

The Ethics of Yoga

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Abstract

Consistency with the old Greek sense of ethics and politics brought to India with Alexander the Great in the time of Aristotle should shed some light on those subjects that came up soon after in the Sanskrit books. Mahābhārata and Bhagavadgītā speak of the virtues of sages and warriors with meditations presenting a sense of virtue more important than that fixed by varṇas or castes. For the Pāṇḍava to be sattvic should not mean to be reborn in any better caste but to follow a path that begins with the sense of personal identity that yoga and Ricoeur's ipseity show.

Keywords

ethics, politics, Greece and India, Aristotle and the Mahābhārata, virtue, identity.

Classical philosophies of Greece and India share, in the 4-1 centuries BCE, the concepts on action, ethics and politics, although the way of talking about these which has long prevailed does not show a common language. The purpose of this article is to highlight this peculiar common sense of the two philosophical traditions, and to do so with some help from the philosophy of personal identity that we owe to Paul Ricoeur (1990).

Ricoeur binds together *ipseity* and the ethics of Aristotle, whom he considers the first to think on how action (*prāxis*) depends on the self or agent (*autós*), but fails to consider the politics of the Greek period and instead looks at its ethics through modern politics and the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and others. This sets a distant modern and spiritual frame to the old Greek world and, of course, omits to examine the subject of Indian literature.

Let us remember that *ipseity* (or *selfhood*) identifies people differently than using names, numbers, and body and political colors (*sameness*). In fact, it implies knowing of the self by means of the self, and considering others as equals in this sense.

Let us start by laying down some principles. The ancient *intellect* (Sanskrit *buddhi*, Greek *noûs*) is the "keystone" that puts in place identity, psychology, ethics, politics, etc. Its being comes out of itself entirely. It can be divine or human,

11, 237-242, Lisboa: CFUL.

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but also just autonomous. It can be active in the sense of the action of the social/ political agents, but also active in the sense of the quietude or stillness of the Greek contemplative sages. We shall prove that yogis combine such action and quietness.

Yoga comes with this, at least in Bhagavadgītā¹.

For yoga, buddhi is Brahman, and Brahman is everything, all things that move and live and everything visible and sensory on which life depends. But the buddhi makes Brahman capable of being and acting by itself. For this reason, there are two versions of Brahman, one that shows it with different selves that come into life in the manner of plants and animals with different individualities. To be born is to be reborn.

And another where Brahman is a lord (īśvara) who is not reborn and exists out of itself with the totality of its being and capacities. It is happy in the self by the self, in the ātman by the ātman. In some versions this Brahman is a lord called Brahmā who is reborn only once each time the cosmos is reborn.

So yoga comes up with the self, the ātman, to show the reflexive nature of buddhi, the intellect. The ātman clearly has a capacity to act not depending on the fruits of actions (karmabandha) nor on rebirths (janmabandha), and so renunciation and ascetism are said to be virtues of buddhi².

It is well known that yoga comes in the Epic together with the wisdom of sām̐khya, and sām̐khya shows the many ways people can be virtuous or sattvic even when born in a society that makes sattvic only one varṇa or caste. Brahmins are sattvic, kṣatriyas rajas, vaiśyas tamas (and so are śūdras).

Politics here rule that every person has his/her own dharma to deal with until the caste confusion (varṇasaṁkara) makes no more sense of it all.

Despite the many sattvic ways of being which sām̐khya allows for (there are fifteen in all³), the politics of dharma have the upper word here. People are born because of previous activities/circumstances, and it is not entirely clear what they are expected to do, like for example kṣatriyas who are not sattvic in principle.

Mahābhārata shows an incredible epic scenario in which kṣatriyas are called Pāṇḍava and Kaurava, and the two groups are only required to act according to their own dharma, the rajasic dharma of the kṣatriyas. This clearly does not lead them equally to be virtuous. The claim for virtue is neglected by birth and rebirth based politics.

So here comes the yoga of Kṛṣṇa to help out some of the Pāṇḍava. When Arjuna (and Yudhiṣṭhira) cannot act virtuously they are told that this is because they are not seeking the way of yoga to free themselves of rebirth. Seeking such freedom or liberation would place the born self (and the demands of dharma) on the self (the *ipseity*) so to act virtuously.

