ABSTRACT:

The contemporary study of Indian philosophy tends to stress those topics that most closely accord with the interests of mid-20th century analytic philosophy, focusing on questions pertaining to logic and the theory of knowledge, philosophy of language, metaphysics and philosophical psychology. Ethics, though by no means unrepresented, has been at best an area of secondary concern. This, of course, reflects to some degree Indian philosophical literature itself: whereas works such as Śāntarakṣita’s Tattvasamgraha, Kumārila Bhatta’s Ślokavārttika, or Jayanta Bhatta’s Nyāyamaṇjarī treat of the topics mentioned above at great length, questions of value—ethics, politics, aesthetics—are remarkable only for their absence. In the case of aesthetics, we can of course supplement apparent neglect on the part of the philosophers by referring to the massive and intellectually challenging literature of Indian poetics and dramaturgy. But where do we turn in the case of Indian ethics?
A number of responses to this query are available, of which one of the most promising is to be found in the late Bimal K. Matilal’s reflections on the elusive figure of Dharma in the Mahābhārata. In the talk proposed here, I wish to develop Matilal’s line of inquiry, but with particular reference to the long-standing Western “quarrel between philosophy and poetry,” as it has been understood beginning with Plato’s characterization of the confrontation between the two domains.
JONATHAN GOLD

Welcome to the Columbia Seminar on Comparative Philosophy. As most of you know, I am Jonathan Gold. I teach in the Princeton University Department of Religion. I'm the chair of the seminar this year. Before we begin, I just want to ask that you have a look at the upcoming events for the seminar. I'm going to pass this – does everyone down here have one?

(off-mic)

MALE SPEAKER

Oh, Evan Thompson cancelled out. That's too bad.

JONATHAN GOLD

Yeah, that is too bad. So that's one thing to look at. Notice that Evan Thompson cancelled out. Notice also that Marie's talk is coming up on Friday, March 6th, with responses from Charles Goodman. And then also – I believe that's going to be on Śāntarakśita. Is that correct?

(off-mic)

JONATHAN GOLD

Okay. Not Śāntarakśita, but Buddhism and free will. There is no Śāntarakśita in the whole talk, so that will be something different. And we'll then have our joint meeting with the Seminar on Ethics, Moral Education, and Society on March 9th, and that's on a Monday evening, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., instead of our regular Friday 5:30 meeting time. So the point of that event is to stage an interdisciplinary conversation that includes some non-western philosophical perspectives on the topic of moral motivation, and specifically as it is addressed in Michael Schulman's paper. So if you'd like a copy of that paper, you can e-mail me or Chris Kelley, and we can make that available to our participants.
Today I think we can expect a very exciting and interesting conversation. It's my great pleasure and honor to be able to welcome our speaker, main speaker, for today, Matthew T. Kapstein. Professor Kapstein is Numata Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and also directeur d'etude at the École Practique des Hautes Études in Paris. Professor Kapstein is among the world's leading scholars of Buddhist thought and history, especially Tibet. You may be familiar with his numerous articles and books. I'll just mention *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* from Oxford, in Oxford University Press in 2000, and *The Tibetans* from 2006, which is really a masterful and comprehensive introduction to Tibetan culture and history. It is in the Blackwell's *People of Asia* series.

This is just a little sampling of Professor Kapstein's work in that area, but Professor Kapstein's PhD is actually from the department of philosophy at Brown University, where he began his work of weaving Buddhist intellectual traditions into a living conversation with European and American thought. And if you've not read his essays, for instance collected in the book *Reason's Traces* – I see Owen has a copy – then you're really missing out on a crucial set of contributions to whatever it is we're claiming to be doing in this seminar.

Today two of our regular contributors, Owen Flanagan of Duke University and Tao Jiang from Rutgers University, have generously agreed to provide responses and to engage Professor Kapstein in conversation. So without further ado, please join me in welcoming Matthew Kapstein speaking on the topic of "Myths, Lies, and Moral Reasoning."

(Applause)

MATTHEW KAPSTEIN
Well, thank you. It's a pleasure to be back at the Columbia religion department, though in a new incarnation. It was in Kent Hall when I last saw it, so I guess that was a while ago. I have to begin with a bit of an apology. I have had really very aggravating computer problems for the past several weeks that caused me to completely give up on the idea of actually writing a paper that I would read. It just became too exasperating and too time-consuming to deal with. So I will – just a machine that was repeatedly crashing and bringing down everything with it.

So I'll be speaking informally, and I have a few little citations that I brought with me, but other than that I'll be pretty much making this up as I go along. And so I apologize for the lack of polish and possibly the fuzziness of what I have to say. I'm reassured by the fact that I have the privilege of having not one but two great respondents, Owen Flanagan and Tao Jiang, that the evening will not be a loss for you all, but that I'm sure there will be interesting comments forthcoming.

