Surrogate Surfaces, Day 1

A broadcast by Surfatial, the collective of Satya Gummuluri, Malavika Rajnarayan and me, 9 December 2014. Watch on YouTube

---

I made this transcript by machine from the recording and corrected it against the recording's description and my own records. I have not checked the words by ear. I checked a sample of the speaker names by ear, and corrected those I heard differently. [?] marks a word still in doubt and [unclear] a passage that could not be made out. A speaker is named only where the broadcast's screen or the recording's own words say who is speaking. Fillers such as "uh" and "um" are left out. Times are from the start of the recording.

A name followed by (?) was read from the screen at a moment when it changed from one speaker to the next, so the turn may belong partly or wholly to the speaker before or after.

Prayas Abhinav · prayasabhinav.net/videos

00:16 AUTOMATED VOICE It's nine o'clock. It's nine o'clock.

00:22 PRAYAS It's nine, and we start our Surrogate Surfaces study group at this point. so our starting question for tonight is if we are so engrossed in our own acts, then what is the source of our anxiety and impatience? If as actors, we are if we consider ourselves as actors, as if we consider ourselves as actor—

01:05 ...troubling us? Because our notions of trouble and kind of self-conscious anxiety arise from ideas of authenticity and of ideas of original narrative, or of responsibility. But if we are considering ourselves as actors, where— what do we place the source of our anxiety on?

01:50 So, Nu Paradox says "on our existential plight." Would you like to expand?

02:03 NU PARADOX Are you asking me, Prayas?

02:06 PRAYAS Yeah. I was wondering if you could expand what do you— what are you pointing towards?

02:13 NU PARADOX Because what we ought to do with our time is not clear yet. I mean, everyone has their own notions about what one ought to do. so I think most of the anxiety would come from there and partly because of it not unfolding according to plan shortcomings. There are many things, really. It can't be summed up in just one statement saying this is the cause.

02:44 PRAYAS Yeah. So, but as— I mean, but as actors, we don't need to think about what to— what to do with our time.

02:55 NU PARADOX We need to play a role, if you— if you look at us as actors. We are all playing parts. What part do we play?

03:02 PRAYAS So, are we determining our own part?

03:05 NU PARADOX Are we? Is that a question? I mean.. Aren't we?

03:12 SATYA I think it takes a certain amount of awareness to be able to do that.

03:19 PRAYAS Right. Awareness towards what?

03:23 SATYA Towards the medium, towards the circumstances. I mean, I think many people are just happy to be playing roles you know. To— to come up with your own role, it's like, where do you fit in? There's a play going on and where do you fit in? So what role are you playing? So it takes a certain amount of awareness to come up with one's role, is what I was thinking.

03:52 PRAYAS Right. But let's say we think I mean let's say we don't separate the two kinds of acts: the kind of act which we have constructed ourselves, and the kind of act which has been constructed for us. Because, I mean, I mean, I personally, so I don't see these two acts differing

from each other. Right? So, once a construct is a construct, it's a construct. So, we don't really need to know whether we made it— we came upon it ourselves, or it was subject— I mean, you know, it was it's— it's projected on us. So and I mean, what— what I'm wondering is once we are part of a construct do we have to think anymore about what to do? Does it— do we basically just follow the— the, you know, the logic of what the construct dictates and demands?

05:09 I mean, what of— what of those who question the script itself?

05:16 SATYA (?) So, where is the script? What's the script?

05:20 SATYA (?) The construct that's placed on us. Or it could be the script that we are writing for ourselves.

05:35 I'm sorry, hi everyone, and I'm just jumping in, so I'm sorry if I'm way off context.

05:41 PRAYAS No, we started with this. we started with the— the first question for the day was as actors who are immersed, absorbed in our own acts, how do we explain our anxiety and impatience?

05:58 SATYA Can I ask for a clarification when you say—

05:59 So you are—

06:01 —ac—

06:04 —actor, and who's this collective "we" that you're speaking for in the question?

06:10 PRAYAS So, I'm engaging in an act of projection on— on all of us, and we can basically each of us clarify our own sense of discomfort or— or comfort with that projection. I'm— what I'm projecting is an— is an actor who is who's playing out an who's pa— who's playing out an a logic which is constructed. So either that is in turn projected again on you, or that's constructed by yourself. But there is no moment of individual self-reflection which is in a way not part of the construct.

07:09 LAWRENCE For me, you— you— one word that I want to pick up on, which you had mentioned, is the word authenticity. Because I think in some ways, I mean, if you're talking about prescripted roles that we find ourselves in a way kind of repeating expectations, you know that are— that are there of us, one of the real dangers for me is this question of how does one access one's own authenticity. And I think the paradox is, on the one hand, there is a— a problem very specific to— to our times, which is you can't know anything without knowing everything else. And very often there is this danger, at least if you're looking at, let's say, someone who— an actor in the terms of someone who professes a certain knowledge, of this little double thought in your head. You know, like the Prince Myshkin problem in— in Dostoevsky, where there's a self-torturing questioning of one's own motives, the little voice that you hear even as you speak telling you that you are a fake. So what does it mean to actually, you know, access that authenticity, is the paradox of the actor, because on the one hand the role isn't yours, and yet at the same time there is a struggle to access what you think is your voice.

