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*Against a Hindu God:  
Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*

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# A Review of *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*

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*Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*. By Paramil Patil. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009, 334 pages, ISBN: 978-0674033290 (hardcover); US \$45.00. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, xi + 406 pages, ISBN 978-0231142229 (cloth), US \$50.00.

Parimal Patil's work *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India*, analyzes the seventh-century Buddhist philosopher Ratnakīrti's arguments against the Nyāya concept of Īśvara. Within the scope of this book, Patil accomplishes the impressive feat of making incisive remarks about the nature of Buddhist and Hindu philosophical argumentation, the interaction between thinkers belonging to the two systems, and also current methodological practices in both religious and South Asian studies. Although scholars with a general background will appreciate these methodological gestures, the book's primary audience, and the group for whom this work will undoubtedly become a major contribution, is specialists in Indian philosophy. In this review, I will detail Patil's complex argument chapter by chapter, providing further comments regarding the book's relevance to multiple audiences, and offer a few points of critical consideration.

In the first chapter, Patil provides a general introduction for his work as well as the foundation for a “transdisciplinary” approach to

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Ratnakīrti's arguments, straddling the lines between philosophy, religious and South Asian studies. Partly, Patil states, he is reacting against a "tyranny of social and cultural history" in the three fields he mentions, which has swung the pendulum too far toward the contemporary "outsides" of texts, treating the pre-modern situation as lacking intrinsic worth (6-7). Consequently, he focuses the book on the "insides" of Ratnakīrti's philosophical texts, placing them in three locations: Ratnakīrti's own "intellectual world," the Euro-American academy, and an "imagined 'our' context" that connects the previous two locations (15-21). The primary goal of this introductory chapter is to describe how Patil will navigate the tension of intensively studying Ratnakīrti while also carrying out comparative philosophy.

Chapter two largely serves as an introduction to the concepts and terms specific to Indian epistemology that characterized the debate between Ratnakīrti and the members of the Nyāya School (Naiyāyikas). Here he provides background on the formal terms and style of debate in Indian philosophical epistemology, introducing the philosophical arguments and styles within their own Sanskrit idiom. Patil accomplishes this partly by drawing on Patañjali's grammatical theory of "event-makers," i.e., semantic cause and effect in a sentence, to introduce the Nyāya premise of "warranted awareness" (Sanskrit, *pramāṇa*) (35-40). Based on this, Patil succinctly summarizes the Ratnakīrti – Naiyāyika debate on Īśvara as a disagreement on what can be considered warranted awareness. The Naiyāyikas held that the existence of Īśvara could be inferred from the cause and effect observed by warranted awareness; Ratnakīrti disagreed. Finally, Patil offers a comparison of the Naiyāyika argument to the Western cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of a theistic god. Besides accomplishing its goal of introducing terminology he will draw upon throughout the rest of the book, with this last move Patil ably demonstrates how his work serves also as a *comparative* project.

Chapter three represents the centerpiece of Patil's work, as it lays out in intricate detail the Naiyāyikas' assertions for Īśvara and Ratnakīrti's refutations. The former is grounded in inference-warranted chains considered natural by the Naiyāyikas, i.e., linked together in such a way that no further conditions were required to connect them. Common examples in the texts of such natural warrant chains are the inference of fire from smoke or the existence of a potter from the design of a pot. According to Patil, Ratnakīrti argued that the Naiyāyikas' argument possessed systematic flaws and fallacies, for not only do they not prove the existence of Īśvara, but by the Naiyāyikas' own logic, there is no way they ever could. For instance, Ratnakīrti points out that additional conditions can frequently obtain without observation (wet fuel being necessary for smoke in a fire, for instance), and that "non-observation" cannot prove absence, for the absence of an effect cannot necessarily prove absence of cause (134). Patil shows us that Ratnakīrti further problematizes the Naiyāyikas' assertions by demonstrating that the inference-warrant argument could never prove the existence of a creator like Īśvara (and here the analogy to the Western "argument from design" is especially appropriate) because one cannot infer the qualities of Īśvara merely based on the "effect-cause" inference. Ratnakīrti notes they cannot do this for the same reason that one cannot impute the number, color, or other specific qualities of a fire simply based on its smoke (168). Ultimately, according to Patil, this debate between the Naiyāyikas and Ratnakīrti hinges on the fundamental epistemological point of "whether fallible relations can be genuinely inference-warranting" and whether our senses are truly reliable (181).

