

THE TRIAL OF PAGANS

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Balagangadhara's (1994) account of the double dynamic of Christianity is persuasive and his use of it as a partial description of the West insightful. Doubts are raised about the author's ambition to embed that account in a theory of cultural difference and the philosophical difficulties involved in stating that theories are explored by setting up a dialogue between self-descriptions of some European pagan thinkers (primarily Wittgenstein and Nietzsche) and the author's partial description of the West. Interpreting the former as an attempt to 'reverse' or 'overcome' the 'category mistake' of the Christian West, the paper argues that 'we' too should see the dominant self-description of the West as a 'mistake' and further suggests that the issues raised by the trial of pagans concern a politics of self-description.

Once more, pagans will testify in a battle about religious truth. (S.N. Balagangadhara, 1994: § 485)

... and write with confidence

'In the beginning was the deed'. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1972: § 401)

In this way, Christianity as a dogma was destroyed by its own morality, in the same way Christianity as a morality must also be destroyed,—we stand on the threshold of this occurrence. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1994: § 127)

We are in an ethical condition that lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and Hegelian legacies. ... In important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left us traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to make our ethical relation to the world fully intelligible. (Bernard Williams, 1993: 166)

Among all the societies in history, ours—I mean those that came into being at the end of Antiquity on the Western side of the European continent—have perhaps been the most aggressive and the most conquering; they have been capable of the most stupefying violence, against themselves as well as against others ... It must be kept in mind that they alone evolved a strange technology of power treating the vast majority of men as a flock with a few as shepherds. (Michel Foucault, 1988: 63)

This bold, challenging and brilliantly original work (Balagangadhara, 1994) begins with an innocuous misdescription: it presents itself as a guided tour of Asia and Europe. As the reader, however, soon finds out, he or she is brought to a trial. And not as an observer either, for barely has the reader had the time to figure out what the trial is all about, he or she is subpoenaed and placed in the witness box. Will the Bible be produced and the oath to tell the truth and nothing but the truth administered? No! Because the Bible and the Truth are exhibits, are evidences in this trial. How can that be? What is the trial all about, then? Who or what is on trial? Why does the reader—whether he or she is a Dinka, a Muslim, a pagan or a secular-citizen, etc.—find himself interrogated? The trial, it turns out, is, indeed, about a misdescription, but there is nothing innocuous about either the trial or the misdescription.

It is time to drop the metaphor and get on with the actual trial:

At the beginning of the chapter on the Roman *religio*, I reflected upon the fact that we all share a Christian world. 'Our (intellectual) world happens to be a Christian world,' I wrote there, 'whether a Jew, a Dinka or a Brahmin; whether a theist, an atheist or a Muslim, our questions have a common origin.' It must be obvious what I had in mind then, and how true it is. In the name of science and ethnology, the Biblical themes have become our regular stock-in-trade: that God gave religion to humankind has become a cultural universal in the guise that all cultures have a religion; the theme that God gave one religion to humanity has taken the form and belief that all religions have something in common; that God implanted a sense of divinity is now a secular truth in the form of an anthropological, specifically human ability to have a religious experience. ... One has become a Christian precisely to the degree Christianity ceases being specifically Christian in the process of its secularization. We may not have had our baptisms or recognize Jesus as the saviour; but this is how we prosecute the Christians. The retribution for this is also in proportion: the pagans themselves do not know how pagan they really are. We have, it is true, no need for specifically Christian doctrines. But then, that is because all our dogmas are in fact Christian. (Balagangadhara, 1994: 246-7)

This, one would have thought, is deeply tragic. Balagangadhara, however, goes on to say: 'We might as well stop here, but we cannot. The tragedy, or is it the Divine retribution, goes deeper. Far, far deeper' (p. 247). I am puzzled by this remark and the author, unfortunately, never returns to it. Perhaps the very project of this book to outline a (Christian) science of (pagan) practices is an expression of how deep the tragedy goes; for that project is both necessary and impossible. Or, so I shall suggest. But before that, here is a quick summary of the book by way of appreciating its genuine achievements.

'... that stroke of genius called Christianity'

Balagangadhara begins by putting on trial the belief that all cultures have religion. This belief is so common or universal as to be an unstated and

taken-for-granted assumption. It has persisted in the face of overwhelming evidence against it. The question therefore is: whence the belief and why does it persist, albeit in different disguises? It is the belief of a culture whose identity is constituted in important ways by religion. However, the theory of which this belief was part has faded into the background making the belief—as well as many other problematics generated by that theory—the more or less unintelligible common-sense of this culture. What makes this belief even more opaque—perhaps we should say transparent—is that this culture now regards itself as embodying a secular world-view; when this culture now turns to other cultures, it seeks to understand the latter too as embodying world-views. The secular people do not realize they are in essence doing and saying the same thing as the Christians: namely, understanding the other as a variation of themselves. How, then, does one explain the compulsion of this culture to understand the other only by transforming the other? By explaining the nature of Christianity as a religion. To be religion is to have an explanatorily intelligible (EI) account of the Cosmos itself. To understand what this means is to understand why (in Nietzsche's phrase) Christianity was a stroke of genius.

