

Methodology: Meditations of a Philosophical Buddhologist¹

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There was a famous incident in the 1980s that sent shivers down spines. A prominent Princeton philosopher put a notice on his office door that philosophy students should just say “No” to the history of philosophy—Western and Eastern alike, no doubt. I am going to turn the tables and look at some arguments by historians for nay-saying to philosophy, in particular arguments by historians of Asian thought and specialists in Buddhist Studies. Such arguments, too, don’t fare well. I close with an instructive example from another field, i.e., linguistics, and a few morals to the story.

I am a buddhologist, i.e., a professor of Buddhist Studies, who never reneged on an earlier training in Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Stars so aligned that I could work in a niche domain, using modern tools to investigate philosophically what Indian and Tibetan Buddhist writers said about logical and metaphysical matters, and what is closely related, about how their languages work. It was often an adventure in largely unexplored territory.

People can pursue interests such as mine with different levels of engagement or disinterest, and different levels of attention to broad themes or to details. Buddhologists who claim to be following a historical-philological approach naturally value the intricacies of what was actually said in texts, how the texts were constituted, or how actual historical figures’ came to produce ideas in specific contexts. Buddhologists who talk a lot with philosophers, on the other hand, tend to seek Buddhist arguments or theories to quite a degree abstracted from contingent historical and causal matters so that the Buddhist positions, in more or less streamlined versions, can be contrasted with other broad Indian views or even resituated as a voice in a contemporary Western conversation.

The English philosopher Bernard Williams, in his essay “Descartes and the Historiography of Philosophy,” made a quite similar distinction, one that he characterized as between the history of ideas— i.e., roughly the history of the complex processes leading to the production of ideas— and the history of philosophy, a history done philosophically and itself yielding a good measure of philosophy as a result. The history of philosophy, then, is a study of past treatments of themes and problems, their evolutions, and, especially, if we follow Williams, their fertile differences from the present-day positions that we take for granted.² Its *raison d’être*, then, is not primarily to establish a tally-sheet of *our* past heroes, i.e., those that anticipated what we consider to be true and important thoughts; instead it

¹ This paper took form as a lecture to the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. It is offered to my friend and fellow buddhologist Marek Mejer as a gesture of my esteem for his work and in fond memory of time spent together.

² Thus, to take Descartes, the history of his ideas will concern, *inter alia*, the influence of scholastic writers, Renaissance-inspired “self-fashioning,” his education in the Jesuit run Collège Royal de La Flèche, or his correspondence with the scientifically oriented Marin Mersenne and others, while a history of philosophy approach to Descartes will examine his skepticism and epistemological turn, in many respects in contrast to the linguistic turn of modern Western philosophy.

widens thinking, opens minds, and even enhances questionability through understanding a coherent, sophisticated system of thought that may well be quite strange to our present way of thinking.

The line between the two approaches to history is admittedly shaded. I was always attracted to both approaches, with the dosage varying depending on the particular subjects treated. At the very least, it seemed to me obvious that if I was going to streamline past texts and treat them as developing summarizable, serious arguments and philosophical views, I had to know reliably and in some detail *what* they actually said and *how* they came to say it. But it was also a matter of temperament: I was intrigued by the prospects of stereoscopic vision and found alternating perspectives more to my liking than a steady, one-sided gaze. History of the complicated processes in the production and adoption of ideas alone did not seem sufficiently philosophical, being short on both argument and vision. But there was also something extremely weird about the perspective of some of my teachers of analytic philosophy, who did indeed (to take a well-worn depiction of analytic philosophers' approach to history) look largely upon the works of past thinkers, like Plato, Descartes, Spinoza or Kant, as though they had just appeared in last month's issue of *Mind*.

