Investigating and Contextualizing Dramaturgical Perspectives: Insights from Abhinavagupta and Social Psychology

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Abstract: Believing that "all the world's a stage" exemplifies using theater as a metaphor for life, also known as a dramaturgical perspective (DP). This project examines DPs in two historical contexts—contemporary psychological research, and the work of medieval Indian philosopher and literary theorist Abhinavagupta. Recent psychological research suggests that viewing oneself as "acting out a part" protects against social threats, but can simultaneously be alienating. Abhinavagupta posits that recognizing performativity can aestheticize life in a way that offers freedom from reified notions of self and other. This divergence suggests that DPs are entwined with cultural contexts. To test this, we examined the association of cultural orientations with responses to the DP among US emerging adults (N = 1146). Cultural variables were associated with DP endorsement, and with a key component of associations between DP endorsement and distress: feelings of inauthenticity. The discussion focuses on salient socio-cultural dimensions of DP operation.

Keywords: Religion; culture; dramaturgical perspective; social psychology; Saivism

> All the world's a stage
> And all the men and women merely players
> – Jacques (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 3.7. 139)

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A Dramaturgical Perspective (DP) involves the application of a theatre metaphor to life. In DP life is characterized as drama, a theatre where we all play parts, perform scripts, and enact particular roles that depend on the stages we occupy. Inevitably, this type of interpretive framework recruits existing assumptions about identity (who is the actor?), social roles (what is entailed by the parts of student, teacher, grandfather, daughter, janitor, or CEO?), and societal expectations (what does it mean to be placed in a role? What if one were to back out? Improvise? Fail?) that comprise vital through-lines in social reality.

To believe that one is "playing a role" in one's life – sincerely or cynically, deliberately or inadvertently – can mean different things across persons, places, and times. Playing a role may efface one's "true" identity if the role is experienced as artificial. Alternately, identifying with a role might enable a person to participate in a transpersonal truth – whether at the fruition of a soteriological project, as we discuss below, or through dedication to a role one deems ultimately meaningful. Perhaps because of the extraordinary range in possible implications of the DP, as well as the potential of dramaturgical theories for describing and navigating social worlds and identity formations, dramaturgical theories have been a consistent subject of historical interest (Blackbourn 1987; Hall and Hall 2006; Richards and Richards 1991).

The cross-cultural prevalence of DP is also striking. It appears that where drama and performance exist, dramaturgical metaphors are readily extended to life. We see them employed by authors across a diverse range of contexts and times, with notable examples occurring in Plotinus's philosophical writings, Shakespeare's plays, the idealism of Friedrich Schelling, the literature of Cervantes (Penskaya and Küpper 2019), and the Theopoetics of Hans Ur von Balthasar.

Historiography can illuminate the contexts, unique deployments, and implications of DPs that emerged in the past, as well as the distinctive cultural lenses and epistemologies that structure them. In addition to being a literary device, however, DPs also involve acts of psychological perspective-taking that give particular attention to the existence of social roles. In recent years, psychological research has attempted to delineate the mental processes and functions associated with the DP among contemporary study subjects. The potential of cognitive historiography for the study of DPs is to inform historical analyses with data from psychological research, while simultaneously enriching psychological knowledge and methods by putting them in conversation with the past.

This article explores the contributions of a cognitive historiographical approach for the study of the DP. It examines the DP in the works of Abhinavagupta (c. 950–1025), an intellectual luminary of medieval Kashmir

who was a religious teacher of non-dual Śaivism and an influential theorist of classical Indian literature and theatre. Abhinavagupta's DP[4] is articulated within a comprehensive metaphysical framework that has a clear soteriological aim: the DP becomes a means to apprehend the true nature of reality by recognizing reality as the dynamic "play" of a universal and non-dual Consciousness. As such, Abhinavagupta's detailed explication of the DP, implicit in many of his earlier sources, offers an illuminating case study on dramaturgical perspectives in the history of Indian religions.

Abhinavagupta's work is also of interest to social scientists concerned with accounting for the vast range of possible inflections and underlying functions of the DP. The employment, utility, and characterization of the DP in Abhinavagupta's writing provides a meaningful counterpoint to investigations of the DP in contemporary social psychology, which has tended to regard the DP as simultaneously defensive and threatening to one's sense of an authentic self. This contrast sets the stage for a more comprehensive study of the DP, which includes the factors that might contribute to differences in its articulations and impacts. We examine social and cultural characteristics of the milieus where the DP appears as especially important for understanding and further studying the ways that DPs function. By operationalizing several of these characteristics, we were able to empirically test the principles that can be brought to bear on DPs.

Cognitive Historiography in the Study of Abhinavagupta's Dramaturgical Perspectives

Cognitive historiography involves an application of the theories, methods, and praxes of psychological science to historical scholarship for the purpose of grounding historical analysis in scientific methods, as well as mitigating the biases entailed in the application of folk-psychological and intuitive schemata within historical research (Martin 2012; Whitehouse 2005). In a description of the aims of cognitive historiography, Ambasciano (2017) clarifies that this is not at the expense of reducing history to deterministic biopsychological processes, nor does it entail a simplistic analysis of cognition as independent of the social and cultural networks within which it is enacted. Along with biological systems, cultural co-determinants of cognition are well detailed in research, including attention and perception (Koo, Choi, and Choi 2018) and language (Lupyan and Dale 2010), not to mention human relationships with abstract constructs like time and space (Keefer et al. 2019; Schmitt et al. 2021). The synchronic and diachronic influence of culture, defined here as patterns of beliefs, norms, values, and praxes for carrying out life activities shared among groups of people, is therefore

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of likely relevance for cognitive historiography of DPs, which reference commonly held, but culturally diverse, beliefs about self and society. To address these influences, we bridge theories and methods associated with the study of social and cultural psychology with our investigation of the DP in Abhinavagupta's work.

Rather than "extracting" a true understanding of Abhinavagupta's views through the application of cognitive historiographical methods or contemporary psychological theories on the DP, however, the present research is bidirectional. The questions that motivate our analyses are twofold: first, can an application of social and cultural psychological methods help contextualize our understandings of the DP in Abhinavagupta's texts, and in particular their translation to contemporary audiences? Secondly, can a historical examination of Abhinavagupta's work inform psychological methods in historiographic research, furthering the aims of consilience (Slingerland 2014)?