To try to situate what I'm doing here a little bit, I know that those of you who participate in this seminar have like myself been interested over the years in seeing the development of a conversation between Buddhism and X, where the X can be philosophy, neuroscience, cognitive science, physics, et cetera. And as this conversation has developed in recent years, I actually find myself looking at it with a bit of disquiet. But I haven't really done the rigorous work to pin down exactly where that disquiet is coming from. At some point, if I get some of my other projects off my desk, I should probably dig in and try to rigorously sort this out.

But in my remarks today, I'll at least be – I think by the time we get to the end – hinting where at least some of the trouble may be coming from for me. And my remarks today are really in – you know, like Caesar's Gaul in
Tres Parties Divibles Est [ph], and the three parts are a few reflections on Plato, on the absence of ethics in India, and on the evolution of language. So they seem like three fairly disparate things probably I'm putting into a shaker and need to add a dash of Tabasco and lime to come up with something that would integrate them. But again, I hope that by the time I have finished with my remarks, at least the line that I'm trying to follow in linking these three will begin to become clear or at least seem not wholly arbitrary.

Now, as you all certainly well know, the reservations or indeed condemnation of the poets that Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates in the Republic and then repeats in the mouth of the Athenian stranger in the Laws is one of the most notorious passages in Plato's opus. I dare say that with the exception of the theory of forms, there is probably no part of Plato's work that has had quite as much ink spilled over it as his problems with the poets. And interestingly, as one looks into writing about Plato and the poets, interpreters are all over the map with respect to this. There is not a lot of consensus about how we are to understand just what Plato is up to here.

Even if we eliminate some of the more extreme readings, such as Karl Popper, who places Plato in the lineage of 20th century totalitarianism, or the Ayatollah Khomenei, who places him in the lineage of the Islamic Republic – even eliminating these readings, if we stick with, you know, what we might think of as more mainstream academic philosophy, we still have a fair diversity.

But let me just begin by recalling for you the key passage in Republic X, in which Socrates says, "Glaucon, I said, whenever you meet with any of the eulogists of Homer declaring that he has been the educator of Hellas and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human things, and that you should take him up again and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him, we may love and honor
those who say such things. They are excellent people as far as their lights extend, and we are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and the first of tragedy writers. But we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted in our state, for if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers of our state."

So, of course, in these lines Socrates assigns a very limited role to a certain kind of edifying poetry in the state and eliminates the rest as promoting a dubious hedonic system of values. Now, in reading over fairly recent commentary on Plato on the poets, there is of course an important line of reflection that takes Plato pretty much at his word in one respect or another here. An example is Susan Levin's work on the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, in which in her concluding chapter she writes, "Plato's insistence that poets may serve only as elementary educators, and even then only under ideal conditions, constitutes a significant demotion insofar as according to tradition they were the instructors of adults. On Plato's model as developed above all in the Republic, it is philosophers, not poets, who play the latter role. In this way and by functioning as the community's ultimate authority regarding the content and form of admissible constructions, philosophy clearly supersedes poetry as the educator of Greece." Right?

So this is one very important and influential reading of this passage that of course has been abundantly documented and studied, for example, in the huge writings of people like Werner Jaeger and other classicists. The role of poetry and literary art in Greek education is very, very well established. So the argument that we
see here is that of course Plato is crucially shifting the paradigm, shifting the paradigm of education that had been accepted through the generations in the Greek world and privileging philosophy over and against poetry.

There is a quite opposite reading that is to be found in the writings of Stanley Rosen. And Rosen's argument is indeed a rather devious one, but I like devious arguments. And to understand it, I'm going to have to drift a little bit off of my main theme and just very briefly sketch out the structure of Rosen's argument overall so that you can see how he positions the stuff about poetry in relation to it.

Rosen holds that the Republic is a giant reductio ad absurdum, and that Plato is being deeply ironic throughout, that the reading that takes Plato/Socrates as speaking at face value is a bad reading of the Republic. And Rosen has in favor of his argument – he holds that there are two key absurdities in the Republic that are so bald that either we must assume Plato to have planted them deliberately within the Republic or else we must assume that Plato was very stupid not to have been aware that he was creating such a bald contradiction within his work.

The two absurdities are these, the two contradictions: the first stems from the definition of "justice" itself. Now, in the Republic, Plato/Socrates defines "justice" as everyone doing just their apportioned task and minding their own business; very famously this is the definition of "justice." Well, why? There is an analogy to the body; when each organ does what it is supposed to and doesn't encroach on what other organs are supposed to be doing, the body is healthy. But when the organs either don't perform their functions or start doing things that other parts should be doing, the creature falls into ill health. So for the state. But Rosen points out that although that seems to hold, there is a crucial figure in the story for whom it does not hold, and this is the philosopher, the philosopher-king. This is Socrates, who minds everyone's business. And therefore,
the legislator, the founder of the state, and the foundation of the state must be unjust, by the very definition offered within the *Republic*.

