

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 60 (2006)
Heft: 3

Artikel: On reading texts
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147714>

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ON READING TEXTS

Johannes Bronkhorst, Lausanne

Reading texts is less valued today than it once was. This is noticeable in various ways. Colleagues, especially from the other side of the Atlantic, tell that detailed philological work is next to useless for furthering their careers. It is perhaps assumed that everyone with a knowledge of the language concerned can read a text, and that the interesting work only begins at that point.

This kind of reasoning may be naive and simplistic, it is not completely foolish. It becomes worrisome when the disinclination to occupy oneself with the details of texts takes such strong forms that people feel they can do without it. For some reason or other they may think that even the most superficial reading of a text is enough for them to know what it really is about, and that all that is really worth knowing about the text can be obtained in this way.

All this may sound somewhat theoretical. It becomes real when one comes across a case where a text one has written oneself is being treated in this manner. This has happened to me, and this note is meant to reflect upon this case. Let me present it.

A recent article in the *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*¹ reviews a volume which I edited some years ago.² The reviewer does not deal with any of the contributions except those by Frits Staal and myself. Since Professor Staal is more than capable of looking after himself, I will concentrate on the part that concerns my own two contributions. This part credits me with a number of views and attitudes, among them the following. I have “an almost messianic view of the West, which is considered the source of rational inquiry (supposedly the yardstick of every possible form of thought), and also the place where it culminated historically in modern science” (p. 191). I appear to have taken “the decision [...] to approach Asiatic thought by considering it within the category of rationality, and more specifically that critical rational thought that distinguishes Western science”

1 “Some questions posed by a recent epistemological approach to Indian thought,” *ZDMG* 155(1), 2005:189–197.

2 Johannes Bronkhorst (ed.), *La rationalité en Asie / Rationality in Asia. Études de Lettres* (Lausanne) 2001, 3.

(p. 193). Questions are used on that same page as a device to impute to me the view that Indian and Chinese thought only merit being known and remembered insofar as they conform to the scientific outlook, that what is not conformable to scientific thought can be forgotten as it is simply irrational and hence useless. On p. 194 I learn that I assume “that our own world is the only sensible and desirable one”.

I plead complete innocence with regard to all of these accusations. Nothing in the articles reviewed, and nothing in any of my other publications says anything of the kind. Quite the contrary! All the ideas imputed to me are so far from any of my own, that I cannot but conclude that the reviewer is fighting windmills. As I read his text, I learn that he is passionately committed to criticizing certain views, which he calls “neopositivist”, but which no one seems to hold. In need of a guilty party, I have had the bad luck of being chosen as victim. Having put me in the guilty corner, the reviewer does not waste time trying to find out which were my real concerns in writing these articles, and in what way they might contribute to the problems that face historians of Indian thought.

No real defence against imputations of the kind outlined above is possible. One can only hope that readers (for I believe they still exist) will not be taken in by this review, and will rather turn to the reviewed texts. One wonders, however, how someone who reads the works of his colleagues so badly will deal with Indian texts.

Much of the review is filled with a discussion of the work of a number of modern Western philosophers (Gadamer, Heidegger, Feyerabend, and others). Inevitably, its level of abstraction is high throughout, and little is said about the precise interpretations of specific Indian texts. However, there are some remarks of that nature, some of which concern the interpretation of the early Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, which I propose to consider in some detail. We read here (p. 197):

the philosophical question that [Nāgārjuna seems] to tackle is very reminiscent of a well-known problem in Western philosophy, and particularly in phenomenology: it is certainly an ordinary and general experience, though not an original one, that there is a subject who is confronted with objects; this experience consists, rather, in a secondary outcome that tends to become absolute and that is merely the result of a process of abstraction; if, therefore, we lose the original immediacy because of a tendency to abstract, the task of philosophy, which in its turn consists in abstracting, will be to think contrary to and beyond its own vocation to abstract and deviate from the original experience. This is why Nāgārjuna [...] constantly [seeks] to lead thought into an impasse:

[he rejects] the evidence of generation, of the cause-effect relation etc. Here thought is required to checkmate itself, to think the unthinkable, more or less as in Heidegger's late work.

Those who have read Nāgārjuna know that this passage is neither a translation of his words, nor indeed a close paraphrase of them. It is a European interpretation which is due to reading European philosophers, but which is not necessarily based on a close reading of Nāgārjuna. As a matter of fact, close reading of Nāgārjuna might well lead to something different altogether. If Nāgārjuna succeeds in leading thought into an impasse, as our reviewer maintains, it is because he reasons on the basis of one or more implied presuppositions. I have tried to identify one of these presuppositions, and have come up with the following: "les mots d'un énoncé correspondent un à un aux choses qui constituent la situation décrite par l'énoncé" ("the words of a statement correspond, one by one, to the things that constitute the situation described by that statement"). I think that this presupposition makes sense of many of Nāgārjuna's reasonings, but I know that other scholars (e.g. Claus Oetke) may prefer a different formulation. The review under consideration cites my proposal (as above, in French), and rejects it as due to my "epistemological neopositivist approach"; I assume that alternative proposals would fare no better. Which leaves me with the question: has our reviewer ever seriously occupied himself with any of Nāgārjuna's works, or even one of them? Has he ever really tried to understand any of the stanzas of the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā? Or does his philosophy not allow him to try to understand a text on such a down-to-earth level? Does he already know what Nāgārjuna is all about because "of a well-known problem in Western philosophy, and particularly in phenomenology"?

Let us consider a concrete example, viz., verse 7.17 of Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā:

yadi kaścid anutpanno bhāvaḥ samvidyate kvacit / utpadyeta sa kiṃ tasmin bhāve utpadyate 'sati //

If something exists somewhere that has not come into being, it might come into being. Since that thing does not exist, what comes into being?

I take it that verses like this lead the thought of our reviewer into an impasse, that they require his thought to checkmate itself, and that they make him think the unthinkable. But there is no need for melodrama. A more measured response would be to point out that the logical force of this verse is nil, so

that we are entitled to discard what seems to be its implied conclusion (“nothing comes into being”) without further ado. It would, however, be more generous toward Nāgārjuna to consider the possibility that he (and many of his Indian readers) held one or more presuppositions which made the verse logically coherent to them. And there we are back at the “epistemological neopositivist approach”. If our reviewer does not like this, he may be urged to explain how *he* makes sense of individual portions and arguments in Nāgārjuna’s works. So far he has given no hint that he has even tried to, except of course through global and unhelpful comparisons with some modern Western philosophers.

I have had the sad experience of being forced into a (mental) box in which I do not fit. I fear that Nāgārjuna, and perhaps other Indian thinkers with him, would be as bewildered as I am, if not more so, if they found out what our reviewer has made of their thought. All I can hope is that other researchers in the field will succeed in finding more time to read in depth the texts which they are supposed to study. The review article here considered seems to me a good example of how not to proceed.