Introduction: philosophy in a global context

It is routinely acknowledged by philosophers that ‘What is philosophy?’ is itself a challenging philosophical question. In western philosophical contexts, this question has often been addressed in ways that marginalise or exclude non-western philosophies, giving little, if any, attention to sources and traditions outside the western canon. But such parochial approaches are coming under increasing pressure in today’s globalised world, a world in which information about many non-western forms of philosophical inquiry is more readily available than ever before. Increased knowledge about non-western traditions inevitably shapes what philosophy is understood to be.

Within the Indian philosophical milieu, the concept of yoga and multiple concepts related to meditation have had a prominent place. Indeed, the term *Yoga* is commonly treated as the name of one of the major *darśanas* (roughly, ‘schools’ or ‘ways of seeing’) of classical Indian philosophy. When treated in this way, *Yoga* normally denotes the system of philosophy attributed to Patañjali and adumbrated primarily in the *Pātañjalanayogaśāstra* (c. fourth or fifth century CE), comprising the series of terse statements customarily referred to as the *Yogasūtra* plus the commentary called either the *Yogabhāṣya* or *Vyāsabhāṣya*. Central to this system are forms of meditative practice geared towards the reduction and eventual elimination of mental activities (*citta-vṛtti*), and the practical instructions for promoting this end are integral to a philosophical vision that includes ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions. The Yoga system of Patañjali is in turn closely aligned with the school of philosophy known as Sāmkhya, whose hallmark is the rigorous analysis of the constitutive conditions of experiential life. At the heart of both Sāmkhya and Yoga is the aspiration – shared especially with Buddhism – to eradicate the causes of ‘dissatisfactoriness’ (*duḥkha*) by coming to realise that none of the modes of desire, feeling and emotion, or of experience tout court, are essential to who one really is. Unlike most forms of Buddhism, however, Sāmkhya and Yoga do not deny the existence of an ultimate self. For Sāmkhya and Yoga, this self is *puruṣa* (the authentic ‘person’, identified with pure consciousness) or *draṣṭṛ* (the ‘seer’ or subject). Never itself becoming an object of consciousness, this self stands in opposition to the fundamental source of everything objective, namely that which is ‘seeable’ (*dṛśya*) or ‘procreative’ (*prakṛti*).

My purpose in this chapter is neither to supply a comprehensive exposition of the philosophies of Sāmkhya and Yoga, nor to offer a survey of the many other philosophies that have been associated with the practices of yoga and meditation (including not only Brahmanical and
Buddhist philosophies, but also those of Jainism, Sikhism and certain non-Brahmanical Hindu schools). Rather, my purpose is to examine some of the ways in which philosophy has been utilised as a disciplinary approach to the study of yoga and meditation. To provide a manageable focus, however, Sāṃkhya and Yoga will constitute central reference points for each of the three main themes that the chapter discusses, and other philosophical schools will be mentioned along the way. The first of the themes, ‘Yoga and ontology’, is concerned with competing interpretations of what, according to classical Yoga, exists. The second, ‘Yoga and epistemology’, concerns what, according to Yoga and other meditative traditions, can be known and, more specifically, what it might mean to speak of a state of ‘pure consciousness’. Third, under the heading of ‘Yoga and ethics’, will be a discussion of how ethical aspects of Yoga praxis have been interpreted in the light of normative moral theories. Rounding off the chapter will be some thoughts about the future prospects for philosophical approaches to yoga and meditation.

**Yoga and ontology**

Ontology (from the Greek *ontos*, ‘being’) is the branch of philosophy that enquires into what *is* or what *exists* or into the nature of *being*. Among yoga- and meditation-related traditions, there is a wealth of ontological systems, from the respective monisms of, for example, Advaita Vedānta and Kashmir Śaivism to the ontological pluralisms of Nyāya and Vaishēsika. Both Yoga and Sāṃkhya, when treated as schools of classical Indian philosophy, are normally labelled as ontologically dualist, but this basic classification leaves much interpretive work still to be done. The task of interpreting Yoga ontology is itself a philosophical enterprise that involves trying to formulate an interpretation that supplies the most coherent result. This in turn normally requires not only close attention to the original sources but also a degree of comparative analysis with other systems of philosophy, for the purpose of discerning both similarities and differences. It is this interpretive philosophical task that will be the main topic of this section.