08:29 PRAYAS (?) Right. And so when you— when— what you point out, what you are— what you are actually opening up for us here, in— in this paradox in this actor's trying to access the authentic voice, which— which has its own mysteries involved, I guess where— what is the source of maybe the discomfort? So where does— where does the— the self-agonizing questioning start? does it start at the point of— of wondering whether there is— what— what is being sought, whether that exists at all, or that anxiety emerges from— you know, where does it emerge from? I mean, I— I really think it's still an open question for us..

09:29 SATYA I think it— it starts with the— where I said, the awareness. You are— you first of all, the actor has become aware, is self-aware that there is— there is third wall— is that what they call it? Fourth wall?

09:43 NU PARADOX Fourth wall, actually.

09:44 SATYA Yeah. So I think the— the very— when there is a self-awareness born, that's when the questioning starts.

09:53 PRAYAS But—

09:54 SATYA Or it could start, it doesn't necessarily start.

09:55 PRAYAS — what's the self? who's the self?

09:58 SATYA The actor.

10:00 And that's where—that's the question, who's the self?

10:04 NU PARADOX Well, Prayas, I think—

10:05 PRAYAS But what the— Yeah.

10:08 NU PARADOX Sorry.

10:10 SATYA I mean, we just spoke about —

10:11 PRAYAS Yeah.

10:12 SATYA You know, that question.

10:13 NU PARADOX (?) I mean, I think the questioning and the agony begins when we realize that experience is not communicable, and language alone will not give you the direct, full experience that one goes through. So I think regardless of what one does—I don't know about what one does—but certainly how one explains oneself to others through ideology, philosophy knowing its limitations triggers the questioning, because you know it's limited

10:50 SATYA But to know that it's limited, you have to be aware, right?

10:51 NU PARADOX And [unclear] the full distance. Sorry?

10:55 SATYA To know that it's limited, you need to be aware that it's limited first of all, because I might have a role which I have assumed, which I don't even know that I have assumed it. I'm just in this role.

11:08 LAWRENCE For me, that's the question of the—the little voice in your head.

11:12 SATYA Yeah.

11:13 LAWRENCE I mean, to take an analogy, it would be if I were, let's say, a theatrical actor, and I had a performance which I know for myself to have been absolutely terrible. There are two ways it can go. On the one hand, it's also deemed terrible by the people who watch it and they hate it, in which case, you know, the—the authenticity of my experience is validated.

11:32 On the other hand, the critics and the audience absolutely love it, but I know that it was absolutely terrible. So how am I going to access that if the—my mode of self-validation is in contrast or in contradiction with, you know, external forms of validation?

11:50 SATYA And that's where the self-validation—I mean, there is that self-critic. I mean, there are times when you do know that your performance actually was really not good, but people—like lot of—lot of famous actors or celebrities, they talk about not loving that song, but it becomes a hit.

12:07 LAWRENCE Mhm.

12:08 SATYA Something like that.

12:13 PRAYAS But Satya, when you—when you mention the self-awareness, I'm in a way still confused about whether you are talking about the actor's awareness of the actor's own act, or the actor's awareness of who the actor is, right? So, I mean, you—so that's where we have the two layers, the—

12:40 SATYA Yeah. I agree.

12:41 PRAYAS (?) So, the—in a way, the broader question for the study group—I mean, what's the relationship between the actor and the act—is—

12:49 SATYA Right.

12:50 PRAYAS So I'm not sure if—what is one being aware towards?

12:57 SATYA I think there's two—both of them, I agree. Like, I mean, I—I guess in this context I was thinking of the actor becoming aware of the act. And therefore through that, to me at least, it

appears once I figure out that I'm acting, or once I realize that I'm acting, then I question: who's acting and who am I?

13:21 PRAYAS But can you do that questioning? Because the—what Lawrence was actually talking about, the little—about the little voice in the head which actually to me would really prevent any total immersion in—

13:43 SATYA Yeah.

13:44 PRAYAS Any act. It would always keep—always maintain a distance

13:49 SATYA Yes.

13:49 PRAYAS Which would manifest as hesitation or as whatever, as—as a kind of friction between, you know, your own—what you think is not your act and what you think is your act. I mean

14:03 SATYA Agreed.

14:04 PRAYAS (?) We can easily think of these as two acts which are superimposed on each other.

14:11 SATYA (?) And I think that's where another layer of awareness can come about, where one can —I don't know— deliberately put oneself in a state of flow, which you know, where you are— where you know you're doing it, but you are not thinking about it or something.

14:35 LAWRENCE But I don't think of—

14:36 SATYA You know, the—the—

14:37 LAWRENCE Hesitation necessarily as some kind of an impediment. Hesitation is an aspect of time. So if you say, take the classical, you know, model of hesitation, which is Hamlet's long delay between, you know, his—his intention and his desire for revenge and his actual acting upon it, is basically, you know, the longest hesitation in the history of theater. But the hesitation is precisely the ethical substance of Hamlet.

15:09 PRAYAS Right, so it slows down the—the movement in the narrative. It slows it down. The hesitation is part of the narrative, it's not an external element.

15:22 Yeah.

15:23 Right? That's what you're saying.

15:27 SATYA (?) It's part of the process of actually creating that act.

15:31 PRAYAS Right. So at the— Right. So at this point, our perspective on the first question seems to be that the actor is really not immersed in the act. So the anxiety is stemming from that lack of immersion, because that lack of immersion is actually part of the act. The act was never designed for being fully immersed into. Is that a kind of good, you know, maybe collapsing down of where we are?

