"the words of both are the words of the living God. ..."

Berachot 3b (Jerusalem Talmud)

T. S. Eliot wrote (1933) that the great philosophers of India "make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys"[1]--an unexpected remark from a man who devoted his career to a defense of the European tradition and who had studied under Bertrand Russell, Josiah Royce, R. G. Collingwood, Harold Joachim, and Henri Bergson. It is difficult to say whether this statement, and many others like it,[2] resulted more from his high opinion of Indian thinkers or from his low opinion of most Western philosophers. What is certain is that Eliot was remarkably well-placed to make this comparative evaluation. Eliot's Indian erudition, on the evidence of his graduate notebooks and essays, was far more extensive than has been suspected.[3] The same evidence suggests that his work for Russell and the others was influenced by his Asian studies[4] and, furthermore, that his later poetry, criticism, social essays, and perhaps even his religious conversion depended on this early work. The material from Eliot's graduate years is restricted and, consequently, little known; but if the
relation between Eliot's notes on Asian subjects and his essays on contemporary philosophy can be clarified, [5] the prevailing views of his poetics, his cultural politics, his philosophical position, and his religion might be significantly revised and our sense of modernism subtly altered. [6]

In the fall of 1911, Eliot commenced work in philosophy at the Harvard Graduate School. He had previously taken an M.A. in literature and, if T. S. Matthews is to be trusted, he had decided to pursue the Ph.D. in philosophy after attending Bergson's College de France lectures in 1910-1911.[7] In that same fall, Eliot elected to take Indic Philology 1A and 1B (elementary Sanskrit) under Professor C. R. Lanman, the most prominent American Sanskritist of the time. The following year, alongside his studies in Western philosophy, he continued to work under Lanman, taking Indic Philology 4 and 5 (Pali), also, in 1912-1913, he elected Indic Philology 9 (Philosophical Sanskrit) with Professor James H. Woods and studied the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali. In his third year--along with seminars in logic (with Royce), ethics, and metaphysics--he took thorough notes in Professor Masaharu Anesaki's course on "Schools of Religious and Philosophical Thought in Japan," a lecture series which detailed the development of Buddhist philosophy in both Japan and China. His course selection shows a marked tendency toward Buddhist studies, as distinct from pure Indology: Eliot left his Sanskrit studies during the second year in order to study Pali, the language of the early Buddhist texts; and, in electing Anesaki's course, he demonstrated a desire to follow the development of Buddhism outside India. According to Stephen Spender, as late as 1922 Eliot "almost became a Buddhist."[8]

Approximately one-third of Eliot's graduate program was devoted to courses in Asian philosophy and philology, but his interest was not in the Orient qua Orient. The notes Eliot took for his courses in Asian studies are intermingled, in the collections of Houghton Library (Harvard) and King's College Library (Cambridge), with his notes and essays for courses in Western philosophy--and, as one reads through them, it becomes apparent that his Orientalist interests, both Buddhist and Hindu, reflected his dissatisfaction with the modes and methods of Western philosophical discourse. What all of this material, Asian and Western, suggests is that Eliot was to leave a promising career in academic philosophy not only for
personal reasons, but also because this was the logical culmination of an antiphilosophical argument he had been constructing for several years.

Eliot's reservations about the nature of Western philosophy were comprehensive: he objected to its methodology, to its results, and even to the assumptions which make this mode of inquiry possible. The distinction between appearance and reality Eliot took to be the founding presupposition of Western philosophy—most European philosophers, and especially the epistemologists, were seeking to ferret out truths not obviously and immediately true—and much of Eliot's own philosophical labor was aimed at undermining that key distinction. In his unpublished typescript, "The Validity of Artificial Distinctions," Eliot concludes that a philosophical theory will have "positive merit" only insofar as "it unfolds no positive result whatever." [9] And this is so because, when a philosopher points to "some discovery which informs us that anything is anything else than what we supposed it to be before we began to philosophise,—then the philosopher is simply pulling out of his pocket what he put there himself." [10] The philosopher's task is "largely one of simplification,"[11] Eliot wrote in his typescript on ethics (1912-1913 unpublished). And the philosopher's chief mistake is that, after abstracting the terms for his discussion from experiences shared with everyman, he takes his simplistic verbal substitutes to be the reality. "In the assertion 'the sky is blue'," Eliot wrote in his manuscript, "Degrees or Reality," (1913, unpublished) "a process takes place during which a hypothetical point of attention is rejected and 'the blue sky' is substituted for it."[12] This error in turn leads the theoretician to forget and consequently to distort the origins of his theory in commonplace experience: "The true reason, I think, for the failure of all philosophic flights, is not that they venture too far, but that they venture alone. The eye of the honnete homme on the ground does not follow them."[13]