A central question pertaining to Yoga philosophy is whether the various entities that constitute Yoga’s overall ontology are best understood in cosmological terms or in terms that might be described as psychological or phenomenological. In this context, a cosmological interpretation is one that identifies the entities in question as constituents of the world as it exists ‘in itself’, independently of anyone’s experiencing it. Such an interpretation may also be referred to as *realist*, in the specific philosophical sense that it understands Yoga to be offering an account of a mind-independent reality, as opposed to an idealist account, which treats the world as in some way dependent upon mental states or activities. A psychological or phenomenological interpretation, meanwhile, identifies the components of Yoga’s ontology as either a set of psychological faculties or as constitutive features of experience – or, in some instances, a mixture of these two categories.

The question of whether a realist-cosmological or a more psychologically or phenomenologically oriented interpretation is most plausible arises largely as a consequence of Yoga’s alignment with Sāṃkhya, an alignment sufficiently close for certain interpreters to have opted to use the combined term ‘Sāṃkhya–Yoga’. Indeed, the *Yogabhāṣya* refers to itself as an ‘explanation of Sāṃkhya’ (Larson 2008: 23), thereby designating Yoga as a form of Sāṃkhya. What Sāṃkhya is most renowned for is its system of twenty-five ‘principles’ or ‘essences’ (*tattvas*), and Yoga is commonly assumed to adopt this same system, with the exception that it adds a twenty-sixth principle, namely ‘the Lord’ (*īśvara*). Whether the latter should be treated as a distinct principle is, however, doubtful, given that *īśvara* is defined in *Yogaśūtra* 1.24 merely as a ‘special self’ (*puruṣa-viśeṣa*) rather than as a separate ontological category (Jacobsen 2012). Meanwhile, when defining what is *not* the self, namely the ‘seeable’, both Yoga and Sāṃkhya characterise it as comprising
three co-fundamental ‘strands’ (guṇas), which are identified, respectively, as ‘illumination, activity and stability’ (Yogaśīlā 2.18). Yogaśīlā 2.19 proceeds to name four different ‘levels’ or ‘divisions’ (pravāṇī) that are formed by these three guṇas, and the Yogabhāṣya subdivides the four levels in such a way as to yield unmanifest prakṛti plus all twenty-three of the principles that, according to Śāmkhya, emerge from it. Thus, if the commentary’s exposition is accepted, Yoga endorses the Śāmkhya ontology. By the same token, the problem of whether to construe the ontology in cosmological or in psychological–phenomenological terms is inherited by interpreters of Yoga.

Provided care is taken not to simply impose western philosophical models on the Indian material, the interpretive project can be assisted by means of comparisons with ideas from western philosophy. Since the ontology common to Śāmkhya and Yoga appears to consist in a basic dualism between a centre of consciousness (puruṣa) — or, more precisely, a multiplicity of centres of consciousness (see Śāmkhyakārikā 18; Yogaśīlā 2.22) — and the productive source of experienceable phenomena (prakṛti), it is tempting to compare it with other dualist ontologies, such as the substance dualism of René Descartes. Despite certain superficial similarities, however, what this comparison reveals is that, unlike Descartes’s ontology, the dualism advanced by Śāmkhya and Yoga is not well characterised in terms of mind versus matter. This is because, for Descartes, both the mind and matter exhibit several ‘modes’, such as perceiving, willing, sensing, emoting and desiring in the case of minds, and position, shape, movement and divisibility in the case of matter (Descartes 1985: Part 1, §§48, 53). Puruṣa is not a mind in this sense, for it is held by Śāmkhya and Yoga to be inactive and without modes. By contrast, prakṛti, in its — or ‘her’ — manifest form, is not only thoroughly active, but is the source of all the mental modes as well as the material ones. This is why philosophical interpreters have characterised Śāmkhya and Yoga ontology as, for example, a dualism between ‘individual consciousness’ and ‘the unconscious world’ (Larson 1969: 47) or between ‘consciousness’ and ‘mind’ (Schweizer 1993; Perrett 2001: 11) rather than between mind and matter. None of these characterisations is, however, unproblematic. While puruṣa is certainly, in some sense, consciousness, prakṛti is not straightforwardly an ‘unconscious world’, unless (implausibly) the term ‘unconscious world’ is understood to include things such as sensations and mental states; but neither is prakṛti simply ‘mind’, for it is, in its unmanifest state, ontologically prior to the emergence of mental capacities and experiential phenomena.

My own interpretive work has included comparisons between the ontology of Śāmkhya and Yoga, on the one hand, and certain aspects of both western philosophy and Indian Buddhist philosophy, on the other (Burley 2007). In the area of western philosophy, I have borrowed ideas from the transcendental idealism of Immanuel Kant and the phenomenological philosophies of Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl; from Buddhism, I have drawn upon prevalent interpretations of Abhidharma philosophy. Though, of course, other comparisons are possible, it is these that I shall elaborate in the remainder of this section.