Religion brings together the cause of the world and the will of the Creator: it not only explains the Cosmos but also makes it and whatever happens in it intelligible to us. As Balagangadhara puts it:

This, then, is what makes an explanation into a 'religious' explanation: it is knowledge of the Cosmos which includes itself as an *explanandum*. There would have been a logical problem here, the threat of circularity perhaps, if this were to be a result of our (human) understanding or theory of the world. But this problem does not arise, because God has revealed His purpose by speaking to us about them. 'Revelation,' then, is the crucial component that breaks the possible circularity. As religious figures would put it perhaps, religion need not prove the existence of God at all; the existence of religion is the proof for the existence of God. In this sense, as an explanatorily intelligible account, religion is God's gift to mankind and not a human invention. (p. 333)

This characterization of religion allows us to grasp the double dynamic of religion. As an EI account, religion has to claim universality, that is to say, it cannot be restricted by time, space or other cultures or traditions. It must universalize itself; it does so by proselytization and secularization. But this is also the dilemma—the Christological dilemma: Christianity as a religion must retain its identity as a religion; however, in order to universalize itself it is compelled to give up its identity, it is compelled to secularize itself. Since it claims to be *the truth*, it cannot restrict access to itself; but in order to retain its exclusivity it must hold on to its identity as a particular religion. As religion, Christianity cannot *tolerate* the otherness of the other; when confronted with other 'pagan' traditions and practices (whether in late Antiquity or only a few hundred years ago in the Indian subcontinent), it must first transform the other into a religion, albeit a false one. It cannot acknowledge that there can be an other of religion. Christianity as a re-

ligion then brings a peculiar *reflexivity* into the world; it begins to predicate truth and falsity of *practices*. This is of course a category mistake, at least in the eyes of pagans, the practice-oriented peoples. The Christians, in contrast, are the theory-oriented people; it is belief that is important to them. They interrogate practices and traditions as embodying beliefs, albeit false ones. This 'fundamental' category mistake, however, lies at the origin of human history which Christianity begins to (re)write.

The twin movements of Christianizing the pagan world and the de-Christianizing of Christian beliefs appear to help us understand what is 'really' going on: the secular world is itself under the grips of a religious framework. (p. 221)

What is really going on is that the distinction between the religious and the secular (between the sacred and the profane) is drawn *within* a theological framework, which has now become 'universal'.

This is a brutally short summary of Balagangadhara's main arguments; it nevertheless helps us to highlight the force and novelty of his account. At one level, we can see Balagangadhara's powerful 'conceptual story' correcting and deepening already existing descriptions and theories of Western culture. Everybody knows that Christianity played a central role in the evolution of this culture; everybody knows that modernity as a specifically western phenomenon introduced radical changes in the world. But in what way does Christianity constitute the identity of the West? How are the secular/liberal self-descriptions of the West related to Christianity? Where did the specifically modern phenomenon of reflexivity emerge from? The standard accounts would mobilize, variously and in various combinations, science, industrial capitalism, enlightenment, revolution and democracy as answer. To be sure, Balagangadhara's account leaves out many things, but we must remember that it is offered as a partial description of a culture against the background of another culture, the culture of the author.¹ That description is then embedded in a projected theory of cultural difference. The questions that the author tries to formulate here are as difficult as they come, and my own discussion of them takes the form of an exploration of the philosophical difficulties we necessarily encounter on this terrain.

The Original Category Mistake

Let me begin by noting that Balagangadhara's attempt to capture the cultural difference of the Christian West has nothing pagan about it. What do I mean by this? Several things, actually. From what we know of pagan cultures, the other was not a problem for them. As long as the other could be recognized as a people with practices of its own, its truths, its gods, its mythologies, pagan cultures had no trouble accepting the other, even

though they might very well entertain doubts, scepticism, even outright criticism of those truths and those mythologies.² But when confronted with the radical otherness of a culture that defined itself in terms of beliefs, their culture did not have the resource to understand or respond to the claims of this culture, except again by *looking at the practice of this culture*, a culture which defines itself by its representations. There is of course an obvious sense in which pagan cultures not only have no use for a theory of cultural difference, they would not even understand what that means. What I wish to get at is something different: Balagangadhara offers a representational account of a culture whose compulsion it is to represent everything, including itself. How does one get at the practice which supports or sustains this representational activity; how does this representational culture represent its own practices? It seems to me that a pagan would have attempted to focus on these two questions. Balagangadhara's account, however, grants Christianity its self-representation, in a way it replicates its structure. Therefore, when Balagangadhara suggests that cultural differences be plotted along culture-specific goings-about in the world and argues that religion brings about the predominance of theoretical knowledge (knowing-about as their going-about in the world), he seems to be accepting the Christian self-representation as true. He seems to be conceding that there can indeed be such a mode of going-about in the world.