16:02 SATYA (?) I—I— I do agree with the anxiety coming from the friction. From the discomfort, yeah. I mean...

16:20 But there was something I—

16:21 PRAYAS But — Yeah.

16:23 SATYA Sorry. No, go ahead.

16:26 PRAYAS No, so, but the— what Lawrence just added I mean, what I got from it was that the hesitation, the anxiety is actually not—not an external element, it's part of the—part of the act, and it's an internal factor of the act which actually slows down the—the flow of narrative. So —

16:52 SATYA But then are there not those who act without anxiety because they are—they are not aware of—see, I mean, with Hamlet, he's questioning, but there are those who do not question.

17:10 PRAYAS So what are the descriptors of such—I mean, how would we qualify such acts, or maybe description of such—such acts? Is it about the actor, or is it about the act which you know, which doesn't have the questioning, doesn't have the—doesn't involve hesitation, doesn't involve—is it—is it the nature of the act or is it the nature of the actor?

17:44 SATYA It feels like both.

17:51 I mean, it depends on the situation, but it feels like both could be true.

18:01 I mean, if you—if the actor is perfectly—I mean, there is a script in front of the actor, or the actor has internalized the script, or there isn't even a thought about the script, but the actor is acting.

18:16 LAWRENCE So there's one interesting distinction that some people have made, which is the difference between knowing to act—which is, there's a—some kind of a metanormative framework that tells me this is the right way to act—versus acting to know, which is in the absence of a predetermined metanormative framework

18:37 SATYA Right.

18:37 LAWRENCE In the process of the action I determine what the right way to act is. And I think that if you were to look at how we are thinking about hesitation as something that is between the two poles: on the one hand, the hesitation could arise from the simple confusion of not knowing what the right way to act is, and that's a debilitating hesitation; it's a kind of a moral conundrum that you find yourself in. The second one is more productive or generative, in the sense that even in the process of acting, you may not be entirely certain that these are, you know, the reasons for my acting. But yet at the same time, because you are engaged in the act, it produces the reasons for the acting.

19:21 SATYA It's like a bootstrapping, the second one.

19:33 PRAYAS A bootstrapping, in the sense?

19:36 SATYA Like, you know, it's like you are creating your ladder and it starts creating itself. So like Lawrence was saying, the second case: you don't know the map, you're just sort of randomly walking around, but then there are some data points that you pick out and then you look like, "Okay, this looks like the grid that I—could, or the script that I could follow." Some patterns.

20:01 PRAYAS But for me I understand this set of patterns, this knowledge of what to make up, you know, what will suit the act and what will not. I consider this to be the script. I mean, the script is not a static entity, it's maybe more of a more of an algorithmic entity which allows me to generate based on a set of rules.

20:36 SATYA Yeah, which is probably my descriptor as an actor. Like, I am a comedy actor, therefore I have these rules, and that's how I will generate the script.

20:49 PRAYAS So then maybe I didn't fully understand the distinction that Lawrence was trying to draw out between the two kinds of the two kinds of hesitation, the two kinds of you know, the sc- the scripts, or the two kinds of positions that the actor finds himself in.

21:15 LAWRENCE No, so one for me would be, you know, let's say if you were to translate this into the moral domain, you have a prescriptive no- norm, "Thou shall not lie," right? So within Christianity, any—

21:30 PRAYAS Yeah.

21:31 LAWRENCE —act of lying becomes an immoral act. In the Chinese tradition, very often it is moral to lie. But that's not a predetermined rule. So it's not like lying is a morality.

21:46 PRAYAS Okay.

21:47 LAWRENCE Right? So that's a context-specific action.
21:53 Whereas if you have a universal principle—

21:55 PRAYAS Right.

21:56 LAWRENCE —which is—determines, you know, your knowing how to act—
22:01 —that confines you within the judgment of, you know, of the rule, not of the action.

22:13 SATYA Yeah, makes sense.

22:14 PRAYAS Right. So it —

22:17 LAWRENCE Yeah, so very typically, I mean, like the idea of the value does not lie in the principle any longer, it lies in the context of the action. So if your friend asked you, "Oh, does this look good on me?"

22:32 SATYA Right.

22:33 LAWRENCE In the first instance you would have to say, regardless of whether you hurt your friend, "No, it doesn't look good on you." The second one would be determined on the context. Your per- your friend is going through a bad patch, needs some validation, you think it doesn't look good on her, but you say, "Yes, it does look good on you."

22:56 PRAYAS Right.

22:57 LAWRENCE So that's acting to know. Why have you acted in that particular—

22:59 PRAYAS So then and so y-

23:03 SATYA Actually, I understood acting to know in a different manner. I understood acting to know as you don't know what to do, so this thing that occurs to you is, "If I start groping around in the dark, something or the other will occur to me and then I will know what to do." So I'm starting from zero and I don't know what to do, something like that.

23:25 LAWRENCE Yeah.

23:27 Yeah, in ordinary kind of everyday context, that's exactly what I mean it as.

23:32 SATYA Okay.

23:34 PRAYAS So —

23:35 LAWRENCE So, it's a—

23:36 PRAYAS —our second question for the day —

23:41 Yeah, Lawrence, please continue.

23:42 LAWRENCE No, go ahead, go ahead with the second.