So much for autobiography. I don't think I was deluded in wanting to combine an informed historical-philological perspective with philosophical engagement, but I won't try to lay out much of a methodological theory and even less of a detailed code as to how one should proceed. My meditations here concentrate on dispelling underlying, *a priori* opposition and some objections that, if founded, would render impossible what I, and people like me, do. I conclude with an illustrative example of what I think *can* be done and some morals to the story.³

Not everyone, neither amongst philosophers nor buddhologists, would agree with a two-aspected approach. Moreover, opposition to philosophical engagement with the East has long been entrenched in institutional practices. Indeed, the first thing to which a philosophical buddhologist must adapt is that Asian thought is deemed more like religion and not actually philosophy at all. Nāgārjuna, Dharmakīrti, Klong chen rab 'byams pa, Fazang, and Tsong kha pa are more often than not relegated to religion or Asian studies departments, while Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz and Kierkegaard are taught and researched in philosophy. Go figure.

In part, this may be due to "the inertia of the institution," for lack of a better term, the ponderousness of universities to adapt classifications and organizational practices even when out-dated. There have also been, however, some very debatable lines of reasoning behind keeping Nāgārjuna, Tsong kha pa *et alii* at arm's length from philosophy. One such line is that philosophy concerns reasoning and argument, and that these things, to take Anthony Flew's memorable dismissal, don't occur much East of Suez. (Instead, we supposedly have mysticism and religion.) Or, equally damaging is the idea that philosophy *proprement dite*, or fully worthy of the name, is somehow essentially derived from Greek thought, with the consequence, again, that East of Suez we don't, or never will, find any full-fledged

³ Call this the *solvitur ambulando* approach. Diogenes of Sinope countered Eleatic arguments for the impossibility of motion by getting up and walking. I think that we can short-circuit some methodological discussions by doing something similar. To use the language of Nike: just do it.

philosophy. These views are, fortunately, on the wane and enough has been said about them already. What I want to take up is something different found in some philosophy departments and other fields: the idea that the study of past and present thought are, and should be, radically separate pursuits, because past work is not sufficiently relevant to present pursuits. When even the history of Western philosophy is taken to be separate and marginal to the pursuit of philosophy itself, past philosophies from far-flung, foreign traditions like those of Asia will end up all the more so. The collateral damage is that Nāgārjuna, Dharmakīrti and co., will seem especially irrelevant.

Who, in Anglo-American philosophy, thought that present philosophy and its history should be treated as very separate things, with philosophy's history marginal to philosophy itself? Well, many did not. The Oxford philosopher Sir Peter Strawson would certainly never have agreed that history of philosophy is marginal, as his work on Kant's first *Critique* amply attests. Neither, of course, would Bernard Williams. Nonetheless, nay-saying to history has been radical and hugely influential. There was a famous incident in the 1980's that sent shivers down spines, and probably still does. A prominent Princeton philosopher Gilbert Harman put a notice on his office door that philosophers should just say "No" to the history of philosophy.⁴ The echoes of Nancy Reagan's absurdly simplistic solution to drug addiction—just say "No"—were unmistakable, with, of course, also the unflattering implication that the history of philosophy—Western and Eastern, alike—was comparable to a stupefying narcotic.

Now, Gilbert Harman himself had a somewhat more moderate position than his "Just say, 'No'" remark might seem to suggest. He did not think that study of the history of philosophy was actually valueless: instead, he seems to have thought that its study was not of *educational* benefit to most students of philosophy and should not be obligatory. Nonetheless, the legend of "Just say 'No'" concords, to varying degrees, with several prominent analytic philosophers' opinions.⁵ The very influential Harvard thinker W.V. Quine, for example, saw the contrast between philosophy and its history as comparable to the difference between science and the history of science. He tells us in his autobiography that a scientist (by which he includes philosophers, as he repeatedly insisted good philosophy was "continuous" with science) seeks to resolve problems, obscurities and conceptual tangles to arrive at truth, whereas the historian "tries to recapture the very tangles, confusions, and obscurities from which the scientist [*scilicet* philosopher] is so eager to free himself."⁶ In fact, Quine's rare foray into the history of philosophy was a course on Hume, which he pursued with very limited enthusiasm, essentially because he thought that extracting truth from historical figures was not worth the effort.

