

Seminar SAW
**Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in
the ancient world, 2015-2016**

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**Historiography of comparison and Historiography of circulation, with a
particular reference to the ancient mathematical sciences**

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The 'Hard Problem' of Comparative Intellectual History: The Case of Europe and India

Abstract – In this presentation I would like to outline some broad methodological and historiographical considerations that may help to make clear what it is we are undertaking when we undertake to study 'Indian philosophy'. The 'we' here is meant to refer, principally, to scholars and readers who started their intellectual careers with a different default conception of philosophy, for whom 'European' or 'Western' philosophy remains, to speak with the structuralists, the unmarked category. The purpose is not to undertake a study of comparative philosophy, in which the questions and arguments of one tradition are measured against those of another. There is significant scholarly controversy as to the best methods, and even as to the worthwhileness, of such comparative study. Comparison, at a minimum, requires a theoretically neutral standpoint that precludes the possibility of interpreting one of the doctrines or traditions under comparison in terms of the other. According to G. E. R. Lloyd, there are in fact two core principles that must be adopted for any meaningful comparison: one must avoid generalization, and one must also avoid a 'piecemeal' approach, placing individual theories alongside one another "as competing answers to the same (probably modern) question about the 'nature of reality'." But if we do not presume to know at the outset what the questions are to which ideas and arguments are intended as answers, then our research will necessarily be focused on finding these questions, a task which depends largely on discovering "the characteristic interests which informed [the] activities in specific social settings" of the historical figures we are studying. Thus, I would like to investigate what might be called 'the hard problem' of comparative intellectual history: how to set about the project at all, in the absence of pre-given questions selected from the one tradition or the other.