The person whose ātman is quiet has a yet another identity than that whose ātman moves and is defined by a karman associated with fruits and rebirths. Simplifying, we call *ipseity* the self (ātman) that is quiet, and *sameness* the self that has

1. Bhagavadgītā, 2.39-72

2. Bhagavadgītā, 18.30

3. Bhagavadgītā, c17-18

different selves in successive rebirths. Identifying people by a self that is born over and over again is like giving them an incomplete and illusory identity.

The *ipseity* of the virtuous should be that of the person who has the best of virtues, or the best of life, not someone who only has the virtue of some important birth compared to others.

Yoga thus improves what sāmkhya declares of virtues. The virtue of not being reborn identifies the lord and makes it possible to differentiate a person who is, for example, a brahmin because of birth and person who is a brahmin because of actions. Being born sattvic is unimportant in comparison to acting from oneself in a sattvic way.

The tradition of yoga speaks of the virtue of not being reborn as mokṣa, liberation and freedom. Mokṣa is the dharma that exceeds the three or four dharmas based on guṇas. And Mahābhārata represents the dharma of freedom not only with īśvara Kṛṣṇa and the samādhi of the yogis but also with characters who are neither divine nor human but fabulous animals, such as snakes and herons.⁴

The freedom of yoga is valid for all varṇas or castes. To be born out of oneself, so to speak, is the best in whatever place of the social hierarchy that could occur. In terms of identity, *ipseity* is the most valuable trait of people, and those who know how to show themselves with it belong to all the three regions of the world (lokatraya).

So, politics can define the virtues and make those who are born kṣatriyas rajasic or brahmins sattvic, but the virtues should also be defined by the quietude of action.

Yoga shows the virtues in this second way. It speaks of the dharma that precedes the dharma of varṇas to show quietude *in action*, and not merely outside of it.⁵

Now let us compare this with what Aristotle wrote about action, ethics, and politics around the same time.

In the 4th century BCE Aristotle considers the ends of actions (praxis), calls them goods, and affirms that some actions seek goods that are independent of the actions and others seek goods which are loved by themselves (hautoū) and are inseparable of actions: productive actions, and actions that become virtuous.⁶

Here politics has a broad vision and classifies virtues according to the parts of social life that are necessary for the city to function and includes the productive in this scheme. Ethics (ethikè) is a point of view created by Aristotle, regards virtues as the good people attain by themselves, and suggests that politics should try to see virtues in this way as well.

Ethical virtues are defined by the affections or feelings of people, for example kindness, generosity, friendship, while demanding that in all virtues there should be prudence, that is, a sense of reason and the intellect capable of recognizing truth. In this way Aristotle displays the ethical sense of twelve virtues considering

4. Mahābhārata, 3.175-8, 12.162-8

5. Bhagavadgītā, 18.66

6. Nicomachean Ethics, cc 1-3

the “means” between excess and defect and marks the difference with the political virtues.

Political it is to recognize four virtues out of three social classes (workers, warriors, and “guardians”) precisely as Plato does in the *Politeía/Republic*. Mark that Plato knows nothing about an *ethikè* point of view.

Aristotle philosophy culminates with the very peculiar thesis that ethical virtues are recognized by affections or feelings and do not depend on knowing what the *noûs* intellect is as such. Prudence is not wisdom. *The virtue of wisdom or contemplation* can lead a person’s intellect along a path much higher than the path of ethical and political life. *Noûs* knows of itself and the wise recognizes its peculiar autonomy (*autárkeia*).⁷

In this way the sense of *ipseity* of Aristotle’s ethics came to us. The one who performs the action, the self (*autós*), cannot be omitted when considering the causes and principles of action. And ethical virtues, which do not separate good and action, identify this protagonist and show the *ipseity* and freedom of the person. In truth, only the virtuous are free the Stoics will later say.⁸

But this ethics does not include the virtue of activity without action or *the theoretical/contemplative activity*. The activity (*enérgeia*) of quietude or leisure is dianoetic or intellectual, and not ethical or practical. And just in this manner is that the *ethikè* does not go far with its alternative proposal to politics, nor does it seem to propose anything but almost the same politics of virtues that come with the *Republic*. What was missing there to make ethics not independent of the politics that it was intending to improve?

The West follows its own path in binding action to the self that came to be named the *agent of action*. What happens after the Greeks depends on the modern biblical-spiritual thought, which is to be kept out of ancient literature. But the ancient should be interpreted as a whole, with its own sense and unity, so that if the Greek version of the ethics of virtues is not complete, it should be fair to account for some other contemporary version as complementary.