What Kant seeks to provide in his critical philosophy is an analysis of the transcendental conditions of possible experience — ‘transcendental’ in the sense that the conditions at issue are not themselves possible objects of experience, precisely because they are what must be in place for experience to occur. On Kant’s account, these conditions include space and time, which he regards as formal characteristics of sensory experience (or ‘pure forms of intuition’) rather than features of the world as it is in itself (Kant 1998: 155–192), plus a total of twelve ‘concepts of pure understanding’ (201–266), which may be divided into concepts of quantity, quality, relation (including causality) and modality. In the case of Brentano and Husserl, they offer, in their respective ways, accounts of ‘mental phenomena in general’ (Brentano 2015: Bk 2) and ‘the invariant essential structure of the total sphere of pure mental process’ (Husserl 1999: 326). And in the case of Abhidharma Buddhism, a number of interpreters have emphasised the extent to
which its account even of the four ‘great elements’ (mahābhūtas) – namely earth, water, fire and air – is concerned not with a physical world entirely independent of consciousness, but rather with ‘the physical world as experienced by a sentient being’ (Gethin 1986: 36).

The comparison with Abhidharma Buddhism is especially instructive, for Sāṃkhya and Yoga share with Buddhism the fact that they are soteriological or liberative disciplines whose ontologies may reasonably be presumed to complement the practice of sustained meditation. If we were to adopt what I above referred to as a realist-cosmological interpretation of the respective ontological systems, then the relevance of those systems to meditative practice would remain obscure. If, however, we treat the ontological systems as the outcome of analyses of experience, then their soteriological relevance becomes evident. In the case both of Sāṃkhya and Yoga and of Buddhism, meditative practice is geared towards the realisation that the various constituents of experience, whether they be cognitive, affective or conative in nature, are not to be identified with one’s true self. From the standpoint of most forms of Buddhism, the very idea of a true self is illusory, whereas for Sāṃkhya and Yoga the self is conceived of as puruṣa; but the negative enterprise of disidentifying with the components of experience and their conditioning factors is common to Buddhism and to Sāṃkhya and Yoga.

The comparisons with Kant and with the phenomenological philosophies of Brentano and Husserl are helpful inasmuch as they further illuminate how a philosophical inquiry might move from the observation of particular experiences towards a progressively abstract classification of the necessary conditions of any possible experience. Just as, for example, Kant identifies the ‘synthetic unity of apperception’ – meaning (roughly) the coherence of all the thoughts and experiences of a given individual within a holistic gestalt possessed by a single ‘I’ – as necessary for the undergoing of any experience at all, so Sāṃkhya affirms that the capacity to identify oneself as an ‘I’, namely ahaṃkāra (literally ‘I-maker’), is what enables the emergence of both the capacities for sensation, on the one hand, and the contents of sensory and perceptual experience, on the other. Virtually the same idea occurs under the term asmi (‘I-am-ness’) in Yoga. And just as, for Brentano and Husserl, one of the fundamental characteristics of consciousness is intentionality – meaning directedness towards an object or the possessing of a given content – so, for Sāṃkhya and Yoga, there is an intentional relation between the ‘instrument’ (kārya), comprising the capacities for awareness, egoity, sensation and sensory synthesis, and the ‘object’ (kārya), comprising the sensory contents and the five perceptible ‘elements’ (bhūtas) (see, e.g. Sāṃkhyaśāstra 32).

An important disanalogy between the position of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, on the one hand, and that of Kant and the western phenomenologists, on the other, is that Sāṃkhya and Yoga insist that it makes sense to speak of nonintentional as well as of intentional consciousness. Puruṣa is defined as consciousness without qualities, and the highest state of meditation to be aimed for is one in which no experiential content is present. But it is precisely because of disanalogies such as this, in addition to the partial analogies, that cross-cultural comparative philosophy can be illuminating. Whether the idea of nonintentional, or contentless, consciousness is viable is a significant epistemological and conceptual issue that will receive further attention in the next section.

