

The Indian Demise of Cultural Relativism

[**Abstract.** Classical Indian philosophy's convergences with Western philosophy help to reveal objective canons of judgment that are transcultural, and by understanding convergences and divergences in logic, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and other areas of philosophy, we can differentiate more clearly the universal and the culturally contingent. This thesis is borne out plainly in comparing the tradition of "critical reasoning" as it has developed in the West with the "debate theory" developed within classical Indian systems. But it also holds for ethics. As parameters of good reasoning transcend individual objective to win a debate or convince an interlocutor, involving an impersonal or community point of view, so the best explanation of striking congruences of moral norms and ideals of character is that ethics too involves an impersonal perspective. When practices and norms are pushed in that direction, they do not pause for border-checks but extend to the universally human. Appreciation of this requires philosophic study of classical Indian philosophy, a subfield of the philosophy discipline that Karl Potter has helped to found and lead.]

What is universal in philosophy? Does philosophy transcend culture, and if so, how? How, in particular, is classical Indian philosophy different from the analytic philosophy practiced now? Where does philosophy fit into culture? Does culture shape philosophy? To what extent? These questions are large and general, but no satisfactory answer could, it seems, be similarly large and general. The answers lie in details of complex textual traditions, and depend on *philosophic* studies of non-Western philosophy, a subfield of the philosophy discipline that Karl Potter has helped to found, shape, and prosper in the case of classical Indian philosophy.

A deficiency in the current debate about culture and philosophy—attributable to objectivists and defenders of transcultural standards as well as to subjectivists and cultural relativists—is shocking ignorance of the two great non-Western traditions of philosophy, the Chinese and the Indian. Significant philosophic convergences and divergences occur among all three traditions. Between India and the West, themes, theses, and arguments crisscross in hundreds of patterns. But few academic philosophers know anything about Indian thought. And what they know—mainly concerning religious views—is often a distortion or

irrelevant to the questions of the objectivity of logical rules, canons of inquiry and justification, moral principles, and metaphysical argument. Cultural relativism targets the training of philosophers who are taught systems of logic, epistemology, and ethics, all as developed in the West. The worry is that these disciplines seem to be objective only from the inside. The training requires philosophers to follow just certain sets of rules. Thus in these areas—as also in ontology and metaphysics where there are intractable problems and little consensus about a “discipline”—we need illumination, I should like to argue, from an overview of non-Western theories. My contention is that classical Indian philosophy’s convergences with Western philosophy betoken objectivity and transcultural standards in just certain areas and ways. Of course, this is a topic for a book, maybe a career, and what follows is exceedingly sketchy. Nevertheless, the convergences should be attended to to achieve a vantage point on a wide range of issues about objectivity. And they may be enlisted to check not only obvious and crude provincialism but also misguided cultural relativism, as I shall outline below.

There is a widespread misimpression—as everyone in this audience doubtless knows—that Indian philosophy is thoroughly theological. One reason for this is misrepresentation: not so long ago classical Indian philosophy was in the West exclusively the province of indologists, sanskritists with no philosophic training who tended to confuse philosophy and religion and who in any case tended to favor the religious dimensions of the few philosophic texts read. The first bit of Udayana’s corpus to be translated, for example—and for decades the only part of the great philosopher’s work—was from his *Nyāyakusumañjali*, the *kārikā* portions where Udayana lays out inferences proving the existence of God. Well, then, a *pūrvapakṣin* could retort, Indian influence on philosophy of religion as a major philosophic subfield could be expected. But philosophy of religion seems steered by developments in other areas. For instance, with the invention of modal systems of logic there appeared new modal arguments for the existence of God. The downfall of Cartesian foundationalism in epistemology brought a new wave of fideism and of Christian philosophers counting certain Christian beliefs as “properly basic,” having no need of proof. These are telling examples—partly in their failure to persuade non-Christian philosophers. More importantly, contemporary philosophy of religion comprises exercises of conceptual analysis in consideration of God’s attributes and of evil, and a single conclusion is commonly drawn: the Christian concept of God cannot be accommodated to what we know. Philosophy of religion specialists tend