The current project is the product of the collaborative, cross-disciplinary engagement between a clinical psychologist (RP), a social psychologist (IY), and an intellectual historian (BW). In this collaborative endeavour, we first examine Abhinavagupta's DP through historical sources. We then present a summary of social scientific research on dramaturgical perspectives, beginning with the work of Erving Goffman, which underpins contemporary empirical research on the DP. Building on Goffman's ideas and influence, recent research explores the DP as a "mechanism" that allows individuals to distance themselves from the tasks they undertake and social roles that they occupy in the course of daily life. It is novel, however, to turn this social psychological perspective towards the past. A key problem we are immediately confronted with is how to account for the vast cultural differences at play in this kind of historiographic research, especially as they pertain to relationships between self and society. Our engagement with Abhinavagupta's work and its intellectual history on one hand, and contemporary cultural psychology literature on the other, provided a generative direction. Our analysis suggests that cultural differences in how people understand relationship between self and society, as well as notions of personal authenticity, may be particularly influential for applications of the DP. Accordingly, we turned to a sample of college student participants to test the principle that differences in these cultural variables – operationalized via cultural orientations such as Vertical Collectivism and Horizontal Individualism (Singelis et al. 1995) – correspond with different responses to the DP. We then discuss the extent to which these findings can speak to the distinctions we might stipulate between the cultural, religious, and aesthetic contexts of Abhinavagupta, and that of contemporary scholarship on the DP. We also discuss several domains with potential relevance to the broader cross-cultural study of DPs,

as well as the opportunities and limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from such analyses.

The Dramaturgical Perspective of Abhinavagupta

> Salutations to Śiva, the dramatist who scripts the three worlds. It is because of Him that human beings can become connoisseurs of the dramatic performance of the universe, in every moment.[5]

In this section we examine an articulation of the DP that emerged within the non-dual Śaiva traditions and literature of medieval Kashmir, with a focus on Abhinavagupta,[6] a polymath known for his compendious explication of tantric Śaivism and contributions to the theory of classical Indian theatre and literature. Abhinavagupta's writings articulate a philosophically coherent and theologically inclusive view of reality as the dramatic display of the non-dual deity Śiva. Understanding what "Śiva" refers to is central to understanding Abhinavagupta's DP. He characterizes this "deity" as an all-pervasive, self-aware reality, which is simultaneously the material cause of the universe, the vital power animating all life, and the universal agent of all action and thought. Thus Śiva is posited as a Consciousness that continually projects the world upon the screen of his own being and not an anthropomorphic divine form whose exploits are celebrated in religious myth cycles. Abhinavagupta's DP, which is connected to the soteriological aim of embodied liberation, comprises seeing and aesthetically enjoying the world process as a "drama" in which this dynamic self-aware Consciousness – Śiva – is simultaneously the playwright, director, actor, and audience. Viewing the world dramaturgically enables one to experientially access and participate in this divine play.

This perspective requires an aesthetically sensitive person to be able to appreciate the diverse repertoire of roles, characters, scenes, narrative themes, and emotions of life, while also recognizing in them a dynamic unity. Moreover, such a perspective entails a shift in the locus of identity: a move from identification with a specific 'role', 'character', or 'person' towards the dynamism of Consciousness playing every part. The tradition of non-dual Śaiva philosophy elaborated by Abhinavagupta presents the expansion of identity from human being to all-pervasive reality as a process of unveiling. Behind or within the "theater" of social and cultural life is an ever-present reality that must be recognized, given that it is invisible to people lost in their "role," characterized as an exclusive identification with an individual socially-circumscribed self.[7]

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One of Abhinavagupta's commentators, Jayaratha, cites an anonymous verse that describes adopting this DP as akin to moving from a state of contraction and ignorance to one of freedom: "One with limited awareness sports in the cage of the body, fixed to that limited identity by threads of ignorance, just like a silkworm wrapped in a cocoon. But one who is truly awake is recognized as being like an actor who roams freely through theatric scenes and characters."[8] This verse points to a process of awakening that culminates in becoming untethered from a fixed identity tied to a particular body, and a new modality of self that is much more fluid.

Many of Abhinavagupta's scriptural sources used dramaturgical metaphors to describe metaphysical propositions about the nature of the universe and the mechanism of ignorance, or how the reality of Śiva is concealed (Törzök 2016). Abhinavagupta expands on these "world as theater" metaphors by adapting resources from the technical apparatus of classical Indian dramaturgy:[9]

> The theatrical plot (itivṛtta) of the universe manifests itself while resting on the troupe director who prompts the cycle of rebirths. Similar to a theatrical play, [this world] becomes an object of cognition [whereas that 'drama' is] not real in the ultimate sense. This is due to the manifestation of Śiva who, like an actor, does not cease to rest in his own nature [while playing this or that role].

Here Śiva, the one reality at play as the world, is envisioned as the stage director who initiates the play of cyclical existence. He is also described as the sole actor who becomes all beings even while never abandoning his own nature (as the unity of consciousness), just as an actor can play multiple characters while never ceasing to have a distinct identity. This DP does not reduce the stage and roles to incidental figments of social construction, but rather places them in a deeper ontological framework wherein Śiva serves as the central orchestrating principle and all-participant in the cosmic drama.

Abhinavagupta also deploys the dramaturgical category of the refined aesthete, a connoisseur of drama and poetry, as a model for a blissful engagement with this theatrical display staged by Consciousness. The Śaiva practitioner, effectively described as a "connoisseur of reality," is presented as being endowed with "heart," or the sensitivity to blissfully savour the experience of the senses.[10] All the sounds, images, and scenes of life can be refigured, in the experience of such an aesthete who sees the world as Śiva's drama, into discrete instantiations of universal consciousness.[11] This perspective on life, framed as an apprehension of reality unfiltered by the dichotomizing habits of conceptual thought, is seen to remake one's entire experience of the world.

Abhinavagupta does not construct his Śaiva DP *ex nihilo*. An important Kashmirian source for his articulation of non-dual Śaivism, the Śivasūtra ("Aphorisms of Śiva"), teaches: "the Self is the actor, the stage is the inner Self, and the spectators are the senses."[12] An early commentary on this text elucidates the notion of a universal Self, whose nature is Śiva, playing all of the roles of a cosmic drama in the technical language of Indian dramaturgy:[13]

> The universal Self is called an actor since it assumes every state of being (*avasthā*) [/phase of action of the hero]. In this way, this [Self], swaying in the savor of supreme bliss amidst this playful diversion [of the world theatre], is like an expert actor totally conversant with such things as the aesthetic sentiments (*rasa*), emotions (*bhāva*), and the semblances of both.

Here we find a clear transfer of technical terms from Indian classical dramaturgy to describe a universal Self, assuming all states of being, and navigating its experience in the world like an actor who is a master of the craft. This application of the DP as the dramatic art of a transpersonal Self on a cosmic scale diverges from other modes of the DP discussed below, which deal exclusively with the social performances and narratives of individuals, *sans* a background of metaphysically-postulated transpersonal realities.

A praise poem (*stotra*) that also predates Abhinavagupta reveals the same strategy of identifying the creation of Śiva with the process of composing, producing and concluding a play, and utilizes technical terms of the theory of drama (*nāṭyaśāstra*) to do so:[14]

> What other dramatist than you, O Śiva, is able to introduce and conclude the theatrical performance of the three worlds (*trailokyanāṭaka*), which contains the [dramatic] seed for the all the states of being that have been produced.