Yoga and epistemology

Epistemology (from the Greek epistēmē, ‘knowledge’) is concerned with questions of what can be known and how we can know it. Corresponding terms in Sanskrit include pramāṇa vidyā and pramāṇa śāstra, the ‘study of knowledge and of the means of knowing’. Traditional schools of Indian philosophy take various positions on what counts as a means of knowing. Classical
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Sāṃkhya and Yoga are among those that initially list three – namely, perception, inference and verbal (or scriptural) testimony – but also admit the possibility of what is often termed ‘yogic perception’ (yogī pratyākṣa). This, which is held to be a special means of knowing available only to those who have mastered heightened states of meditation, is also recognised by other schools of Indian philosophy, such as Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika and the sundry Vedānta schools, as well as by Buddhism and Jainism (Sinha 1934: 335). It is held, for example, that certain practices of prolonged meditation can deliver knowledge of otherwise inaccessibl...
the ineffable state of realisation – ‘a wakeful but objectless consciousness’, which, he maintains, 'should be viewed as decontextualized' (1998: 7). For as long as the ‘event’ lasts, the mind is devoid of content, yet following the event ‘one knows that one has been aware continuously for some time’ (ibid.). This conception of a heightened meditative state requires an understanding of consciousness as something that can persist even in the absence of anything that one is conscious of. It thus entails a rejection of the standard view taken by phenomenological philosophers, which is that consciousness is necessarily intentional, in the sense that it is always consciousness of something. Understandably, Forman’s critics, such as Katz, have questioned the intelligibility of the idea that one can be ‘aware continuously’ without being aware of anything, including the passing of time. And even if one thinks the idea is intelligible, critics have also taken issue with the contention that one could ever know that one has undergone an episode of pure consciousness, for there would be literally nothing to remember that could differentiate it from a period of mere unconsciousness (Gellman 2005: 148). In response, Forman admits that the idea is paradoxical, but insists that pure consciousness events nevertheless occur, that he has undergone one and that what is disclosed through these events is precisely what mystics have alluded to with phrases such as ‘ground of the soul’ (1998: 7; 1990b: 28; 1990a).

An interesting dimension of the debate over pure consciousness is the way in which it intersects with debates concerning the ‘gendered’ nature of religious discourse. From a feminist standpoint, Katz’s contextualist approach has been endorsed for its rejection of the idea of any epistemic position that is unaffected by sociocultural factors, including gender. On this view, the notions of neutrality and objectivity are fictions that operate to conceal ‘male partiality’ (Jantzen 1995: 337). They also, it has been claimed, serve to privilege a conspicuously disembodied conception of mystical states that is unlikely to coincide with the more bodily forms of religious experience often reported by female mystics (Raphael 1994: 522).

Whatever we make of the disagreements between contextualists and their perennialist opponents, it has to be admitted that, at the level of textual exegesis, something like a pure consciousness event does seem to be what the authors of sources such as the Pāññālalayogaśāstra and Sāmkhyakārikā are alluding to as the goal of meditative practice. That goal, termed ‘aloneness’ (kaivalya), is described, for example, as ‘the abiding of the power of consciousness (citi-śakti) in its own form’ (Yogaśūtra 4.34) and as the ‘singular and conclusive’ result of the complete cessation of the activities of the guṇas (which are the fundamental constituents of everything that is experienceable) (Sāmkhyakārikā 68). So if one’s primary philosophical task is the hermeneutic one of interpreting what is being described in the original texts, then Forman’s idea of ‘a wakeful but objectless consciousness’ seems close to the mark, a point that has not gone unnoticed by certain scholars of Sāmkhya and Yoga (e.g. Chapple 1990; Pflueger 1998). If, however, one maintains, with Katz and others, that there are irremediable conceptual and epistemic problems with such an idea, then one will be forced to conclude that the purported soteriological goal of Sāmkhya and Yoga is itself incoherent. Since some contributors to the debate, such as Forman himself, claim to have first-hand experience on their side, whereas those on the other side suppose that they have a priori reasons for denying the possibility of what Forman claims to have undergone, it is far from obvious how the debate might be resolved.

Amid the more abstract moments in the debate, it is important not to lose sight of the textual sources that constitute much of the raw material for the study of mysticism and meditative traditions. As Jason Blum (2015) has argued, the project of understanding these texts, and of analysing them in comparison with one another, is unlikely to benefit from imposing upon them a preformed epistemological theory. Instead, what is called for is close attention to the experiential accounts in relation to multiple contextual factors, such as the rest of the text within which they occur plus (where available) other writings by the same author and within the same
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Such holistic interpretive procedures provide a firm basis from which to pursue comparison across the various traditions of meditation and mysticism without simply presupposing either that there must be a common essence that all of them share or, contrariwise, that every tradition, by virtue of its being a distinguishable tradition at all, must generate experiences that are incommensurable with those of any other.