Eliot thought that Western philosophy, from Socrates to Russell, was largely concerned with discovering the reality, whether metaphysical or logical, behind and above the world of appearances. Many of the Indian philosophical schools, too, have centered on the distinction of appearance from reality, and their views have been likened to views found in the writings of Plato, Epicurus, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Russell. But Eliot was not especially interested in any of these. He found in certain Buddhist
schools, as he was finding in F. H. Bradley, an option which he believed to be unavailable in the range of previous European philosophy:[14] The world in which we live lokadhaatu is the result of our common dhaatus and efforts. (This is neglected in Western philosophy.)[15] These sentences are taken from miscellaneous, undated notes by Eliot: the word dhaatus can mean parts, essential parts, elements, constituent substances, ingredients. The first sentence seems intended to be tautological—the world is the sum of the parts of which it is composed. Eliot thought that this was worth saying because so much of Western philosophy had been dedicated to demonstrating the opposite, that the Real World is something utterly apart from the shared world of human experience. What Eliot felt was lacking in the West was an appreciation of experience, appearance, social convention, common sense: an appreciation for "the honnete homme on the ground." The quotation just given suggests, and it is certain in the context of all his graduate notebooks, that Eliot held the view that the world of ultimate reality and the world of appearance are not as distinct as had been traditionally held in the West.

The particular forms of East Asian Buddhism to which Anesaki exposed Eliot—the Kegon, Shingon, and Tendai—were characterized, by Anesaki, as descendants of the Maadhyamika school, which was founded in the second century A.D. by Naagaarjuna, the Indian Buddhist philosopher. According to one standard text on the subject, Naagaarjuna's method was to show the self-contradictory nature of every concept and doctrine about reality.... The aim of Naagaarjuna is to show that nothing positive or negative can be asserted of reality. It is therefore `Suunya (Vacuity, Emptiness). Even to think of it as `Suunya is a mistake, because the concepts, vacuity and emptiness, are understood with reference to fullness.... Nothing determinate could be true and could express the nature of reality. Reality is unique, and even the concept of uniqueness is not applicable to it, because uniqueness can be understood only with reference to the non-unique. ... It is beyond concepts, and beyond speech also, if speech represents concepts.[16]

Living without reliance on conceptualization—on the icons which substitute for "immediate experience"[17]—is, for the Maadhyamika school, nirvaa.na. Nirvaa.na means, literally, extinguishing, blowing-out. Nirvaa.na, in Buddhist literature, is always counterposed to sa.msaara, a word not easily translated into Western terms.
but meaning something like 'wheel of life', 'that which turns around forever'. Sa.msaara is negative, the world as a place of pain (du.hkha) and impermanence (anitya); and the implication of the wheel image is that sa.msaara is a place of repetition and perpetual boredom. It is reality apprehended merely through fictional linguistic constructions. Sa.msaara can also comprehend both the concept 'the conventional' and the concept 'the relative', and, in this context, nirvaa.na may be said to mean 'ultimacy', 'the absolute'. The statements in the Maadhyamikakaarikaa, Naagaarjuna's seminal text,[18] which are most relevant to the forms of Buddhism Eliot studied, are the famous verses, Sa.msaara is nothing essentially different from nirvaa.na. Nirvaa.na is nothing essentially different from sa.msaara. The limits of nirvaana are the limits of samsaara. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.'[19] What is distinctive about Naagaarjuna is his belief that both sa.msaara and nirvaa.na are 'empty'. Maadhyamika is known as the 'doctrine of emptiness' because Naagaarjuna held that everything is provisional and contingent ('empty'), ideas and concepts as much as physical objects and living beings. They are empty to the extent that they have no 'own being' (svabhaava), no existence independent of causes and surrounding conditions. But it is only because things exist in a 'relational' way that they exist at all: the shabby, unphilosophical world of imperfections, half-truths, and shades of meaning-sa.msaara-is what-there-is. Naagaarjuna's thought does not lend itself to summary, and his attempt is not to present a system or to demand assent to philosophical propositions. His Maadhyamikakaarikaa is a set of exercises intended to act as an antidote for the ontological urge. In the Indian tradition, one major model for philosophical enlightenment--the one to which Naagaarjuna adhered--is a systematic divestment of concepts, theories, and ideas, rather than a systematic accumulation of them; and it is because of their common mistrust for philosophical propositions that Naagaarjuna has often been compared to Wittgenstein.[20] Many Indian schools--such as Maadhyamika, Advaita Vedaanta, Yogaacaara Buddhism, and other Yoga-related disciplines--hold that thought-constructions (vikalpa) obscure the perception of reality, but Naagaarjuna's school resists the temptation to posit an ultimate reality that exists behind the illusory veil of conceptual thought. It is little wonder that Western scholars of a philosophically Idealist orientation have had difficulty understanding Naagaarjuna.[21] For him, the goal is never a logically demonstrated theoretical proposition; rather it is a complex of subtle and dramatic psychological changes,
changes that result in seeing the world fresh. The end of the journey finds one either in a familiar landscape that appears to be utterly new, or in a foreign landscape that seems strangely familiar.

Similarly, throughout Eliot's graduate essays, the controlling metaphor, whenever he discusses philosophy as a profession or an enterprise--and Eliot does this insistently--is of a journey, or of a process in which there is a choice of directions. Eliot's clearest formulation of the metaphor appears in the essay, "Degrees of Reality":

The token that a philosophy is true is, I think, the fact that it brings us to the exact point from which we started. We shall be enriched, I trust, by our experiences on the Grand Tour, but we shall not have been allowed to convey any material treasures through the Custom House. And the wisdom which we shall have acquired will not be part of the argument which brings us to the conclusion; it is not part of the book, but is written in pencil on the fly-leaf.

