Casting Kings:
Bards and Indian Modernity

JEFFREY G. SNODGRASS

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In memory of Bansi Lal and Narayan

The mind is greedy, the mind is covetous,
The mind is fickle, the mind is a thief,
Wherever the mind is told "Don't go!"
In a blink, blink of an eye, there it will be.

—Bhat poem

Preface

This book considers the lives of a group of seminomadic performers from the Indian state of Rajasthan who call themselves Bhats. Specialist scholars know Bhats as elite bards who sang the praises and kept the genealogies of Rajasthan's former kings and nobles. As late as the colonial era, Bhats received land grants from their royal patrons and thus could become, reminiscent of their benefactors, landed noblemen. Given their connection to religious scholarship and ritual performance, these elite bards have also been associated with Brahmin priests.

Many locals told me that there were no longer any Bhats in Rajasthan. They meant that elite and landed bards tied to kings had abandoned their traditional profession and were now tending their flocks and lands or turning to modern professions such as medicine or law. My own Bhat informants, however, claim descent from these elite bardic communities. Moreover, the Bhats I knew, in addition to dancing and selling puppets in the tourist industry, still narrate praise-poems and family histories for their patrons.

Despite their purported connection to royalty, my Bhat informants are now generally poor, possessing little land and even less political power. My three years of ethnographic fieldwork, for example, took place for the most part in Bhat homes in slums and tent colonies in the Rajasthani cities of Udaipur and Jaipur. In the summers of 2003 and 2004 I did see that many Bhats had begun to invest their money in houses of stone and concrete. Nevertheless, during the early to late 1990s, a period that forms the ethnographic present

of most of this book, most Bhats I knew were squatters without legal rights over the land on which they lived.

Thus, despite my informants' claims to be descended from royal forebears, the Bhats I knew also claim Dalit, or "Oppressed," status. The term *Dalit* is generally reserved for members of India's formerly untouchable communities, whom Gandhi called Harijans, or "Children of God," and the Indian state refers to them as Scheduled Castes, since they are "scheduled" for advancement through preferential treatment in a number of Indian-style affirmative action programs. The Indian state maintains strict lists of which caste communities qualify for everything from reserved seats in local governments, state legislatures, and national parliament to preferential placement in universities. My informants, if in fact they descended from nobility, would not qualify for this aid. However, as I witnessed, they do access these programs.

My informants suggest that their present poverty, marginality, and Dalit status is a result of a recent "fall." Their formerly royal patrons, I was told, no longer remember the old ways; similarly, they no longer remember, or patronize, their bards who keep the old ways alive. I learned over a period of years, however, that there is more to this story. I do not wish to give away too many details of a mystery that will be explored in the book's opening chapters, so I will simply say that my informants' caste identity, which hinges on the connection between elite bards termed Bhats and my own Rajasthan informants who also refer to themselves as Bhats, is complex and slippery. Also, as readers will see, my informants render this connection more complex through their deliberate deceptions, often claiming affinities and suggesting relations that do not exist.

In examining Bhat lives here, I hope to illuminate the resilience of South Asia's famous system of inequality, often glossed as "caste." I will argue that despite all the bewildering changes in the cities they now inhabit, Bhats continue to conceptualize their own identity around a notion of patronage and thus around the interconnection of patron and client castes. Bhats are most comfortable and successful when they are able to position themselves as clients of the economically and politically powerful, be they village landlords in a crumbling rural economy termed *jajmani* or modern hoteliers and bank managers who now also employ these informants.

Given the importance of relations of patronage to Bhat identity, this book draws heavily on the ideas of A. M. Hocart and the so-called neo-Hocartians, who argue that caste is best conceptualized as a social system organized around kings and patrons who protect and support dependent service communities. Though these ideas help to illuminate the logic of Bhat social relations in modern Rajasthan, my informants do not readily grant superiority or social centrality to the patrons who support them economically and protect them politically. Rather, Bhats argue that they possess a power over language, as well as a general bardic knowledge and cunning, that render them superior to their

patrons, whom they educate and also manipulate and control. In the past, kings were in part made or "cast" by skillful bards, much as a sculptor might mold or cast a work of art in plaster or wax, or as a director might cast actors by allocating roles in a play or a film. In the process, kings obtained their royal "caste"—that is, their status, their ranking, and their position in society. Bhats currently argue that they continue to do so for their village and urban patrons.