to assume that Indian “philosophy” (the scare quotes are important) is merely another target, subject to analytic scrutiny in the ways philosophers scrutinize Christian beliefs, with a similar outcome presumed (though still rarely labored out). The serious work is taken to lie in anthropology or cultural history (or “religious studies”). In sum, philosophers looking for arguments against cultural relativists would find little help in this arena. Udayana may have a teleological and other arguments that converge with much rational theology in the West. And Indian pantheism, or panentheism, is not without Western allies. But the overall impact of Indian religious views on contemporary philosophy seems on the side of the cultural relativists since there is so much in Hinduism that is unique, as there is in every religious tradition. In overview, conflicts are rife, conflicts both practical, as well we know, and doxastic. Peculiarities of religious practice and doctrine are mainstays of the relativists’ brief.

Furthermore, much that we recognize as philosophy seems to be tied to culture by way of religious tradition—in ethics, for instance (consider Manu), poetics (the *śānta-rasa* controversy appears, I dare say, only in the *alamkāra* literature), religious metaphysics, and other subfields. In logic and epistemology, in contrast, a judgment-constraining objectivism is striking, it seems to me. But Vaiśeṣika ontology, which seems similarly independent of a religious point of view, would nevertheless have to be handled deftly were one to try to maintain a similar objectivity in that arena. One would focus perhaps on common problems and arguments as opposed to common solutions. Ethics, poetics, and religious philosophy would require even greater subtlety of treatment. However, my own view is that in these “softer” areas too we can discern significant coalescences and learn lessons about the limits of common standards. Before I try to flesh all this out, let me say that examples here will be rather meager and unelaborated, mainly because of format but also because of this audience’s familiarity with Indian views. And before talking about epistemology and ethics in particular, I want to say something about the meaning of philosophic convergences across the board. Karl Potter’s contribution to this and similar enterprises will be addressed at the end, though the case for the significance of his efforts will be built all along.

Recognizing convergence of views arising in distinct traditions of philosophy is a starting point in answering the broad questions about culture and philosophy, not the end of inquiry, since different types of convergence are to be interpreted differently. “What explains a convergence?” is, it seems, an unavoidable question. Admittedly, some

may be satisfied simply to know whatever invariable standards there are. But good explanations maintain confidence. Furthermore, an extreme realism—the view that the objects of theory constrain thought so perfectly that all mature traditions are bound to converge—seems inadequate for all areas. Clearly some philosophic commonalities are better explained by focusing on subjective elements, a common range of emotional response, a common nature in valuing pleasure and happiness over pain and suffering, and by various exigencies of a peculiarly human form of life. My question is whether these routes require relativization to culture.

Let us consider the ontology and epistemology of perceptual report, where subjectivism is more easily dismissed than elsewhere. Here it may well be that a full-bodied realism of entities transcendent to consciousness causing such-and-such perceptual content is the best explanation not only of transcultural agreement about rocks and trees and certain standards of observation (like sight's being unreliable in poor light), but also, a level up, conspicuously, Nyāya's congruence with analytic reliabilism and causal theories of perception. However, in ethics, aesthetics, and religious philosophy, as also in logic, if there are universal canons of right judgment, this cannot be so simply a matter of constraints exercised on our faculties by physical processes and objects. The atoms composing a ten-dollar bill do not determine its character *for us*; a convention that is broadly part of a culture makes the thing a denomination of U.S. currency. Ethical characteristics such as being praise- or blameworthy can be appreciated only by a perspective aware of peculiarly human connections. It is hardly a priori, therefore, that all convergences are to be interpreted in the same way in every type of inquiry from ethics to ontology, all somehow underpinned solely by a causal realism of physical entities. Much that is of human interest is, truistically, tied to a human point of view. But, again, how much of this depends on cultural variance? The objectivity of a common subjective view and of common rules of right practice that are not culturally specific is sufficient to secure the demise of cultural relativism. A more robust realism is not required for the task.

