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Ronald S. Green

D. E. Wittkower
Old Dominion University, dwittkow@odu.edu

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Chapter 8

The Case of the Dangerous Detective

Ronald S. Green and D.E. Wittkower

During an idle hour, we took up the question of why it is that the detective, as a literary figure, is viewed as 'dangerous'.

"It is not so strange," I said, "for the detective is always uncovering facts that guilty persons have very good reasons not to want known."

"Yes," said Wittkower, "but if that were the end of it, there would be little difference between a detective story and a thriller. The hero of a thriller wishes to set things right and escape with her life—but the detective wants knowledge which is itself dangerous, not knowledge which is simply dangerous because it's somebody's dirty secret."

"I'm not sure I follow. What do you mean, exactly?"

"Well, take for example the first detective in Western literature: Oedipus. In Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*—or perhaps we could call it 'A Scandal in Thebes'—Oedipus must solve a murder. He is warned away from finding the truth by Tiresias, a prophet of Apollo, a god of light and truth. Despite having been told by the god's representative that he should not seek the truth, he cannot resist his thirst for knowledge, and it is this which brings his downfall.

"There's a similar social history throughout antiquity. Those who claim to know a hidden truth about the world are treated as dangerous and are made to pay for their forbidden knowledge, and even seeking such knowledge is viewed as immoral—from the Athenians' prosecution of philosophers like Anaxagoras, Socrates, and Aristotle; to the Roman persecution of early Christians; and to Roman Christian persecution of Gnostics and Pagans. Society, it seems, has long had the habit of putting to death those who ask too many questions."

This seemed to me too quick. "But," I said, "in the cases of the Greek philosophers, early Christians, and Gnostics, each of these groups were undermining political authority by adopting doctrines which went against the religious doctrines of the state. For example, when Anaxagoras claimed that the sun was a giant burning rock, he wasn't just making a claim about astronomy or physics, as we would interpret this today. Rather, since the Athenian state based its legal tradition on the stories of the gods and heroes, when Anaxagoras said that the sun was an object, not Apollo, he implied that we could get rid of all the stories of the state and replace them with more scientific knowledge. So, he was put to death not because he claimed that the sun was a burning rock, but because he undermined the state by encouraging Athenians to reject traditional knowledge, belief, and authority. In this case, as well as the others you mention—Isn't this a simple matter of a political crackdown on dissidents?"

"Surely this is a significant motive," he said, leaning forward. With a curious, playful look in his eyes, he went on. "But there's something much more distinctive and unusual in these cases. You said Anaxagoras was 'encouraging Athenians to reject tradition'—I suppose that's true, encouraging by example if nothing else, but he wasn't exactly leading riots in the streets!"

"No, that's true."

"And the early Christians and the Gnostics as well; they weren't trying to convert the majority or overthrow the state. Mostly, they were just trying to keep to themselves and maintain their small and unpopular communities of belief."

"Yes," I had to admit, "that is so."

"Tell me, doesn't it seem strange that Western society, which values understanding and knowledge so highly, views some knowledge claims as undermining society itself?"

"Yes, now that you mention it, this does strike me as a bit odd."

"Now, if these 'dangerous' claims are false, why didn't these political authorities simply *disprove* them?"

"Why, these claims about fundamental reality and religion aren't the sorts of things that can be disproved!" I paused for a moment. By prompting me to this response, Wittkower had given me the next step I needed to see what he was getting at. "So, you think these claims are dangerous because they undermine the *ideology* of society—the basic beliefs about humanity and the world which justify the society's laws and ways of life, but which can't be justified, since they can't be proven or disproven. And this fits with the other evidence we have: the great scandals of knowledge in the history of the West, ranging from persecution of Jews and atheists, to the individualism of democracy and

Protestantism, to the 'scandal' of Darwin. *Some* of these forms of 'dangerous' knowledge were direct threats to established power, but *all* of them were threats to foundational ideas about what it is to be human. But how does this explain anything about 'the detective' as a character type?"

"Green, tell me: isn't there a 'dangerous' school of thought that you've left out? One that was prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when detective stories really came into their own as a genre?"

"Yes, hundreds I'm sure. But perhaps you are thinking of Marxism?"

