What the Čārvākas Originally Meant
More on the Commentators on the Čārvākasūtra

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Abstract This essay proposes to review the problems of reconstructing and interpreting ancient texts, particularly philosophical commentaries, in the context of the Čārvāka/Lokāyata system of India. Following an overview of the Indian philosophical text tradition and the ontological and epistemological positions of the Čārvākas, three cases are discussed: (1) when there is no invariance in the text and the commentary, (2) when commentators differ among themselves in their interpretations, and (3) when contradictory interpretations are offered. The paper further discusses why certain commentaries are to be treated as inconsistent with the base text and concludes that innovations inconsistent with the intention of the author should be treated differently from glosses that seek to explain the author’s original intentions.

Keywords Sanskrit philosophical literature · Commentaries · Reconstruction · Interpretation · Development · Inconsistency

Reconstructing and Interpreting Ancient Texts: Two Views

Recently there has been a controversy on the task of a modern commentator on an ancient text. Michael LaFrague declared quite unambiguously:

I believe that either one is trying as best as one can to reconstruct what the Daode Jing meant to its original authors and audience or one is not. If one is not, there is no basis for placing any limits to what can be considered a legitimate interpretation. (Qtd. Goldin 750)

Paul R. Goldin has taken exception to this attitude. He writes: While it is praiseworthy … to remind readers that authors and audiences of the past did not
necessarily share our modern world-view, one cannot deny that twentieth-century critics such as Gadamer, Ricouer and Derrida – whose Hermeneutics LaFrague freely grants are opposed to his own – compellingly demonstrated the limitations of a narrowly historicist approach. (Goldin 750)

Goldin admits that “historically informed reading” has its merits and can be defended. Nevertheless, in his view, it cannot be contended that “reconstructing the author’s original intent is the modern reader’s only legitimate concern.” He contends LaFrague by pointing out: Texts that survive through the ages do so because people continually find new meanings in them. Texts that die, by contrast, are ones that have to be read as though we are all living in the third century B.C. (Goldin 750).

Goldin further seeks to refute LaFrague’s view by the following observation:

The weakness of the argument is apparent if one tries to apply it to jurisprudence. Lawyers would hardly agree that the only two alternatives in constitutional law are to reconstruct the constitution as it would have been understood by its original authors and audience, or to disavow any limits to what can be considered a legitimate interpretation (Goldin 750).

This difference of opinion obviously has its bearings on ancient texts other than the Daode Jing. I find it particularly relevant to the field of my study, the Cārvāka/Lokāyata materialist system of philosophy, which flourished in ancient India and totally disappeared with all its literature after the twelfth century. The whole system has to be reconstructed on the basis of fragments, found quoted or paraphrased in the works of its opponents. The task of reconstruction is made all the more difficult by the fact that its opponents did not always follow the rules of fair play. Quite deliberately they distorted and misinterpreted the views of the Cārvākas (for example, their stand on inference). In spite of this, attempts made by scholars in the last two centuries have resulted in a tentative reconstruction of the system in broad outline (Bhattacharya 2009, pp. 69–104).

Let me declare at the outset that I agree with LaFrague about the task of a reconstructor and am totally out of sympathy with postmodernist hermeneutics which is avowedly a-historical. The case of jurisprudence cited by Goldin is beside the point. No maker of a country’s constitution can foresee all later developments. Some clauses have to be reinterpreted and even suitably amended to keep pace with the changing times. The case of an ancient philosophical text is altogether different. It may very well be so that it had a considerable number of adherents in the past but is now as dead as a dodo. It is also evident that not all adherents stuck to the original intention of the author and some reinterpreted the words of the base text to suit their own taste or to incorporate new elements quite alien to the system. Yet it is necessary to know first what the system was originally like, that is, what it meant to its author(s) and its audience at the time it had been first systematized. Then and only then we can judge where (and if possible, when) some later adherents turned away from the intent of the author(s) or redactor(s). This of course cannot and should not be the only legitimate concern. Later developments, too, have to be taken into consideration. But unless and until the original intent is fairly well understood, the study of later developments cannot be truly fruitful.