In this verse, the author or playwright of the drama of the three worlds is described as Śiva. Furthermore, the dramatic production contains the seed (*bīja*) of the resulting states or scenes of this production. The term "seed" (*bīja*) deepens the metaphor of cosmic drama by alluding to the first of the five pragmatic factors (*arthaprakṛti*) of the development of a plot in classical dramatic theory. These factors eventually lead to denouement of a particular play. Therefore, these exegetically inlaid details from classical Indian dramaturgy offer further interpretive tools for a Śaiva devotee to systematically experience the world as Śiva's play through the categories of structural plot analysis.[15]

Continuing this well-wrought theme in the Śaiva tradition, Abhinavagupta invites us to see the world as the drama of universal consciousness and the entire range of our experience as a divine enactment or

dramatic performance to be aesthetically enjoyed. Such a change in perspective is designed to awaken us from the ignorant tendency to see life in non-fictional terms, as the storyline of a fully individuated psycho-somatic self.

Metaphysics and Abhinavagupta's View of the Self

The notion of self that underwrites Abhinavagupta's DP is radically different from the individual self, which is often implicit in modern Euro-American discourse (Jaeggi 2014), and understandings of self as contingent or constructed that are explored in post-modern thought. For Abhinavagupta, the goal of human life is the recognition of a self that is the source, substance, and creative power of the universe; this Self is an agent of all cognition and action, and self-differentiates in order to experience itself through the drama of creation.

One method of realizing this self is to begin to identify with it through the following conceptual affirmation:[16]

> I am that which transcends all limited forms of existence, beyond the levels of reality ending in Śiva; I am the essence of pure Consciousness that cannot be divided [by time, space, etc.], the ultimate reality; I am the pure abode in which all things find their being, the vitality of the universe. I am that which animates the universe. For this reason, I transcend the universe and am also one with it.

Mentally identifying with the pantheistic reality of Śiva is a thought exercise that is aligned with the true character of reality (as envisioned by Abhinavagupta's non-dual tradition), but still mediated through concepts. This practice naturally gives way to a dawning of non-conceptual awareness of one's true nature:[17]

> Directly perceiving one's own Self as that essential nature in which all phenomenal awareness rests, in which the entire multitude of principles, beings, and worlds are reflected, is embodied liberation by means of a divine absorption, since [that realization] is non-conceptual.

Cassie's experience

This recognition of this Śiva-self as one's ultimate nature, a spontaneous identification that is not mediated by concepts or thought constructs, provides an essential framework for appreciating Abhinavagupta's DP. However, such a self-construal is far removed from the more conventional experience that we are one being among many, a particular personality associated with a body-mind complex. It follows that the non-dual Śaiva view Abhinavagupta presents actually bears a significant burden of proof, given its distance from common-sense experience. Put another way, if this universe is really the

imaginative creation of one consciousness, and we are that, why do we not naturally experience such a vast and unbounded self-sense?

As hinted at above, the DP, as it is accessed by Abhinavagupta, actually helps explain how this one consciousness, the creator and stuff of the world, self-differentiates into myriad individual beings and environments of experience without sacrificing its inherent nature as unified and remaining free from any of the specific temporal, spatial, and causal instantiations it freely adopts. Isabelle Ratié spells out how Abhinavagupta's use of the metaphor of theatre has explanatory power in this regard. It reveals how all-pervasive consciousness, which is independent and ever-free from the world it manifests, can adopt limitation by playing the role of the individual self (Ratié 2010, 464):

> The reason for this lies in the Pratyabhijñā philosophers' understanding of freedom and passivity: they believe that we experience passivity only insofar as we agree to be passive. Thus, the spectators of a theatre play know that what they see is only a fiction, since they do not jump on the stage in order to rescue someone about to be murdered there; and yet they go through all the emotions of the main character, tasting his sadness when the hero supposedly experiences sadness, or being relieved when he overcomes all the obstacles, etc. So the spectators are fooled by the play – but only because they are willing to be fooled, and because they take pleasure in it. According to Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, in the same way, we are bound to our existence in *saṃsāra* for the simple reason that we agree to be bound – and we believe that there is an external world of objects to be sought and avoided because in us, the infinite and omnipotent consciousness chooses to believe that it is bound.

Here we have an important insight into how the DP is not only adopted as a means for awakening from an obfuscating identification with a single character, but also explains how an all-pervading Self, Śiva, becomes lost in those individual roles in the first place.

Abhinavagupta's employment of the DP is intimately woven into and in dialogue with the cultural, aesthetic, and theological frameworks of the milieu he inhabited. It is quite difficult to faithfully transpose this conception of the Self as Śiva – the cosmic dramatist and actor, to other unique social-historical horizons, not to mention importing what it means to be an audience or play a role in such a DP. Furthermore, the social roles that Abhinavagupta observed one may get lost in – related, for example, to the structures and obligations of caste – are notably distinct from the ways in which the subjects of contemporary psychological study appear to frame their own roles within networks of societal expectation. Registering these kinds of differences is important for capturing a broader, more

comprehensive sweep of DP applications than psychological research alone can account for.

Dramaturgical Perspectives in Social Scientific Research

> Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains a deity of great importance.
>
> – Goffman (1967, 95)

Social psychological research has recently begun to examine the causes, conditions, and consequences of the DP in people's daily lives. This research has attempted to contextualize the subject of its focus – the DP in late-modern, US and European contexts – within this cultural milieu (i.e. post-modern, individualist). A dialogue with DPs across space and time has the potential to enrich and complexify understandings of this DP and DPs in general. For this reason, even as psychological theories may be relevant for interpreting Abhinavagupta's use of dramaturgical metaphors, Abhinavagupta's DP is of considerable interest to social psychologists. For example, contemporary psychological investigations of the DP do not typically begin, as Abhinavagupta does, with an appreciation of theatrical aesthetics and dramaturgical metaphors, facilitating a deliberate and meticulous extension of these into the individual's experience. Rather, social psychological research on the DP primarily seeks to understand the laypersons' application of the DPs as it emerges incidentally through engaging with one's social surroundings.

Made famous in Erving Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), the application of a dramaturgical lens in the social sciences has a rich history (Brissett and Edgley 2005). According to Goffman's framework, individuals are motivated to promote certain identities, achieve desired goals, and maintain the fluidity of social interactions. These motivations result in social interactions that unfold very much like stage plays, where individuals attempt to impart certain impressions of themselves to the audiences around them. In so doing, individuals (i.e. actors) wear masks, enact roles, perform scripts, adjust their performance according to the stages they occupy, and have differentiated "front stage" and "backstage" selves. According to Goffman, these performances function to conceal people's inner selves and impulses in order to convince those around them that the roles they enact are genuine and natural. Goffman used this lens to describe and explain the form and function of a variety of social situations and processes.

Although the dramaturgical approach, as applied by Goffman, is primarily an analytical framework, he is also mindful of the capacity of everyday people to think about their lives in dramaturgical terms. Such dramaturgical self-awareness can contribute to cynicism. Goffman (1959, 28) writes, "we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on."

It is as though, for Goffman's dramaturgically self-aware subject, acknowledging the performativity of life undermines the authenticity of one's activities. Notably absent is any superordinate reality which, as for Abhinavagupta, is at the centre of the drama. Rather, contact between reality and the actor may be undermined through the DP, a distancing that may also serve a purpose.