In India, philosophy is commonly supposed to be a soteriological enterprise. It is an attempt to attain enlightenment, or epistemological salvation: release from an imagined world of pain and suffering. This soteriological purpose was what Eliot admired most about Indian philosophy, and its absence what he liked least about the Western philosophical tradition.

This epistemological sense of salvation was characteristic of many forms of Buddhism. Eliot's notes show that Anesaki began his course by explicating the 'First Noble Truth' of the Buddha--that life is pain. But, Eliot records, Anesaki then went on to say that once enlightenment is attained, when life and pain are fully understood, then what was originally perceived as pain is not pain at all. Salvation (mok.sa: release) is not, for the Buddhist, an escape from the world but an epistemic revolution which so corrects his vision of the world as to make it the realized nirvana. Salvation is the freedom from presuppositions. As late as 1932, Eliot applied this Buddhistic structure to the etiology of religious conversion, which he described as "simply the removal of any reason for believing anything else, the erasure of a prejudice, the arrival of the scepticism which is the preface to conversion." The sense that skepticism can be the machinery of faith is not a standard notion in the West, where skepticism is associated with names like Hume and Voltaire. But Eliot
thought that this sort of skepticism was itself a virtual religion--he calls it "a faith,--a high and difficult one" [25] in the typescript, "The Validity of Artificial Distinctions." And, in an article published shortly after terminating his academic career in philosophy, Eliot expressed mock astonishment at the "capacity for believing" of such celebrated skeptics as Bertrand Russell:

...When I peruse Mr. Russell's little book What I Believe, I am amazed at Mr. Russell's capacity for believing. ... St. Augustine did not believe more. [26]

Eliot explained his own religious conversion--in the only sermon he ever delivered--as the result of "pursuing scepticism to the utmost limit."[27]

Eliot had learned from Hindu and Buddhist thought that philosophical skepticism is not incompatible with religion. In fact, Naagaarjuna has been construed by different schools of interpreters, over a period of centuries, as both a philosophical nihilist and religious absolutist--a nihilist because of his emphasis on the void, on emptiness, and on the unreality of perceived states and objects, and an absolutist because he has been understood to posit a monistic Void as the ultimate reality. In his notes on Aneesaki's lectures, Eliot recorded and underlined

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for emphasis Aneesaki's assertion that "Naagaarjuna as a philosopher alone might be taken as a pure nihilist," but Aneesaki was careful to emphasize that Naagaarjuna's skepticism should not be mistaken for nihilism. As its name implies, Maadhyamika ("the middle way") attempts to find a path between the denial of existence and the hypostasizing of an ultimate existence which transcends quotidian reality.

In order to avoid these two theoretical extremes, Naagaarjuna developed a subtle form of perspectivism. He articulated two categories of perspective from which the world is viewed: the standpoint of the absolute (the perspective of the enlightened) and the standpoint of the conventional (the perspective of the unenlightened). From the point of view of the absolute, no distinction exists between the absolute and the conventional; from the point of view of the conventional, however, there exists a radical distinction between conventionality and ultimacy. Those who are en route to enlightenment, to the 'absolutistic' standpoint, will seem to outsiders to be skeptics or even nihilists because the methodology of salvation is the negation of all philosophical views, all unconscious concepts embedded in language, and all sensed or perceived particulars.
A religion which sets a soteriological goal will by definition require of its adherents the rejection of many conventional assumptions, habits, theories, and norms. In some forms of Christianity, this rejection is meant to be permanent; in Maadhyamika Buddhism, the rejection is temporary. And this is so because the bodhisattva's enlightenment consists precisely in his discovery that the point toward which he has journeyed is the point from which he departed. This Buddhist principle began to appear in Eliot's graduate essays in Western philosophy as early as 1913: What is here germane, is the fact that in whichever direction you go .... The crudest experience and the abstrusest theory end in identity, and this identity, I call the absolute. If you choose to call it nothing, I will not dispute the point. But whichever it is, it is both beginning and end.[28] The first and final cause is both nothing and absolute: in his equation of ontological plenitude and ontological vacancy is a virtually certain case of Buddhist influence on Eliot's developing philosophical position.

In his philosophical essays, Eliot self-consciously walks the middle way ("So here I am, in the middle way")[29] between the relative and the absolute. A reader used to thinking of Eliot as an absolutist Angle-Catholic may be interested to learn that 'relativist' was the only label which Eliot was willing to accept for himself during this formative period.[30] Every theoretical statement, he wrote in his doctoral dissertation (1916), "is thoroughly relative... [and] exists only in a context of experience, of experience with which it is continuous."[31] Eliot's prose, throughout his career, is saturated with remarks of this sort, with suspicion of theories that make claims to universal validity. But, at the same time, Eliot was concerned to affirm the contextual validity of all theoretical statements: any theory will possess a significance and function within a limited system of beliefs.
Eliot's sense of ideology is the least understood facet of his ideological commitments. For him, a perspective (what he calls, in his dissertation, a "point of view" or "finite centre") should involve the recognition of a multiplicity of valid views, each of them merely provisional but correct nonetheless in context. Eliot is not saying that the truth can be distilled from a multiplicity of views, but rather that, for most of us, intellectual humility requires the recognition that the place from which one views the world will unavoidably determine one's 'world view'. In his preface to an anthology of religious texts, prepared by an Indian scholar, Eliot applied this 'perspectivist' argument to the field of comparative religion:

There are some readers who ... regard Asiatic literature as the sole repository of religious understanding; there are others who ... refuse to venture further than a narrow Christian tradition. For both kinds of reader, it is salutary to learn that the Truth ... is not wholly confined to their own religious tradition, or on the other hand to an alien culture and religion.... I am aware also that there are readers who persuade themselves that there is an 'essence' in all religions which is the same, and that this essence can be conveniently distilled and preserved.... Such readers may perhaps be reminded that no man has ever climbed to the higher stages of the spiritual life, who has not been a believer in a particular religion or at least a particular philosophy. ... It was only in relation to his own religion that the insights of any one of these men had its significance to him, and what they say can only reveal its meaning to the reader who has his own religion of dogma and doctrine in which he believes.[34]

Eliot was introduced to this line of reasoning by Anesaki's lectures on the Tendai school, in which Anesaki dealt specifically with the reconciliation of the diversity of views within Buddhism. "Tendai," he argued, "wishes to keep both diversity and unity, explaining the latter by the former."[35] Anesaki described this school as an attempt to conjoin all possible versions and interpretations of the scriptural pall texts; it was an effort to arrive at a point of view which is at once the truth of the matter and a simultaneous occupation of diverse points of view:

A view is false in one sense, true in another. This kind of synthesis is characteristic of Buddhism from its very beginnings under the name of middle path. . . . Life is neither pain nor pleasure. The views that the world exists or not, both are false, the truth lies in the middle, transcending both views.[36]

'Synthesis' is not a very good term for the process which Anesaki was describing. Naagaarjuna's notion of enlightenment involves negating all philosophical views or, rather, awarding to all of them equivalent
metaphysical status—that is to say, no ontic status whatever. Put another way: Naagaarjuna's denial of the absolute reality of theoretical claims implies acceptance of their equivalent conventional validity. And this is not the same as a 'synthesis'.

The problem is that Naagaarjuna's quasi-synthetic nonposition is identical with enlightenment and, therefore, incomprehensible to those of us who occupy only one perspective at a time. This philosophical middle way is, in Eliot's words, "a coherence which cannot be formulated"[37] at least not without recourse to paradox, metaphor, and the techniques of art. The task set by Eliot's philosophical position was to locate a point of intersection between the absolute and the conventional-- between nirvaa.na and sa.msaara, absolute truth and relative truths, the perspective of ultimacy and the perspectives of conventionality-and, for Eliot as poet, the intersection came where absolute meaning and individual interpretations meet. As he wrote, in a letter of 1956:

It seems to me that it would be more wrong to say that poetry has no meaning, than it is to over-emphasize the importance of meaning. The fact that a poem can mean different things to different persons--something which I think has been stressed by Paul Valery as well as myself--must, however paradoxically, be reconciled with the assertion that it has an absolute and unalterable meaning.... One can only deal with problems like this in contradictions.[38]

Eliot's perception of these contradictions and paradoxes--of the complexities inherent in experience--led him away from theoretics and toward a poetics so intricate and allusive that, after decades of exegetical ingenuity, it still is said "to defy the criteria we implicitly expect to be observed in ... all forms of written English--certainly all forms that offer us sustained development of thought."[39] Eliot's mature poems, and especially the Four Quartets, are comprised by "a constantly shifting and developing web of relationships" [40] in which there are no explicit statements of personal belief or principle.

In each quartet, Eliot programmatically places theoretical statements in a highly specific psychological, biographical, and temporal context--and, consequently, no line in any quartet, no quartet taken apart from the others, may be said to represent Eliot's point of view. As Eliot writes of the sea in "The Dry Salvages," the whole of the Quartets is composed of "many voices, many gods and many voices" (I, 24-25). Critics of the third quartet
some years ago raised the issue of multivocality for Eliot scholarship. Several readers noted with something hardly less than alarm that "The Dry Salvages" seems a very nineteenth-century poem. Quotations, allusions, and ventriloquized imitations of voice have been identified from virtually every major figure of nineteenth-century culture in England and America, from Coleridge and Whitman to Spencer and Darwin. Considering Eliot's ambivalence toward the romantics and Victorians, Donald Davie even proposed that the third quartet might be a failure; but, declining to entertain his own proposition, Davie endorsed Hugh Kenner's outline for the poems, in which the third element of all four-part propositions (including, Davie added, the whole of the third quartet) is a false synthesis of the first and second elements, thus preparing us for the true synthesis of the fourth.[41] It has been argued recently that the first, second, and fourth quartets, like "The

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Dry Salvages," possess more-or-less specific historical correlations and that all three represent stages of the poet's life and career.[42]

That is to say, the structure of Four Quartets is based on the pattern of the 'journey through perspectives' which dominated Eliot's philosophical career-- as also much of his critical practice[43]--and which was informed by the soteriological perspectivism of Indian philosophy. The Maadhyamika notion of epistemic enlightenment, as Eliot's lecture notes state, consists of a philosophical and psychological process leading to the realization of identity between contingent perspectives and the perspective of the absolute: "Tendai's ambition was a synthesis to embrace all views by elevation to the one standpoint." [44] For Eliot, that one standpoint was not a synthesis of all possible views but a complex interrelation of all actual views--of those perspectives which have occupied a significant place in a cultural tradition. The "familiar compound ghost" of "Little Gidding," II, is, as has been thoroughly demonstrated in the critical literature, a synthetic personage, compounded of Yeats, Mallarme, Swift, Milton, Dante, and many other, diverse cultural figures; but that cultural apparition also effects a transformative coalescence of the ghosts, illusions, and god-substitutes which have materialized in the first three quartets.