What I wish to argue is that this mode of going-about in the world cannot be all that it claims or seems, that it misrepresents, it has to misrepresent the practices on which it rests. I shall do so by summoning some European pagan thinkers whose quotations have served as epigraphs for this essay. That is to say, I shall be looking at the cultural self-descriptions of some Europeans who could not accept either Christianity or its secularized fusion of morality and epistemology or its claim to provide a theoretical foundation for practices. They tried to reject Christianity (and its dynamic) by providing a cultural self-description at a level where it could be shown that Christianity and its self-representations are in a profound sense a *mistake*. By contrasting these self-descriptions with Balagangadhara's partial description of the same culture as well as with his attempt to conceptualize cultural differences, I hope to be able to show not only that these self-descriptions and other-descriptions can generate a fruitful dialogue but, more importantly, that there is something unsatisfactory about Balagangadhara's proposal for a comparative science of cultures, even though there is also something worth pursuing, not necessarily or not only as science or theory, but perhaps as a politics of cultural self-description.

Let me take up Wittgenstein first, since the interpretive dilemmas generated by his later work will throw light on the difficulties I have with Balagangadhara's theory of cultural differences. The difficulties will come into focus if we read Wittgenstein's later work as cultural self-descriptions *against* the background of the problematic that Balagangadhara has so

boldly proposed through his partial description of the West. I want to argue that Wittgenstein was attempting to reverse, as it were, the category mistake committed by Christianity, a mistake which, as Balagangadhara has insightfully shown, bestows a certain reflexivity on practices that cannot be reflexive in that way. Consider the following remarks, all taken from *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1972):

Not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice has to speak for itself. (§ 139; emphasis added)

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of language-game. (§ 204)

And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, I have no doubt about it, I can still give no *grounds* for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for. (§ 307)

At any rate it is important to imagine a language in which our concept 'knowledge' does not exist. (§ 562)

And finally, at the end of a characteristically self-questioning remark, this seemingly enigmatic self-admonition:

... and write with confidence
'In the beginning was the deed'. (§ 401)

I suggested that we read these remarks as cultural self-descriptions. Does that mean that the 'we' in later Wittgenstein is relative to a culture? Are these remarks empirical propositions about a culture?³ The answer to the latter is clear: they cannot be empirical propositions. Rather, they are aimed at showing that a certain kind of theoretical demand for explanations and justifications of practices cannot be met because practices are ... what they are. To insist on knowing or explaining what they are, how we go on, is to look for an empirical explanation where there is none to be had. His remarks, then, are situated at that point where we have run out of empirical explanations of how we go on; and the insight they provide, if any, enables us to cope with the 'empirical exhaustion' (Lear, 1982: 388).

To take up the first question now, several commentators have noticed that there is a certain vagueness or indeterminacy in Wittgenstein's 'we'. When he notes the 'groundlessness' of our beliefs or imagines examples of radically different linguistic practices, is he, in the famous phrase of Bernard Williams, imagining alternatives *to us* or *for us* (Williams, 1981: 160)? If he was doing the former, then he was trying to state an unstatable and untenable relativistic thesis; if he was attempting the latter, which is the preferred interpretation, then he was trying, transcendently perhaps, to explore from within the limits of our own practices, to say or show what it

is to be 'minded as we are', to share with others 'routes of interest, perceptions of salience, feelings of naturalness, etc.' (Lear, 1982: 386). This exercise is, clearly, not an empirical one; it does not, unlike the relativistic one, claim to provide *explanations* for being 'minded' as we are. The imagined alternatives have the sole purpose of rendering perspicuous the boundaries of our form of life, its 'unpredictability', its 'groundlessness'. The exercise does not warrant the conclusion that we must revise practices—the law of the excluded middle, for example—that have no justification. The 'we' then is a transcendental 'we', relativized to humanity rather than to an empirical 'we' of a culture. It has been further suggested that in this precarious exploration of the boundaries or limits of our practices, a space could be found where relativism can legitimately take bite, and that is the space occupied by our ethical practices. But the exploration of the alternatives opened up by this space would be imagining alternatives *for us*.