Sullivan and colleagues (2014) have investigated the psychological antecedents and implications of the extension of the DP to the entirety of social life. They argued that people sometimes endorse the DP in order to downplay threatening information (e.g. failures to live up to social expectations) by "taking refuge in the idea that all social roles are dramatic performances and thus ultimately unimportant" (Sullivan et al. 2014, 770), where, again, dramaturgy signifies artificiality and does not, as for Abhinavagupta, provide a vital metaphor about the nature of reality.

Furthermore, Sullivan et al. (2014) were attentive to the cultural influences that might potentiate this defensive utilization of the DP. Consistent with work suggesting that Euro-American societies have increasingly promoted the perception of radical separation between selves and society (Baumeister 1987; Jaeggi 2014), they showed that people's tendency to endorse the DP is positively associated with dominant values in post-modern, Euro-American societies (e.g. competitive individualism and secularism). They also found that individuals' endorsement of the DP increased after experiencing threats to their perception of personal value and worth (i.e. self-esteem). For example, college students' endorsement of the DP increases after reflecting on a time that they failed to live up to the expectations associated with being students. This suggests that the endorsement of the DP may sometimes be a reactive, defensive response to threatening external information, at least against the backdrop of secular, competitive individualism. Conversely, they found that if the DP is made salient to US participants, the effects of threats to their self-esteem were attenuated. The DP likely undermines the legitimacy of external, social prescriptions, thus buffering participants' self-esteem against self-threatening information (e.g. feedback suggesting they have failed to meet those prescriptions).

Importantly, the research conducted by Sullivan and colleagues (2014) primarily used participants recruited from a US college setting, an environment that is prone to promoting an individualist atmosphere and independent self-conceptions (Stephens et al. 2012). Though Sullivan and colleagues acknowledged that the exact manifestation and consequences of the DP most likely vary cross-culturally, this possibility has not yet been adequately explored. In particular, certain sociocultural factors may account for the particular manifestation of the DP that they observed. The purpose of the remainder of this section is to identify and describe several of these factors, which may shed additional light on the distinctive manifestations of the DP described thus far.

The DP in Post-Modern Euro-American Cultural Settings

In the social dynamics of individualist, post-modern cultures, the DP appears to arise incidentally (rather than purposively), predicated on a relationship between two factors. The first is the belief in (or motivation to maintain) a bound, authentic, and stable core-self[18] and the second is the observation that engaging with the social world often requires individuals to "perform" differently based on one's role or social context, thereby necessitating each individual to possess a "cast" of different selves. In combination, these two factors contribute to the emergence of a worldview in which a "true," inner world is obscured by the performativity of daily social life. This conception of reality is consistent with the layperson's DP as explored by Sullivan and colleagues (2014).

Considerable literature has focused on describing the peculiarities of late-modern Euro-American cultures, with some consensus that such settings afford self-concepts that are bound and unique, and which constitute one's "true" identity. In a review of historical and literary scholarship, Baumeister (1987) argued that events in the course of the European history (e.g. rise of capitalism; shifts from medieval Christianity to Protestantism and eventually secularism) have contributed to a sense that one's internal self is unique and independent of one's surroundings, and that this unique self requires uncovering through self-discovery and fulfilment through self-actualization. Consistent with other theorizing on "modern" identity formation (Taylor 1992), this characterization exemplifies how individuals are increasingly expected to "carve their own paths" in order to discover and express their identity and satisfy personal drives for wellbeing (see also Inglehart 1997). From this perspective, individuals are believed to value agency and self-exploration over social immersion, while society may be perceived as an encroaching force that necessitates insincerity. Indeed, the embeddedness of a more cynical manifestation of the DP in the culture and

zeitgeist of Euro-American history is further supported by Baumeister's suggestion that the distinction between inner (the self) and outer (the social) worlds was perhaps facilitated by the rising popularity of theatre in England and France in the sixteenth century.

Contemporary cultural psychology provides some terminology that can aid in summarily describing these processes. The now classic work from Markus and Kitayama (1991) describes the cognitive, emotional, and motivational differences between two types of culturally afforded views of selfhood: *independent* (associated with individualistic cultures) and *interdependent* (associated with collectivistic cultures) self-construals. Relative to interdependent self-construal – which emphasizes the contextualized, socially-connected self and prioritizes socio-centric value orientations – independent self-construal is characterized by the perception of the self as bound and autonomous and promotes egocentric value orientations (for a more recent review, see Cross et al. 2011).

However, independent self-construals are complicated by certain societal and cognitive factors. For example, social constructionism, a logical implication of the DP, has been argued to be contradictory to the view of the individual as the "knower, the rational, self-directing, morally centered and knowledgeable agent of action" (Gergen 2011, 109). In other words, the belief that one's self-conception is beholden to social or cultural artefacts is inconsistent with the idea that the self is ontologically primary. When applied to a layperson's phenomenology, this suggests that people with independent self-construals may find it distressing to contemplate the performativity of social life or transience of the self. Indeed, research has found that experiencing self-inconsistency across situations is more strongly related to decreased psychological wellbeing among US compared to Korean participants (Suh 2002) and, among individualists (i.e. those low in collectivism), the experience of putting up a "façade" in order to fit in is associated with emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave one's place of work (Hewlin 2009). Further, some initial data from our own research suggests that there is a strong relationship between the belief in a "true," stable self-view and feeling uncomfortable when "faking it" in social situations (Young et al. 2022, in preparation).

Thus, although the DP can protect people from "low-level," everyday self-esteem threats, if endorsed chronically or to its fullest extent, it may also leave people with individualistic cultural orientations feeling untethered in an artificial, meaningless social world. This is consistent with the "threat-culture cycle" model (Sullivan 2016), which proposes that cultures tend to afford mechanisms to cope with certain psychological threats (e.g. employing the DP to cope with self-esteem threats) while also predisposing

individuals to be susceptible to other threats (e.g. meaninglessness). Some preliminary research on the correlates of the DP supports this double-edged view of the DP among people in the US. Specifically, among college students, endorsement of the DP is associated with depressive symptoms (Young et al. 2022) and among working people in the US the DP is associated with lower self-esteem, greater perceived stress, using substances to cope with stress, higher perfectionism, more professional burnout, and more thoughts about quitting one's job (Young 2020). Thus, while employing the DP may temporarily relieve individuals from the burden of living up to social expectations in a contemporary, individualist context, it may also open the floodgates of disenfranchisement, alienation, and ultimately psychological distress.

Examining Dramaturgical Perspectives in Context: An Empirical Analysis of Cultural Orientations

Contextual factors thus warrant close consideration in the historiographic application of social scientific findings on the DP, a consideration that is doubly supported by our examination of the DP in the works of Abhinavagupta. The potential importance of distinctive cultural and social contexts for articulations of the DP is of particular concern. Put differently: not only can the mitigating role of culture for contemporary empirical research on the DP inform and nuance any cognitive historiographical applications of psychological theory to Abhinavagupta's works, but Abhinavagupta's DP conveys important insights for contemporary psychologists. Cultural contexts that are distinct from late-modern European and US societies in their assumptive foundations about the relationship between self and society may contribute to different functions and consequences for the DP. For example, a society that promotes interdependent (rather than independent) self-construals, and which emphasizes hierarchy (over egalitarianism) may also bestow a different function to social roles – a position influentially advanced in the philosophical work of MacIntyre (2007).