"Precisely. In the Golden Age of detective stories, most famously including the stories of Sherlock Holmes, the basic premise is that there are dark, violent secrets under the genteel veneer of upper-class English society. Holmes does not simply find a truth that some guilty party tries to hide—by finding an ugly truth in high society, he reveals the far more dangerous truth that the ruling class is not fundamentally better than or different from the lower classes. He is *in danger* because he goes up against criminals, but he is *dangerous* because he goes up against the idea that those who are privileged in society are better than those who are downtrodden."

"Ah, but surely there are plenty of detective stories where the guilty persons are career criminals, or other 'outsiders' . . ."

"Yes—like the more distinctly American genre of hard-boiled detectives and film noir. If the idea that our society is a just society were being supported, it is true that the criminal would be from a 'seedy' element in society, as he often is in these stories. But tell me, is the detective part of established authority?"

"No, I suppose not. Usually, the detective is a PI—and if not, then he is a police officer who rebels against authority; a 'cop who plays by his own rules'."

"And so here, the claim is that the established power in society—in this case, the police force—is not able to fix society, and only a detective who acts as an outsider can get to the truth. So the hardboiled detective is *in danger* because he goes against society's undesirables, but he is *dangerous* because he shows us that authority cannot deliver on its promise. Stories about by-the-book police work or FBI investigations are thrillers, not detective stories—only the detective, as an outsider, can represent how *ideologically* dangerous seeking knowledge is."

"So, even though these genres are quite different in their mood and their subject matter, in either case the detective is a dangerous figure because he shows that society is unjust, or unjustified."

"Yes, Green, you've quite got it. And, in that way, 'A Scandal in Thebes' never was a detective story, but more simply a tragedy. Oedipus's story tells this ugly historical truth, but the story is itself part of this social control." Wittkower paused for a moment, pressing his fingertips together, an abstracted look on his face. "The Oedipus myth speaks the truth when it depicts the foundation of society as a crime. How could the founding of a society, in which some rule and others are ruled, be fair or honorable, when there would not have been any rules or justice agreed to by all before that society existed? And then the myth that the poor and disadvantaged are lazy, or undeserving, or genetically inferior; all this is the alibi and the cover-up."

Wittkower sat up, elbows perched against his knees. "Oedipus is a tragic figure because he knows the truth, that society is based on crime, and he suffers from and regrets this forbidden knowledge. In the story this is also expressed in the sexual crime of incest, to represent how forbidden this knowledge is, and how shameful it is to desire this knowledge. And this is what makes Oedipus's story a tragedy: the audience is meant to identify with him, and to suffer with him, and through that, to be prevented from rebelling against society's injustices themselves. Aristotle called this 'catharsis'; I prefer to call it 'oppression' and 'ideological enforcement'. Oedipus questions society's foundations, and discovers a truth he cannot bear—and so we are told never to question society's foundations, so we do not discover the truth which society cannot bear."

I sat back and considered this novel perspective on a play I have long known. Wittkower, though, had not quite finished his account. "The detective story though, my dear Doctor Green, is no tragedy. The detective suffers in a way from his knowledge. He becomes an outsider, but often he is as much an outsider from his unusual abilities to see the truth as he is from his possession of such dangerous knowledge. He is, on the whole though, an appealing and romantic character rather than a warning and cautionary figure, and the rise of the detective story may be a sign that a culture is becoming increasingly open to criticism from within."

"The detective story is on the whole dangerous and liberal, while the thriller is typically conservative or reactionary."

"Perhaps, Green, perhaps. Now, Doctor, you spent time in Afghanistan. What is the view of the detective in Asian traditions of inquiry?"

"An apt reference for the flow of ancient ideas, perhaps from Mesopotamia to all directions, into Europe and India through Afghanistan. Somewhere along the way speakers of Proto-Indo-European languages must have bade farewell in groups as classical Greek and Latin bear marked resemblances to Sanskrit. They carried, I venture, the seeds of European and Asian inquiry. In the case of India, we might call Vyasa the primal detective as he appears in the earliest of Indian literature, tentatively dated to around 1700 B.C.E., and a man of danger as well."

"I've never heard of this sleuth Vyasa. Pray continue. What was his most renowned case?"

"Let us say it was A Case of Identity. Hereby he established the grounds for three millennia of dangerous detective work that followed. Aiming high, Vyasa set about to hear the cosmic sound a thousand years before Pythagoras."

"Good heavens!"

"Quite. Examining the extent of knowledge itself, which is called Veda in Sanskrit. He splits knowledge into four categories which became the four written *Vedas*, perhaps the oldest writings in any Indo-European language."