How does this interpretation of Wittgenstein square with my suggestion that he should be seen as offering a cultural self-description and that the point of that exercise was to reverse the category mistake committed by a religious culture? I would like to claim that Wittgenstein (1972) was simply (!) trying to say that the existence of certain practices—mathematical, scientific, ethical, or whatever—is itself the only justification for going on the way we do in any of these practices; if someone did not get the hang of them, no further justification—by showing, for example, that these practices are true, are the embodiment of reason itself—can make them acceptable or understandable. And the one who could not or would not accept or understand these practices need not be 'irrational', or inhabit another relativistic universe. Is this not relativism? But relativism is a worry if we want to make truth do more than it can, if, that is, we have a religious notion of truth.

Is it wrong for me to be guided in my actions by the propositions of physics? Am I to say I have no good ground for doing so? Isn't precisely this what we call a 'good ground'. (§ 608)

Supposing we met people who did not regard that as a telling reason. Now, how do we imagine this? Instead of the physicist, they consult an oracle. (And for this reason we call them primitive.) Is it wrong for them to consult an oracle and be guided by it?—If we call this 'wrong' aren't we using our language-game as a base from which to *combat* theirs? (§ 609)

And are we right or wrong to combat it? Of course there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings. (§ 610)

I said I would 'combat' the other man,—but wouldn't I give him *reasons*? Certainly; but how far do we go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think of what happens when missionaries convert natives.) (§ 612)

It would be a mistake to focus on the problem of relativism when we try to understand what Wittgenstein is getting at (is the philosophical ob-

session with combating relativism of a piece with Christian or religious obsession with combating false gods and heathen practices?). No practice embodies reason or truth in such a way that the very proposition embedded in that practice should simply strike me as true. Nothing in the practice of consulting the physicist can make the practice of a person who consults an oracle false; to make it false, one has to use the physicist's language-game as a base from which to combat, persuade, discipline the person consulting an oracle. For Wittgenstein, as I interpret him, this is not a problem about the truth of relativism; indeed relativism is a problem for a culture which seeks to combat the other with slogans, persuasion, etc. but cannot admit that it does so. It cannot admit it in part because it cannot understand itself or misunderstands itself.⁴ Wittgenstein's self-description is aimed at showing that this theoretical culture profoundly misdescribes its own practice. If it understood the nature of practice, then it would not see the other as a problem. The missionary-native analogy Wittgenstein uses is perfect, and we now know from Balagangadhara why it is more than an analogy. Wittgenstein, as we all know, thought that philosophy was the cause of this misdescription, implying, rather tamely, that once we stop doing philosophy the problem of saying or showing what practice is would also disappear.

These considerations connect up with Balagangadhara's concern, by both complementing it and correcting it, in two ways. First, Balagangadhara's partial description of the West showed why that culture was compelled to understand the other only by transforming it. Wittgenstein, I claimed, shows how it misunderstands or misdescribes itself. Balagangadhara's description helps us to deepen our understanding of the sense in which that mistake or misdescription was no ordinary mistake, but a 'world-historic' one. It also helps us to understand how philosophical problems—or more modestly, some philosophical problems—themselves are symptoms of a larger cultural process or compulsion. Some of the problems a secular culture grapples with—epistemological ones about foundation of practices and beliefs, moral ones about duty and responsibility, for example—are intelligible as problems only when we fill in the theological framework that gave rise to those problems. So some of these problems do require therapeutic dissolution for reasons other than, and deeper than, Wittgenstein himself gave. Second, Balagangadhara's attempt to elaborate a theory of cultural differences unfolds at the same level or in the same territory as Wittgenstein's attempt to reverse the category mistake of a culture which privileges theoretical understanding or knowledge.

It should by now be obvious what I am getting at. Although Balagangadhara rather blithely offers his considerations about configurations of learning as theory or science or hypothesis, there is nothing empirical about them. That the hypothesis appears determinate is because it extrapolates from 'learning' as an activity in the narrow sense. We under-

stand what it is to learn arithmetic, to swim, to pacify one's ancestors, and so on. But we cannot really get any determinate hold on the idea that we extend this understanding to culture as a whole. A transcendental remark is being misleadingly put as an empirical hypothesis. But it cannot function as explanation. In fact it merely redescribes the problem of why the other was a problem for one culture. For, in Balagangadhara's own terms, he is trying to say what 'performative knowledge' is from within 'theoretical knowledge'. Furthermore, if my interpretation of Wittgensteinian self-description is persuasive, then it would seem that Balagangadhara is asking us to accept the misdescription of a culture as the only possible or true description of it.

Is the West Condemned to be Christian?