This reasoning motivated an empirical examination of the role of cultural orientations in the functioning of the DP. Our object of inquiry was relatively circumscribed, but with potential relevance for the historiographic project: if minute variations in cultural orientation among our contemporaries can contribute to differences in the way DPs operate, then the wholesale translation of our social scientific knowledge about DPs to historical luminaries like Abhinavagupta (who are wont to differ on these same cultural orientation variables from ourselves) are liable to inaccuracies, not to mention cultural projections. Our study recruited college students – the most typical subject pool for social psychology experiments – to examine this question.

On the one hand, the distance – chronologically, geographically, culturally, and conceptually – between US college students and Abhinavagupta is a daunting indictment of the generalizability from one sample to the other; on the other hand, this distance underscores our aim of characterizing the impact of even relatively minute cultural differences on the DP. This juxtaposition of Abhinavagupta with late-modern DP theorization and research thus primarily marks a starting point for investigations of this kind.

In order to begin to shed light on the ways that relatively subtle cultural values may influence DP-related processes, we sought to measure values that relate to broader constellations of cultural patterns, such as the dimension of individualism-collectivism. In a diverse society such as the US, individuals are exposed to a number of cultural values systems and ways of being (e.g. Oyserman et al. 1998), thus making it possible to examine individuals' tendencies to endorse any of these cultural values relative to their peers. We used the Horizontal-Vertical Individualism-Collectivism scale (Singelis et al. 1995) to capture individual-level endorsement values associated with individualist or collectivist, hierarchical or egalitarian, views of self and society. Operationalizing culture in a short survey is inevitably fraught with the limitations of reductionism; however, individuals' endorsements of views that correspond to broader cultural patterns may nevertheless be revealing. We initially hypothesized that cultural orientations towards Horizontal Individualism (self-construal as independent and autonomous, with expectations of equality), vs. Vertical Collectivism (self-construal as inter-dependent and part of a collective, with expectations of inequality; Singelis et al. 1995) should correspond with the kinds of reactions to the DP consistent with our description of the DP in post-modern Euro-American culture. For example, among a relatively individualist sample such as US college students, endorsement of the DP should correspond with distress (operationalized as reduced life satisfaction), partially due to compromising perceptions of authenticity. On the other hand, because hierarchical and collectivist orientations accord greater importance to social roles and explicit norms, and correspondingly place lower emphasis on individualistic notions of authenticity, greater endorsement of Vertical Collectivism may be protective and result in reduced distress from the DP because of a greater sense of authenticity. In the next section we present an initial test of this line of thought.

Method

Participants and Procedure

For an initial inspection of the theorized relationships between cultural orientation, the DP, the phenomenology of self-role relations, and life satisfaction, data were collected from a sample of US undergraduates. Although this sample represents a relatively homogenous population, data were collected with the expectation that some variance in cultural orientation, particularly along the dimension of Vertical Collectivism, would influence the experience of self-role relations and subsequently life satisfaction. Data were collected from 1,332 introductory psychology students, though complete data were only attained from 1,146 respondents. The age of the sample ranged from 18 to 56 ($M = 18.91$, $SD = 2.63$; 413 males, 919 females, 0 non-binary). Participants primarily identified as White (73.3%), with participants also identifying as Black (6.95%), Asian (10.8%), American Indian/Native Alaskan (3.7%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%), or other (14.2%).

The measures of this study were administered within a larger set of materials. The focal measures included brief measures of cultural orientation, the DP, inauthenticity, and life satisfaction. Responses to all measures were queried via 7-point Likert scales (*Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*). Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for these measures are provided in Table 1.

Materials

Cultural orientation
Cultural orientation was measured using an abridged version of the Horizontal-Vertical Individualism-Collectivism Scale developed by Singelis et al. (1995). Although three items were included to capture each of this measure's four subscales, the focal items were those that capture Vertical Collectivism (e.g. "I would do what would please my family, even if I detested that activity", α = .64) and Horizontal Individualism (e.g. "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many ways", α = .57).

DP
Although the scale used to measure the DP in prior research contained 5 items (Sullivan et al. 2014), 2 items were selected for being best suited for the present purpose ("I often feel as if society is one big game that everyone is playing," and "I often feel as if society is one big play that everyone is performing in"; $r = .81$). These items were selected as they most directly reflect the application of a performative metaphor to social life, but with minimal evaluative valence.

Inauthenticity

Inauthenticity was measured with three face-valid items that capture the degree to which individuals believe that following social prescriptions undermines their and others' authenticity (e.g. "When people do what's expected of them, they are masking who they really are," and "When I do what people expect of me, I feel like a fake"; $\alpha = .48$).

Life satisfaction
Life satisfaction was measured with the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985; $\alpha = .87$).

Results

We conducted several analyses to examine our predictions regarding the relationships between the variables of interest. First, we anticipated a positive association between Horizontal Individualism and the new ("valence-free") pair of DP items. In other words, consistent with our characterization of late-modern social dynamics, those who most endorse egalitarian and individualistic cultural values should be likeliest to endorse the belief that they are actors moving between different roles in daily life. This prediction was supported by the correlation between these two composites (Table 1).

We also anticipated that DP would be associated with decreased global wellbeing (as indicated by Life Satisfaction), and that this effect would be partially accounted for by greater feelings of inauthenticity that result from the DP. In other words, endorsing the dramaturgical perspective would lead participants to feel like they are "faking it", and that these feelings of inauthenticity in their lives would help to explain why DP would be associated with decreased Life Satisfaction. On the other hand, we anticipated that tendencies away from the dominant, individualist orientation (i.e. towards a more collectivistic orientation) may provide a buffering support to life satisfaction. In particular, we expected that Vertical Collectivism would have the opposite (positive) relationship with Life Satisfaction, as a function of Vertical Collectivism being associated with lower levels of inauthenticity. Greater endorsement of hierarchical collectivist values, we reasoned, would enable our participants to experience less distress when performing social roles, and that this in turn would contribute to greater life satisfaction. Both of these cross-sectional mediation models were examined using the PROCESS macro (Hayes 2017) for SPSS, which facilitates the execution of more elaborate statistical models rooted in traditional regression analyses. In this case, we were interested in detecting indirect effects of the DP and Vertical Collectivism on Life Satisfaction. Thus, we employed a resampling (bootstrapping) approach with 5,000 resamples in order to estimate a range

within which we can be 95% confident the true effect resides. These analyses revealed partial mediation for both the DP Life Satisfaction (Figure 1, panel a) and Vertical Collectivism-Life Satisfaction (Figure 1, panel b) relationships by inauthenticity. Thus, these analyses reveal that the negative relationship between the DP and life satisfaction, and the positive relationship between Vertical Collectivism and Life Satisfaction are partially accounted for by the role that inauthenticity has in these processes.