In focusing on the roles and perspectives of bardic clients as opposed to those of kingly patrons, I hope to illuminate the poetic, imaginative, and thus radically contingent nature of contemporary caste relations. Bhats understand how social hierarchies can be imaginatively constructed and deconstructed and thus how those hierarchies would seem to be inventions of a kind. Indeed, such self-consciousness lies at the heart of the Bhats' traditional bardic profession and continues to form the basis for my informants' claims to status and dignity in contemporary India.

Further, I hope to show how the Bhats' sophisticated take on the art of representation, though couched in my informants' distinctive poetic and narrative registers, is akin to poststructuralist insights into the "play" of language and identity. In drawing parallels between my own informants and western philosophers of language, I hope to bestow agency and further dignity on these Bhat informants. Though socially subordinate in many ways, Bhats are not simply oppressed victims of a traditional system of inequality that marginalizes them. Rather, their poetic ingenuity fills their lives with what seems at times like limitless power and possibility.

The Bhats, a community on the move, are energetically remaking themselves in pre- and postindependence India. This book further argues that changes in colonial and postcolonial India, such as the decline of elite bardic communities, the reconfiguration of gift economies, and the rise of tourism, provide opportunities for Bhats to refashion their caste identity. Conversely, I also hope to show how the Bhats' bardic heritage, as a repertoire of narrative and poetic skills as well as general cunning honed in older patronage contexts, allows Bhats effectively to exploit the new economic niches opened up by these diverse changes. *Casting Kings*'s central argument, then, is partly a historical one. Nevertheless, the book is primarily ethnographic and thus firmly rooted in the present. It is most interested in documenting the manner in which Bhats apply old skills in new ways and, in the process, transform these old skills.

Bhats are skillful players who pride themselves, both as individuals and as a community, on their ability to manipulate both story and people. As the reader will see in the opening chapters, they effectively played me, particularly in the context of narrating their community's caste history. I do treat some Bhat histories as being truer than others. And I feel strongly that I got to the bottom of many Bhat deceptions. This feeling is based largely on the fact that my most trusted older informants, who were considered by other Bhats to

possess authoritative knowledge of the past and who became over time my close friends, eventually opened up to me and revealed previously hidden details from their past. Nevertheless, there was rarely consensus among Bhats on any topic. In Bhat caste histories in particular, there remained inconsistencies from telling to telling that I never managed to resolve to my complete satisfaction.

In this book, then, I hope to provide readers with insights into the lives of members of a fascinating community of paid praise-singers and storytellers. I share with readers my knowledge of the Bhat community, which has been painstakingly acquired over more than three years of ethnographic research spanning more than a decade. Still, given Bhat pride in their cunning, as well as my informants' penchant for spinning compelling though not always true tales, the reader should exert a degree of caution and treat each detail presented in the following pages as partial, and thus open to further elaboration and interpretation.

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Bansi Lal Bhat and Narayan Bhat, two unique individuals and my most important informants. Narayan died in 1995 at about age sixty-two (older Bhats did not generally know their exact age), just after I had completed my dissertation research in Rajasthan and returned to the United States. He was said to have silently keeled over while sipping tea. Bansi Lal died in 2003, at the age of sixty-five or so, of complications brought on by liver failure. The deaths of these two men, who provided many of the stories and poems discussed in this book, represent a tremendous loss to the Bhats and especially to the Bhats of Udaipur. The Bhat community will of course survive, but I hope its members continue to appreciate, as did Bansi Lal and Narayan, the value of bardic knowledge in the contemporary world.