Let me get at the problem from another route. To begin, does not Balagangadhara's partial description of the West have the consequence of making it seem as though the West is condemned to be Christian? Balagangadhara is especially concerned that his description of the dynamic of religion captures the intellectual and experiential aspects of being a Christian. One would have to agree that even a contemporary Tertullian would have to accept Balagangadhara's account (with perhaps some discomfort at his sarcasm directed at missionaries). It captures the identity of a Christian. What about the identity of a secular European, say a liberal? He or she might claim that Balagangadhara's description debunks his or her identity rather than giving a satisfactory account of it and its autonomy. He or she could say that all the insights that Balagangadhara has—about theories, 'our' human theories, being partial, tentative, etc.—are also available to him or her; and, further, that although the political and ethical values—the values of Enlightenment, say—have no chance of being what they claim, they are also not entirely illusory, and indeed, they can be disconnected from Christian or theological values. If some of his or her problems and attitudes are inheritances of Christianity, he or she is slowly deconstructing them or working his or her way out of them. Although Balagangadhara does not address this problem, I think that his account of the double dynamic of religion can be extended—such is its power and richness—to characterize contemporary liberalism.

Liberalism can be shown to exhibit—from, as it were, the secular side—the Christological dilemma or a version of it. It is a particular doctrine—historically the offspring of Christianity—which claims to be the universal frame for resolving all political questions. In its most refined version, that of John Rawls's political liberalism, it goes so far as to deny truth to itself so as to propose a framework of cooperation which should be acceptable even to those who adhere to comprehensive doctrines (his version of the

explanatorily intelligible account) such as Christianity, Islam and, yes, Hinduism (Rawls, 1993). Thus, in the same way as Christianity and intolerance went together, now it seems liberalism and tolerance go together. Thus the liberal framing of the 'multi-culturalism' problem is the contemporary way in which 'the secular, pagan world of today is not merely a problem to Christology but is, actually, a problem in Christology itself' (p. 221). The liberal formulation of the problem of multiculturalism or secularism makes perfect sense if we see it as description of the contemporary trial of pagans. This is not the place to develop these remarks; enough said, at any rate, to indicate that Balagangadhara's account can capture the identity of the liberal as well.

What about, finally, those who would indeed subscribe to Balagangadhara's description but who would want to 'overcome' that description by showing it to be a mistake, even though a 'world-historic' one? I have already sketched one such pagan response when I discussed Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's animus was, however, directed against philosophy, with the rather optimistic implication that his culture is, but for philosophy, in fine shape. (We know of course that he did entertain dark visions regarding the European and American civilization and was sceptical whether the spirit of his work would be understood.) I want now to discuss Nietzsche whose critical self-description targeted precisely the dynamic of Christianity (in which he included philosophy too) with the hope of overcoming the 'lie entailed in the belief in God'. It is doubtful if there are any philosophical accounts of the role of Christianity in the shaping of European culture which surpasses Nietzsche's in scope or in insight. Rereading Nietzsche's genealogy of Christianity in the light of Balagangadhara's description of the West, I am struck by the extent to which one complements the other.

Since I do not have the space here to reconstruct Nietzsche's arguments, let me quickly and schematically list some of the themes and questions that resonate with Balagangadhara's concerns: the contrast between the pagan culture of Antiquity and the Christian West; the priority, if you like, of custom or practice; Nietzsche's account of Christianity as a 'closed system of will, goal, and interpretation' (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 116; hereafter referred to as *GM*); the will to truth or the will to know that enables Christianity to fuse epistemology and morality (which can be shown to be similar to the EI account Balagangadhara offers); the link between the ascetic ideal of Christianity and both atheism and science; the invention of the will, which leads to obscure, but still powerful, notions of human action and to a moralized psychology that supports it. Finally, the perspectival character of 'our' human knowledge.

What needs noticing here is that Nietzsche's self-description fits or matches with Balagangadhara's account of the dynamic of Christianity; Nietzsche, however, does not simply stop where Balagangadhara's account

does. He cannot; indeed, he is forced to do more. That is why I termed his description *critical* self-description. Rather than stop at a theoretical characterization of Christianity, he focuses on how its will to truth distorts or misdescribes practices and how these misdescriptions in the service of what he calls the ascetic ideals create entities or experiences such as will, conscience, responsibility and guilt, etc.:

But have you ever asked yourself properly how costly the setting up of every ideal on earth has been? How much reality always had to be vilified and misunderstood in the process, how many lies had to be sanctified ... (GM: 70)