23:45 PRAYAS Yeah, so our second question— so we switch questions every 20-odd minutes. So our second question is you know, as actors, if our biggest anxiety is that we is that of breaking our acts—so, in the sense, yeah, not being coherent to the in with respect to the pattern that we are following or whatever other notion of script you're following—then how do we mitigate that? How do—if that is our biggest anxiety, and is to break the act—

24:29 —how do we—

24:29 SATYA (?) So if our biggest anxiety is to break the act, so we are afraid of breaking the act.

24:38 PRAYAS Yeah.

24:39 SATYA Okay, then?

24:42 PRAYAS So we are afraid of breaking our act, or in the in the sense, rendering a kind of image of it which is not you know which is not faithful to its image. So let's say we are afraid of either breaking the act or putting on a bad act, which is the same thing.

25:03 NU PARADOX Right.

25:07 LAWRENCE How are they the same thing?

25:13 Because—

25:14 PRAYAS Because putting on a bad act is not coherent with the idea of the act itself, which is a, you know, it's a perfect cohesive whole, I mean, which is the idea. I mean, so all manifestations of the idea will always be lesser, but there is a—the—but a degree of degeneration is considered breaking the act.

25:42 LAWRENCE No, I think there's a distinction between—

25:43 PRAYAS So there is a—

25:45 LAWRENCE There's a difference between the two. So if you take, for example, let's say—

25:49 —in classical theatre, you have a performance which is scripted, so you have a set of dialogues, right? The rule—the rule is that you remember your dialogue. If you don't remember your dialogue, then you are not—then you're breaking your act. That's very different from your judgment about whether your performance was good. So you can remember all your dialogue and still have a bad performance, and that's a different anxiety.

26:18 PRAYAS But —

26:19 LAWRENCE So I—

26:20 PRAYAS —if you're—if you're remembering your dialogues, but rendering them in a way which is not convincing—

26:28 LAWRENCE Yeah.

26:30 PRAYAS (?) —so you are basically not doing your job.

26:34 LAWRENCE Yeah, but there are two ways of not doing your job. One way of not doing your job is in relation to a qualitative standard, and one is an objective standard of not doing your job because you've not remembered your lines.

26:47 SATYA Not following the script, yeah.

26:50 PRAYAS But I mean, what I'm trying to communicate is that as an actor, the minimum description of my job is that I have to be convincing. So where I am not convincing, I already break the act.

27:08 SATYA (?) We can take that as the baseline for the question.

27:14 PRAYAS I mean, I'm proposing that. I mean I don't know if it's useful, but does it—

27:19 SATYA I feel—I mean, I personally agree.

27:26 Cuz we are talking about the anxiety of—either ways there is an anxiety. "I didn't say my lines according to the script," or secondly, "I didn't act convincingly." Both seem like to me could cause anxiety, right? So we're talking about anxiety caused by not adhering to something.

27:47 NU PARADOX So is choosing not to act the source of our anxiety?

27:57 Meaning—I mean, are we—is that a given that one must act?

28:05 I mean, aside from the theatre example that Lawrence was talking about, we're just talking in general as to we play our parts. But not playing the part—

28:17 PRAYAS Inability to or refusal to play the act, I mean, that would be coming from two places. Either you don't know how to act or what to act as, or you know, but you don't agree, so you refuse. But in the second case, not acting is also an act.

28:44 NU PARADOX Yeah, could be, yes.

28:46 LAWRENCE Yeah, and for me the classical example of this would be Arjun's hesitation before the beginning of the war. Because even though going by, you know, the scripted role which is his kshatriya dharma, he is supposed to participate in the war, the hesitation is mitigated by Krishna's somewhat spurious arguments which in a way doesn't really answer the question that he had posed.

29:17 SATYA Agreed.

29:18 LAWRENCE Which is that, "How can I actually act in a manner which, you know, entails my killing my relatives, my teachers, my friends, et cetera?" Right? And one can—I don't think we have the time to get into the debate on that, but if you were to take that as a model of inaction as action, then the role that Krishna plays there is one of the pedagogue who convinces him about the necessity of the action. But I'm not convinced that was, you know, really in some ways a kind of a conflict between action and inaction. There were two different kinds of acting. And the more morally dubious one won the argument in that case.

30:02 PRAYAS So, my impression or understanding of what Krishna did was in that moment maybe s- a kind of zooming out. So, whereas Arjuna was talking— Arjun was talking about a specific a situation, a context that dealt [unclear] human being and human relationships Krishna chose to anchor the insistence on action to the very macro flows between kar- karma and justice and— and these things which are not essentially... yeah, which make those make action not a human or not a human choice, but more a inevitable...

30:58 LAWRENCE Mm. Yeah.

31:00 PRAYAS You know, instance of flux.

31:02 SATYA It's like Arjuna was overanalyzing and Krishna was like, you know what, he's sort of almost providing the script saying that you have to act, and here's what you have to do. And he does that through a philosophical sort of...

31:22 So in that sense Arjuna was going to the micro, like you were saying, of to the micro details

31:30 LAWRENCE Mm.

31:30 SATYA Which was— which is thinking, and thinking causes inaction. Whereas Krishna, on the other hand, is like here is the excuse and here is the justification for doing such and such things, and those justifications include philosophizing about karma, etc.

31:52 PRAYAS So, as far as the actual war was concerned, the battle was concerned, Lawrence, why do you think [unclear] didn't [unclear] play his role?