So this is the first internal contradiction that Rosen points to as inscribed within the *Republic*. And the second concerns this whole issue of poetry. And Rosen writes about this – now let me just say that in Plato's terms, the kind of poetry that gets condemned is what is referred to as mimetic poetry. And mimetic poetry, unlike the eulogies of the gods and of heroes, which praise excellences and qualities and great things – mimetic poetry is art that seeks to imitate life, effectively. It mirrors things as we have them. And Rosen argues that what is a Platonic dialogue? It is an exercise precisely in mimetic poetry. And he writes, "The presentation of the ideas in the *Republic* is poetic. The crux of the refutation of poetry, or let us say of the demonstration of the superiority of philosophy to poetry, is itself poetic. There cannot be any doubt about the fact that in the *Republic*, to speak only of this dialogue, Plato presents philosophy in a poetic form or image. And this means in turn that philosophy is subordinate to poetry in a crucial respect." So Levin writes philosophy clearly supersedes poetry, and Rosen, philosophy is subordinate to poetry. Right? Exactly opposite conclusions regarding this crucial passage in the *Republic*.

However, if one digs more deeply into both Rosen and Levin's arguments, one finds that actually they take a few – and they are not writing with reference to one another. I'm simply – they don't cite one another at all. I'm simply placing them side by side. But one sees that actually they make certain crucial concessions to one another. Rosen, for example, does not conclude that philosophy is wholly subordinate to poetry. He concludes that, "As the unity of theory and practice," to cite him exactly – "As the unity of theory and practice, that is to say, as the right way of life, philosophy is inseparably united with poetry," right? So there the conclusion is a
little bit weaker than the one he first seemed to be urging. And Levin, for her part, even though she holds that philosophy supersedes poetry in some sense, the whole point of her book is to illustrate the innumerable ways in which Plato is engaged in the problem of incorporating poetic discourse in the fabric of his philosophizing.

And so, when we look at the two from this point of view, they seem to be nevertheless converging. And I think that perhaps the point of convergence – the point at which they converge – and again, in a passage that has reference neither to Levin nor to Rosen, is perhaps best articulated in remarks of Martha Nussbaum in her fine book, *The Fragility of the Good*, in which she writes, "Plato, borrowing the critical openness and many-sidedness of good theater, uses argument to show genuine communication taking place and to establish such communication with the reader. Dialogs then, unlike all of the books criticized by Socrates, might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity. They owe this to their kinship with the theater.” I’m just going to read that last bit again because I’ll be closing here on the Plato part of my talk, but later on it will be good to have these words in mind, right? "Dialogs might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity. They owe this to their kinship with theater." This is to me at least a very – it’s a profound nerve that I think she touches on in these words.

Okay. So that is what I had to say about Plato, and let's go to India. Now, the question of what kind of discourse might count as ethical philosophy in India has aroused a lot of puzzlement and discussion within the field of Indian studies. Of course, there are all kinds of Indian works that address ethical issues in important ways. No one calls that into question. And in almost all schools of Indian philosophy, we have an important place for moral psychology, for the classification of psychological states and attitudes according to their ethical
worth. But nonetheless, many who have been engaged in the study of Indian philosophy have noted that there seems to be an interesting disjunction between the kind of rigorous argumentation that is brought to bear in writers like Śāntaraksita, Kumārila Bhatta, Jayanta Bhatta, Jayarāsi, Udayana, on and on and on, in relation to issues like logic, epistemology, philosophical theology, causality, word-meaning relationship, and so forth and so on, and the apparent absence of a similar discourse with respect to the ethical issues that indeed are abundant within Indian thought elsewhere. Bimal Matilal has commented on this as follows: "Certainly there exists a lacuna in the tradition of Indian philosophy. Professional philosophers of India over the last 2000 years have consistently concerned themselves with the problems of logic and epistemology, metaphysics and soteriology. And sometimes they have made very important contributions to the global heritage of philosophy. But except some cursory comments and some insightful observations, the professional philosophers of India have very seldom discussed what we call moral philosophy today. It is true that the Dharmaśāstra texts supplement the Hindu discussion of ethics, classification of virtues and vices, and the enumeration of duties related to the social status of the individual. But morality was never discussed as such in these texts. On the other hand, the tradition itself was very self-conscious about moral values, moral conflicts and dilemmas, as well as about the difficulties of what we call practical reason or practical wisdom."