Confronted with the 'power' and 'monstrosity' of the ideals, he seeks points of resistance to them. When he refers to the cost involved in the setting up of the ascetic ideal, he does not mean the violent history of Christianity. His genealogy of morality is not a history of Christianity. It tries to grasp the practices that Christianity as will to truth brings into being and perpetuates in order to sustain itself and that will. Sometimes it fastens upon local or particular examples to show the distortions and misunderstandings of practices; at other times, it goes further and tries to grasp the practices that Christianity brings into being without acknowledging it. Sometimes, the exercise is conceptual, as when Nietzsche shows how morality 'misconstrues all action as conditional upon an agency, a "subject" and ends up doubling the "deed"' (*GM*: 28).⁵ At other times, it is historical, as when Nietzsche contrasts Greek gods with the Christian God, to bring out the peculiar economy of spiritual debt, in which God sacrifices or crucifies himself for man's guilt, invented by Christianity (its 'stroke of genius').⁶ Fundamentally, however, genealogy seeks to call into question 'the will to truth':

Because the ascetic ideal has so far been master over all philosophy, because truth was set as being, as God, as the highest authority itself, because truth was not allowed to be a problem. Do you understand this 'allowed to be'?—From the very moment that faith in the God of the ascetic ideal is denied, there is a new problem as well: that of the value of truth.—The will to truth needs a critique—let us define our own task with this—, the value of truth is tentatively to be called into question ... (GM: 120)

The question is: how does one do this? By formulating another goal in place of the goals set up by the ascetic ideal? Or by pointing out the mistake involved in the setting up of goals? But what exactly is the mistake involved? How does one say that? We are, it would seem, back on the Wittgensteinian territory. How to indicate the nature of practices, their lack of goals, without giving in to the temptation of setting up alternative goals?

What does the *power* of that ideal mean, the *monstrosity* of its power? Why has it been given so much space? Why has more effective resistance not been offered to it? The ascetic ideal expresses one will: *where* is the opposing will, in which an *opposing ideal* might express itself? The ascetic ideal has a *goal*,—which is so general, that all the interests of human existence appear petty and narrow when measured against it; it inexorably interprets epochs, peoples, man, all with reference to this one goal, it permits

of no other interpretation, no other goal, and rejects, denies, affirms, confirms only with reference to *its* interpretation (—and was there ever a system of interpretation more fully thought through?); ... it believes there is nothing on earth of any power which does not first have to receive a meaning, a right to existence, a value from it, as a tool to *its* work, as a way and means to *its* goal, to *one* goal ... Where is the *counterpart* to this closed system of will, goal, and interpretation? Why is the counterpart *lacking*? ... Where is the *other* 'one goal'? (GM: 116)

The rhetorical question about the counterpart and an other goal is precisely that: rhetorical. Nietzsche considers whether science and atheism express a different ideal or goal and argues that they derive their values from the ascetic ideal. Indeed, he sees atheism or secularism as expressing the 'kernel' of the ascetic ideal, the will to truth shorn of all other trappings. As for science, which has or can have no value of its own, he wonders if its value too will depreciate with the depreciation of the value of the ascetic ideals.⁷ If Christianity appropriated human histories through a category mistake, History as we know it and live it is the universalization of that mistake. The fundamental thrust of his genealogy of morality is directed at making us realize that the setting up of will, goal and ideal as a closed system is a mistake and a misdescription of ... Saying that is precisely the difficulty that both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein negotiate in their different ways. Nietzsche, however, goes further than Wittgenstein in that he seeks to grasp the reality, the distorted and obscure reality, brought into being by the misdescriptions generated by the will to know or the will to truth.⁸

From Trial and Theory to Festival and Theoria?

It is time now to refocus and to conclude. I have found extremely persuasive Balagangadhara's account of the dynamic of religion and his use of that as a partial description of the Western culture. I have tried to raise doubts about his further ambition to embed that description in a theory of cultural differences which seeks to identify the dominant mode of going-about of a culture. The argument I have sketched through an interpretation of Wittgenstein and Nietzsche tried to make two related points: Balagangadhara's description of the West's cultural compulsion and his attempt to explain it in terms of the predominance of one type of knowledge has, in effect, the consequence of accepting the self-description of the Christian and secularized Christian culture. To express the same point a little more dramatically: in Balagangadhara's account it looks as though the West is condemned to be Christian. To show why it is unacceptable—unacceptable to whom? to some Europeans, obviously; but also, as we shall see presently, to us, Indians or Asians—I contrasted Balagangadhara's description of the West with the self-descriptions of some European pagans. My discussion of Wittgenstein's self-description and its status was aimed at

showing both how Balagangadhara's project for a science of cultures with its ambition of capturing differences at a global level runs into philosophical difficulties and the sense in which we can say that the dominant cultural self-description of the Christian West is a mistake. I suggested further, through an all too brief interpretation of Nietzsche, that the project of 'overcoming' that mistake should be part of our description of the West.