32:05 LAWRENCE Because—

32:06 PRAYAS I mean, he got him to do what he wanted.

32:09 LAWRENCE Yeah, I mean, so there are two kinds of you know, arguments that are— are presented, right? I mean, and in— in— in philosophy you would distinguish them between, you know, the consequentialist and the deontological. Except that it appears to be two competing ideas of consequentialism, right? So, if you were to take the idea that is espoused, namely that there is a larger macro kind of perspective, whether it is on— on— on transmigration of souls or it is on the idea of time, both of them are claims or appeals to a certain kind of a— a reason. Now, you could say that in the Gita the big debate is not really about how to think about, you know, some meta-norm, but really about how to think about acting itself, right?

32:58 SATYA Yeah. Yeah.

32:59 LAWRENCE Or a certain kind of a, you know, a knowledge that arises from— from— from action. In that sense, there is no disagreement. But if you say in terms of just the— the— the quality of the argument between the two, they appear to me as being a goading towards action which is at the end of the day based on a consequentialism.

33:29 PRAYAS So consequentialism is an— an adherence towards the outcome, and not the— the— the— the process which takes you there, towards that outcome. Is it?

33:44 SATYA I feel like it's the agenda. I feel like Krishna came with the agenda.

33:49 PRAYAS So the— yeah, the— so the agenda that insists, I mean, that is more concerned about the— the outcome.

34:00 SATYA Right.

34:01 NU PARADOX Has morality any place in this at all? Or did anyone think about good or evil at all? Of course it was about good and evil, wasn't it? I mean, that's what I was made to believe, actually.

34:12 SATYA (?) I mean, I feel like it's the morality of a specific person, such as Krishna. It was Krishna's version of morality.

34:26 NU PARADOX So, Lawrence, could you perhaps elaborate on consequentialism? I mean, you said there are two—

34:34 LAWRENCE So, I mean, the— the basic logic behind consequentialism is a— a concern for the literally the consequences of one's actions, right? And that forms in a way the— the— the— the guidelines of determining morality in terms of, you know, rightful or wrongful—

34:54 NU PARADOX So, just the action.

34:56 LAWRENCE Con- yeah, conduct.

35:00 Now, this is very different from, let's say, the— the other school, which is the, you know, deontological, which basically says that you have a principle that determines in advance the morality of your action.

35:15 NU PARADOX So let— let's not worry about that, let's just act.

35:19 LAWRENCE Yeah, so I mean, like, the— one, it would seem like, you know, it's like one is to say that, okay as a principle life is sacred, so taking anyone's life is you know, immoral, right? Now, if you have that, then the question is how can anyone act then in a— in a situation of war? Now contrast that is the consequentialism argument. Very often, I mean, it seems as though the — the— in— in— in the Gita, the debate about, you know, urging Arjun to act pits it against some a priori claim, right? So, I mean, Krishna's revelation of the universe in his mouth, at the end of the day the argument ends there because he is the universe.

36:01 NU PARADOX Right. There's no— yeah, you can't— then it's an infinite regress. You can't question Krishna.

36:06 LAWRENCE Yeah.

36:08 NU PARADOX Okay.

36:11 PRAYAS But is— is Arjun breaking his own act when he is, in fact listening to Krishna? Or i- i- is it a kind of progression or extension of his act when he kind of agrees to not argue?

36:39 SATYA It feels like it's a question now of going against one's nature. If this is— if I'm an introvert and I am now supposed to— I'm put into an extroverted corporate situation, I have to step out of my introversion somehow. And I have to put on this act. So in that sense, your question to me sounded like he is sort of putting on an act and agreeing to do something.

37:09 LAWRENCE I mean, what you're describing as the introvert, I would take that and I would say, if we were to also think of it as a certain kind of an— a— a privation, right? Which is that any dilemma about the right action, in terms of, you know, whether this is right or wrong, is always pitted against some idea of either an interiority or an exteriority. In this case, the dilemma was an interior one. How am I, specifically me, Arjun, to act in this situation if I— my hands are quivering, you know, my lips are shaking, and I can't, you know, find myself? The reason being there is a reason that is coming from my interiority.

37:54 SATYA Right.

37:55 LAWRENCE You are giving me an entire bunch of arguments about why that should not matter, because there is a larger world in terms of a normative world, in which my own self-doubt is inconsequential. It's inconsequential either because it's misguided or that there is a better truth out there.

38:13 SATYA But then maybe I am right, though.

38:16 LAWRENCE No, absolutely.

38:17 SATYA Why— yeah.

38:18 LAWRENCE Abs— but that's— but that— that is really the— the— the question, right? At what point do you determine, you know, like Nora walking out in the last scene of The Doll's House — in Ibsen's Doll's House, her line is, "I need to know for myself who is right, the world or I."

38:38 SATYA Right.

38:40 LAWRENCE Right? And in her case, she goes out of the scripted role that she has of being the housewife and the little pigeon or the little sparrow

38:48 SATYA Right.

38:49 LAWRENCE And says that I need to validate this for myself.

38:51 SATYA Right.

38:52 LAWRENCE In the Gita, Arjun accepts the external validation.

38:56 SATYA Correct. He didn't have a chance to act out what he—

38:59 LAWRENCE Yeah.

39:00 SATYA (?) Maybe— we don't know, though. I— I don't know Arjuna's mind, so yeah, but I see what you're saying, yeah.

