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Transition to philosophy or philosophy in transition?

Contextualizing philosophical and theological doctrines in the Mahābhārata

The expression "Epic Philosophy" suggests that the Mahābhārata contains philosophical and theological terms and doctrines to an extent or of a quality that justifies addressing them collectively and locating them primarily in the "collection" of texts transmitted in the Mokṣadharmaparvan. The use of the term "philosophy" was accepted by most scholars without proposing a definition or giving reasons for abandoning the other designation "didactics" for this part of the epic. Instead, "epic philosophy" by and large came to be defined by way of according it a place within the intellectual history of ancient India. According to some scholars the epic mirrors a certain stage in the development of Indian philosophical systems, which implies interpreting "epic philosophy" as "the state of philosophical thought at the time of the composition of the epic". This understanding was often embedded in an evolutionistic framework and resulted in interpreting the epic as a text that testifies to different forms of "proto-philosophy". Accordingly, the epic material is seen as testifying to a "transition to philosophy" which culminates in the composition of the authoritative, "classical" texts of the different philosophical schools. Others would view things differently and argue that the epic uses already extant philosophical terms and doctrines for its own purposes, resulting in terminological combinations peculiar to the epic and pointing to "philosophy in transition". This turns the epic into an important source for tracing the reception and sometimes even the existence of ideas and terms that were either omitted or elaborated in subsequent philosophical discourse. Both views are not mutually exclusive as can be seen in text-historical studies, in which they are historicized. Frauwallner, for instance, postulates that passages in the epic that shown signs of development towards systematic thought are older than passages which seem to be based on an already fully elaborated systems.

The paper will offer a discussion of both approaches and of problematic verdicts and distinctions they imply (as for instance, between "theistic" and "non-theistic" forms of philosophy). This shall provide the basis for exploring yet another approach to the epic material, which aims to contextualize philosophical terms and arguments: firstly, with regard to their function in different literary settings provided within the MBh, and secondly, by studying not only the chronological, but also the discursive relationship between philosophical material contained in Moksadharmaparvan and in the other parts of the epic. By drawing on some examples from different parts of the epic, it will be analysed how philosophical terms and arguments are developed because the literary or narrative contexts provide a referential framework that allows terms as well as methods of reasoning to be recognized and gain shape as something "philosophical". It will be asked whether the arguments and terms put forward in these contexts differ from "philosophical" discourses that are explicitly presented as answers to a whole series of "philosophical" questions as is the case with most of the material included in the Mokṣadharmaparvan. This rapprochement of narrative and argumentative levels may contribute to a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the scope of the philosophical material and the forms of argumentation included in the epic. Such analysis implies exploring aspects of "epic philosophy" that have rarely been dealt with, such as the issue of the validity of arguments and the criteria of "valid" teachings which are no less important in establishing a philosophical discourse than a more or less skilful or coherent handling of terminology.