As a final analysis, we examined a moderated mediation model in which the relationship between DP and life satisfaction, as mediated by inauthenticity, is moderated by Vertical Collectivism (Figure 1, panel c). This allowed us to put together the two arguments – that DP would be associated with lower life satisfaction due in part to feelings of inauthenticity, but also that Vertical Collectivism would simultaneously display the reverse, negative relationship with inauthenticity. This model also tested to see whether the cultural variable of Vertical Collectivism would influence the extent to which DP would be associated with lower life satisfaction (again, via inauthenticity). This analysis revealed a non-zero, though small, mediated moderation effect, suggesting that it does, albeit in a small way.

To summarize, our results offer preliminary support for the relevance of cultural orientation differences to the functioning of the DP, even among college students in the US. The correlations in Table 1 reveal that in this sample, (1) Horizontal Individualism is positively associated with the DP, and (2) the DP is associated with greater experiences of inauthenticity and diminished Life Satisfaction among this population of college undergraduates. Further, the mediational analyses suggest feelings of (in)authenticity partially account for the DP's association with lower Life Satisfaction, as well as for the positive association between Vertical Collectivism and Life Satisfaction, and for the simultaneous existence of these two opposing relationships within the same sample. These findings thus lend some support to the idea that cultural orientations – as operationalized by Horizontal Individualism and Vertical Collectivism – respectively play a role in people's endorsement of the DP, and in mitigating a factor that is associated with the distress related to the contemporary DP: feelings of inauthenticity.

Discussion

These analyses suggest that cultural orientations (Vertical Collectivism and Horizontal Individualism) should be considered important, contextual factors in the study of the DP, with implications for the cognitive historiographic project in general. Without taking into account the role of cultural orientations, we might assume a relatively straightforward relationship

between the DP, feelings of inauthenticity, and life satisfaction, such that viewing one's daily activities in a dramaturgical way would undermine feelings of authenticity and thus lead to a decrease in quality of life. However, applying these assumptions to dramaturgical perspectives wholesale would be an error. The first two sections of our manuscript suggest that dramaturgical perspectives can accommodate significant and consequential variation. The third, empirical portion initiates an examination of some of the cultural variables that accompany this variation as potential correlates and moderators. For instance, even among a single sample of college students, relatively subtle tendencies towards Vertical Collectivism appear to run in opposition to the negative associations of the DP with Life Satisfaction. These findings can provide clues for understanding the factors at play in various instances of the DP across contexts. In addition to continued psychological research, historical data on the organization of family life, socialized roles, religious frameworks, and economic contexts, as well as other important aspects of the social environment, should be accounted for; this is an essential groundwork for understanding the cross-cultural and historical application of DPs.

We cannot say, then, that Abhinavagupta's DP is construed as liberating because, for example, he draws on collectivist, hierarchical social structures. The application of a modern theorization of Vertical Collectivism to Abhinavagupta's social, religious, and intellectual culture cannot do justice to the models of self and society at play in the many cultural and social domains he inhabited, envisioned, and made interventions upon. It should also be born in mind that no one thinker can be considered a paradigmatic exemplar of any broad cultural variable or epoch. Critically, Abhinavagupta departed in important ways from the norms and practices of the more dominant social and cultural formations of his time period; the more esoteric revelatory tradition within which he worked emphasized the agency of individual religious masters and marks a significant "horizontal" expansion of social inclusion. It even argued that the hereditary social roles typically naturalized by orthodox communities are arbitrary "constructs". This notion of the general social world having an obfuscating or veiling function aligns with some of the attitudes attributed to Horizontal Individualist interpretations of the DP. However, for Abhinavagupta the notion of a "true" individual self, set aside as "authentic" and "unique", is certainly not the ontological ground of that veiling. To the contrary, the very notion of an individual self was also considered a conceptual construction that actively concealed an innate transpersonal reality. There is thus an interesting inversion of perspectives between our two contexts of inquiry, as well as a parallel in the general distrust in socialized identities.

The milieu that Abhinavagupta spoke to – medieval Kashmirian intellectuals, religious adepts, and literati – was anchored in radically different presuppositions about the nature of self and the social world, which make his perspective a striking counterpoint to that of twentieth-century social theorists such as Goffman. It is nevertheless also clear that Abhinavagupta's cultural setting powerfully informed his articulation of the DP. To understand the psychological import of his DP, historical and comparativist scholars must therefore make use of a variety of sources to understand his broader social environment, with particular attention to several domains recommended below.

Stepping back from the strands we have braided together in this article, a general case can be made about DPs. First, DPs may well be ubiquitous: where there are drama and performance, dramaturgical metaphors can readily be applied to life. Dramaturgical perspectives also enable a kind of perspective-taking: the relationships between agents and the social roles that they occupy can be made explicit and deployed, affirmed, questioned, or reconfigured through the use of dramatic metaphors. Second, social and cultural environments can promote very different expectations of how people should relate to the roles they perform – e.g. is one's place in life structured by birth or the welfare of a city-state, or is it governed by choice and self-invention? The tensions between agent and social role may therefore have different values and priorities at stake depending on the social setting. Third, the DP can open up remarkable creative potential for configuring and reconfiguring the social milieu, imagining different articulations of the person-role relationship through the robust repertoire of metaphors in theatre and dramatic performance. Below, we suggest several domains that may be especially relevant for understanding how DPs are employed within their particular contexts, based on our convergent case studies, methodologies, and analyses.

Soteriology and Ontology

The religious and soteriological significance of Abhinavagupta's DP is a particular point of interest. Although our empirical analyses focus primarily on cultural orientations and individualistic self-construals, the socio-historic context of the commingling of secularism and individualism discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Taylor 2007) should not be disregarded. Dramaturgical and literary metaphors readily draw value-laden content from religious and soteriological traditions, as theorized by MacIntyre (2007), and the deployment of dramaturgical perspectives, accordingly, can carry influential religious valences. Abhinavagupta's broader religious worldview is crucial to his DP. When the Śaiva adept steps back to witness how their extrinsically

conditioned social role or dichotomizing conceptual mind act like an obscuring veil, waiting in the wings is the all-pervasive and transcendent play of the universal consciousness. This dramaturgical "double vision" imparts a rich reappraisal of one's life in light of a comprehensive and explicit ontology. On the other hand, if one's social role is believed to be an arbitrary construct that only serves to abnegate their individuality and provides no other meaning or ontological substratum to the drama, the experience may be one of angst and alienation. The ontological significance of playing a role is thus not pre-determined by one's cultural environment, but culturally specific religious and soteriological frameworks can afford unique ways to make the role-play full or empty of meaning.

Contemporary research assessing the importance of religious worldviews for the DP is also warranted. For example, variation in the construct of Intrinsic Religiosity (Hoge 1972), which corresponds to the organization of one's life around one's religious beliefs, may demonstrate similar relationships to those observed with Vertical Collectivism in our data. If religious meaning systems impart added significance to one's social roles (e.g. by valuing a profession as a calling), or provide ultimate and transcendent meanings that are untarnished by a felt sense of mere "performativity" (e.g. one may play different roles in life, but is ultimately destined for heaven), then they may attenuate the threatening impact of the DP in a broadly individualistic social context.