"...I was spared Leibniz. I chose Hume. ... I tried to make a virtue of the necessity. ... By the end of the course my lecture notes were full and ready for a repeat performance in another year, but I could not bear to offer the course again.

⁴ See Sorell and Rogers 2005, 43-44. Sorell corresponded with Harman about the "just say 'No'" incident. Harman's reply then figures in Sorell's own paper.

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein had little use for or interest in past philosophers (apart from Frege, and a few nineteenth century figures, like Schopenhauer and Hertz), probably not so much because of an ideological position about the valuelessness of history, but because he was who he was, a strikingly original thinker. The logical positivists, however, were ideologically motivated in their rejection, famously taking much or most of what had passed as previous philosophy as thoroughly meaningless.

⁶ Quine 1985, 194.

Determining what Hume thought and imparting it to students was less appealing than determining the truth and imparting that.”⁷

Quine, like others, no doubt evaluated thinkers in terms of their worth to our time; his extremism, however, was that probably nobody outside the 20th century figured as much of a hero on his tally-sheet. I would like to be able to say that I’m exaggerating the uncompromising narrowness of such ideological positions on the valuelessness of the history of philosophy to philosophy. But I doubt that I am. Let’s call this the hardline analytic philosophy approach: truth is what counts; there may well not be enough of it in past thought to make studying history worthwhile. These were shots across the bow that did not go unnoticed. Restrictive conceptions of what constituted genuine philosophy shut out its history.

So much for some prominent analytic philosophers and their complex connections (or lack of them) with historical Western or Eastern thinkers. Let’s shift the focus to Asianists. Amongst Asianists looking at Indian or Tibetan Buddhist ideas, there are, no doubt, quite a number who, in one way or another, would agree that present-day philosophy (or perhaps all Western philosophy) is a fundamentally separate and marginal pursuit, with the conclusion that there is all the less reason for aspiring buddhologists to do much of it. It would be better, in effect, to just say “No” to modern philosophy instead of history. Better, so it would be said, to learn languages, read Sanskrit or Tibetan texts, and learn the history of Buddhism than to struggle through symbolic logic and abstruse theories of doubtful relevance. There is, of course, truth in arguing for practical or pedagogical priority of language study and history; there is an awful lot to do *before* one adds Western philosophy to the mix if one does so at all. But practical caution is a different matter from an across the board, ideological opposition to more broad-stroke contemporary philosophical interpretations.

Let me take up some of the ideological arguments of buddhologists that crop up for keeping present-day philosophy at a solid arm’s length from historiography of Buddhist thought. One such argument is the potential for abuse, a problem that Harman himself had actually identified and which also, I think, seriously worries buddhologists, and with some reason. For Harman, the abuse is “reading one’s views into a sacred text so one can read them back out endowed with authority.”⁸ For buddhologists the abuse is not just that philosophers legitimize their views by finding pseudo-backing in historical Buddhist writers, but that other people (i.e., Buddhist modernists and proselytizers) legitimize the texts of Buddhism by finding that they anticipate prestigious modern philosophies or scientific theories. While the abuses serve different ends, they are two variants on the same process. Let’s label both these types of abuse with the moniker “piggybacking.” You can piggyback modern philosophical ideas onto Buddhism or Buddhism onto the modern. Neither type is a good thing to do.

There are numerous examples of one type or another, and there may have been some that were both. To take an influential case, there are many who would take a version of utilitarianism—in its simplest form, an act is good if and only if it maximizes happiness—as the best account of Buddhist ethical philosophy. At some point they find corroborating textual passages: some such principle is supposedly in all, or at least essential, Buddhism, in Śāntideva, the Pāli canon, Tantra, or sometimes the Vinaya. I can’t take this utilitarian

⁷ Quine 1985, 194.