I would also like to thank the many Bhats who welcomed me into their homes and taught me so much about Rajasthan and also about life. In the Rajasthani town of Udaipur, I especially appreciate the help of Bansi Lal's wife, Bedami, as well as this family's five daughters, Gita, Kamla, Kosila, Santos, and Krisna. In addition, I thank, in no particular order, Kalni Lal (Gita's husband), Sarma (Kosila's husband), four incredibly ingenious and resilient Bhat brothers (from oldest to youngest), Bamla, Sarvan, Krisan, and Babu Lal, Mansu (Narayan's young wife), Amba Lal (Narayan's son by a first marriage to Mansu's sister), the brothers Hari Lal and Prem, as well as Kamla Bai and her son Beni Lal. In the city of Jaipur, I gratefully acknowledge the support and friendship of Mulcen (another husband of one of my Bhat sisters, Kamla, mentioned previously), as

well as Santos Bai, Panna Lal, Ramu (Bansi Lal's "cousin-brother"), Guljar, Dilip, Babu Lal, and Harji. Of course, thanks go not only to these individuals but also to their families as well as to the many other unmentioned Bhats who contributed to this project in so many important ways. Your warmth and generosity of spirit will remain with me forever.

I wish to thank especially Sri Komal Kothari, the founder and director of the Rajasthan Institute of Folklore located in Borunda village near the Rajasthani city of Jodhpur, for teaching me so much about Bhat history and identity. Komalda, as he was known to his friends and relatives, passed away in 2004. Some of his thoughts on Rajasthan, however, have been captured in a 2003 book, *Rajasthan: An Oral History, Conversations with Komal Kothari*, which I highly recommend. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of several other scholars who facilitated my research in India, namely Dr. O. P. Joshi, a folklorist at the Officers' Training College in Jaipur, Drs. N. K. Bhargava and Mohan Advani of the Department of Sociology in Udaipur's Mohan Lal Sukhadia University, and also Dr. Yuvraj Singh Jhala, now a professor and principal at Udaipur's Bhupal Nobles' P. G. College. I cannot even begin to express my gratitude to these generous and talented individuals, who gave so fully of their time and expertise.

The American Institute of Indian Studies (Chicago and Delhi) funded the dissertation research upon which this book is based. In addition, I have benefited from the financial support of the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of California San Diego, the Izaak Walton Killam Foundation of the University of Alberta, and Colorado State University. Without the funds provided by these institutions, the research and writing leading up to this book would never have been completed.

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I am also deeply indebted to my mentors in the United States. First, special thanks go to my dissertation advisor, Michael Meeker, whose ideas and influence are present on virtually every page of this book, and to F. G. Bailey, my co-advisor, for teaching me the craft of anthropology. Thank you Michael and Freddy for all your wisdom and guidance, as well as for your illuminating insights into Bhat culture.

In addition, I acknowledge the stimulating environment provided by the Department of Anthropology, the University of California, San Diego. I especially appreciate the mentoring provided by this department's many talented faculty members, such as Roy D'Andrade, David Jordan, Bob Levy, Tanya Luhrmann, and Mel Spiro; their psychological theories of culture have influenced

my thinking in ways that are only now becoming evident to me. Likewise, I benefited from conversations with my friends and fellow graduate students at UCSD, some of whom remain close friends to this day. Deserving special mention are Axel Aubrun, Rolf Belgum, Sharla Blank, Andy Brown, Tom Brown, Brendan Cooney, Gary Dmytryk, George Ericksen, Marysia Galbraith, Jon Guice, Kris Jansen, and Jordan Martin.

I am extremely grateful to Jean DeBernardi and the Department of Anthropology, the University of Alberta, for providing much needed warmth during my years in Canada as a postdoctoral research fellow. It was during these years that this book's central arguments gelled in my mind. For this I thank all my friends and colleagues up north—Jean especially, but also two Chairs, David Lubell and Nancy Lovell, friends such as Hugh and Sarah McKenzie, and many others.

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I wish to express special gratitude to Ann Grodzins Gold. Not having been trained in one of the large centers of South Asian studies in the United States, I have often felt like an outsider to the field of Indian studies. Ann, however, has provided informal post-PhD mentoring, offering me not only gentle guidance, but also applause, when I have most needed it. Ann, thank you for your scholarship as well as for your graciousness and generosity.

In addition to these mentors and colleagues, I thank the many scholars of South Asia who have inspired this book's ideas and arguments. I am thinking particularly of the so-called neo-Hocartians, such as Nicholas Dirks, Gloria Raheja, and Jonathan Parry, whose ideas I engage in the chapters to come. Christopher Fuller's writings on caste and the *jajmani* patron–client economy also have helped me to place my ideas on the Bhats in a broader context. And Denis Vidal's research has illuminated for me the roles and statuses of elite bards in Rajasthan's colonial period.