"What was his mode of examination?"

"Vyasa turned his search within, like an ancient Descartes but with a rather different conclusion. The 'I' of the "I think" was, for Vyasa, not the true self. As the story goes, he risked it all and lost it all, transcending his own beliefs about who he was and who we are by moving to a depth of his heart which lay outside of word-thoughts. For lack of a better descriptor, he thereby heard the cosmic sound, the vibrations that are the essence of matter. By transcribing this into a language we might understand, the *Vedas* were penned."

"This talk of exalted visions and, I imagine, sparse monk-like lifestyle does remind me of Holmes, and not a little of you I confess."

"I thought you were the Holmes character here. But never mind that for now. Have a pinch. You're on to something vastly more interesting." I noticed the "*o* " symbol on the wooden snuffbox Green proffered, as both stood in contrast to his homely and simple lifestyle. Something in this question of identity also rang true, for I had become the narrator.

Green continued, "In Chapter 2 of the *Bhagavada Gita*, Krishna speaks of two distinct paths for conducting investigation, each with its own assumptions and motivation but ultimately leading to the same outcome. The simpler of these involves deductive reasoning. A consequence of this path in various cultures has been versions of Cartesian dualism, such as found in the ancient Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy. An adherent to this is very formulaic in approach, strictly following set steps of inquiry."

"Somewhat like Holmes, I'd say. Appropriate for dealing with large crimes and academic undertakings."

"Somewhat. But while the larger crimes may be simple to solve using such methodology, Holmes regarded the finer ones as more interesting. Krishna says Sankhya's proclivity for formulae springs from the desire to secure better positions in this world and in future lives if such should come about."

"Why, that's little else but enlightened self-interest, then!"

"Precisely. However, Krishna considers the desire for material gains to be contrary to the better path. The better path is to do good things because those things are good."

"On what basis are we to judge which things are good and which lesser?"

"Krishna says both the realization that this is the better path and the understanding of what is good are achieved through meditation. Meditators proceed from the vantage point of self-knowledge and may disregard rules that appear in doctrinal writings, quite a dangerous task considering the institutions that penned and protected the sanctity of those doctrines. Such a person alone, he says, deserved to be called a yogi."

"I must object that this sounds most anti-intellectual and not at all like Holmes, although he did at times disregard social standards in pursuit of truth."

"It is only anti-intellectual in the terms historically imposed on this mystery that is consciousness. Although we would be remiss to impose the term yogi on Holmes, let us also admit that Watson awarded him the grade of zero in philosophy, called him eccentric in chemistry, unsystematic in anatomy . . ."

"Yes, and as I recall a self-poisoner by cocaine and tobacco," said Green, grinning at these entries to the list. "Here we come to another Indian version of the prototype for dangerous detectives," he said. "While Vyasa deals with matters outside of ordinary social acknowledgments, his discrimination makes the extraordinary accessible to the ordinary. This means the "cosmic sound" he heard was not really heard. It was the experience of absolute unbroken monism without differences that make our reality comprehensible such as you-me, day-night, past-present, material-non-material and so forth. He makes this indescribable experience intelligible through ordinary language that uses such categories. However, in the same *Vedas*, a different type of dangerous detective appears. These long-haired ones are given to ecstatic flight in the opposite direction. Away from the mundane, their detective work is by way of enduring fire, gazing full on heaven while drinking poison from a cup."

"This does sound remotely like Holmes. But is this not simply dangerous to one's well being and ultimately to mental health?"

"We find something of a counterpart in Euro-American literature detective stories, in the psychic detective or psychic who assists the detective. Also the "existential detectives" in the film *I © Huckabees* operate outside methods ordinarily considered logical. The detective in the film *Zen Noir* proceeds in accord with the *modus operandi* of the genre before abandoning the noir method upon realizing its shortcomings in terms of examining his life."

"This intuitive or non-discursive detective indeed differs from the tragic hero, the film noir PI and from Holmes," I said. "It reminds me a bit of Monk, from the television series by that name. I'm not sure his is always the logical method. But these people are harmless and nigh-invariably turn out to be frauds, at least in Euro-American writing."