Self and Society

Our findings may also be contextualized by considering the different ways that the relationship between self and society can be constructed. Is this relationship complementary or antagonistic, equal or unequal, co-constitutive or separate? What are the primary ways in which desired relationships between self and community are achieved? For example, Daniel Bell describes how historical transitions to industrial and then post-industrial economies have corresponded with a shift from life imagined as a "game against nature" to a "game between persons" who are regarded as in opposition to society at large (Bell 1973, 117–118), referring to the kind of sceptical cynicism of social institutions that has co-developed with Euro-American, rational thinking. On the other hand, collectivist self-construals often imply that social harmony takes precedence over individual autonomy. However, this too may be nuanced, as in the important principle of *familismo* where positive and supportive exchanges are emphasized in an interdependent context, rather than solely order or harmony (Campos and Kim 2017). Research examining the DP should be especially mindful of how these relationships between self and society are described, valued, and enacted.

One component of the self-society relationship may be examined through the indices of Horizontal-Vertical Individualism-Collectivism (Singelis et al. 1995). In our research, as expected, we found Horizontal Individualism to be associated with endorsement of the DP. Moreover, we found that in this college sample the DP was associated with reduced satisfaction with life and that this relationship was partly explained by feelings of inauthenticity. We have argued that the DP in contemporary Euro-American, individualistic contexts is underwritten and articulated through the cultural scaffolding of individualistic self-conceptions and worldviews. In a context where the individual is valued over society, and social constraints are considered to be socially derivative rather than self-formative, one's capitulation to a social role can imply a retreat from primary ontological foundations (of "unique individuality") to a secondary, less desirable existence. In a social world that prizes the full expression of one's personality and individual potential, the abnegation of the unique self may undermine one's psychological wellbeing.

On the other hand, we found Vertical Collectivism to be associated with greater life satisfaction via authenticity. This is consistent with our argument that collectivist and hierarchical social orientations may diminish the power of authenticity threats posed by the DP. If the self is construed as intertwined with (rather than ensnared by) the social order, social roles may be regarded as more valuable indicators of the deeper ontological significance of common identity or social obligation. In other words, to fully understand and embody one's social role can point towards, rather than away from, a valued way of living.

Foreground and Background

Given that dramaturgical perspectives provide frameworks to conceptualize the backgrounding and foregrounding, veiling and unveiling, of agents' different roles, we can attempt to elucidate what is being obscured and revealed in any given DP. For example, in the speech from which this article's epigraph is excerpted, Shakespeare effectively uses the DP to re-frame and de-particularize the personal travails of individuals. In Jacque's words, Shakespeare effectively removes to the background a particular set of woes (age, hunger), and brings to the fore a sweeping view of life that is composed, dramaturgically, of "acts being seven stages" that correspond with life's milestones, and which resolves towards quietude in old age, "mere oblivion, /Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." The DP's capacity to flexibly emphasize particular, and often motivated, views of life roles may be one of the characteristics that lends it so well to deployment across cultural and historical contexts.

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Goffman's pioneering framework, augmented by subsequent scholarship and our own research, approaches late-modern applications of the DP primarily in terms of strategies for managing or avoiding information and experiences that can threaten an underlying "backstage" self, construed as an irreducibly unique individual agent that underwrites self-worth and meaning. The "frontstage" self, when too distant from the backstage identity, is regarded as a ruse. To inhabit such a persona as a social artifice, granting it the "lead role" in one's life, can lead to cynicism. Such a deployment of the DP contrasts Abhinavagupta's in compelling ways.

Instead of serving as a primarily reactive strategy or coping mechanism, Abhinavagupta prescribes a self-conscious or deliberative adoption of a DP to initiate a perspectival shift that is liberating. This DP, too, affords a conception of the self that "backgrounded" or "veiled" by social performative roles. That said, to the extent that one *also* identifies with a transpersonal subjectivity (Śiva), and thus lets go of exclusive commitments to a unique, separate identity, an existential resolution is possible that allows an agent to freely enact individual roles in the foreground while understanding them as a part of a much vaster cosmic plot line. This application of the DP thus allows the yogi-aesthete to rest in identity with the universal actor, ever-shining in the background.

Concluding Remarks

First, several limitations of this research must be acknowledged. This study was conducted with a college sample whose socio-demographic characteristics match only a small fraction of the world's (or even the US) population (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). As a cross-sectional analysis without experimental control, it is also not possible for us to make causal inferences that the differences we observed are due in any way to cultural orientations – only that they co-occurred in this particular sample. In addition, cultural and historical differences cannot be reduced to scores on a self-report measure, and we would not support such an interpretation of our findings. Such data can provide valuable indices of variation and even some explanatory accounts, but they must always be supplemented with additional rich cultural and historical description and research.

With these caveats in mind, we close by observing that the DP continues to be employed in a variety of ways today, and that turning to Abhinavagupta and other connoisseurs of dramaturgic perspectives can enrich broader research into the cross-cultural significance and recurrent emergence of DPs. The contradistinctions and counterpoints among dramaturgical

perspectives can provide opportunities, for example, to highlight or extend the liberating and creative potential of DPs. The ways in which the DP can be threatening may also be countermanded, whether by turning towards an overarching meaning system or by supporting the wellbeing of a "background" self. The readers of this article, too, might step back and see themselves acting out roles as academics, students, writers, members of certain classes or nation-states, and bearers of social identities. To what extent do these roles serve the needs and disquietudes of our times, and might the DP help to soften – or embolden – our commitments to these roles in beneficial ways? These may be the most important questions to ask of the DP moving forward as, ultimately, the dramaturgical perspective presents a metacognitive tool that is formless and taskless outside the ongoing work of culture.

Notes

1.   Roman Palitsky, MDiv, PhD is Director of Research Projects and a Research Psychologist at Emory University. He received his PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Arizona. His research programme investigates the pathways through which culture and health interact by examining the biological, psychological, and social processes that constitute these pathways. He is particularly interested in existential issues such as religion, spirituality, and the meaning of suffering, as they relate to health and illness.

2.   Isaac F. Young is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Psychology at Beloit College. He received his PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Arizona, preceded by a MA in Social Psychology and Programme Evaluation from Claremont Graduate University. As the principal investigator of the Stress, Wellbeing, and Identity in Modernity Lab at Beloit College, Isaac's research aims to explore how the characteristics of the modern world shape psychological processes and experience.

3.   Ben Williams is a scholar of Indian religions and an Assistant Professor of Yoga Studies and Hinduism at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. He has received extensive training in Indian philosophy, literature, and aesthetics in Sanskrit sources. Ben completed his PhD in the Department of South Asian Studies at Harvard University. Since arriving at Naropa University, he has helped launch an MA programme in Yoga Studies, and currently serves as the programme lead.

4.   Although Abhinavagupta does not describe his view or theoretical approach as a "dramaturgical perspective," it is a category that we use to describe the application of theatre metaphors to life. It is employed as such in the present comparative analysis of his deployment of the deep metaphor across life and theatre.