We have, or should have, an interest in that project because, remember, our intellectual world too is Christian—we no longer seem to know how pagan we really are. In the same way as these European pagan thinkers were and are struggling with the misdescriptions that they cannot simply cast aside because in one sense they themselves are the product of those misdescriptions and errors, we too have been living and struggling with a history of misdescriptions (a much shorter one, obviously), with a history created and perpetuated by misdescriptions. For them as well as us, the difficult question is how we can say we are the products of errors or misdescriptions without implying that there was and is an entity waiting to be correctly described. It cannot, therefore, be a question of reviving or restoring anything. As Williams puts it:

It is beguiling to dream about a history in which it was not true that Christianity, in Nietzsche's words, 'robbed us of the harvest of the culture of the ancient world.' These dreams should not detain us, but the fact that such speculations are a waste of time does not mean that there could not have been such a world. (1993: 12)

Nor can that counterfactual allow us, moreover, to 'see', as Williams engagingly remarks, 'Christianity as merely the longest and most painful route from paganism to paganism' (Williams, 1993: 12).⁹ It is an important, if obvious, precaution for these Nietzscheans who use the Antique culture as a contrast as well as a support for their self-understanding and self-overcoming. Their objective is, to quote another Nietzschean, 'to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently' (Foucault, 1985: 9).

How do things stand with us? The focus on European pagans may have been misleading to the extent that it is only through the structure of self-interpretation imposed by Christianity that all pagan cultures look the same. To say that that self-interpretation is a mistake and we should set aside that structure, does not in any way imply that cultures that looked the same or similar through that structure would look the same if they looked at one another independently. Would we then need a theory of cultural difference? We cannot really tell. We have some way to go before taking up that question, before, indeed, we can even formulate that question.

Some questions, however, appear prematurely, as it were, compelling us to respond with whatever resources we have (which is not to say that we can actually decide the proper time and place for questions). It is not as

though we can now separate the question of reversing the category mistake from the question of cultural difference. My suggestion then is that we do not; indeed, we cannot. What does that imply? Let us recall that for Balagangadhara science or theory of culture unfolds within the structure that we are trying to overcome or cast aside. But a science of practice seems, so I suggested, impossible, however necessary it may also seem. I also suggested there is nevertheless something worth pursuing in what Balagangadhara was attempting to do. Why not try to pursue the question of cultural difference by shifting to another language?¹⁰

This is not a metaphorical cry for a new language. What I mean is this. If the European pagans have constantly turned to Antiquity for self-understanding and self-overcoming, we do not need to do only that. We have other resources. We can shift to the languages in which it should be possible to pose, in a local or particular way, questions of alternative practices, of alternatives to practices that are being mutated or even destroyed by becoming reflexive. Rather than use the secular theology of philosophy of science to work out the constraints on the theory of practice (which is what a theory of cultural difference formulated within the language of a theoretical culture would be), I suggest that raising these questions in, say, Kannada (the language that Balagangadhara and I share), would make what is possible and plausible and what is not in letting 'practice' or performative knowledge, if there is such a thing, speak for itself. We can, in particular, begin to show how this culture and language has negotiated with the 'reflexivity' that it is forced to acquire. The very process of inquiry, then, would testify to the existence and effectivity of performative knowledges, for working with(in) the concepts that embody a certain way of doing things—that are, to use Williams's characterization of 'thick' ethical concepts, both world-guided and action-guiding¹¹—would involve ascertaining the procedures they outline by moving about within the space created by them. In this exploration of ways of doing things, we would necessarily run up against the problem of registering the mutation or even destruction of these concepts. That would also entail asking ourselves whether there is a route back or, at any rate, away from reflexiveness for these world-guided and action-guiding concepts? If we cannot forget that we are reflexive, how do we delimit that reflexivity and resist its corrosiveness, without simply and in vain trying to reaffirm those concepts that have been modified or destroyed? How do we continue, revise or extend, create (in some non-voluntary sense of the term) or learn (new) ways of doing things?¹²

This way we could prepare the ground for addressing, very concretely and without the misleading theory-talks,¹³ another important task: to say, in whatever way we can, the senses in which our dominant self-descriptions are misdescriptions and find ways in which to, if not reverse them, at least to resist and recast them. A task that would lead to or perhaps be inseparable

from a politics of self-description. That is a *political* issue in the sense that it is something we need to argue about.¹⁴ By organizing this trial in such a powerful way, then, Balagangadhara has confronted us with questions which we cannot evade any more. Whether theory will become *theoria* and whether this trial, in all its senses, will lead to a pagan festival, are questions of and for our political present.

