Yoga Philosophy and the West
Part 2
Yoga and Thinking Philosophically
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Abstract

Contrasting the early stages of the history of Western philosophy and the history of South Asian philosophy is useful. For whereas Socrates was executed by the Athenian court for the alleged crime of promoting falls gods and corrupting the youth, philosophical disagreements about what gods to worship and how to raise the youth were thought to be the proper topic of public interaction in pre-colonial South Asia. Here, Yoga as one philosophical option rises to the surface of many dissenting options as it provides a way to think about public engagement as a matter of individual responsibility that allows for a diversity of individuals and perspectives. This has direct implications for practice. There are tell-tale signs as to whether one is engaging in yoga or not. And this has to do with the question of whether you engaging in explanations by way of your perspective, or whether you reject that there is anything exceptional about your perspective. Anthropocentrism and communitarianism are incompatible with this yoga deflation of one’s perspective.
Start of the *Yoga Sūtra*

• Either we own our choices, and take responsibility for our experiences as a function of our own agency, or

• We treat our experiences as facts that define us
Two Models of Understanding

• **Explication**: explanation by way of logical validity (that someone’s reasons support their conclusion)

• **Interpretation**: explanation by way of what one takes to be true/believes/or would say

• Explication is all about Yoga: *yogaś-citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ* (YS I.2). It’s the requirement for engaging in philosophy. It prevents interpretation

• Interpretation is anti-philosophical
Origin of Interpretation

• Linguistic Model of Thought

• Thought is the meaning of what you say

• Endorsed by Confucius in the Analects, but criticized by Taoists in East Asia

• The default assumption about thought in the Western tradition that is neither defended nor criticized. (Entailment of the ancient Greek idea of logos---one word for thought, language, reason)

• (a) A thought is the meaning of what I say → (b) to understand what others have to say I have to understand them in terms of the meaning of what I would say → (c) others are always a prop for what I would say. Others can’t have their own perspective.
My Research during my PhD on translation

• (a) If one assumes the linguistic account of thought, then translation seems like the effort to match words and sentences across languages on the basis of shared meaning

• (b) Linguistic differences render this impossible
What Translators Actually Do

- They don’t translate languages: they translate texts
- And to translate a text, they have to translate it as a certain type of text
- This is to use language, or any other semiotic resource, as a raw material for reconstructing a text
- And the criteria of equivalence are relative to the type of text
- So translating poetry operates according to differing criteria than translating philosophy or chemistry
- What translation allows us an appreciation of how the same topic can be viewed from differing cultural vantages
Knowledge

• How translation is successful ties into how knowledge and research is successful:

• We don’t learn by figuring out what our words mean or by explaining everything by way of what we believe or how things seem to us

• Researchers discover answers to controversies by subjecting our representations to the same considerations that facilitate translation—the criteria that help us understand how the same topic can be described from differing conflicting perspectives

• Hence, to go to university one doesn’t learn everything: one specializes in disciplines (yogas)
Higher Learning

- Yoga: taking responsibility for your experiences as a function of choice
- Ties in with South Asian distinction between two truths: Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth
- Conventional truth is how things look like from a cultural vantage. Ultimate truth is what we figure out when we transcend this via a disciplinary practice
- Disciplinary practice allows us to transcend a perspective for it permits us criteria for evaluating data from differing vantages
- This allows us to compare notes, and arrive at an objective account (what we can observe from differing perspectives)---with the ever present possibility that we could be mistaken
- This is called realism
- Realism is a position of epistemic modesty
Subjectivity vs. Objectivity vs. Truth

• Subjective Truth = how things seem (tells us more about the observer).
  Conventional truth = shared subjective truth

• Objective Truth = what we can disagree about (tells us more about the observed)

• Example of objectivity: logic
The West

• Despite the evidence, I discovered that intellectuals in the Western tradition were tied to the linguistic account of thought, for no good reason: it creates problems it cannot solve, and it remains undefended

• It’s a cultural quirk

• It confuses knowing with occupying a privileged vantage

• Leads to a history of Western philosophy where all explanation is described as what we do properly from a special vantage

• In other words, it leads to the anti-yoga approach to identifying with experiences
Linguistic model of thought (LMT)