39:05 LAWRENCE But textually, yeah.

39:10 PRAYAS But as far as we are observing the acting of Arjuna do we consider his transition, or his— the change in his act do we consider that yeah, you know, a change in the act itself, or do we — so basically the act is one and the act changed because of interaction with another actor, essentially, or do we think of it a break in one act and a resumption of another?

39:48 LAWRENCE It's certainly the latter for me.

39:52 PRAYAS So it— it— there is a— so you are saying that there is a possibility of a— of a break in an act.

40:00 So it doesn't there is no unitary envelope within which all the transitions and movements happen, but there is more of a casebook where different fragments are kind of latching onto the same actor, but they don't need to be included in the same envelope necessarily.

40:21 NU PARADOX I think the stimuli, what triggers a certain action, may differ. However, the actor —the act would be the actor's, essentially. The act would not break. What triggers, what determines how one would act, would keep changing. Meaning the influences may vary and change. You may not be the sole driver of the act itself, but the act remains intact, I would think. I would think. That's just my opinion, though. Can't back it with certain examples or facts.

40:53 SATYA But then what you're saying is that there is an overarching—it sounds to me that it's— there's an overarching envelope. And the actors are within that envelope.

41:06 PRAYAS I mean, that is the basic yeah let's say, a question for me, which I—I don't really know whether the act has a unified envelope or are we— or it—it is a bunch of fragments, and it doesn't have any unity.

41:30 I think we should further define what an action is, really.

41:41 So that—that brings us to the third trigger for the day and which is I—I think in a way extending what we are talking about currently. It's, if our supposed agency exists only to help us be more convincing as actors, and then—and if this agency can never be exercised...

42:12 So as—as actors we have to essentially—if we—if—if we have to be essentially within our envelope, then the— the only agency we have is to...

42:33 Ensure how elegantly we remain inside the envelope.

42:44 SATYA What is agency? Is it the script, or is it our own engine that drives us?

42:56 PRAYAS Yeah, it's the—it's the imagining of the actor's ability to go outside the script and make decisions. So for— for example, what we were just talking about, I would consider Arjuna's ability to—or abil—ability or authority to break his act and listen to Krishna and resume another act to be a kind of agency which leaps outside the limitations of the script. And so —so basically this trigger that we just read, I mean it's basically voicing out the—

43:40 LAWRENCE No, but Prayas, in the text—if you go in the text—the... it would be the reverse for me, because the script that is given is that the world's greatest warrior has to engage in battle. The agency for me is the moment of hesitation, when he's acting out of script, and saying, "I don't want to be a warrior." So he's being brought back into the script. So I'm not sure how you're reading his agreement with Krishna and to engage in battle as agency, then.

44:13 SATYA (?) But it does take a certain amount of self-awareness to realize that this is what I want to do, but this is what is being asked of me; therefore, I will go and do what is being asked of me.

44:26 LAWRENCE That is dependent, then, not—

44:28 SATYA (?) Yeah, I mean, I—I'm—

44:30 LAWRENCE —on the judgment of the action per se, as much as how you evaluate the self-knowledge that arises. I'm not saying that, you know, the—the—the ability to be convinced by someone does not count as action. That is also obviously an— a kind of an active act on your part. But what is that transformation in terms of self-knowledge that is required for you to recognize your action then as your own, which is the agency question?

45:03 SATYA So what is the transformation in the self that has to happen? Is that what you said?

45:08 LAWRENCE Yeah.

45:09 SATYA Mm. And that again, it comes to—

45:14 PRAYAS So, but —

45:15 SATYA —like an awareness.

45:16 LAWRENCE So—so it has to be based on the idea or a moment of recognizing that Krishna is not right because he's generally right.

45:27 SATYA Right.

45:28 LAWRENCE Krishna is right because he is right for me.

45:32 SATYA At the moment, and I—I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do, so I could just do this.

45:37 Yeah.

45:38 NU PARADOX But if—if—if we begin with "Krishna is not right because he's generally right," how do we know he's right this time round, and especially for me?

45:47 LAWRENCE No, that's the thing. So that—that for me is the moment of the self-transformation or the self-knowledge. There is no objective criteria by which one can determine whether he is right.

45:56 NU PARADOX Correct.

45:57 SATYA Correct.

45:59 NU PARADOX So it's all subjective then, I mean. Because how else [unclear]

46:07 PRAYAS I'm not really—

46:09 NU PARADOX —right for you?

46:11 PRAYAS Yeah, I'm not sure if I'm actually [unclear] this through. If—if an—if an actor in a construction that I have modeled—if this actor goes and has a conversation with another actor, and both are actually—both are following their script up till this point, but because of this conversation, this actor, in my perspective, doesn't really have the choice to change the parameters of the script and do something which breaks the construction even. I mean —

47:01 —the only potential—I mean, yeah, the—the only potential which I would see is that I could use the conversation as a transition point in my construction, but the construction always remains coherent, and in that sense, the envelope of the act—the envelope of—of the act as far as the actor is concerned, is continuous. There is no break in the act.

47:31 SATYA So you're saying even the break is contained within the act? It's like a transition.

47:35 PRAYAS I mean, yeah, it's just the nature of the act. It's... Yeah, it's a point of transition. It's a—

47:43 SATYA Yeah.