Okay. Now, Matilal, in one of the – I think one of the many very interesting turns his thought took – sought to then turn to the epic traditions of India, notably the Mahābhārata, and to begin to ferret out the manner in which the epic text constituted a discourse about ethics. And to just try to illustrate in a few minutes where Matilal's thinking was going about this, for those of you who haven't read Matilal on the subject, he saw a key theme running through the Mahābhārata as what he referred to as the "elusive of Dharma." Dharma, as you all know, is the whole system of principles governing law and custom and obligation and duty and the like. It covers the
whole sphere of what we would call the moral or the ethical, but also the legal, also large parts of religious law, and so forth. And one of the things that is a leitmotif within the Mahābhārata is no one can ever quite seize Dharma. Of course, one would have this idea in Sanskrit culture that if you can adhere to Dharma, you're living righteously. That would be the definition, if you will, of right living in traditional Hindu culture, a life that adheres to Dharma.

But what is interesting in the Mahābhārata is that no one can quite find Dharma. It's always disappearing and vanishing before the eyes of the characters. A character will come into a glade; there will be a heron there that will fly off, and later the character will be taking with Krishna, and Krishna will say, "You haven't encountered Dharma yet? What happened to you today?" "I came into a glad; a heron was there and flew off." "That was Dharma, dummy." And this kind of pattern just occurs again and again throughout the epic. And this leitmotif of the illusiveness of Dharma is in a sense fleshed out in actual moral dilemmas that are introduced in the text whose resolution is not always evident in terms of the dominant moral codes.

An example that Matilal gives is a case in which Arjuna has taken a vow to kill anyone who insults his bow, and his brother, Yudistira, insults his bow. And so he is faced then with fulfilling his vow by killing his brother or abstaining from killing his brother, but breaking his vow. And given that one of the supreme moral injunctions in the society of the Mahābhārata is to keep one's word, to be absolutely a truth speaker, he is confronted with a dilemma. And so he asks Krishna, "What am I to do now, Krishna? I'm between a rock and a hard place." And Krishna tells him the story of – everything of course is answered through stories. And Krishna tells him the story of the sage Koshika [ph]. And the story of Koshika goes like this. Koshika is a hermit sage who has like Arjuna taken a vow to always tell the truth. And so he has made truth-telling his one
and supreme principle. A group of people fleeing murderous brigands pass his hermitage, and the brigands stop and ask Koshika, "What happened to these people?" And Koshika, being a truth-teller, says, "They went that-a-way," at which point the brigands catch up and kill them. And for this, Krishna goes on, Koshika failed to attain heaven, right?

And so Krishna's point is of course that the preservation of life supersedes the commitment to truth-telling, right? Principles can have exceptions. There can be exemptions to them. For one who tries to adhere to pure principle, the Dharma remains very elusive indeed. And Matilal concludes his discussion of the Mahābhārata's ethical discourse in writing, "The nature of our practical wisdom has a sort of malleability, which is compared to the ever-elusive nature of Dharma ethics to be found in our epic literature. It has been said that [unintell], the truth of Dharma lies in the dark cave –" not intended as a reference back to Plato. "It cannot be completely known by us as universally fixed, but the acknowledgement of possible flexibility does not mean that the fixity and universality of ethical laws will be entirely negotiable. Situational constraints may require some bending, but by allowing genuine moral sentiments like remorse or guilt, it makes up for occasional lapses. A moral agent exercises his practical wisdom and also learns from the experiences he passes through during life."

Okay? Now, in an interesting article that in a sense is a follow-up on Matilal's work on this, Robert Goldman engages this issue of the Sanskrit epics as involving a kind of flexible approach to ethical problems and dilemmas. And he actually published this in the memorial volume for Matilal that [unintell] and [unintell] edited. And Goldman takes up the very troubling ending of the Ramayana as his case. The Devanāgarī Ramayana, as you know, has this very disturbing bit at the end when, after all of, you know, the wars and so forth to retrieve Sita, who had been kidnapped, and bring her back to Rama – she is finally restored to her
husband, and he rejects her. And if you think that Rama acted as a cad, so actually did much of India throughout thousands of years. And as one tracks the literature, the later plays, poems, and so forth, down to, as Goldman shows, telefilms in contemporary India, there is a whole history of discomfort with the end of the \textit{Ramayana} that one can trace. Beginning in the first millennium, you have stories created with new endings for the \textit{Ramayana} because they were really unhappy with this one. And in some of the recent telefilm examples, things are switched around to create a feminist story at the end in which Sita is welcomed back as her husband's co-equal partner and so forth and so on.

And Goldman concludes his investigation of the epic as a type of moral literature in India with these words: "Although the great Sanskrit epic poems do largely live up to their reputations as Indian culture's great repositories of moral and ethical values, in short of \textit{Dharma}, a close synchronic analysis of the various moral and ethical crises and dilemmas the works contain, accompanied by the diachronic examination of the culture's shifting response to those dilemmas, reveals a number of interesting transformations as the epic stories are subtly revalorized over time. Thus, while the epics and the culture in which they are embedded make frequent rhetorical appeals to Sunartana \textit{[ph]} Dharma, a theoretically single, eternal, and immutable code of values, in reality the text and their interpreters have always understood Dharma to consist of a complex set of codes from which the justification for a wide variety of actions could be drawn. It is the genius of these poems that so marvelously supple and context-sensitive a mechanism devised in antiquity can still remain adaptive and useful in the modern age."