⁸ Harman as quoted in Sorell and Rogers 2005, 43-44.

reading of Buddhism seriously. The brute fact of texts talking a lot about happiness as a goal is not probative. Historical authors are not themselves utilitarians simply because they value happiness—most people do—nor because they espouse equality of self and others. Rather a past author might be determined to be more of a utilitarian (than, say, a Kantian, Aristotelian or other) because in certain litmus tests he or she decides the right course of action by a purely utilitarian calculation of maximizing happiness and not by any other ethical considerations. We might, for example, see if the author would choose the intuitively difficult course of action in well-known ethical dilemmas, as utilitarians seem forced to do. These are dilemmas such as the “inhospitable hospital,” the “lynch mob,” or “George the Chemist.”⁹ There is no evidence whatsoever—apart from the words *we* might put in their supposedly re-educated mouths—that major, historical Buddhist writers would choose the intuitively difficult, utilitarian side of those dilemmas or others like them. In short, I doubt you would find utilitarianism in Buddhist texts unless you were already a utilitarian anyway. All this suggests piggybacking.

Piggybacking is indeed a mortal sin when it baselessly or fraudulently finds one set of ideas in another thinker’s words and uses that “find” to up legitimacy. There are, however, ways to avoid mortal sin and still use contemporary ideas. Texts provide friction and resistance confirming or rejecting would-be interpretations, on the condition, of course, that we have the requisite linguistic skills to read them reliably in depth or, at the very least, have regular collaboration with someone who does. Also, the interpretive notions used must themselves be sufficiently precise for the question of applicability to be meaningful. Logical notions, technical matters, and other well-defined ideas in the interpretive toolbox may work reasonably well. Not surprisingly, woolly notions, Western or Eastern, or ones that we ourselves do not fully understand, do not fare well.

There *are* philosophical problems in Buddhist texts where historiography with liberal use of contemporary notions works very well and is also grounded in textual evidence—I am not going to run through success and failure stories here. There is also a quite different situation worth mentioning, namely, that we, as modern readers, think *with* or along side Buddhist philosophers and say what they could, or even perhaps should, have said to answer a problem without pretending that they ever did say it, explicitly or implicitly. One can use this tactic, for example, to answer past or present objections that a Buddhist position was fatally flawed, impossible, or incoherent. The defense we might offer is not itself what the past philosopher said, but is useful, perhaps even indispensable if we are to take the philosopher seriously. Thus, for example, we can marshal 21st century theories of truth, like deflationism, to show that the Madhyamaka idea of customary truth need not lead to nihilism or pernicious relativism. What would, of course, not be useful would be to insist that those same 21st century ideas already figured somehow deep in the past thinkers’ works when there is no textual evidence whatsoever that they did. That would be a misapplication of the otherwise sound principle that one should interpret texts charitably. It would not be a charitable or creative way of interpreting textual evidence; it would be a self-serving invention. The mortal sin is to fudge the difference.

There is a second, but related, argument that I have heard not infrequently from colleagues to keep Western philosophy out or, at most, marginal. I understand the argument

⁹ For the details, see Goodman 2009, 25-27.

to be something like this: Western philosophy abounds in concepts and terminology that are alien to the Asian authors and their milieu; the point of historiography of Buddhist philosophy is to get into past thinkers' actual worldviews, what we might find if we could get into their heads, understanding them in their own terms, or at least in translational equivalents of their terms, and not via notions foreign to them. Alien concepts and terms from a significantly different philosophy thus betray history—if we rely heavily on them, we will piggyback our own views onto sacred texts.

The problem sounds a bit worse than it is. Baseless use of terminology foreign to a past author is uncontroversially bad, but fortunately not all use of foreign terminology is baseless. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine why it *should* always be baseless, especially as it is a routine feature of our descriptions of other people's thought that we do, on many occasions, use terms and add information that they did not know or would often even contest. Thus, to take a bit of a cliché example, it is legitimate for me to say something like, "Mr. Onassis thinks that his yacht is bigger than it is," when it is clear to me that Onassis self-delusionally aggrandized an average-sized boat. Onassis's own inner monologue, however, never featured him telling himself he was delusional about his boat-size. He would surely protest, instead, that he was absolutely accurate and that it is I who am deluded. Put in other terms, the routine feature I am referring to is that propositional attitudes—e.g., "thinks that...", "believes that ..." "hopes that ...", "knows that ..."—admit of *de dicto* interpretations that are "about what is said" and *do* turn predominantly on what figures in the thinker's inner speech, and they admit of *de re* interpretations that are about the things in question, often largely independently of how the thinker depicts them. Often one does have valid bases and evidence for a *de re* ascription. It depends on each case.

