination of claims in the form of an argument. Many of Socrates' dialogues demonstrate that his interlocutor accepts inconsistent claims without realizing it, and of course each of us has been and is guilty of the same kind of oversight. We should leave open the possibility that a text or author is capable of this kind of oversight as well. So, rather than simply assume that the author draws every justified inference, a case should be made for each inference that is attributed.

There are at least two different strategies for justifying the attribution of an inference to a text, and the two strategies parallel those for justifying the attribution of a claim to a text. (For the sake of simplicity, in what follows, I assume that the first criterion is met.) The first is to find sufficient evidence for the inference within the text or tradition of which it is a part. This might mean establishing that the very argument that is being attributed to the text is explicit within the text or tradition itself. Otherwise, it might mean establishing that a sufficiently similar line of argument is advanced, perhaps repeatedly, in the text or tradition.

The second strategy is to say that the inference is self-evident, and hence that the original author must have accepted it, even if there is insufficient textual evidence to support the claim that the original author accepted it. If the inference is attributed to the text on these grounds, then it must meet the very meagre condition of being justified, just as the attribution of a claim to a text on the grounds that it is self-evident must meet the minimum (and only necessary) condition of being true.³⁷

So in summary, the second criterion states that the inferences within the argument that demonstrates that a contradiction or absurdity results from a literal reading of a textual claim must be plausibly attributed to the text. In order for an inference to be plausibly attributed to a text, at least one of two conditions must be satisfied. Either (a) there must be

sufficient evidence from the text or tradition, or (b) the inference must be self-evident. If an interpreter attributes an inference to a text on the basis that it is self-evident, then minimally the inference must be justified. Sufficient evidence from the text or tradition is a *sufficient* condition for attributing an inference to a text. That an inference is justified, however, is merely a *necessary* condition.

LAKṢĀNĀ AND CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETERS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

The two criteria that I have defended here might be combined to read:

The argument that demonstrates the contradiction or absurdity that follows from the literal reading of the claim must be plausibly attributed to the text, author, or tradition of which the text is a part.

If the argument is plausibly attributed to a text, then presumably each premise of the argument is plausibly attributed to the text and any inference between premise(s) and conclusion(s) is plausibly attributed to the text. Still, it is helpful to keep the two criteria distinct, since each amounts to a distinct task that comes with its own obstacles. In closing, I want to say something about the skills that are required to deal with these obstacles.

First, an interpreter should know the text and traditions that he or she interprets as well as possible and attempt to align the text under analysis with its cultural, philosophical, and historical milieu. Facility with the original language in which the text was composed is an important component in this range of skills. This skill will generally be of most use in establishing the plausibility of a claim or inference on the basis of evidence from the text or tradition of which it is a part. This point can be reduced to the advice to simply employ a certain kind of hermeneutic and historical rigour that many scholars already employ.

Hermeneutic and historical rigour is not enough, however. Thorough knowledge of the traditions under interpretation does not ensure that the interpreter will correctly identify possible contradictions and accurately discriminate between more and less plausible interpretations. In order to

do this, the interpreter must also employ a certain kind of philosophical rigour – a careful analysis of concepts and their implications, the broad consideration of alternatives, and an ability to evaluate his or her own arguments honestly – much like that employed by classical Indian authors.

This is not to say that the careful historian and philosopher never imposes his or her own convictions, intuitions, conceptual schemes, and so on, onto a text. My point is that some of the grossest instances of this can be avoided by means of the strategies I have outlined. Without these strategies, there are literally no limitations on what an interpreter might claim a text implies.

There are both altruistic and egoistic reasons to produce research of this sort. To the extent that we do, we contribute toward building a community of scholars with a common set of standards. With a common set of standards, we produce work that is useful and interesting to a larger audience. We also work towards avoiding obvious mistakes and the relatively effortless refutations of those who have mastered skills that we have not. In short, we improve our work by making it more convincing.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary interpreters of Indian philosophy employ something like the classical Indian exegetical principle of *lakṣaṇā*. While this principle is indispensable to current scholarship, contemporary scholars will benefit from appreciating the rigour with which it was applied in the classical Indian commentarial traditions themselves, and by following their examples.