The narrators of "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," and "The Dry Salvages," faced with the poems' myths and phantoms, suppose that any perceived object must be either real or illusory--a presupposition which Eliot had challenged in his graduate essay on the "Degrees of Reality."[45] But in
the "intersection time" of "Little Gidding"—in the apocalyptic "passage ... Between two worlds become much like each other"---the theoretical distinction between appearance and reality no longer functions. The compound ghost is both illusion and reality: the narrator enters into conversation with it but it fades at daybreak, it is "intimate and unidentifiable," "one" yet "many," both identical with and distinct from the narrator. These pseudodistinctions—appearance and reality, this world and the next—are "United in the strife which divided them."

And this is true of all the antinomies, distinctions, contradictions, and oppositions which dominate the poem. Wars become dances as the narrators—dissociated fragments of the European sensibility—discover slowly that, together, the opponent fragments form a complete consort: that these historical oppositions descend only from having asked the wrong questions of life. In considering irreconcilably opposed perspectives, Eliot found that "Each is true only within a limited field of discourse, but unless you limit fields of discourse, you can have no discourse at all. Orthodoxy can only be found in such contradictions. ... "[46] Eliot wrote these sentences not in his philosophical notebooks, but in the postconversion essay on Dante. In his Primer of Modern Heresy, Eliot defined heresy as taking one facet of a complex truth as the whole truth.[47] And this was, for Eliot, the advantage of orthodoxy, "the advantage of a coherent traditional system"---that it speaks with many, often discordant voices and that

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"it stands apart, for understanding and assent even without belief, from the single individual who propounds it."[48]
It is a commonplace that Eliot is a great defender of tradition, but the origins and implications of his defense are often overlooked. His devotion to tradition and convention is not an expression of cultural absolutism but virtually the opposite: an expression of radical skepticism in regard to any one philosophical perspective. Eliot had accepted and assimilated the Buddhist model for salvation—salvation as the freedom from presuppositions and theoretical constructs—and, hence, he recognized no theoretical resting place on the route to epistemological nirvaa.na. The hidden advantage of tradition is that it simultaneously satisfies the intellectual demand for meaning and allows for a complexity of meanings unavailable to any one theory or system: a long, rich cultural tradition is
multivocal and replaces the concept of simple semantic meaning with notions of relationship, place, and contextual significance.

Eliot's veneration of tradition was the end product of his radical skepticism, but this does not mean that Eliot took refuge from nihilism in the church of tradition. Eliot's Christianity was neither partisan nor univocal. He saw Christianity as (among other things) a cultural given: The dominant force in creating a common culture between peoples each of which has its distinct culture, is religion. Please do not, at this point, make a mistake in anticipating my meaning. This is not a religious talk, and I am not setting out to convert anybody. I am simply stating a fact. I am not so much concerned with the communion of Christian believers today; I am talking about the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is, and about the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it. If Asia were converted to Christianity tomorrow, it would not thereby become a part of Europe. It is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have--until recently--been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning. Only a Christian culture could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith. And I am convinced of that, not merely because I am a Christian myself, but as a student of social biology. If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes. Then you must start painfully again, and you cannot put on a new culture ready made. You must wait for the grass to grow to feed the sheep to give the wool out of which your new coat will be made. You must pass through many centuries of barbarism. We should not live to see the new culture, nor would our great-great-grandchildren: and if we did, not one of us would be happy in it. . . . The Western World has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome, and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our descent.[49]

The Christian cultural tradition of which Eliot writes here is the 'Christian synthesis' of Greece, Rome, and Israel, taken together with "the legacy of

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Europe throughout the last two thousand years[50]---this legacy including by specific reference such anti-Christians as Voltaire, Nietzsche, and Russell.[51] For Eliot, truth is not formulable; culture is multivocal; and tradition is an ordering of many, often discordant truths, arrived at from a multitude of perspectives.