I greatly appreciate the work of the editors of the various journals in which my work has appeared over the years. In particular I would single out Ann Anagnost (*Cultural Anthropology*), Susan Bayly and James Carrier (*Journal of*

the Royal Anthropological Institute), Carol Greenhouse (*American Ethnologist*), and Don Kulick and Willie Ostberg (*Ethnos*) for their seemingly tireless engagement with my manuscripts. I cannot even begin to express how impressed I have been with these editors' commitment to scholarship and academic excellence. Likewise, I have benefited from many anonymous reviewers of my writings, who have given so generously of their time and expertise, in some cases leaving me speechless, and at first a little perturbed, with up to seven single-spaced pages of comments on an article barely twice that length. Thank you all; your energy and ideas have allowed me to refine my prose and my arguments and have thus greatly enhanced the quality of this book. Special thanks go to the publishers of *Ethnos* and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, respectively, Taylor and Francis (http://www.tandf.co.uk) and Blackwell Publishing (http://www.blackwellpublishing.com), for graciously allowing me to reproduce previously published material.

I particularly thank Cynthia Read for her calm and patient guidance and sensible advice, which were offered throughout all stages of the publication process at Oxford. Cynthia, thank you for seeing, and then rediscovering, promise in this book on the Bhats. I am indebted also to Theo Calderara, Brian Hughes, Robert Milks, Julia TerMaat, and other Oxford editorial staff for the professional and meticulous manner in which they have completed the multiple tasks related to the production of this book. I should also mention that I have greatly benefited from the responses of this book's reviewers. The feedback of William Sax has been particularly helpful, and his many useful and penetrating comments have been directly incorporated into the text without further acknowledgment.

An Acknowledgments section would not be complete without some reference to the friends and family who have supported and sustained me over the years. I owe a special debt to my grandparents, Mary Belle and Walter Gore, who taught me the value of tradition and provided me and my brothers with needed stability. Thank you for Bastrop as well as for everything else that went along with life in this small Texas town. I am also forever indebted to my mother, Mary Kathryn, for making me always feel unconditionally loved and supported. Kay, or Katie, as her friends called her, is no longer with us in body, but she still feels close in spirit. Likewise, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my father, Edward Leslie, for all that his continued presence in my life has meant over the years. I would also thank my stepfather, Billie Gene Caves, for, among other things, knowing the value of an education, and particularly of a McCallie high school education. My love and gratitude go to my brothers, John and Tom, as well as to their families (and especially Jennifer), for always warmly welcoming me back to the United States after my travels and for listening with attention and humor to my stories when and if I was ready to recount them. I am also indebted to Véronique Pache for love, companionship, and intellectual stimulation during our years together in India.

I wish to thank Ann Russ for, among many other things, her careful and thoughtful readings of almost everything I have written since the completion of my PhD. Thanks too go to Todd Shimoda, for billiards, for reminding me that science is art, and for allowing me to dream of a screenplay featuring Bhat characters (that still may happen). My gratitude also goes to Phil and Kris Cafaro for their warmth and friendship here in Fort Collins. I especially appreciate Phil's outsider perspective on the anthropological enterprise and love of old-school ethnography, as well as his wager, which I lost, but which nevertheless helped me to stay motivated in the final stages of this book's completion. Thanks also go to Joe Grady and Axel Aubrun, as well as to their consulting firm, *Cultural Logic* (http://www.culturallogic.com/), for doing research that matters and for providing me with opportunities in the United States to hone my anthropological skills. I also thank a handful of old friends who go way back, Mark Cleaveland, Glenn Etter, and Kip Soteres, for giving my life some semblance of emotional and intellectual continuity.

Finally, many people over the years have also stood in the way of this project's completion, a point that I have never seen acknowledged or spoken of in any scholarly book. In deference to the Bhat tradition of insult-singing, I briefly considered listing all such persons in a final "in spite of" paragraph. In respect to Bhat wit and common sense, however, as well as to the difficulty of clearly distinguishing friend from foe, I have chosen to stick with the gratitude and praise. I will thus leave this act of bravado, and of potential foolishness, to some future author.