Notes

- 1 The translation is authored by Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, but this portion of the introduction is written by Doniger and reflects her interpretation of the text, which differs from Smith's. See footnote 3, p. xvi.
- 2 Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith, *The Laws of Manu* (London: Penguin, 1991), xliv–xlv.
- 3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1994), 36.
- 4 Doniger and Smith, *Laws of Manu*, xvii.
- 5 Arindam Chakrabarti, “Meat and Morality in the *Mahābhārata*,” *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 3 (1996): 261.
- 6 Rajendra Prasad, *Varṇadharma, Niṣkāmakarma and Practical Morality* (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 1999), 59–60.
- 7 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “The Ethics of *Bhagavadgīta* and Kant,” *International Journal of Ethics* 21 (1911): 475.
- 8 See Christopher G. Framarin, *Desire and Motivation in Indian Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2009), 6–8.
- 9 There is disagreement over whether a word or a sentence is the fundamental unit of meaning.
- 10 Consider examples of each claim. Mañḍanamiśra begins his *Brahmasiddhi* by attributing the following argument to his opponents: “Indeed, others [that is, my opponents] think that since, when there is a grasping of [the *Upaniṣads*] primary meaning, there is a contradiction ... with perception, and so on, [therefore] they are [to be taken] in [their] secondary meaning” (Framarin, *Desire and Motivation in Indian Philosophy*, 156). Vācaspatimiśra, in his commentary to the *Nyāyasūtra*, says, “only if the primary (*mukhya*) [meaning] is inconsistent is the secondary (*gauna*) [meaning] reverted to” (Framarin, *ibid.*, 151).
- 11 Vātsyāyana offers these examples in his commentary to *Nyāyasūtra*, 2.2.59.
- 12 K. Kunjunni Raja points out that the English sentence “The village is on the Ganges” might be understood to mean that the village is on the bank of the Ganges without reverting to its secondary meaning, since part of the primary meaning of the word ‘on’ in English is something like “in the vicinity of” (K. Kunjunni Raja, *Indian Theories of Meaning* [Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1969], 232).
- 13 Shastri Gajanana Shambhu Sadhale, ed., *Bhagavad-gītā with Eleven Commentaries* (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2000), 83.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.* See also Christopher G. Framarin, “The Problem with Pretending: Rāmānuja’s Arguments against *Jīvanmukti*,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37 (2009): 399–414.
- 17 Sadhale, *Bhagavad-gītā*, 331.
- 18 *Ibid.*

- 19 This is a standard claim accepted by both the Naiyāyikas and Vedāntins. The thought is that if something comes into being, then it is partite, and if it is partite, then it inevitably reduces to its parts.
- 20 Framarin, *Desire and Motivation in Indian Philosophy*, 144–45.
- 21 As these examples make clear, the use of *lakṣaṇā* is widespread by the time of the oldest extant commentaries throughout a variety of traditions.
- 22 Tinu Ruparell raised this kind of objection against the strategy in a discussion at the Comparative Philosophy and Religion Workshop in Calgary, AB, October 2006.
- 23 Doniger and Smith, *Laws of Manu*, xlvii.
- 24 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 413.
- 25 Vācaspatimīśra and Udayana, for example, simply deny Vātsyāyāna's claim (at *Nyāyāsūtra*, 1.1.10) that the self is imperceptible, rather than attempt to interpret him in a way that is consistent with this claim (which would anyway be an impossible task).
- 26 This point is implicit in what Kisor Kumar Chakrabarti calls 'GAIE' – "the principle of general acceptability of inductive examples," which requires that the counter-example offered to an opponent is one that the opponent already accepts. Kisor K. Chakrabarti, *Classical Indian Philosophy of Mind: The Nyāya Dualist Tradition* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 8.
- 27 See, for example, Roy W. Perrett, *Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 23, and Tara Chatterjea, *Knowledge and Freedom in Indian Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 125.
- 28 See, for example, Jagat Pal, *Karma, Dharma, and Moksha: Conceptual Essays on Indian Ethics* (Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2004), 53.
- 29 It might be that in order to determine whether a text or tradition asserts the premise, an additional argument, the conclusion of which is the premise under analysis, must be considered. This additional argument, in turn, must also meet the criteria that I outline here.
- 30 In what follows, I assume that a claim that is self-evident might still require some reasoning along the following lines. If someone has drawn on the wall with a crayon in the past fifteen minutes, and only a parent and her child are in the house, it might be self-evident to the parent that the child drew on the wall.
- 31 If a claim is plausibly attributed to a text on the basis of additional textual evidence, however, then the claim need not be true.
- 32 Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 152.
- 33 Whicher says, "Such willfulness leading to suppression, and so forth, is simply a form of misguided effort based on *rajasic* and *tamasic* *vṛttis* and predispositions in the form of aggressive or deluded ideas or intentions.... The disempowerment of *avidyā*

(ignorance) over the mind is not to be confused with the *guṇa* [quality] of *tamas!*" (ibid., 163).

- 34 Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (London: Routledge, 2008), 49.
- 35 Whicher offers at least two additional arguments for his interpretation of *Yogaśūtra*, 1.2. The more convincing of the two points out that if all mental modifications of an individual cease, then the individual cannot act in the world. If a liberated person cannot act in the world, then no living liberated teacher can exist. This, Whicher claims, is absurd, since the tradition admits liberated teachers. In an earlier draft of this paper, I argued that this argument is unconvincing, since it attributes the later doctrine of *jīvanmukti* (the possibility of a living liberated person) to the original text. Since then I've become less convinced
- 36 of my objection. Even if the original text does not mention the doctrine of *jīvanmukti* per se, the problem that Whicher points out does seem rather obvious. Whether Whicher is justified in drawing the conclusion that *Yogaśūtra*, 1.2 ought to be translated as he suggests, however, is a further question.
- 37 I use the word 'inference' to refer to any inferential move from premises to a conclusion. The conclusion might be an intermediate conclusion or a final conclusion. If a premise contains a conditional – such as, 'If *P*, then *Q*' – then the first criterion, rather than the second, requires that it be plausibly attributed to the text.
- 37 If the inference is plausibly attributed to a text on the basis of additional textual evidence, then the inference need not be justified.