Now, putting Matilal and Goldman's remarks side by side, there is an interesting – of course, they agree with one another quite precisely, but there is an interesting shift of accent that takes place in Goldman's reading of
this material. Matilal concluded with the remark, "A moral agent exercises his practical wisdom and also learns from the experience he passes through during his life." Matilal in a sense is reading the epics as moral and ethical literature through the eyes of something approaching methodological solipsism. He is approaching it from the perspective of the unique agent who is self-correcting with respect to his own action. Goldman places the accent, however, on the epics and the culture in which they were embedded, not the individual agent, but as a collective cultural response the epics have been reinterpreted and have shifted. And it again seems to me that in that nuance, there is something important for us.

Okay. So there I have done Plato and I have done India, and now I'll do something else. Now, I'd like us to try to entertain a thought experiment that asks us to reflect on how language happened and what language did when it happened. There are a few constraints I place on the thought experiment. One is that personally I'm not a believer in a gradual evolution of language. I think that the evolution of language probably happened fairly rapidly. Part of that I base on the fact that may not be very applicable to the distant prehistoric past, but the conclusion of linguists that there is no such thing as a primitive language, that given the collective knowledge of linguistics that has been amassed over the past few centuries, the category of primitive language just doesn't compute. It makes no sense whatsoever.

So my thought is that at some point people became language users fairly rapidly. And it seems to me when I conduct my thought experiment and ask what did language use do, what accompanied it, one aspect of the issue that I find particularly striking is that it seems to me that it must have accompanied our ability to generate rich, four-dimensional space-time maps, okay? Rich, four-dimensional space-time maps. It seems to me to have at some point in our history have been a very major leap when we could situate ourselves not just in a landscape,
not just know that we were near the waterhole, but to position ourselves in time as well, not just to have memory images that were fleeting and so forth, but to orient ourselves to the past and to the future. But wait a minute, we're not prophets. We can't see the future. How do we orient ourselves to the future?

Well, we have this rather strange, uncanny ability to generate possible futures, to conjure up possible worlds for ourselves. And part of what language does is it gives us the ability to share our possible worlds. This strikes me as an extremely uncanny ability among animal creatures, to be able to generate possible worlds and to have a vehicle which effectively allows me not just to have my own brain, if you will, programmed with possible worlds, but to be able to program your brain with my possible worlds as well. A very strange and wonderful ability indeed.

Now, in trying to think about this from the point of view of a history of adaptation, oh, we can invent a simple story for ourselves, a simple story in which I imagine myself going off near the watering hole, digging a great pit, covering it with leaves, and waiting for a mastodon to fall in. But it becomes immediately evident as I imagine this possible world that it would be a lot easier for me to get the pit dug if I could do it with others so I can share the whole possible story; I can share the whole set of outcomes. And thanks to it, we can be a happy collectivity with plenty of meat and lots of free time to work on our cave paintings and other satisfying activities.

Okay. Now, I think what I'm trying to get at through this rather simplistic group of reflections on our ability to think possibilities and to communicate possibilities is that the art of storytelling, the art of narrative, the skill of the poet comes to be seen with all of this in mind as a crucial way of orienting ourselves and our communities to
the world as a whole. In a sense, narrative storytelling, poetry, and theater, these are the first virtual reality programs. And it becomes, I think, fairly clear with this in mind, if we are puzzled today, as to why the bard was such a valued figure in traditional societies. It becomes clear, I think, given this, that the virtuoso exercise of the poetic, the virtuoso exercise of the story had not just an entertainment value, but a crucial role in orienting entire communities to not just an abstract system of values, but to the concrete means and ways through which survival, success, thriving might be assured. And so not for nothing was the home of ethical and moral education in ancient Greece and India alike to be found in the poetic and the narrative. It seems to me that that involves a very deep lesson about what we are.

Now, with these reflections in mind, it seems to me that if indeed Plato was urging a replacement of the poetic with the philosophical in this domain – and again following Rosen, I'm not sure that he was – but that if he was, that the entire success of history of moral philosophy that sought to find a means to replace the poetic with the purely philosophical was engaged in a massive mistake. And this by a somewhat different route parallels, of course, the arguments of Alasdair MacIntyre in respect to what he terms the failure of the Enlightenment. But he gets there by a rather different route than I'm suggesting here. I'm suggesting that on the most basic level of our linguistic capacity, the narrative and the poetic are tied to the whole range of what we would think of as the moral.