NOTES

1. For those working within the space opened up by the influential work of Said (1979), Balagangadhara's book offers far more satisfactory answers to questions that Said for the most part leaves unasked. Said, to recall very briefly the outline of *Orientalism*, describes the systematicity of certain discursive constructions of the 'Orient' by the West—from Homer to Kissinger. Said never offers—in fact, his methodology prohibits him from asking the question—an explanation of this phenomenon. By locating the mechanism of effacement of the other, Balagangadhara's book prompts us to reformulate and revise the problematic set up by *Orientalism*. In particular, insofar as Balagangadhara's characterization of religion applies to Islam as well, we need to rethink the relationship between (or the mutual representations of) Christianity and Islam.
It is rather curious that Balagangadhara does not mention this work at all, especially since a discussion of *Orientalism* would have helped him both compress some of his historical/linguistic discussions and set off his own thesis more sharply.
2. Much more needs to be said than these highly abbreviated and idealized remarks. I am not suggesting that the other presented no problems for pagan cultures, but only that they were not the kind of epistemological and moral problems that Christianity saw the other as presenting. For material that might help in clarifying the contrast, see Veyne (1988, esp. Chs 1–2 and 6–10); Francois Hartog (1988); de Certeau (1988, part III); Greenblatt (1991, esp. Chs 1 and 5).
3. My discussion of Wittgenstein engages with the following two articles: Williams (1981: 144–63) and Lear (1982).
4. Even philosophers are slowly coming round to the view that a few a priori reflections on the requirements of translation or interpretation (combined with some considerations taken from Wittgenstein such as agreement in form of life) cannot refute what the philosophical tradition regards as relativism. As Balagangadhara's work so powerfully demonstrates, there can indeed be translation and interpretation, but still no understanding of the other. My remarks, it should be obvious, are not aimed at either defending or refuting relativism. As I see the matter, relativism is not a particularly helpful way of even formulating what is involved in the understanding or non-understanding of the other.
5. For an interesting discussion of Nietzsche's critique, see Williams (1995).
6. For a discussion of this Christian economy of debt and credit, see Derrida (1995, esp. Ch. 4).

7. Why is there such a powerful ideological resistance to seeing science as simply a problem-solving activity? The scientific practice itself has no need of the picture—a properly secular—theological picture, if we follow Balagangadhara's remarks regarding the link between science and religion—the picture of itself as limning the ultimate structure of reality or as delivering the absolute conception of reality. And yet, one wonders if scientific activity would enjoy the prestige it has and, consequently, would flourish the way it has, without that picture.
8. Two contemporary Nietzscheans—Williams and Foucault—have deepened and extended the genealogical analysis. In his recent work Williams (1993) has explored ways of making perspicuous the sense in which the morality system, with its cluster of concepts such as will, moral responsibility, guilt, blame, etc. rests on notions which are irreducibly obscure and/or mistaken. He has made the telling point that to the extent the modern ethical practices keep going at all, they do not do so because they are what the self-description offered by the morality system claims them to be, but because they rely on concepts—such as shame—which are more like (or indeed the same as) the ethical concepts used in classical Antiquity.
Foucault, on the other hand, has extended the Nietzschean attempt to grasp the specificity of the practices that Christianity mobilizes and the technologies of power which it generates. His concern too has been to contrast other forms of practices (of the self in Antiquity, for example) with the modern practices of the self which the Christian and modern technologies of power effectuate. See especially Foucault (1988).
9. Williams (1993: 12). One is also tempted to say, in homage perhaps to a time that Balagangadhara and I once shared, 'pagans of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but ...' But that would be wrong, too.
10. Could this project have been undertaken in an Indian language? It is worth exploring this question especially in relation to Balagangadhara's hypothesis regarding cultural differences. The propositions of the latter tried to say something about being minded in a certain way; but they could not be empirical propositions. However, the difference they tried to capture in a misleading way could be shown, could be made to speak for itself, if the project were carried out in a 'pagan' language which has been touched by 'reflexivity.' It seems to me that a work like Williams (1993) shows how productive such an exercise in cultural redescription can be.
11. Williams (1985, see esp. 140–73). Relevant here are Williams's provocative contentions that reflection can destroy a certain kind of (what he calls ethical) knowledge and that there is no route back from (what he terms) reflectiveness. I do not have the space here either to discuss the problems in his arguments or to show how I am mapping his problematic onto the territory I have been exploring.
12. The strain involved in saying what could be done without doing it is evident in these formulations. Continuing in this vein would only produce indeterminate or misleading propositions. We can see now the reason for the extremely strained language of Balagangadhara's prolegomena for a theory of cultural differences.
13. I am, of course, referring to the rather daunting apparatus of philosophy of science that Balagangadhara mobilizes.

14. Constraints of space prevent me from even trying to dispel the cryptic nature of these remarks. But see Dhareshwar (1995a, 1995b).

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