There is no reason to say that a version of the *de dicto-de re* distinction can never be applied to the thought of distant past Indian or Tibetan thinkers. Thus to enquire *de re* whether Dharmakīrti recognized certain tautological inferences, like, say, the *consequentia mirabilis* or double negation elimination and others, is something that *can* be meaningfully debated in a history of logic—it is not to be ruled out *a priori* simply because Dharmakīrti did not know any Latin or because there was no explicit Sanskrit equivalent of "tautology," i.e., the idea that certain propositions are true in virtue of their logical form alone irrespective of content. Dharmakīrti's inner monologue, whatever it was, may even be largely irrelevant to the question of whether he recognized tautologies *de re*. In short: we need to avoid piggybacking but at the same time be able to say as best and honestly we can what past thinkers have thought, using the evidence available and not infrequently going well outside their inner speech.

I had spoken at the beginning of this lecture of Bernard Williams' distinction between the history of ideas and that of philosophy. Here is what I personally think is involved in doing the history of Buddhist philosophy philosophically. The least controversial part is that we can use appropriately clear contemporary concepts and tools to understand metaphysical themes, logical structures, argumentation strategies, etc. that one finds in the Buddhists' texts themselves. I and many others have done a lot of that, analyzing Buddhist treatments of liar sentences, *reductio ad absurdum*, theories of perception, universals, part-whole relations, and so on. I don't see why one would rule it out from historiography *a priori*, and I think we would have a poorer understanding of history if we did. At the other extreme of the spectrum, I had said that one can think philosophically *with* or along side the past Asian thinkers to

elaborate what they could have said in the face of such and such objections, though history and texts show that they did not. Both these ways of doing history help us understand a past philosophy as a coherent, rationally structured thought in itself, and not just how we would prefer it to be. To go back to Bernard Williams, proceeding in this way also leads to understanding the strangeness of past positions, their differences from modern views, as much if not more than their similarities. It does not reduce history of philosophy exclusively, or even primarily, to a search for arguments and ideas that we can plug in and play for our purposes, or to a ledger of *our* heroes.

Well, then, can we *never* use past positions for our present purposes? No, I don't think we're categorically prohibited from doing this—far from it. My bone of contention is with the hardline analytic philosophy approach to history, the Quinean stuff, the view that the *only* worthwhile reason to do history would be for its contributions to the present, because present-day analysis yields truth and that's what good philosophers should be interested in. *That* is a weird, narrow criterion that excludes a lot of other worthwhile, attainable things, like opening one's mind and questioning the going thinking. So, I think that one can profitably resituate and reformulate some Indo-Tibetan ideas to make a contribution in contemporary debates, without saying that *that* type of payoff is the only point to doing history and reading texts. Not surprisingly, the success rate of such an approach is not nearly as high the other two. It is riskier because it demands that one adheres to texts and goes beyond them (in something like a *de re* perspective), and what is more, that one *also* makes some kind of contribution to solving present-day problems. That is a tall order.

I'll stick my neck out a bit: I think it can be done, should be done by competent people, and that the interdisciplinary payoff is quite remarkable when it works. I want to take up an illustrative example of this more adventurous approach and draw some lessons from it. Instead of revisiting potential Asian contributions to contemporary treatments of personal identity or philosophy of mind, I will take up a contribution in a different domain, i.e., linguistics. The situation is parallel, however: use of an Asian idea to make a contribution to a contemporary theoretical problem.

I am thinking of the work of the linguists Randy J. LaPolla, František Kratochvíl, and Alexander Coupe, who, in their joint article “On Transitivity”, i.e., LaPolla *et al.* 2011, take notions figuring in Tibetan grammatico-linguistic literature (*sum rtags*) and apply them in their own analysis of the phenomenon of transitivity, not just transitivity in Tibetan but in other languages, too. It is, I think, an important example of how one can profitably take past and foreign ideas different from contemporary Western notions and use them to make a contribution in a contemporary problem.