47:43 PRAYAS —it's a—it's a narrative — you know, it's a—it's a dis—it's a turn in the narrative, which is logically, let's say, explained by circumstances happening in the construction, like this conversation.

48:11 SATYA And the question was, how does that transformation happen? Or have we passed that?

48:17 PRAYAS Yeah. Yeah. no, so I—I'm not really sure how we can view either one or the other as break—as a break in the act. So either of —I don't know how we can see Arjuna's hesitation to engage in the war as a break, or his being convinced again by Krishna and then going on and fighting the war as a break, which was something, yeah, which I saw as a break earlier. But maybe neither of them can actually be seen as a break because —

49:00 —that's just the narrative's way of turning.

49:03 SATYA (?) Yeah, that's right. Like, that had to happen—Arjuna had to reach that point to evolve to whatever his next state is.

49:12 PRAYAS Or at least appear to evolve.

49:14 SATYA Right.

49:15 PRAYAS I mean, we don't really know if—if there is any change in the person. We just know that's the way it plays out.

49:21 SATYA There's a change in the act, yeah.

49:24 LAWRENCE Well, I mean, if you looked at the, let's say, the logical consequences of his hesitation, and you had a situation where he drops his weapons and he walks off the battlefield and that's the end of the Mahabharat you would have a very different Mahabharat.

49:42 SATYA Yeah.

49:44 LAWRENCE And so that for me is a very significant break. It's not pre-scripted at all.

49:50 SATYA But that's where I'm saying there is an agenda where the actual script is that it is a transformation and not a break. There is no option for Krish— Arjuna to have walked off.
50:00 That's a very postmodern sort of thing to happen.

50:06 LAWRENCE So, I mean, then for me the question is, in that sense, I mean, like, if you're looking at agency is it an absolute idea of agency that you have?
50:18 You know, because the— and this is at the heart in a way also of kind of Greek theater, right? Oedipus has already been scripted. And yet the entire reason that we even celebrate any of these plays is because it is in light of, you know, the gods and their scripting or their fatedness, the ability to struggle against it is the agency, not necessarily winning over it.

50:52 PRAYAS So the ability to struggle against what? I'm sorry, I just missed that.

50:56 LAWRENCE Against the—
50:57 Fated conditions.

51:00 PRAYAS Okay.

51:02 LAWRENCE I mean, the heroic quality—

51:05 PRAYAS So, but...
51:07 But the— so, but then you are viewing the you're viewing the narrative of the Mahabharata at this point as a, as a historical narrative of something that actually happened and not as a story. Because you were s— I mean it, because it seems to be about how—

51:29 LAWRENCE No, I'm absolutely—

51:30 PRAYAS Actually—

51:31 LAWRENCE —viewing it as a story.

51:36 PRAYAS But then in a story where does the actor ever have a choice of doing one thing or the other? Like, you know, we always know that this guy is going to catch the bad guy towards the end. It's I mean, what I'm saying is that we don't always know that, but we know that whatever is going to happen in the story is being directed by the author of the story.

52:04 NU PARADOX Who's the author? Yeah, that's— that answers what we are doing here now.

52:10 PRAYAS But the author of Mahabharata is the author of Mahabharata. I mean, we know who the author is.

52:16 NU PARADOX No, in terms of us acting and our hesitations.
52:20 *[laughter]*

52:22 SATYA And that's where the frameworks that we—

52:23 NU PARADOX Yeah, I mean the author in—

52:24 SATYA —the frameworks that we inhabit, that's where it comes in. The structures that we are within, they might determine our script. And therefore, if I do not go to a nine-to-five job and, you know, I might be viewed as somebody who's out of the script, you know? Or I might view myself as being somebody as, "Oh my god, I should be in a nine-to-five," or something. So it could be like the structures are the scripts. Or we could have our own script.

52:53 PRAYAS Yeah, but I mean, yeah, what Nu Paradox is actually putting in here is, who's the author? I mean —

53:01 SATYA Yeah, but that's what I'm saying, like the author could be myself, or it could be this structure that I'm inhabiting.

53:02 PRAYAS Let's say—

53:09 Yeah, and in both cases, I mean, I mean, I don't, I don't know if the author is— I don't know if the actor is allowed to know who the author is.

53:23 SATYA That's true.

53:24 PRAYAS I mean not allowed and not supposed to, and, you know, whatever. There is no link, there is no relationship between the author and the actor.

53:36 SATYA Yeah. Yeah, because even if I'm thinking that I am scripting my script, it is being influenced by some other structures which are beyond my scripting capabilities.

53:49 LAWRENCE Yeah, but that for me is really the given. I mean, in terms of how one thinks about the question of agency. I mean, if you're talking about an absolute agency in which I am a sovereign, you know, individual with an absolute sovereignty, now that is obviously factored in by a whole range of conditions, right? In terms of—

54:09 SATYA Yeah.

54:10 LAWRENCE —society, class, language, time, history, and everything else.

54:14 SATYA That's what I mean, yeah.

54:15 LAWRENCE So I don't think there is an ever, you know, this idea of an absolute romantic sovereignty in that sense.

54:21 SATYA Right.

54:21 LAWRENCE The question of sovereignty only arises in relation to the fact that there is a fatedness that you have, whatever it might be, in terms of whether it's, you know, the condition of your birth, the condition of your class, your race, your gender, whatever that might be. Within the domain of that, the little wiggle room that I create for myself in acting in a manner that defies my scriptedness is the recovery of the agency.