• Anthropocentric
• Communitarian
• Controversial in the East Asian tradition
• Not defended or even entertained in the South Asian tradition (though widely criticized)
• The basic model of thought connecting ancient Greek speculation and contemporary philosophy in the Analytic and Continental Traditions
Early Manifestations of the LMT in the West

• Emphasis on social conformity to community expectations

• Non-conformists have to be punished

• Consider Socrates’ treatment at the hands of the Athenian court (Plato, *The Apology*), where he was executed for allegedly promoting false gods and corrupting the youth
Martyrdom

• Socrates, but Jesus, Hypatia, Boethius, early martyrdom of Christians, subsequent killing of heretics, genocide as a function of proselytization (the irony) and colonialism

• (Canadians should be familiar) Residential Schools, an entire project to convert First Nation kids into Europeans: funded by the Canadian government, and implemented by all major denominations of Churches
South Asia: Śramaṇa vs. Brāhmaṇa

- Samaññaphala Sutta (The Fruits of the Philosophical Life)
- The concept of martyrdom comes to South Asia when Sikh Gurus are martyred by local Muslim king for, according to the tradition, not converting to Islam (1500ish CE)
Home to People Fleeing Religious Persecution

• Zoroastrians (fleeing persecution Muslim conquest of Persia)
• Jews (who came in ancient times, and then in subsequent waves)
• Christians (also apparently ancient)
• Ancient Greek communities (Questions of King Milinda), and others who adopted other local practices (e.g. Heliodorus)
Xenophanes Fragments

• “But mortals deem that the gods are begotten as they are, and have clothes like theirs, and voice and form (14)

• The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed; the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and red hair (16)

• Yes, and if oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds (15)”

• (Early Greek Philosophy ed. John Burnet, p.100)
South Asian Gods

• Avatāras of Viṣṇu (fish, tortoise, boar, lion-human chimera), Hanuman (Āñjaneya), Gāṅeśa, Garuḍa, Ādi Śeṣa

• What Xenophanes thought was a universal feature of (human) subjects, that they represent their ideals in terms of their own species and appearance, is a cultural quirk of the West
Pūrva Pakṣa

• Full airing of the opponents’ view *first*
• Part of the history of South Asian Philosophy as a practice of public debate and disagreement
• This contrasts sharply with interpretation
Pre-Colonial South Asia is not Post Colonial South Asia

• There’s a rupture in the tradition: colonialism
• Colonialism passes along the template of the Western colonizer and is then promulgated as a virus in South Asia (more on that next webinar)
Point of the comparison

• Interpretation and the hostility to other perspectives is a cultural quirk---not a universal necessity

• Systemic racism, for instance, is a systemic hostility to racialized perspectives

• We do not need to replicate the imperial and colonial aspects of Western culture

• We can be philosophical, i.e. yogic
The West vs. being western

- The problem is not having a perspective (or being white, male...)
- The problem is thinking that your explanations have to be in terms of your perspective
- * This undermines our agency for then we have to act in accordance with our perspective
- * It undermines the room for others to have their own perspective
- asmitā: “Egotism consists in conflating the power of the seer (that is, the puruṣa) with the natural powers of perception into a single (conception of a) self” YS II.6
Implications for practice: Yoga As Fight against the West

• (1) If we assume LMT (Anthropocentrism/Communitarianism) then we must endorse and engage in interpretation

• (2) Rejecting interpretation is yoga

• Therefore the yogi rejects anthropocentrism and communitarianism (Modus Tollens: if $p$ then $q$, not $q$ therefore not $p$)

• If you are practicing yoga ---as in (2) --- you are already doing your bit to fight Western imperialism

• Implication for racism: as yogis we criticize the generalization of the experience of persons on the basis of our experience. This prevents us from treating others as props for our point of view and frees others to be autonomous individuals in their own kaivalya
āsana

• Āsana practice? What’s the difference between that and mere contortionism?

• It’s yoga in so far it is the practice of denying explanations by way of your perspective, and locating experience as a function of choice

• That allows you, the agent, to be isolated from your experiences (kaivalya)

• Āsana practice is hence not about stress or relaxation, but then again, yoga isn’t about that either: it’s about sovereignty (Īśvara)
Limited Bibliography

- Samaññaphala Sutta https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.02.0.than.html