To set the stage, let's remind ourselves of our usual sense of “transitive” as found in English dictionaries:

“... denoting an occurrence of a verb when it requires a direct object or denoting a verb that customarily requires a direct object ...[from Latin *transitus* a going over...]”¹⁰

¹⁰ *Collins English Dictionary*. HarperCollins Publishers 2006.

In short, as is well-known from school grammar lessons, an intransitive verb has one core argument, the subject, while a transitive verb has two, i.e., an agent and an object, with the action extending, or carrying across, from the agent to an object and usually affecting it.

Now, relying on the account of traditional Tibetan grammatical conceptions developed in Derek Herforth and my *Agents and Actions in Classical Tibetan* (i.e., Tillemans and Herforth 1989), LaPolla *et al.* argue that there is a “Tibetan view of transitivity” that differs from the usual Western conception but is nonetheless a needed complement to it.

“We can see that the Tibetan view takes a different perspective from the Western view: in the traditional Western view a transitive differs from an intransitive in having a second argument that the action passes over to, while in the Tibetan view a transitive clause differs from an intransitive one in having a second argument representing an external agency.” (LaPolla *et al.* 2011, 478-479)

Here is their idea in a bit more detail. Let’s take the following pairs of English sentences:

A. (\pm extension)

“The lion hunted the tourist.”

“The lion hunted.”

B. (\pm agency)

“The lion chased the tourist.”

“The tourist ran.”

The usual transitive/intransitive perspective is in terms of \pm extension of an action to an object (e.g., “The lion hunted the tourist” versus “The lion hunted”). The ergative/non-ergative perspective, by contrast, is in terms of \pm agency of an action (e.g., “The lion chased the tourist” versus “The tourist ran [spontaneously]”).¹¹ Taking the first perspective, a sentence like *The lion hunted the tourist* is put in relation with *The lion hunted*, in that the lion’s hunting either extends to the other actant (transitive *The lion hunted the tourist*), or does not so extend (intransitive *The lion hunted*). On the second perspective, where one focuses on the instigation of an action like running rather than extension to an object, *The lion chased the tourist* is related with *The tourist ran*. Either the tourist’s running was instigated by an external agent (*The lion chased the tourist*) or it was simply self-motivated (*The tourist ran*).

For LaPolla *et al.*, Tibetan grammarians develop the ergative/non-ergative perspective. I think that this is right. The Tibetan grammarians’ version of a transitivity/intransitivity contrast is in terms of *bya tshig tha dad pa* and *bya tshig tha mi dad pa* (literally: “differentiated or undifferentiated verbs”), or what is the same, *byed pa po gzhan dang ‘brel ba yin min* (“[verbs where the action] is or is not related with a distinct agent”). It clearly focuses on the instigation of the process by an external agent and not on its

¹¹ This is clearly an intentional departure from the more limited and usual use of the term “ergative”—as in Comrie 1978 or Dixon 1994—to analyze and classify languages (i.e., ergative versus accusative languages) on the basis of their morphosyntactic coding of subjects, objects/patients, and agents.

extension from an agent to an object. Indeed, the stock examples of transitivity and intransitivity are phrased in terms of \pm agency of the process, i.e., the same contrast that we see between “The lion chased the tourist” versus “The tourist ran [spontaneously].” Thus, in the favorite Tibetan example of transitivity, viz., “Woodcutters split/cut wood” (*shing mkhan gyis shing gcod do*), the grammarians’ point is indeed that the wood’s splitting is instigated by an external agent; it is not a splitting (*‘chad pa*) that simply happens to the wood by itself. The other example ubiquitous in the literature is alchemists changing (*sgyur, bsgyur*) iron into gold versus the iron naturally (*rang gi ngang gis*) changing (*‘gyur, gyur*) into gold. Tibetan shows transitivity in the former case by marking the agent—i.e., the alchemist (*sgyur ba po*)— with the ergative (= ERG) *s*, and using the transitive form of the verb, i.e., *bsgyur* (“change,” “transform”). In the latter case there is no marked agent, and the verb is the intransitive form *gyur* (“change”).