In his graduate essay on ethics, Eliot depicted the history of Western philosophy as a futile alternation between the mutually excluding theoretical extremes of idealism and materialism--and he ridiculed the assumption that either might be adequate on its own. When forced to choose between radically different theoretical perspectives within the European tradition, especially where one is in contemporary favor and the other in derision, Eliot will reduce both to a level of equivalent invalidity: "there was no more reason Swedenborg should be absurd than Locke."[52] This may sound like a restatement of Keats's negative capability--a form of philosophical pluralism--but Eliot's mature view was more complicated than that. When he writes of the dissociation and reassociation of cultural sensibility, what Eliot has in mind is a coherence of miscible fragments, not a miscellany of fragmented coherence: a kind of conservatism, not a kind of liberalism. In his radio lectures to a de-Nazifying Germany on "The Unity of European Culture," Eliot formulated in prose what is implied by the Four Quartets, though the principle of unity-in-diversity is applied here to nations as well as to historical periods:

For the health of the culture of Europe two conditions are required: that the culture of each country should be unique, and that the different cultures should recognize their relationship to each other, so that each should be susceptible of influence from the others. And this is possible because there is a common element in European culture, an interrelated history of thought and feeling and behavior, an interchange of arts and of ideas.... We need variety in unity: not the unity of organization, but the unity of nature.[53]

In all of these passages, Eliot perceived tradition as a unity in diversity. When he wrote of the ancient Indian philosophers that "their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys," he was expressing awe at the Indian appreciation for the complexity of tradition. Tradition, no less than truth, is considered sacred in India, China, and Japan, and all of the voices which speak within a tradition, even when they oppose one another, are considered facets of the truth.[54] Part of the reason may be that, in much of Asian thought, and particularly in the Buddhist schools which Eliot studied, value is placed more on daily behavior and ritual practice--on "prayer, observance, discipline, thought,
and action" ("The Dry Salvages," V, 214)--than on philosophical meaning, which, in any case, the philosophers themselves attempt to devalue.

Where the search for meaning is considered theoretically naive and a source of pain, where questions of meaning are posed in terms of context and perspective, tradition can possess special value: tradition--the contingencies of Becoming--can take the place of theoretical meaning in an historically developing cultural and intellectual organism. Questions about 'truth' will be satisfied contextually--by reference to the unity' and diversity of views within the living tradition--and Eliot clearly preferred this 'Oriental' notion of the relation between truth and history to the relatively crude Western constructs of progress and reaction, liberalism and conservatism. (As Eliot said of Wordsworth's cultural politics, "the difference between revolution and reaction may be by the breadth of a hair.") Eliot's defense of tradition, the conventionality of his social persona, and his insistent redemption of literary cliches--all these stem from his disbelief in the possibility of noncontextual meaning, from his distrust of the theoretical distinction between meaning and behavior or reality and appearance, and from his dislike for theory in general. Eliot shared this configuration of disbelief with most of the great modernists, and the 'contextuality' of Four Quartets is matched by the perspectivism of Faulkner (The Sound and the Fury), the cultural fusions of Pound (the China/Adams Cantos: LII-LXXI), the experiments with point of view in Henry James ("The Turn of the Screw"), and even the multiple-pose portraits by Picasso ("Dora Maar Seated," 1937).

From the beginning of his career as poet and critic--from the end of his career as philosopher and Orientalist--Eliot would distinguish between two sorts of response to the modern discovery that meaning was an overrated concept. One response was to find life meaningless and on this account to strike a nonconformist or an anti-intellectualist or a Dadaist pose. The other position Eliot spelled out in his philosophical notebooks and may very well have derived from his education in Indian philosophy: to acknowledge that only Meaning is meaningless, and then to go about one's business. Eliot's only piece of fiction, "Eeldrop and Appleplex," published the year after he completed his dissertation, presents these alternatives in the poet's two most endearing objective correlatives. Eeldrop and
Appleplex hold identical views of the human social condition—that it is "too well pigeon-holed, to taken for granted"—but these friends come to opposite conclusions about what is to be done. Appleplex (possibly modeled after Pound) insists that they settle on a philosophy which will establish their difference from the man determined wholly by social convention. Eeldrop—almost certainly a self-portrait; Eliot calls him "a sceptic, with a taste for mysticism"—finds Appleplex’s position to be hopelessly unsophisticated:

"But at least," said Appleplex, "we are ..."

"Individualists. No!! nor anti-intellectualists. These also are labels. The 'individualist' is a member of a mob as fully as any other man: and the mob of individualists is the most unpleasing, because it has the least character. Nietzsche was a mob-man, just as Bergson is an intellectualist. We cannot escape the label, but let it be one which carries no distinction, and arouses no self-consciousness. Sufficient that we should find simple labels, and not further exploit them. I am, I confess to you, in private life, a bank-clerk...."

"And should, according to your own view, have a wife, three children, and a vegetable garden in a suburb," said Appleplex.

"Such is precisely the case," returned Eeldrop, "but I had not thought it necessary to mention this biographical detail. As it is Saturday night, I shall return to my suburb. Tomorrow will be spent in that garden...."

"I shall pay my call on Mrs. Howexden," murmured Appleplex. [57]

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Literary critics have for decades been playing Appleplex to Eliot’s Eeldrop, and the liberal/conservative distinction has obscured both the nature of their differences and the (more interesting) fact that they proceed from similar assumptions. The world of contemporary scholarship and even the world of twentieth-century philosophy sometimes seem to be battle-grounds on which avatars of Eeldrop and varieties of Appleplex compete. They have a common point of departure—the Western intellectual’s native distaste for conventionality, for the realm of appearance—and they share a thirst for meaningful existence, for the realm of truth and reality Long years of intellectual struggle have brought both to discard the concept of meaning and the search for truth, and so far they agree. Yet their opposition is probably inevitable. Eeldrop’s conclusions may always be too extreme, his metaphysics too foreign, for Appleplex, who will prefer his indulgence with Mrs. Howexden to the rigors of
Eeldrop's 'conventionalist' position: to the social consequences of the skeptic's view that there is nothing more meaningful than tautology.