Yoga and ethics

Ethics (from the Greek ἔθος, ‘character’ or sometimes ‘custom, habit’), though often equated with morality and hence with issues such as which actions are right and which are wrong, may also be concerned with broader matters of how to live one’s life. The most comprehensive of ethical theories will thus typically include a vision of the ultimate goal (or goals) of life, along with some prescription for how best to make progress towards its fulfilment. When ethics is construed in these broad terms, the various philosophies associated with yoga and meditation can in most instances be understood as having a strong ethical dimension. They can often also be described as soteriological, inasmuch as their respective formulations of the ultimate goal are ones that consist in spiritual salvation or liberation. In the case of Buddhism, for example, the goal is generally said to be nirvāṇa (however that might be understood), and, as has been discussed above, the goal specified in classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga is kaivalya.

With regard both to Buddhism and to Sāṃkhya and Yoga, the methods for achieving the ultimate goal are multiple. They include adherence to moral principles, or precepts, but also activities that are less obviously morally focused such as, prominently, extensive periods of meditation. Buddhism is well known for its noble eight-fold path, which comprises two principles of ‘wisdom’ or ‘insight’ (prajñā) and three of ‘meditative absorption’ (samādhi) alongside three of ‘morality’ (śīla). And the best known portion of the Pāññālayogasūtra is that which expounds the ‘yoga of eight limbs’ (aṣṭāṅga-yoga), the first two ‘limbs’ of which are each made up of five regulative precepts, with the subsequent six ‘limbs’ consisting of instruction in correct posture, breathing techniques and progressively internalised modes of single-pointed meditation.

The Sāṃkhyaṇārikā, for its part, says little about actual practice, which is one of the reasons why Sāṃkhya is frequently assumed to advocate a ‘rationalistic’ or ‘purely intellectual’ method (Feuerstein 1980: 113; Koelman 1970: 237). But a perusal of the traditional commentaries indicates that meditation is as central to Sāṃkhya as it is to Yoga; in fact, as I noted above, Patañjali’s Yoga system has been regarded by the commentarial tradition as itself a version of Sāṃkhya. Here, for reasons of space, I shall focus on the Yoga system and on how it has been interpreted in relation to theories of ethics or moral philosophy.

For a start, there has been disagreement over whether Yoga should be regarded as a moral or ethical system at all. While recognising that there is an obvious sense in which the five ‘restraints’ (yamas) and five ‘observances’ or ‘lesser restraints’ (niyamas) do constitute a set of ethical principles, some interpreters have regarded these as playing a merely instrumental role within the system as a whole, and hence as conveying a sense of extrinsic rather than intrinsic value. Georg Feuerstein, for example, points to Yogasūtra 4.7 – which states that the actions of a yogin are ‘neither black nor white’ – as indicative of the fact that yoga’s purpose is, ultimately, to transcend morality. Although the implication of this is not that the accomplished yoga practitioner is free to perform acts that would be deemed immoral by conventional standards, it does entail that yogic meditation should ‘be understood as an a-moral process’ (Feuerstein 1989: 81). Gerald Larson, too, observes, with reference to both Sāṃkhya and Yoga, that the goal of kaivalya is (in Nietzsche’s phrase) ‘beyond good and evil’ – ‘a non-moral or a-moral intuition that arises through an extraordinary modality of knowing’; hence, although the world may have
some extrinsic value for the practitioner insofar as it provides the setting within which the goal can be sought, neither the world nor moral theorising is of any value in its own right (Larson 1987: 151).

Comparable to the ‘a-moral’ interpretation just outlined is the view that the moral outlook of Sāṃkhya and Yoga is best categorised as consequentialist, for adherence to the ‘first-order moral precepts’ of these systems is enjoined merely as a self-purificatory exercise that contributes to the supremely sought-after consequence, namely kaivalya (Perrett 2007: 152–153). If we are to call this a version of consequentialism, its divergence from what has normally been referred to as consequentialism should be acknowledged.

Consequentialism is normally defined as the view that (in simple terms) what determines the moral rightness of an action is the goodness of the consequences, and hence that what ought to enter chiefly into moral decision-making are considerations of how one’s actions are likely to impinge upon not only oneself but upon sentient beings in general. By contrast, when someone such as Roy Perrett defines the moral perspective of Sāṃkhya and Yoga as consequentialist, the relevant consequences are exclusively self-directed: it is one’s own liberation from the suffering that permeates the ongoing flow of life, death and rebirth that is at issue.