C. (Tibetan \pm agency)

<i>sgyur pa pos</i>	<i>lcags</i>	<i>gser</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>bsgyur ro</i>
alchemist ERG	iron	gold	into	change(transitive past)

“The alchemist changed the iron into gold.”

<i>lcags</i>	<i>rang gi ngang gis</i>	<i>gser</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>gyur ro</i>
iron	naturally	gold	into	changed(intransitive past)

“The iron changed naturally into gold.”

Those alchemical examples, and others, are regularly taken up by major Tibetan grammarians.¹² They are parallel to example B, “The lion chased the tourist” versus “The tourist ran [spontaneously],” i.e., the ergative versus non-ergative contrast. As far as I can see, Tibetan does not often make or emphasize a contrast analogous to that of example A.¹³ Morphological contrasts between transitive and intransitive forms of verbs (i.e., *sgyur* versus *‘gyur, gcod* versus *‘chad*, etc.) seem to be in cases like B and C, i.e., the ergative perspective. It is no wonder, then, that Tibetan grammarians developed a theory of transitive verbs as being those with distinct agents: that reflects what is important in their language.

The view of grammar that LaPolla *et al.* invoke is that of Michael Halliday in *Functional Grammar*, where lexico-grammar is driven by semantic principles. Thus, the ergative/non-ergative perspective reflects a semantic concern: *Is the action caused/instigated by an outside Actor or is it self-engendered?* If one generally embraced strongly semantic accounts of transitivity, as do Halliday and LaPolla *et al.*, then the relevance of Tibetan indigenous grammatical writing to contemporary linguistics increases remarkably. It then becomes possible to come up with a “Tibetan view of transitivity,” as do LaPolla *et al.*, that

¹² For Si tu Panchen’s use of the alchemical example to show transitive and intransitive verbs, see Tillemans and Herforth 1989, 68

¹³ Arguably it does exist, as we could make contrast like *khos gzugs mthong ngo* (“He sees a form”) and *khos mthong ngo* (“He sees” or “He sees it”). But it is much less important than in a language like English. Note that the contrast in A. between hunting an animal and simply hunting, however, does not go over well in Tibetan where the verb is *ri dwags brgyab pa* with *ri dwags* (“animal”) being itself the object and necessary in the verbal phrase.

goes well beyond the matters of coding and morphosyntax in certain specific languages or typologies of languages, and works profitably in a generalizable fashion. This is a considerable change from the usual, one-sided, school-grammar view on transitivity as extension to an object. It involves a stretching of our usual notions, no doubt, to accommodate Tibetan views, but that is a healthy phenomenon.

“Halliday’s conceptualisation, which incorporates both the traditional Western view of transitivity and something like the traditional Tibetan view of transitivity into one system, is an improvement over the other mono-construction approaches...” (LaPolla *et al.* 2011, 481)

In short, there seems to be a lot more to transitivity in language than what we learn in school or university, that is to say, the traditional Western view about verbs having or not having objects (or for that matter the traditional Sanskrit view of verbs as either *sakarmaka* (“having an object”) or *akarmaka* (“without object”).) Both models—traditional Western and ergative— can be taken as two features of a single system of transitivity in English and other languages. Accounting for the two perspectives is better than only explaining one.

It is time to take some morals from my story. What one sees in the example from LaPolla *et al.* is that an expanded concept can be developed with impetus from a Tibetan theory whose own concept seems to be significantly different from the Western. This expansion has a liberating effect, especially when it is in the context of a new, overarching theory. One easily gets bogged down—and indeed people *have* been bogged down—in sterile debates as to whether Tibetan terms like *bya tshig tha dad pa* and *tha mi dad pa* are to be translated faithfully by the terms “transitive verb” and “intransitive verb.” (On the other hand, “differentiated verb” and “undifferentiated verb,” while perhaps not distorting the Tibetan, tell you next to nothing.) There are, fortunately, ways to get around such translational issues. When an expanded perspective emerges, prior semantic debates about accurate and faithful translation of Tibetan terms into English can fade away mercifully. I think that we should indeed forget about them in cases such as these and quietly move on.