Now, with this in mind, just to close, I want to turn back to why it addresses the little itch I was feeling about Buddhist and X dialogue, because if the sketch – and it's a sketch. I really need to work this out; it's all very rough. But if the sketch that I have been putting before you here has anything credible in it, if I'm right in my supposition that our true moral home is to be found in our narratives rather than in abstract principles, then I
would say that we situate ourselves in the world as moral beings through the narratives in which we see ourselves as operating. In other words, we are in a sense avatars within our own virtual reality. And with this in mind, returning to the question of dialogue, and what dialogue can and might mean, we can see that rather than states, statements, affirmations, other static tokens, what is most crucial is the manner in which the different actors situate themselves in a plurality of narratives. And what I am not so sure about when I look at the state of current Buddhist and X dialogue is as to whether the narratives that the different actors are engaged in have really been yet made explicit, and whether they conform by convenience or more deeply so.

So I will close with that.

(Applause)

JONATHAN GOLD

Owen, would you like to pick up?

OWEN FLANAGAN

Well, great. Thank you. So my job will be to say a couple of things and then get out of the way to make – we have very interesting material. So let me say a couple of thoughts I had in advance and then tie them in. So I'm – I also, because I tried to, you know, recently to do this comparative kind of work. I'm always sensitive to the fact that there just may be incommensurability problems, inter-translatability problems. But you've made this nice general thesis about the fact that most moral instruction takes place within narratives. And I think that's entirely plausible.
Let me say maybe three things to just orient ourselves. So regarding Plato – and I'm much more inclined towards Martha Nussbaum's reading, the one you mentioned, which is that – I mean, Plato – I always tell students this. I say, "After you've read Plato, there is a tendency to want to write your first paper in dialogue form." And I tell students, "Don't try that. No one has been able to do it since then." And that really is in some ways related to Martha Nussbaum's idea, that, look, this is what from – and anachronistically, from our perspective – is very much a dramatic style, very poetic, and one can see this being performed. In fact, there is a show going around right now that is coming to North Carolina which is a performance of the *Apology*. So we can see how these dialogues can be performed as drama.

Okay. So I've been doing a philosophy and literature course recently, so I happen to have read Aristotle's *Poetics*. And the standard view – I'm no expert on the Plato debate. But the standard view is that Aristotle was able to appreciate certain things in art that Plato didn't get because Plato – so I've always taken the – Plato's criticism of poetry is, outside of a few rare examples where there is the edification and the exemplification and the glorification of excellent role models – it's just dumbed down. It's very similar to the criticism we hear now, right? So you teach the youth to believe in fantastical things, that isn't good for them because it doesn't – they don't attract the truth as well if that happens. Or there is stuff about things that little – that children shouldn't know about, for example, sex and what gods do with – you know, there are funny stories about what gods do with humans and animals, and that sort of thing.

So that's one part of it. But in reading – but we know that Aristotle, of course, thinks that at least tragedy, high-end art, okay, has this wonderful effect of producing catharsis, purgation of pity and fear. And in reading another of Matt's papers, I had this thought this morning – this afternoon on the plane, that – and now I really
want to say it because of what you said about the Sanskrit epics. So one worry that a Platonist might have, even after reading his student Aristotle say that, okay, you see *Antigone* – and here we have this problem, right, that her two brothers have fought in a war, died on the battlefield, and Creon, the king, says she is not allowed to bury her brother who fought on the wrong side. So Creon has made the oath that he will kill anybody who buries the traitor brother, and Antigone has the duty to bury her brother. Any daughter, any sister has that duty, and she does so.

Now, and then everything goes – is terrible. This is always the – it's the usual. Everything comes undone, everybody's wife and daughter – and the marriage is a tomb. We know it's all terrible. So Aristotle tells us, "Ah-ha, but this is good because it is a purgation of pity and fear." There is this cathartic release. I think Plato would have liked it if there was a Sanskrit epic around that he could have read to say, "Look it, here is the problem. No one knows what trumps what in this case." It would be nice to know. Like, if Creon and Antigone knew what the trump rules are when there are these complicated situations – and now that could be argued is the philosopher's job, because I'm supposed to go around all day long like an annoying gadfly asking you questions to keep you – this is Plato's rationalism, right – from getting stuck in these tragic conflicts. Now, that is probably a crazy, excessive hope about what reason could do. But I think that would be maybe the Platonic response even there.

So – and I love the example of the epic because remember, the Sanskrit epic tells us that – the story that you told about the oath, and that if anyone offends my bow, and of course it's my brother who offends the bow, and I'm supposed to kill my brother. This is very bad. It's the stuff of ancient Greek tragedy. And then we find out,
though, that Krishna tells these stories where the person who allows the right to life to supersede truth-telling lives longer or flourishes.