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NOTES
2 For example, there are the ten statements following:
   (a) "In the literature of Asia is great poetry. There is also profound wisdom and some very difficult metaphysics.... Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility" (Christianity and Culture (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), pp. 190-191; hereafter cited as Eliot, Christianity and Culture).
   (b) "Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and-a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification. A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after--and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys --lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and
kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks. My previous and concomitant study of European philosophy was hardly better than an obstacle. And I came to the conclusion--seeing also that the 'influence' of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and Deussen, had largely been through romantic misunderstanding—that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European: which, for practical as well as sentimental reasons, I did not wish to do"(After Strange Gods, pp. 40-41).

(c) "I do not know whether she [Simone Wei 1] could read the Upanishads in Sanskrit; or if so, how great was her mastery of what is not only a very highly developed language but a way of thought, the difficulties of which only become too formidable to a European student the more diligently he applies himself to it" (Preface to Simone Well, The Need for Roots (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. ix).

(d) "... the Bhagavad-Gita ... is the next greatest philosophical poem to the Divine Comedy within my experience" ("Dante"[1929], in Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), p. 219; hereafter cited as Eliot, "Dante," Selected Essays.

(e) "The method--the analogy, and the repetition--is the same as that once used by a greater master of the sermon than either Donne or Andrewes or Latimer: it is the method of the Fire-Sermon preached by the Buddha" ("The Preacher as Artist," The Athenaeum, 28 November 1919, p. 1252).

(f) "India has already given something of the highest value to the world.... That without spiritual knowledge man is an incomplete being" (Interview by Ranjee Shahani, "T. S. Eliot Answers Questions"[1949], in T. S. Eliot: Homage from India, ed. P. Lal (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1965), p. 134; hereafter cited as P. Lal, Homage from India). See also Eliot's preface to Thoughts for Meditation; A Way to Recovery from Within, ed. N. Gangulee (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1952), pp. 11-14; hereafter cited as Eliot, Thoughts for Meditation), and his short foreword to G. V. Desani's Hali, A Play (London: Saturn Press, 1950), the latter taken from a personal letter and printed without Eliot's consent. (See Eliot's Letter of 28 August 1963 to Richard Church, T. S. Eliot Collection TLs G877, University of Texas at Austin.) These latter
demonstrate his continuing interest in Indian philosophy and Indian authors.

(g) "It is a great many years since I coined, as I thought, the phrase 'objective correlative'. ... It is a little difficult to say positively, one way or another, whether what I meant some 35 years ago by the phrase corresponds to the analysis of the author of Vibhava. ... I must confess that I am neither quite sure of what I meant 35 years ago, nor sure of what the Sanskrit philosopher meant a good deal longer ago than that" (Letter from Eliot to Nimai Chatterji, quoted in a letter to the editor of The New Statesman, 5 March 1965, p. 361).

(h) "... a mind saturated with the traditions of Indian philosophy is and must always remain very different from one saturated with the traditions of European philosophy" ("A Commentary," Criterion 3:11 (April 1925): 342).

(i) "I am not a Buddhist, but some of the early Buddhist scriptures affect me as parts of the Old Testament do. . . ." (The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber, 1933), p. 91, hereafter cited as Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism).

(j) There is also Eliot's description of the W. B. Yeats/Bhagwan ShriTamtamsa translation, Ten Upanishads, in the spring 1937 Faber and Faber list (p. 57). Eliot's authorship is established by a note of John Hayward's in the King's College Library collection.

3 In addition to the evidence of the graduate notebooks, there is Eliot's little known review of Brahmadasanam, or the Intuition of the Absolute; Being an Introduction to the Study of Hindu Philosophy, by Sri Ananda Acharya, in The International Journal of Ethics 28, no. 3 (April 1918): 445-446. The author is given as "T. S. E."

4 In Eliot's classwork, there are numerous bits of surface evidence for this Indo-European penetration. In his notes of 1912 on Plate's Gorgias, Eliot practiced the Devanaagarii script in the left-hand margin. Dealing with a Mahaasa.ngika text which, he noted, makes an "uncompromising antithesis" of appearance and reality, he added the parenthetical comment: "(Bradley)." He makes similar allusions to Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Plate in his notes on Indian philosophy, and, in an essay on ethics (1912-1913?), he refers at critical junctures to both Indian and Chinese thinkers.

5 There has been a plethora of articles about this subject, but none written with knowledge of the restricted notebooks. They have been, therefore, totally speculative. For articles up to 1965, refer to P. Lal, "Useful Articles and Books on T. S. Eliot by Indians and Pakistanis," in T. S. Eliot: Homage from India, pp. 227-228. Articles published after 1965

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6 Earlier in this century, Eliot's Indian interests were taken more seriously than at present. Eliot's friends, for instance, were well apprised of his Eastern orientation; see, for example, Conrad Aiken's letter of March 1913, which deals with the subject (Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken, ed. Joseph Killorin (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 30); hereafter cited as Selected Letters of Conrad Aiken. Aiken considered Eliot's Indic interests as further evidence of his friend's overall "decadence" (ibid., p. 26). There is also Ian Blyth's broadside, The Redeemed Realm. A Satire on T. S. Eliot and the Hollywood Hindus (Boston, Massachusetts: David Page Books, 1947), where Eliot is accused of, among other things, "Hindu Dadaism" (p. 12).