The importance of finding the right, equivalent English word for abstract Asian concepts and then letting translated texts “speak for themselves” has, in any case, been overrated. First, one doesn’t understand much in depth about a Buddhist or indigenous Tibetan linguistic concept as it is embedded in a whole conceptual scheme by finding one more or less adequate English word. Many buddhologists—especially those close to Tibetans— have thought that abstract Buddhist texts would somehow speak for themselves if a kind of new and final *Mahāvvyutpatti* (i.e., a new English-Tibetan-Sanskrit lexicon) of correct translational equivalences could be established, and that therefore nothing much is needed for our understanding other than good translations using a new and improved lexicon.¹⁴ I don’t think so. To go back to the example we discussed, it is liberating to use the English word “transitive” in a new way, knowing full well that the meaning we learn in school will *not* actually match that of the Tibetan *bya tshig tha dad pa*. There may be similar cases for terms in Buddhist logic and metaphysics, too. One such key term may be the Sanskrit *svabhāva*. It seems to me likely that the *svabhāva* a Mādhyamika Buddhist is

¹⁴ I am reminded of almost comical attempts to better understand the physics of gravity by finding the right Tibetan translational equivalent of the English “gravity”. Coming up with the word *then shugs* tells you almost nothing about a scientific concept of gravity other than that gravity pulls.

refuting is, in some important respects, not the same thing as “intrinsic natures” or “intrinsically existing entity” for major analytic philosophers like David Lewis, Rae Langton, Jaegwon Kim, and others. Nonetheless this mismatch could be quite fertile for an expanded conception of what it is to be intrinsic.¹⁵ It is not the first nor last time that imaginatively distorting what we have learnt could be just what doctors order to alleviate semantic or conceptual impasses.

Finally, much of what has been termed “comparative studies” has focused on same or similar East-West arguments and East-West ideas. They, of course, exist but are of relatively limited value when one is trying to resituate an argument to make a contribution in a contemporary context. Bernard Williams’ emphasis on difference is particularly relevant here. More generally, as we see in the linguistics example, differences can sometimes be built upon collaboratively, while similarities in ideas and arguments are more of a dead end: they tend to show little else than what we, in any case, were familiar with already. I leave you with this last meditation: there can be much better things for philosophical buddhologists to do than pursuing East-West identities. Interesting, fertile differences lead to questioning and creative disorientation; they are thus not only conducive to open and widened philosophical thinking but may also, on occasion, show a way out of some stagnating, contemporary discussions. All this is, no doubt, more difficult than just sticking with the history of ideas approach. Resounding failures will occur, especially when people lack the needed skill set. The risk, however, is worth taking if there is to be informed, philosophical engagement in our on-going intellectual conversation about Buddhism. There is, I think, a pressing need for that informed, engaged discussion. The price, otherwise, is that thinking people will feel their only choice is between rather arcane details and frustratingly shallow, popular clichés.

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¹⁵ For many contemporary analytic metaphysicians “intrinsic” is understandable in terms of the notion of unaccompaniment: something being what it is even if it were the sole existent thing in the universe, unaccompanied by anything distinct from it. The basic idea first comes from Jaegwon Kim but is refined and revamped by others, e.g., Langton and Lewis 1998. Mādhyamikas, too, speak of *svabhāva* (“intrinsic natures”) as something being what it is without dependence on anything that is other than it (*paratra nirapekṣa*). Note that, for these Buddhists (but seemingly not for Lewis and Langton), however, intrinsicity, *stricto sensu*, implies something stronger, i.e., not even being accompanied by parts— anything that would be what it is when unaccompanied would have to be impartite. There is clearly room for an important debate as to whether or not “intrinsic” does ever have this Madhyamaka meaning and whether it should.

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