Opposed to these a-moral and consequentialist readings is the view that Yoga’s contribution to moral theory is in fact a highly developed one that offers an advanced alternative to standard western theories such as those of deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics (Ranganathan 2017: 177). Ian Whicher, for example, describes the way of life promoted by Yoga as a process of ‘sattvification’, by which he means the continuous refinement of one’s state of mind so that the quality of sattva (roughly, ‘intelligence’, ‘purity’) predominates over the qualities of rajas (‘activity’, ‘energy’) and tamas (‘darkness’, ‘inertia’). Internal to this process is ‘the cultivation of moral virtues such as compassion (karuṇā) and nonviolence (ahimsā)’ (Whicher 1998: 285), and hence there is something dubious about picturing Yoga’s moral requisites as mere means to some further end that transcends morality altogether; rather, the goal of ego-transcendence is itself a moral end. In this respect, Whicher’s vision of Yoga’s aspirations in fact comes to resemble a version of virtue ethics, according to which one’s aim is to develop a virtuous character and live a flourishing life. Controversially, Whicher interprets kaivalya not as a realisation of puruṣa’s absolute isolation from prakṛti, but as ‘an integration of both principles’ (Whicher 1998: 303). Despite its revisionary flavour, this interpretation is apt to appeal to many modern yoga enthusiasts since it places the emphasis firmly on purification, understood in both moral and cognitive terms, as opposed to a total cessation of activity and experience.

Even if one remains doubtful that a vision of kaivalya as ‘an integrated, embodied state of liberated identity’ (Whicher 1998: 301) is well supported by the original sources, there are good reasons for questioning the view of Yoga’s moral precepts as serving a merely instrumental function. The Pāṇiniya-yogaśāstra makes it explicit that the five restraints (yamas), with ahiṃsā (‘nonviolence’, ‘non-harming’) as their foundation, are thoroughly unconditional. To commit oneself to abiding by them is to take the ‘great vow’ (mahāvrata), which is not qualified by factors such as caste, place or time (Yogaśāstra 2.31). If it were qualified in these ways, then, as Yogabhāṣya 2.31 observes, someone who catches fish for a living might be excused from causing harm to fish, or someone might vow to abstain from killing living beings only in sacred places or at certain auspicious times, and so on. Contrary to such conditional commitments, the great vow is deemed to be categorical. Exactly what its implications are in practice remains, no doubt, open to interpretation. For example, Jainism, which has the same five-fold great vow as Pāṇiniya’s Yoga, is renowned for the strictness with which its mendicant practitioners follow the principle of nonviolence. But even in Jainism there is room for differing interpretations, with the monks and nuns of certain sects (most notably the Sthānakvāsīs and Terāpanthīs) constantly wearing a
cloth over their mouths to avoid harming microorganisms in the air, whereas others either wear
such a cloth only when performing rituals and speaking or do not wear it at all (Cort 2001: 41–
42). Such stringency is not typically assumed to apply in the case of Patañjali’s Yoga, though it
has been argued that, even in this case, the vow of nonviolence minimally demands ‘the uncondi-
tional renunciation of all flesh eating’ and could also be extended to encompass withdrawing
one’s consent from non-vegetarian social practices more generally (Dickstein 2017: 620).

Notwithstanding the latter considerations, it could still be contended that Yoga’s moral
principles in general and its principle of nonviolence in particular fail to demonstrate a
commitment to the intrinsic value of living beings. This contention may be strengthened if
one takes seriously the comparison with Jainism, for the Jain ethic of nonviolence, at least as
it applies to mendicants, is commonly interpreted as forming part of an overarching strategy
for disconnecting oneself from a world that is irredeemably mired in violence. One cultivates
detachment not for the sake of the world and its inhabitants, but for the sake of one’s own spir-
itual purity (Vallely 2002: 29–32): nonviolence is, as James Laidlaw provocatively expresses it, ‘an
ethic of quarantine’ (1995: 159). One way of countering this interpretation, however, is to point
out that abstaining from harming living beings would not even have the purifying effect that is
attributed to it if it were the case that the lives of such beings are of no intrinsic value, for it is
precisely their having that kind of value that makes harming them detrimental to one’s spiritual
progress. With regard to Yoga, an argument along these lines is supportable by means of careful
elaboration of certain claims made within the Patañjalayogaśāstra itself. By analysing several
passages (esp. Yogabhāṣya 2.13–15, 2.34 and 4.11), Christopher Framarin has argued that the text
at least implicitly asserts that pleasure and a relatively long life have positive intrinsic value, that
pain and a relatively short life have intrinsic negative value, and that these positive and negative
types of value apply to living beings across the board (including non-human animals and even
plants), as does the intrinsic positive value of certain further capacities that may be acquired as
a consequence of virtuous behaviour in previous lives. On this basis, Framarin concludes that
Yoga does indeed accord intrinsic value and, hence, ‘direct moral standing’ to humans, animals
and plants (Framarin 2014: ch. 8).