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Note on Language and Texts

In 2004 Rajasthani was recognized by the State Assembly as an official Indian language rather than as a mere dialect of Hindi. Recognition is still pending, however, from the government of India and the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Some linguists, such as Lakhan Gusain, who is involved in writing various Rajasthani pedagogical grammars, delineate eight major regional dialects in Rajasthan—Bagri, Dhundhari, Harauti, Mewari, Mewati, Marwari, Shekhawati, and Wagri. Still, as other linguists such as David Magier remind us, Indian languages are said to change every four *kos*, or eight miles, and Rajasthani is no exception. Thus there being "eight" dialects is somewhat illusory, given the manner in which they shade into each other in border areas. There is also a rich Rajasthani literature, much of it composed by bards beginning around 1050 A.D., which is taught at the university level. This literature is written in a number of archaic dialects, Dingal and Middle Marwari among them. There have been several attempts to standardize Rajasthani, in some cases on the basis of the Marwari dialect, which is widely spoken in western Rajasthan. It is still an open question, however, as to how much standardization has actually taken place—be it in spoken, written, or broadcast Rajasthani.

Since Bhats originated primarily from the district of Nagaur in western Rajasthan, their first language is Marwari. Still, many of my Bhat informants have for many years been living part-time in the cities of Jaipur and Udaipur. They have thus picked up the dialects of those two regions, Dhundari (Jaipur) and Mewari (Udaipur), which they combine with their Marwari. Exposure to television, cin-

ema, and the speech of educated elites in these urban contexts, as well as the fact that Hindi functions in many of Rajasthan's cities as a general lingua franca, has also allowed Bhats to master spoken Hindi. Also some younger Bhats read Hindi in school, though they typically do not study past the primary level. (Most older Bhats are illiterate.) Many Bhats, then, adults and children alike, speak Hindi comfortably; in some cases it has even become their principal spoken language. They also blend Hindi with their Rajasthani, according to the context and the audience. By contrast, Bhats speak little or no English, though they sometimes sprinkle their speech with English terms picked up from the Indian cinema or from tourists.

Typically, I spoke to my informants in standard Hindi, and they spoke to me either in Hindi or in their distinctive Hindi-Rajasthani blend. By the end of my fieldwork, I could understand the gist of most conversations in Rajasthani, though I did not speak this language's dialects. Early on, Bhats would frequently speak in "pure" Marwari in my presence when they did not want me to understand what they were saying. As my language skills improved, however, they shifted to what they call "Parsi." This is not Persian, but rather a dialect invented by Bhats that only members of their community speak.

Bhat poems, which appear throughout this book, were for the most part collected in my informants' homes. Some, however, were witnessed on ritual occasions, such as patrons' weddings at which Bhats performed. The poems are composed in a mixture of Hindi and Rajasthani, with a sprinkling, I was told, of the archaic Dingal dialect. The poet would recite the poem and then explain his or her basic point, with others in the audience providing further insights and commentary. At that point I would have the poet repeat the poem while I transcribed it with the help of Bhat children. If there were parts that I still did not understand after consultations with Bhats, then I would consult dictionaries or outsiders to the Bhat community, such as my landlord and friend, Mr. Devendra Sharma, or folklorists such as Sri Komal Kothari or Dr. O. P. Joshi. English translations, based on Bhat interpretations of their poetry, are found in the main text of this book. Indian language equivalents are in the Appendix.

Stories were collected in a different manner. I would first listen to the tale, which was usually narrated for my benefit and entertainment over lunch in an informant's home. Others in the community, having heard the story many times, would offer commentary. The narrator would then ask me what the story meant and what I thought of it. On the basis of my answer, the storyteller would elaborate, or not, on those portions he or she thought I had misunderstood. The narrator would then tell the same story a second time (or a third), slowly repeating and explaining unfamiliar vocabulary, while I took down each sentence in an English-Hindi shorthand. In most cases I would then be asked to retell the story to the audience, and I would be congratulated or criticized for my performance. On returning to my home, which was a short distance

away, I would write out the entire story, translating from my shorthand into English. In a few cases I would tape-record difficult stories so that I could translate them at my leisure and with the help of specialists. Sometimes I glossed Hindi words into English too quickly, losing the original and thus also losing my ability to reinterpret the stories as my appreciation for local language grew. Because my transcriptions and translations were never exact, I have felt justified in further editing these stories from my memory, and in some cases condensing or expanding them in order to enhance clarity and readability.