10 Ibid.


13 Eliot, "Artificial Distinctions."


15 T. S. Eliot, Houghton Library notebooks: miscellaneous notes on Indian philosophy, manuscript, no date, Houghton Library, Harvard University.


19 Ibid., p. 158, verses 19 and 20.

20 It is because of their attention to the linguistic nature of thought that recent Western attempts to explicate Naagaarjuna's philosophy have centered on comparisons with Wittgenstein. This comparison involves the claim that both Wittgenstein and Naagaarjuna offer a functionalist view of language ("meaning as use") and that their reservations about any linguistic expression of Truth lead to a parallel skepticism about the utility of every philosophical formulation. As a result of this correlation, it has become possible for scholars to describe Wittgenstein's desire for philosophical therapy as a search for something not unlike Buddhist enlightenment, and to portray Naagaarjuna as an Indian metaphilosopher concerned with "language-games" and "forms of life." See: Chris Gudmunsen, Wittgenstein and Buddhism (London: Macmillan, 1977); Frederick J. Streng, Emptiness (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1967); and Robert Thurman, "Philosophical Nonegocentrism in
Wittgenstein and Candrakiirti in their Treatment of the Private language Problem," Philosophy East and West 30, no. 3 (July 1980).

21 See Andrew P. Tuck, Isogesis: Philosophical Readings of Naagaarjuna and the Assumptions of Scholarship, ms., 1985, chaps. 1 and 3; hereafter cited as Tuck, Isogesis.


23 Tuck, Isogesis, chap. 3.


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29 T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," V, 172, in Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1943), p. 30. It is likely that Eliot refers to Maadhyamika--the middle path--at the same time that, more obviously, he alludes to the via media of Dante.

30 Eliot, essay on ethics. It may be worth mentioning, in reference to Eliot's relativism, that even the divine voice at the conclusion of The Waste Land teaches a perspectivist moral. Robert Bluck has shown ("T. S. Eliot and 'What the Thunder Said'," Notes and Queries, October 1977, pp. 450-451) that the thunderous Da is, in the Upanishadic myth (B.rhadaara.nyaka: 5, 1), intended to have a different signification for each of its three audiences (gods, men, and demons). The gods understand the monosyllable to mean daamyata; the men, datta; and the demons, dayadhvam. Prajaapati, the Hindu 'lord of creatures', tells these three groups--his children--that, despite the divergence of interpretation, each has understood correctly.

31 Eliot, Knowledge and Experience, p. 165.
We hope that we will not be construed to say that Eliot's specific religious commitment was ironic in some sense that we do not intend: for example, half-hearted or coy. By irony, Schlegel meant primarily the quality which relates opposed but inseparable phenomena, and also the paradoxical embrace by man of polarity and indeterminacy as the dynamic principles of universal order. See Jeffrey M. Perl, "Friedrich Schlegel," European Writers. The Romantic Century (New York: Scribner's, 1985).

Eliot, Preface to Thoughts for Meditation, pp. 13-14.

T. S. Eliot, lecture notes from Philosophy 24a: lectures by Masaharu Anesaki, manuscript, 1913-1914, Houghton Library, Harvard University; hereafter cited as Eliot, notes on Anesaki's lectures.

Ibid.

Eliot, Knowledge and Experience, p. 89.

T. S. Eliot, Letter to Philip Mairet, 31 October 1956, T. S. Eliot Collection TLs G767, University of Texas at Austin.


Confer Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London: Faber, 1933), pp. 84-85, where Eliot's sense of a poetic (or a cultural) tradition is most clearly anchored in his sense of the equivalent conventional validity of all perspectives and his understanding of the necessity of their integration. He begins with an analysis of "the splitting up of personality" in English poetry and concludes that the great poet is "one who not merely restores a tradition which has been in abeyance, but one who in his poetry re-twines as many straying strands of tradition as possible."

Eliot, notes on Anesaki's lectures.
The synthetic and synthetic nature of Asian thought has been well-publicized—the extent to which all Hindu schools derive their authority from the Vedas, the ability of Chinese Taoists to absorb Buddhist teachings, the merging of Buddhism with Shinto in Japan—and even seeming exceptions prove the rule. There have, for example, been real revolutions in Indian intellectual history, the most notable by the Buddhist and Jain heterodoxies; but even a rebel such as Gautama Buddha was eventually canonized by the Vaishnavite orthodoxy as one of Visnu's avatars. Likewise, the warring factions within Buddhism saw themselves as presenting competitive versions of the Buddha's teachings, rather than exclusive and accredited interpretations. This process is not unlike the one Eliot describes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

In a letter to Philip Mairet of March 23, 1955, Eliot noted with disapprobation the "poverty" of "hagiology, rites and customs" in "such Western adaptations" of Asian religions as "Irving Babbitt's buddhism [sic] and Pound's Confucianism" (T. S. Eliot Collection TLs G715, University of Texas at Austin).

Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the use of Criticism, p. 73.