Although it is beyond the scope of my present discussion to enter into the details of Framarin’s
analysis, it is notable that he situates it within a more general appraisal of the relevance for envir-
onmental ethics of ideas contained in traditional Hindu texts. Despite his making a strong case
for the contention that the texts in question, including the Patañjalayogaśāstra, ascribe moral
standing to individual creatures, there is no suggestion in the texts that value is being accorded
to collectivities such as species or ecosystems, and hence the application of the conclusions to
environmental ethics remains limited.

**Future prospects for the philosophical study of yoga and meditation**

The foregoing sections have examined a selection of ways in which yoga and meditation have
been approached philosophically. In relation to each of the three topics I have discussed, a
broad distinction can be made between two orientations, which we might call a *hermeneutical*
orientation and a *critical* orientation, respectively. By ‘hermeneutical’, I mean an orientation that
prioritises the task of exegesis: seeking to interpret and understand what the original sources are
saying. The pursuit of this task may occasionally require admitting that it is simply impossible to
make sense of a given text, perhaps because it is incoherent or confused. In these cases, a her-
meneutical approach cannot avoid passing judgement upon the text; but, for the most part, the
approach emphasises understanding over evaluation. What I am here calling a critical orienta-
tion, meanwhile, places the emphasis more on critical and argumentative engagement with the
textual sources. Of course, a critical approach cannot be pursued in the absence of a hermeneutical one, since one can hardly hope to engage critically with philosophical ideas if one does not know how to interpret them. But a critical emphasis will view the hermeneutical enterprise as something merely preliminary and subordinate to the evaluative project. In considering future prospects for the philosophical study of yoga and meditation, it is helpful to bear in mind this distinction between hermeneutical and critical orientations.

The philosophical investigation of yoga and meditation in a hermeneutical mode remains an ongoing venture, with regard both to texts that are already well known and to those that have been newly discovered or newly translated. The Pāññājālayogaśāstra and Sāṃkhya-kārikā, for example, have both been studied extensively, and yet questions about how best to interpret them have not been fully resolved. In the past, many interpreters sought to distinguish Yoga from Sāṃkhya on the grounds that its methods of inquiry involve 'direct experience' in contrast to the 'rationalistic' methods of Sāṃkhya, but, as I suggested above, such a distinction appears crude in the light of the recognition that the Pāññājālayogaśāstra articulates a form of Sāṃkhya and that significant commentaries on the Sāṃkhya-kārikā, such as the Yuktidīpikā (c.680–720 CE), describe Sāṃkhya's methods as including a combination of non-attachment (vairāgya) and meditative practice (tattva-abhyāsa) highly resemblant of that which is recommended in the Pāññājālayogaśāstra. These observations facilitate further exploration of the intriguing relations between rational analysis and meditative insight not only in the context of Sāṃkhya and Yoga in particular, but also, by means of comparative study, in connection with Indian soteriological traditions more generally. The scope for further cross-cultural or inter-traditional comparative research is also substantial, having the potential to disrupt simplistic assumptions about, for example, the supposedly more rational nature of western philosophy vis-à-vis the more 'mystical' philosophies (or 'wisdom traditions') of Asia.

My notion of a 'critical orientation' to the philosophical study of yoga and meditation is really a placeholder for a rich melange of philosophical approaches. The demand is growing, both from within academic philosophy and from outside, for professional philosophers to do justice to the full range of philosophical traditions throughout the world in their teaching and research, as opposed to remaining sequestered in a monocultural silo dominated by a relatively narrow canon of western philosophers. No one is expecting those who teach philosophy to become experts in all the philosophical traditions of India, China, Africa, Native American communities and so on, but merely to look seriously at ways of incorporating non-western material into the philosophy curriculum (see, e.g. Van Norden 2017). This can be done in various ways, including drawing upon ideas and arguments from one tradition to supplement or modify a position in another, or showing how philosophical considerations from tradition A undermine or refute certain positions in tradition B.