Chapters four and five hang together very closely. In the former Patil illustrates how the Indian epistemological traditions used the "theory of exclusion" in constructing "awareness-events," which are the components of all the semantic and mental objects we encounter or create (244). By virtue of this, in chapter five, which ventures slightly

outside the “insides” of the texts, Patil explains how Ratnakīrti and the Naiyāyikas do agree that there is a creator of the world. For Ratnakīrti, though, the creator of the world is not Īśvara, but our own mind and language, which construct and determine awareness-events through exclusion (250).

The sixth and concluding chapter takes us the furthest from the “insides” of the text. This chapter nicely contextualizes Ratnakīrti within the “two-dimensional framework of value” of the Buddhist textual and philosophical tradition. In that tradition, “establishing correct views about the instruments of valid awareness is, therefore, also a way of establishing what is in fact the case” (316-17). Hence, by laying bare the fallacies and false views of opponents, they will be brought closer to the world as it is, in other words, the dharma: “there is... widespread agreement that there is a dual purpose in the work of the Buddhist epistemologists—namely to argue both against their opponents’ account of the sources of knowledge and in support of their own. There is also widespread agreement that a correct account of the sources of knowledge brings one closer to understandings and realizing the *dharma*, even though *dharma* itself is inaccessible to philosophical analysis” (328).

There is a great deal to be admired in this book, which clearly elucidates occasionally abstruse topics and solidly maps out the contours of an intricate philosophical debate in a way that does justice to its particularly Indian context and simultaneously renders it intelligible and relevant to a Western academic audience. I intend the following points in the spirit of conversation, therefore, rather than criticism. First, to a great extent I am sympathetic with Patil’s perspective that philosophy and textual studies have been unfortunately sidelined by an increasing emphasis on cultural or ethnographic contexts, which he terms the “outsides” of texts. That said, however, I wonder about the extent to

which any text, even those of Ratnakīrti or the Naiyāyikas, can be extracted from its “outsides.” One could argue that the epistemological system of inference-warrant (*pramāṇa*) undergirding the entire debate is itself a cultural, performative practice that stands apart from any given text and largely determines its structure and content. This would call into question the capability of any discussion focusing on a text’s “insides.” Similarly, Patil’s elucidation of the implicit and explicit argumentative interaction between Ratnakīrti and the Naiyāyikas—not to mention his triangulation between Ratnakīrti’s world, the Euro-American academy, and their shared context—immediately brings to mind the more literary philosophies of Gadamer or Bakhtin and their conceptualizations, respectively, of the fusion of horizons and the dialogic imagination. Although Patil’s project is to swing the pendulum back to philosophical textual analysis, the ease with which connections can be made to literature and cultural performance speaks to the potential comparative gestures that an emphasis on textual insides might actually obfuscate. I believe Patil could have made some of these gestures to the exterior of his texts without compromising his stated goal of reinvigorating comparative philosophy.

These “conversational” points aside, I must return to my original and primary assertion that this is a fascinating and important book, which will be of great use to specialists in Indian philosophy and whose methodological approach should be of concern to a great many more. Indeed, I believe the manner in which Patil describes the multivalent quality of Ratnakīrti’s argument applies to this book itself. Late in the work, Patil summarizes Ratnakīrti’s project in this way: “Thus Ratnakirti sees his philosophical work as exhibiting both instrumental and epistemic rationality and as having both instrumental value and epistemic value. Unlike the instrumental value of his work, which is indexed to the achievement of his goals, its epistemic value is a kind of ‘final value’—it is valuable for its own sake, and not just for some end”

(358). We can interpret Patil's book in a similar light, for on an instrumental level, it is eminently valuable as an assessment of Ratnakīrti's thought and the epistemological and sectarian issues with which he dealt. At the same time, the book also accomplishes the larger methodological project of showing the great intellectual rewards of comparative philosophy and how the "insides" of texts are valuable for their own sake.