Now, that is interesting because, you know, Kant has a famous essay called "On the Supposed Right to Tell a Benevolent Lie." And in this essay, Kant says famously – because Kant is challenged after he writes the groundwork, and someone says to Kant, wait, you don't mean that you can never tell a lie because that would mean that if someone comes to me and says where is Jonathan, and I say, "Why do you want to know?" and he says, "I just want to kill him," that if I know where he is, I'm not supposed to – I'm supposed to – you know, we all think that you should send the person the wrong way. And Kant says, "No. You should tell the truth." And when students read this, they think Kant is crazy, and I tend to agree.

But you might just say, well, Kant – this is the problem. It's a lack of – once we get around to doing what MacIntyre calls the "Enlightenment project" – big examples are Kant and Hume – then you get yourself caught up in this preposterous sort of meta-level thinking. But I love the story because this is what we want our stories for, maybe, to help us through these odd but rare, hopefully rare, sorts of cases.

The other thing I just want to say, and this is a little bit of an aside, I take it – and this is more in the form of a question that you may want to address or not – that the issue about Indian philosophy isn't, of course, that there is a lack of ethics. It is that there is a lack of meta-ethics or ethical reflection.

MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

Right, yes, of course.
OWEN FLANAGAN

Right? So that there is lack of theorizing, because there is tons of stuff about how we are supposed to behave. There might be another analogy here. This is just an historical one. Descartes in the *Discourse* in the first two *Meditations*, when he says, "I'm going to doubt everything," the one thing he says I'm not going to doubt, of course, are my ethical principles. They are taken for granted. It's like they're not up for – they're not thrown into doubt. I mean, I'm doubting now because of the Copernican Revolution how the – you know, is the earth the center or is the earth not the center. But he is quite clear that – so I can doubt everything. I can doubt that I have a body. I can doubt that you're here in the room. I can doubt all this stuff. But I won't doubt my basic values.

So this is an interesting moment. And you might say at least in the North Atlantic, in the west, ethical theorizing didn't go meta, one might say – I'm just going to throw this out; I'm in a religion department. I can say this, right – until 1517 when Martin Luther sort of, you know, spices things up. You might say that there is no need to go meta and engage in ethical theorizing until there is conflict among various ethical traditions. And so long as there is a dominant ethical view, reflectiveness won't be demanded. The stories won't have to go meta, or the theorizing won't need to go meta.

So I have only admiration for what you said about the narrativity. It raises interesting questions about why we hire professional ethicists in philosophy departments. Since I don't do professional ethics in a philosophy department, I don't have to justify my existence. And I'll turn that over Tao.
TAO JIANG

Thank you. I have a – I come to this, your talk, from a slightly different direction. I take the purpose, the point, of your – of this talk is to defend the Indian approach to ethics, to say – because the premise is that the Indians, you know, do not really engage in sort of meta-ethics or the sort of moral philosophy in the way that the western philosophers do, even despite the fact they have moral psychology and so forth. But, you know, the west has the epics as well, but then it has the moral philosophy, you know, sort of subsequently. But the Indians – you know, if the consensus is such that the Indians – the Indian philosophers seem to be more interested in, you know, logic, epistemology and metaphysics and so forth, and they seem to shun away from ethics. And Matilal's approach is to say, well, wait a minute, you know, that's just the wrong place to look. It's sort of let's look at ethics.

But what I take you to be doing is that, yeah, that's actually – epics or narrativity – you know, narrative is actually a better way to approach ethics than the western approach, you know, to philosophize ethics and so forth. I'm not sure whether I understand sort of the grand design or the purpose of your talk, you know, in the ballpark or not.

MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

Well, it is to suggest that the true home of ethical reason is within narrative.

TAO JIANG

Right.
MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

And, you know, I'll just add – I mean, I think it's not an Indian exoticism. I think that the – I mean, it's interesting to look at the whole role of the novel, not just among readers of literature, but as one tracks writing on moral philosophy and the role of the novel for thinkers in that domain. You can imagine, if you conduct a thought experiment that imagines doing ethics without doing what we call moral philosophy – you can imagine that because it can be done through narrative, through story, and so forth. To try to imagine a world of moral philosophy with no narratives I find incomprehensible, at least in relation to our world, in relation to a world in which real actors had to make moral judgments.