Since I rarely tape-recorded my conversations with Bhats, direct quotes found in this book should be viewed in the same manner as Bhat narratives. I would typically write down an imprecise, on-the-spot gloss or paraphrase in my notebooks, partly in Hindi-Rajasthani and partly in English, and then later standardize it into a "quote" in my Jaipur and Udaipur residences. Such a style was less obtrusive than a tape recorder and thus allowed me to better capture the subversive commentary that was characteristic of almost all of my conversations with Bhats.

I have chosen to render most Indian terms in Hindi rather than in Rajasthani. Doing this allows specialist scholars working in other parts of Rajasthan or India to recognize more readily the terms Bhats employ. Also, as I have mentioned, I did not meticulously transcribe recorded texts in local Rajasthani dialects in the way some folklorists and other scholars are known to do. Nor did I generally hire research assistants to do so. In addition, I do not feel that my ear was always capable of capturing the nuances of Bhat pronunciation of local terms. Furthermore, capturing the exact flavor of Bhat speech was made more difficult by the fact that Bhat speech—in its peculiar mixing of Hindi and Rajasthani, with the occasional English and "Parsi" phrase—seemed so often to deviate from standard forms. Indeed, most Bhats I knew had their own idiosyncratic pronunciation, depending on their education as well as on how many years they had been in their new urban homes and how widely traveled they were. Also, most Bhats rarely spoke to me in any singular dialect or even in any standard Bhat form of speech. Rather, they used a form of speech, part Hindi and part Rajasthani, that they thought I would understand. As a result, it is not clear whether careful transcriptions of their exact words, even if I were capable of capturing them, would have served the interests of any scholar other than myself. Poems are generally presented exactly as I encountered them. Still, the reader should note that Bhats generally recited these to me in a mix of Hindi and Rajasthani, though usually in a way that did not compromise these verses' rhyme and rhythm.

In addition, I transliterate Indian terms in a simplified Roman script. I do note aspirated consonants, which are followed by an /h/. However, I do not employ diacritics to distinguish between, for example, long and short vowels or retroflex and dental consonants. I have chosen this course because this book is aimed partly at an undergraduate and nonspecialist audience, who tends to

find diacritics distracting. This simplified system will allow for approximate pronunciation of Indian terms. Specialists, on the other hand, often do not need the cues provided by diacritical marks, especially in the case of relatively common Indian terms. In addition, the difficulties mentioned here render any attempt at accurate reproduction of my informants' speech, as a community or as individuals, problematic at best.

Indian terms, with the exception of proper nouns, are italicized. Caste names are capitalized only when they refer to the community itself and not when they refer to the profession associated with that community. Thus, "Bhat" and "Bard" could refer to my informants' caste community, but "*bhat*" and "bard" would refer to their work as praise-singers and genealogists. I pluralize Hindi-Rajasthani words by adding an /s/ to the end of the term. In some cases I deviate from these simplified conventions, such as when representing terms or names that are customarily written in a certain way by scholars, or when quoting authors who employ other systems of transliteration. Note that /c/ is pronounced /ch/.

Numbers in parentheses after the Bhat poems quoted as epigraphs at the beginnings of chapters refer to the poem number, which corresponds to Hindi equivalents in the appendix.

Sources

This book draws in part on three of my previously published articles:

"Beware of Charitable Souls: Contagion, Roguish Ghosts and the Poison(s) of Hindu Alms." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s) 7(4) (December 2001): 687–703.

"The Center Cannot Hold: Tales of Hierarchy and Poetic Composition from Modern Rajasthan." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.) 10(2) (June 2004): 261–285.

"The Future Is Not Ours to See: Puppetry and Modernity in Rajasthan." *Ethnos* 69(1) (March 2004): 63–88.

These articles have been abridged in some places and expanded in others, in order to mesh better with the arguments presented in this book. Still, much of the original text has been left unchanged.

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