"Danger sometimes seems to be in the eye of the beholder. In the late 1990s the Chinese government arrested and tortured members of the group Falun Gong on charges of sedition for practicing a mystical form of Tai Chi in the parks of Beijing. It is in a similar vein that the long-hairs of the Vedas appear to threaten the orthodoxy by challenging not only the need for sacrifice which is at the core of Brahmanical social structure, but also the underlying dualistic worldview that most of us share, the view that there is a gap between self and other which Derrida says we can never bridge. Care for that pinch now?"

"The rantings of a few demagogues hardly seem so consequential," I objected waving off his snuff box. "Such is not so dangerous to a sound of mind, I should say. Although history might not bear me out, as I think of it."

"There's more than that at issue. Consider a counterexample in the most famous of Indian epics, that exemplary case of *The Ramayana*."

"Ah yes. Let us call it 'A Scandal in Lanka'."

"Let us. You will recall in the story, Rama is set to become king of Ayodhya in northeast India. Before this happens however, his wife Sita is kidnapped by a mysterious man disguised as an ascetic."

"As with the Bohemian gentleman, Holmes might have deduced this masked man was the king of Lanka in the south of India."

"For the bulk of the story, Rama forges his way southward through the forests of the subcontinent. On the way he forms alliances with forest dwellers to battle an array of demons and evil doers, all the while gathering clues as to the whereabouts of his beloved Sita. Throughout the story, Rama is portrayed as the representation of order in the world. Indeed he is the very incarnation of order, the manifestation of the supreme god Vishnu, although he forgets this for most of the epic. After a year of subduing the non-Vaishnavites of south India, spreading wide what is represented as righteous social stratification in gender and caste . . ."

"This is generally termed imperialism."

". . . he discovers where Sita is being held. In the climactic battle, Rama kills Ravana and regains Sita. The story ends not there however. After their return to the north and subsequent coronation, the people of Ayodhya begin to wonder if Sita was not raped or, what is apparently worse, if she had willingly succumbed to Ravana's charms. After all, she was with him for over a year."

"I suppose succumbing to his charms means she became attracted to chaos or at least came to reject certain aspects deemed essential to civilization."

"You have hit directly upon the matter. The danger faced by Rama, Sita and all of us according to the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, is *adharma*, the violation of dharma or righteous duty. The motivating factor in the story is the maintenance of cosmic order. It is for this the sacrificer keeps his fire ablaze, the warrior battles even faced with defeat, the householder reproduces society, all for fear of chaos courted by the renunciate, Ravana and the long-haired ones."

"I now believe your snuff box to be of Lankan design. A reward advance for the present cultural dissemination I surmise. And what of Sita?"

"When Rama asks her of her trials she denies being touched. But the people are not convinced. Rama asks Agni, fire, to test her. Sita is insulted but walks through fire thereby receiving Agni's testimony on her behalf. Yet Rama and his subjects persist in conventional, civilized cruelty and Rama finally casts out his queen. This tragic event is considered the utmost sacrifice for the sake of social order."

"It is also punishing the victim is it not? Which is truly more dangerous, ruling with truth or by upholding a lie to placate subjects? It is a strange application of deontology indeed, this strict adherence to rules at the expense of breaking a few."

"An alternate outcome to the story appears in the recent Hindi film adaptation called *Raavan*. The film features two glamorous stars, Aishwarya Rai as a Sita character named Ragini and her real-life husband Abhishek Bachchan as the Ravana persona named Beera, meaning Brave. In the film, Dev, a modern police detective whose name means god, reminding us of Rama, investigates his wife's kidnapping. This leads him to south India and the criminal Beera he has indicted before. Beera has kidnapped Dev's wife to show the injustices of the detective past and present, charging that Dev only persecutes south Indians because they are poor and uneducated. As time goes on, Ragini comes to realize the truth in this and sees that her husband's obsession with Beera is stronger than his desire for her release. As in the *Ramayana*, once his wife is returned, the detective questions her fidelity and rejects her. But here Ragini returns to Beera. Dev then kills Beera even as Ravana is killed. Again, conventional social order triumphs. But in this case the outsider dies with a smile, the ideological winner for having gained both the love of Ragini and the audience."

"What of Holmes, then? Does he plummet at Reichenbach Falls with a smile on his face? And, if he does, is it because he has enforced order in society, or because Moriarty's defeat is also a defeat of the ideology that those who are 'respectable' are in fact deserving of respect?"

"Ah, but my dear Doctor Wittkower, you have all the evidence you need to form the proper conclusion, and if I spell everything out for you, we both shall find it so painfully dull!"