TAO JIANG

Right. But I think the Matilal, when he talks about the sort of elusiveness of Dharma in the epics, but, you know, sort of takes the example of Krishna, he said, well, he doesn't – you know, he doesn't exactly resolve the problem at all. In many ways, he actually sort of heightens the mystery. I think that's what he says, right? So if that is the case, then I guess philosophy does have a role to at least to demystify, if that's sort of Aristotelian, to say, well, what if there is these – you know, there are these conflicts of Dharmas, and how are we – are there any ways to adjudicate, or are there any ways to resolve them, or are we simply – go by their sort of circumstantial constraints. And if so, then how exactly is that supposed to work? Then, of course, that then leads you away almost from the narrative. And so I wonder, you know, sort of what would be a kind of a – what would be a – you know, whether there will be any way out of this. Either you go with the narrative, or you go with the other.
And the other question – I think it's – so in other words, so you are defending the Indian approach to ethics through narrative, through epics. And so the other view that I am aware of about the seeming lack of interest, or at least insufficient interest, to the ethical issues in the orthodox Indian, you know, sort of philosophical schools, you know, has to do with the concept of moksha, right, that at least – you know, sort of that's – in other words, there seems to be a conflict not just between Dharmas, but between Dharma and moksha, right? So the ultimate liberation, you know, it is sort of in some ways almost engage Dharma, right?

MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

Absolutely.

TAO JIANG

So there is that dynamic at play in the Indian – so in that sense – and sort of the role or the position of ethics in the grand structure – in the grand scheme of things in the Indian intellectual discourse and in the western intellectual discourse is drastically different in that regard.

MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

Right.

TAO JIANG

So if you think of the western and sort of the – it's hard to imagine the sort of – the liberation can be free – can somehow negate, you know, sort of moral. That I take to be an interesting sort of tension in the Indian intellectual discourse. Anyway, that's just —
MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

Great. Thank you. The last point is, of course, quite relevant, that in a sense in the scheme of values moksha trumps Dharma. I just completed the translation of a Sanskrit play called the Prabodhacandrodaya, the – I translate the title as "The Rise of Wisdom Moon." It's a Vedantic allegory. And what occurs in it when the lead character gets on the path of moksha finally, the character of Dharma drops out of the play. And it's very precisely just in confirmation of the point that you're making.

However, there are some – I'm not sure I want to get into a long thing about moksha right now because moksha turns out to be a deeply slippery category. There is – again, with my love of somewhat devious and seditious arguments, there is a wonderful paper by Daya Krishna in which he shows moksha as being – you know, you have it in erotic manuals, and you have it in musicological manuals, and you have it in architectural manuals. "The highest fruit of mastering architecture is this. You'll get wealthy, you'll get famous, you'll get this, and you'll get moksha." You know, "If you master the music, you'll win the ladies, you'll be loved everywhere, the gods will adore you, and you'll get moksha." And similarly for sexological stuff, and on and on and on. And so Daya Krishna concludes that actually moksha becomes an empty gesture in Indian discourse.

I don't really agree with Daya Krishna's conclusion about that. I think there is another way to look at what is occurring there. But I think what is very clear and what the point that he very rightly makes is that sometimes we naively assume that there is a clear understanding of moksha that is shared in the many contexts in which it is invoked in Indian thought, and that that's probably not the case, that it embodies its own other complex scheme of values.
But it is true that it is contrasted with Dharma as the ethical as we normally think about it. But I don't think it's true that because of the interest in moksha in some quarters there was a lesser interest in Dharma. I mean, if you look at – again, the epics are the best proof. The Mahābhārata sprawls on for, what is it, 18 volumes or something like that. And if you look at – I mean, there have been a number of – probably the best thing to just kind of look at in awe is P.V. Kane's famous history of Dharmasāstra, which, you know, it occupies like about a yard of shelf space. And so this was a very rich area of classical Indian discourse as well, and one that wasn't by any means permitted to languish just because in some sense of ultimacy it got trumped by moksha. The traditional etymology of Dharma is that Dharma is that which upholds the world, and that was in a sense taken seriously.

So I think we do have to understand that there wasn't a disinterest in ethics in India as the result of the emphasis on moksha in some context. But indeed, quite the opposite. It was a really important domain of discourse, but a domain that was in a sense bracketed out of philosophical discourse. And actually, I think Owen's point about Descartes – and of course, Descartes is imitating Sextus and the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition there, which essentially accepted this trade-off that if you accepted that in your outer comportment you weren't going to shake up the world and make trouble for your neighbors, you were free to think whatever you wanted. And so that was essentially the exchange that was made there. And I think that is perhaps applicable to some degree in the Indian case. There are occasional suggestions to that effect so that, for example, in the introduction to the Tattvasangrahapanjika [ph], the commentary on Shantaraksita's Tattvasangraha by Kamalashila where the question of moksha is – you know, the value of moksha is raised. Kamalashila says learned people don't dispute this. It's just, you know, it's there. Learned people don't dispute these things.
And what is presumed is – unfortunately, he doesn't elaborate on what he means very much. But what is presupposed is the idea of a cultivated individual, and a cultivated individual as accepting a certain scheme of values. And when you are within that community of cultivated individuals who operate within the accepted value scheme, then we can debate all this other stuff. All of that is then open for discussion. All of these however many topics get thrashed out in infinite detail in the text that follows. So it's an interesting and useful point.