54:48 SATYA So there— then there is a generation of a self-script, even if that— even if it's a very tiny, even if it is one sentence.

54:58 LAWRENCE Always. I mean, like, you know, this— the idea, for example, which is very common again in theater, and especially in Shakespeare, is this idea of equivocation. Equivocation literally is, you know, when the, when the— when Christian priests were being tortured and asked to admit to a certain truth, they would say it in a manner which would belie it, right? Which is that— or I would, you know, like, you know, if I kept my fingers crossed while telling you—

55:28 SATYA Right.

55:28 LAWRENCE —something that you want to hear, but I retain for myself that ability to keep my fingers crossed. That sovereignty is really for me— it might amount to very little in terms of history, but can only be the only source in which one can think about sovereignty if we're thinking about it in individual terms.

55:50 SATYA (?) So it's like free will, right? The question of whether free will exists.

56:01 PRAYAS Yeah. I mean, and that's the kind of question which, I mean, I don't know if we can ever access because, I mean we are inside a scene. we have to exit the scene to actually know who's pulling the strings of the actors in the scene.

56:22 SATYA Mm.

56:23 PRAYAS Or if, or if at all there are strings or not. But then once we exit the scene, we can't enter again, so I'm not sure if.. yeah, we can we can really know this. we can really know or we can—

56:43 LAWRENCE But if that's the assumption, then that render— then that renders your question redundant.

56:50 PRAYAS The question of agency?

56:53 LAWRENCE Yeah. I mean, if you're saying that if that's the situation...

56:58 SATYA Right.

57:00 PRAYAS Yeah, so because this—

57:02 LAWRENCE So I'm saying that you need to recast what you mean by agency.

57:07 SATYA Right, like we, if we assume that the baseline is that you can't know the script, if that's the baseline, then what is agency?

57:17 LAWRENCE Yeah.

57:21 PRAYAS So, I mean so the third trigger is actually a— it's a, for me it's a paradoxical sentence more than a question.

57:30 But so it's so it's stating agency as our as something that helps us be more convincing as actors, but then it's— this agency can never be exercised because we cannot do something to be more convincing. We are, you know, so in that sense we can't really do something. It's the act which dictates our doing. It's not the, I mean the description of an act is not going to specify, "Oh, the actor needs to try here," or "the actor needs to put in more effort here to try and be convincing." The elements of the, of the conviction that is being tried to be, you know, be portrayed or the construction that's— those are, those are decisions in the architect's hand, in the director's hand. So, I mean, this is for me it's a, it's a paradoxical sentence the way it is here. so in that sense I don't really have a clear notion of agency, but this but except from the fact that if it is there, then it cannot be exercised. So I don't really have anything more than that on the, on the table.

59:16 LAWRENCE So have we come to an end of the chat?

59:22 PRAYAS We have another minute left, but does my clarification or let's say about agency, does that answer what you were asking for me to kind of state in terms of my notion of agency?

59:42 LAWRENCE Not entirely. I'm still trying to think through how it— I mean it, you know, in terms of how you're imagining this idea of agency. Maybe the— some of these terms are way too loaded for us to be using it.

59:59 Right.

01:00:00 It might be more interesting to pose them as a set of problems rather than as, because I think this entire free will, agency, structure, agency is not a conversation that one can actually spin something around within an hour.

01:00:17 So if there were, if there was a way of posing it as a problem of a certain kind, of maybe a concrete nature from which one kind of, you know, abstracts, it would be easier.

01:00:29 PRAYAS Yeah, which at least takes it away from words that we somehow feel that we have a existing relationship with. So, you know so in this sense have a more words which forces to think that we there is already something involved.

01:00:49 LAWRENCE Yeah.

01:00:49 PRAYAS So, it could be more a refreshing of the vocabulary set at least.

01:00:54 LAWRENCE Yeah. No, and that's an interesting one for the question of acting, because I mean in a way this kind of linguistic division of labour, you know, with these heavy loaded words is that you don't have to do any work, na. The word is already going to do the work for you.

01:01:10 Or at least you hope it is.

01:01:11 PRAYAS Right.

01:01:11 LAWRENCE Yeah, I mean it's already done so much work.

01:01:17 PRAYAS Yeah, but it they get exhausted, right? The words then get exhausted, so—

01:01:20 LAWRENCE Yeah. Yeah, I mean, which is why I mean if you, if the question is, you know, how do we think about these questions as our way of being or acting in the world, then if we free ourselves of this baggage of the, you know, the heavy duty conceptual vocabulary that we are inheriting, then it's more of a challenge.

01:01:44 PRAYAS Yeah, so actually, yeah, find other words to maybe more accurately capture, more precisely capture what is the matter at hand instead of yeah, that will, that will maybe help in disambiguating what we are talking about.

01:02:04 LAWRENCE Mm.

01:02:04 PRAYAS So we'll maybe take that up for the questions that we post tomorrow.

01:02:09 Yeah. Thanks everyone for coming online today. So we've ended our hour here and I hope some of you can join us tomorrow at 9:00 p.m.

01:02:21 LAWRENCE Thank you.

01:02:22 Prayas, thank you.

01:02:23 Thanks all. Bye.

01:02:25 Thanks.

01:02:25 See you.

01:02:31 PRAYAS Thanks everyone.

01:02:40 Thanks, [unclear].