With regard to traditions with a specifically meditative component, attempts at bringing them into engagement with western philosophy have been most prevalent in the case of Buddhist philosophy. Mark Siderits, for instance, has championed what he terms 'fusion philosophy', which he views as a successor to the sort of comparative exercises that seek merely to expose similarities and differences between perspectives arising from two or more philosophical traditions. In contrast to these 'merely' comparative approaches, fusion philosophy applies methods or theories from one tradition to philosophical problems that occur in another. Siderits himself has made notable contributions to the philosophy of personal identity by deploying ideas from Buddhist debates concerning the non-existence of a permanent self (Siderits 2015), and further contributions to this and related topics have been made by others (e.g. Ganeri 2007; Garfield 2015). Although the themes of yoga and meditation are not uppermost in such studies, they nevertheless infuse the practical and conceptual background out of which notions
such as the Buddhist conception of no-self emerge. As Jay Garfield remarks in a discussion of Śāntideva’s account of ethics, meditation plays a central role, ‘for it is through meditation that one embeds discursive knowledge into one’s character’ (2015: 307). If this role for meditation in cultivating an ethical life at first appears alien to western philosophy, it may cease to do so when one recalls the long tradition of ‘philosophy as a way of life’ (Hadot 1995), which stretches back to the ancient Greeks and routinely combines various ‘spiritual exercises’ with more overtly discursive forms of reasoning in the philosophical quest. One benefit of attending to yoga- and meditation-related philosophies of Asia (and elsewhere) can thus be the reminder that is thereby offered of the fact that philosophy has frequently – indeed, predominantly – been pursued not as a purely academic exercise, but as a means of overcoming genuine difficulties in life and, ultimately, advancing towards some ethical or spiritual ideal.

There is, then, enormous potential for continuing and expanding the philosophical study of yoga and meditation, both as a field of philosophical inquiry in its own right and as part of the development of increasingly globally aware perspectives on philosophy as a whole.

Glossary

Abhidharma, a body of Buddhist scholastic teachings that attempts to systematise doctrinal material from discourses attributed to the Buddha

Advaita Vedānta, a school of Indian philosophy, best known for its monist (or ‘non-dual’) conception of reality; most famously propounded by Śaṅkara (c.8th–9th centuries CE)

ahimsā, nonviolence, non-harming

a priori, prior to and independent of experience

aṣṭāṅga-yoga, eight-limbed yoga

Brentano, Franz (1838–1917), German philosopher and psychologist, a seminal influence on the development of phenomenological philosophy

citta-vṛtti, mental activities

contextualism, theory that mystical states of consciousness are ‘mediated’ by contextual factors such as language, culture and conceptual scheme

darśana, Indian philosophical school; way of seeing

Descartes, René (1596–1650), early modern French philosopher

dnaṣṭ, seer; also a synonym of puruṣa

dṛṣṭha, seeable; that which can be experienced

duḥkha, dissatisfactoriness, pain, suffering

epistemology, branch of philosophy that studies what knowledge is and how we can have it

guna, quality, constitutive property; lit. strand

hermeneutics, branch of study concerned with interpretation – especially of texts

Husserl, Edmund (1859–1938), German philosopher, generally regarded as the founder of phenomenological philosophy

idealism (in philosophy), ontological theory that the whole of reality is mental or ideational in nature

īśvara, the Lord

kaivalya, spiritual liberation; lit. aloneness

Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804), an influential German philosopher, well known for his ‘Critical’ philosophy

karuṇā, compassion

Kashmir Śaivism, a school of Indian philosophy, most famously propounded by Abhinavagupta (10th–11th centuries CE)
monism, ontological theory that the whole of reality is reducible to one ultimate principle
Nyāya, a school of Indian philosophy, originally propounded in Gautama Aksāpāda’s Nyāyasūtra (c.100 CE)

ontology, branch of philosophy that studies what exists or the nature of being; an ontology can
also be a taxonomy of basic categories of entity
Pāṇini, term for the Yāsūtra plus Yāgabhāṣya
Patañjali, purported author of the Yāsūtra

perennialism, theory that states of pure consciousness are common to multiple mystical or
meditative traditions

pluralism (ontological), ontological theory that reality comprises multiple categories of entity
puruṣa, self, centre of consciousness; lit. man, person

realism (in philosophy), ontological theory that some designated class of entities exists inde-
dependently of anyone’s perceiving of thinking about them
Sāmkhya, a school of Indian philosophy, expounded in the Śāmkhyakārikā
Sāmkhyakārikā, principal text of ‘classical Sāmkhya’, composed by Īsvarakṛṣṇa (c.4th–5th
century CE)

Śántideva (late 7th to mid-8th century CE), Indian Buddhist philosopher-monk whose works
include Bodhicaryāvatāra (‘Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life’)
tattva, essence, entity, principle
Vaiśeṣika, a school of Indian philosophy, originally propounded in Kaṇāda’s Vaiśeṣikasūtra
(c.100 BCE)

Yāgabhāṣya, earliest and most influential commentary on the Yāsūtra, traditionally attributed
to Vyāsa

Yogācāra, a school of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, normally defined as idealist but some-
times as phenomenological

Yogasūtra, principal text of ‘classical Yoga’, attributed to Patañjali (c.4th or 5th century CE)

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