5.   *Abhinavabharatī* on *Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.1: *namas trailokyanirmāṇakavaye śambhave yataḥ | pratikṣaṇaṃ jagannāṭyaprayogarasiko janaḥ.* Here Abhinavagupta is citing the dramatic theorist Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka. All Sanskrit translation are of the third author (BW), unless otherwise stated.

6.   This example in no way exhausts the extraordinary range of DPs formulated in premodern India. One example of a distinctive DP from the subcontinent that emanated from an extraordinarily disparate set of metaphysical presumptions and social models for religious life is found in the tradition of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. A particularly sophisticated use of classical Sanskrit dramaturgical categories and metaphors to map a salvific mode of

devotional life in this tradition is found in the sixteenth-century writings of Rūpagosvāmī (Haberman 2001). For a modern reference to the DP in the context of Advaita Vedānta, see Swami Tyāgananda's recent essay, "All the world's a Stage" (https://vedantasociety.net/blog/all-the-worlds-a-stage).

7.   In the passage below, Abhinavagupta shows how the socially prescribed identities that structure his broader social world are mere conceptual constructs that actively veil one's essential nature. See *Tantrāloka* 15.597 and 15.598cd-600ab: *brahmaṇo'haṃ mayā vedaśāstroktād aparaṃ katham | anuṣṭheyam ayaṃ jātigrahaḥ paranirodhakaḥ ||… atatsvabhāve tādrūpyaṃ darśayann avaśe 'pi yaḥ || svarūpācchādakaḥ so 'tra graho graha ivoditaḥ | saṃvitsvabhāve no jātiprabhṛtiḥ kāpi kalpanā || rūpaṃ sā tv asvarūpeṇa tadrūpaṃ chādayaty alam*, "I am a Brahmin. How can I perform actions that transgress the authoritative teachings of the Vedas? Such an understanding is the possession that is caste, the ultimate obstacle. Displaying an identity with a sense of self that is not inherent and veiling one's essence, this perception is taught as similar to a possessing spirit. There is no conceptual construct such as 'caste' in the nature of Consciousness. That construct is a form that completely conceals one's nature with an extrinsic identity."

8.   Jayaratha's *viveka* ad *Tantrāloka* 1.136: *anyathā svalpabodhas tu tantubhiḥ kīṭavad yathā | malatantusamārūḍhaḥ krīḍate dehapañjare || samyagbuddhas tu vijñeyaḥ… | nānākārair vibhāvaiś ca bhramyate naṭavad yathā.*

9.   Ratié 2009, 364 n. 42, citing the *Īśvarapratyabhijñāvivṛtivimarśinī*, vol. III, p. 244. Translation slightly adapted by third author.

10.   In the *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta refers to an aesthetically sensitive person (*sahṛdaya*), a technical term for the ideal audience of poetry and plays, in relationship to Śaiva practices found in texts such as the *Vijñānabhairava* (which Jayaratha cites in his commentary on the following verse). See *Tantrāloka* 3.209cd-210: *tathā hi madhure gīte sparśe vā candanādike || mādhyasthyavigame yāsau hṛdaye spandamānatā | ānandaśaktiḥ saivoktā yataḥ sahṛdayo janaḥ*, "To explain, the subtle pulsation in a heart that is free of indifference in the presence of sweet music or the [delightful] touch of sandalwood is taught [in this system] as *ānandaśakti*, the power of bliss. Through that (*ānandaśakti*) a person becomes a connoisseur (*sahṛdaya*)."

11.   Ratié 2010, 474–75: "Finally, if the world is the outcome of consciousness' essential creativity, it cannot be discarded as an unreal appearance because it is indeed an appearance, but this appearance is a manifestation of the absolute. Provided one knows that the word is nothing but a way for consciousness to manifest itself freely, its enjoyment is no longer what bind human beings, on the contrary… One can be fully liberated and still enjoy the beauty of the universe, since being aware of beauty is nothing but recognizing one's own free creativity while contemplating the universe, and this enjoyment constitutes a privileged opportunity to become aware of consciousness' freedom: if the Vijñānavādin's ultimate goal is to awaken from the ordinary constructed world, the Pratyabhijñā's idealism aims to become fully aware of its aesthetic nature."

12.   *Śivasūtra* 3.9–11: *nartaka ātmā | raṅgo 'ntarātmā | prekṣakānīndriyāṇi.*

13.   *Śivasūtravārttika* ad 3.9: *sa nartakaḥ smṛto yasmāt sarvāvasthāvalambakaḥ itthaṃ vihṛtau ayaṃ parānandarasena ghūrṇan prauḍhanaṭa iva rasabhāvatadābhāsādyabhijñaḥ.*

14.   *Stavacintāmaṇi* 59: *visṛṣṭānekasadbījagarbhaṃ trailokyanāṭakam | prastāvya hara saṃhartuṃ tvattaḥ ko 'nyaḥ kaviḥ kṣamaḥ.*

15.   For an early scriptural example of using the technical terms of Nāṭyaśāstra such as *vṛtti*, *bhāva*, and *rasa* to describe the universe, see *Jayadrathayāmala* 1.30.19: *svabhāvaraṅgamadhye tu nṛtyate naṭavaj jagat | vṛttitraya[ṃ] samālambya nānābhāvarasāśrayaiḥ*, "The world dances like an actor on the stage, which is its nature, resorting to the three styles of composition and making use of the various feelings and dominant sentiments." Trans. Törzsök 2016, 473.

16.   *Tantrasāra*, chapter four: *samastebhyaḥ paricchinnasvabhāvebhyaḥ śivāntebhyaḥ tattvebhyo yad uttīrṇam aparicchinnasaṃvinmātrarūpaṃ tad eva ca paramārthas tad vastuvyavasthāsthānaṃ tad viśvasyaujas tena prāṇiti viśvam tad eva cāham ato viśvottīrṇo viśvātmā cāham iti.*

17.   *Tantrasāra*, chapter three: *sakalaparāmarśaviśrāntimātrarūpaṃ pratibimbitasamasta-tattvabhūtabuvanabhedam ātmānaṃ paśyato nirvikalpatayā śāmbhavena samāveśena jīvanmuktatā.*

18.   Explicating the long-standing debates concerning the ontological nature and structure of the self falls beyond the purview of this analysis. However, we note that one understanding of selves, bridging philosophical and cognitive theorizing, posits an in-the-moment, agentic self that involves ownership of one's body (sometimes called the minimal self), and a self that extends across time and pieces episodic memories together into a sense of continuous identity (sometimes called the narrative self; Gallagher 2000). Somewhat similar to G. H. Mead's (1934/1967) *I-Me* conception, this distinction suggests that one's identity, or self-narrative, is a construction of self-reflective awareness and memories. Following this logic, it is probable that these self-narratives are susceptible to influence dominant cultural discourses regarding values, self, and society, or "master narratives" (Hammack and Toolis 2015). Given our focus on the phenomenology of selfhood and self-society relations, these perspectives support our position that cultural factors are imperative for understanding how individuals conceptualize their (narrative) selves.

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