There is no reason to rule out another such version. The Greeks came to India with Alexander the Great (Hydaspes 326 BCE) surely speaking divinely of the virtues (the best of human virtues receives the love of the gods⁹). But also showing the limitations of their own certainties. Which in turn could very likely lead the Eastern theme of *varṇas* and rebirths to make room for yet another sense of ethics to better understand the virtues.

Hellenism in NW India saw several centuries of prestige and development, and the Indian emperor Aśoka (270-232 BCE) gave proof of it in his well-known stone edicts written in Sanskrit, Greek and other languages. Scholars hold that *Mahābhārata* began to be created *circa* 2nd century BCE and precisely in NW India,

7. Nicomachean Ethics, 10.7

8. The agent of action is not a cause but a principle of the self, and as such Ricoeur names it *ipseity*, cf Ricoeur 1990, Ch 4.

9. Nicomachean Ethics, 10.8

close the area of Hastināpūra and Indraprastha.¹⁰

Particularly the sāmkhya version of guṇas and varṇas seems in many ways to accommodate a sense of the virtues as considered by the Greeks, and the Aristotelians. The union of karman and guṇa sattva, action and virtue, here again speaks of an action bound to a self or ātman and free from the dharma of birth and nature. In Bhagavadgītā virtue is sattvic action, action done according to a particular type of “mean” that is the good of human action.

Just as the life of the Greek contemplative sages falls outside ethics but depends on politics to belong to the forms of social life, so the brahmins also depend on the politics of the varṇas. Brahmins are to be born so, and there may well happen to be brahmins who, despite being sattvic, have nothing of the guṇa sattva or goodness in their behavior. Thanks to birth, one could be a sattvic brahmin and yet a very bad person indeed.¹¹

A sense of the sattva a little more meaningful than what sāmkhya suggests is here necessary. And this sense comes with the Brahman of the ātman, the lord of yoga Kṛṣṇa, the mokṣadharmā, the quietude of the samādhi and the characters of some fables. People of all varṇas calling themselves yogis have this peculiar *ipse* identity.

The historical moment in India both vindicates varṇas as natural entities and identifies the good in people with a criterion better than that of varṇas. Mere being born or reborn explains much of the sattvic, but not enough. Clearly, the Greeks came with a similar way of thinking, that of desiring to see politics as from ethics, and the Indians will have their own and original solutions to the common problems.

There is a different *ipseity* then in sāmkhya-yoga than in the ethics of the Greeks of the 4th century BCE. The yogi acting according to it will not say that the working life sets the highest virtue and would let the self have the last word on that.

In yoga, ethics does not come with a political limitation but speaks of virtue, the sattvic, equally in all varṇas.

Yoga gives up the fruits of action, karmaphalatyāga, and this coincides with the Greek concern for the good in action itself and not in what action can produce¹². It is worth asking then why Aristotle failed to come to a sense of personal *ipseity* like that found in the yoga in classic India.

The explanation should be political. The Greek world did not allow to give ethics the scope of politics. There were no castes in Athens or in the Greek cities, but the Greek way of understanding virtues did not make a virtue the overcoming of rebirths. On the contrary, as far as the subject was discussed with Plato and the Pythagoreans, rebirth was a good thing, an opportunity to rectify the evils and injustices of life, and justifies giving the rulers an identity of birth exactly like that

10. The Maurya kings (322-184 BCE) caused a reaction of brahmins, who likely began the creation of the Mahābhārata as we know it; by then the Greek had established in NW India the sense of rationality or rational discussion. Cf J Bronkhorst 2007 pp 94-111; 2016 pp256-302.

11. Mahābhārata, 12.162-8

12. Nicomachean Ethics, 1.2

taught in the Republic.¹³

Aristotle omits any mention of rebirths, and this certainly brings him closer to overcoming them. The message to Platonism should be noticeably clear: politics is to be based on ethics, on what people do with themselves, and not on simple nature and births.¹⁴ But important doubts remain. The philosopher, the theoretical or contemplative sage, is a virtuoso who integrates political life from outside ethics, and whose identity is then determined by birth or some way of organizing births.

Greek ethics then comes with a gap between the practical and the theoretical, as well as between the affective and the intellectual. And everything clearly suggests that the creator of the ethical vision of virtues did not come to question Platonism as much as necessary, however much the history of philosophy recognizes him.

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13. Republic 10.13-16, 5.8-9

14. Nicomachean Ethics, 2.1