I should like to outline a view that is, I think, broadly Wittgensteinian. This reference may strike some as working at “cross-purposes” (committing the fallacy of *arthântara*, according to Indian logic) since many following a common reading of Wittgenstein would uphold an extreme cultural relativism. Canons of judgment are justified only by the role they play within culturally established “language games.” Science may or may not escape relativization to social practices, but judgments about ethics, aesthetics, and religion clearly would not. Standards of

ethical judgment, etc., would have no foundations except in arbitrary custom. However, following S. Kripke, T. Nagel, and others and a realist reading of Wittgenstein (“realist” in a suitably wide and weak sense), I see some practices and some features of practices as non-arbitrary, determined by desiderata that societies share. In addition to being objectively constrained by being learnable—the lesson of the “private-language argument”—some cultural practices are shaped by interests that are only species- and not culture-specific. It is ironic that Wittgenstein, who so stressed the difference between the measured and measuring rods, between “results of measurement” and grammatical remarks about “forms of representation,” should be cited in support of the position that interests have reality only within a cultural practice, that objectivity is nothing but consensus. Does the consensus in a slave-holding society make it impossible to see the evil in holding slaves? In long perspective, we see progress, objectively, by several norms—or, sometimes, regression, objectively. In classical Indian epistemology and logic, for example, we see the reasons why there are developments and the direction there is, the reasons for the revision and innovation. Some expansions or reformations of ethical practices, too, and trends of societal change, line up with nothing less than the universally human. Otherwise, neither we nor anyone could discern progress nor indeed make recommendations. Vacuously, there is no art of cooking without the human institutions, which, fortunately, do vary along cultural lines. But there are transcultural constraints on good cooking nonetheless. As more is learned about health and nutrition, for example, chefs change their recipes.

Furthermore, socially established practices are separable. No one in the current debate has stressed this enough, not even Isaiah Berlin. The expatriate farm worker does not have to learn the English of the stockbroker. With other values held constant such as respect for human life, insensitivity to animals can give way to *ahimsā*. A raga as much to be appreciated now in Ohio as in Kāśī in previous centuries can be played on the sitar by a *mleccha*. Cultures are permeable, and cultural practices, while often bundled, can be unbundled and rebundled. This is important for the culture and philosophy debate, and helps us to see why philosophic convergences are exciting despite—maybe I should say because of—their societal origins.

Compare (a) the tradition of “critical reasoning” as it has developed in the West from Aristotle to modern textbooks of informal logic, with (b) the “debate theory” developed by Naiyāyikas and Buddhists and philosophers of other classical Indian schools. There are conventions that

differ, such as the *a-prāpta-kāla* fallacy exemplified in a violation of the peculiar order of statements in the five-part form of an “inference for others,” *parārthānumāna*, which would appear to have no counterpart in the West. But there is an amazing amount of convergence in the listing of fallacies and in the overall sense conveyed of the nature of a cogent argument, as well as, to be sure, a common insistence on clarity. Convergences sometimes appear only appropriately abstracted. But there are also concrete instances. The *pratibandhi* fallacy in the Sanskrit tradition is in every relevant way identical to *tu quoque* of the Western tradition: pointing to an opponent’s committing the mistake that one oneself commits does not redeem the mistake in either theory. This seems to me to be objectively right, as it did to theorists hundreds of years ago both in the *écoles* of Paris and the *ṭols* of Bengal. Why? Wittgenstein has taught us that we need not posit a system of transcendental railways to understand the universal repeatability of games we invent. This would explain why chess is learnable by anyone from any background though it was presumably invented within some very particular cultural space. Socially established practices have rules, and there are internal connections between understanding and behavior. But this does not carry us far enough. For, why shouldn’t the Indian and Western practices have different rules, like the different rules in baseball and cricket? Why is it—as is evident with the *pratibandhi* fallacy and in many other instances—that the same games are invented? In both traditions, we have the same high-order rule of what appears to be a discipline of “good reasoning.” Why would this convention come about in cultures that are entirely distinct along the lines used by ethnographers, location, history, language, etc.? This is difficult for the cultural relativist to explain. The best explanation seems to be that canons of good reasoning transcend individual objective. People sometimes simply want to win a debate or convince an interlocutor. But sometimes we want to discover the truth or judge as *madhyastha*, as “umpire,” public reasoning fairly. It is important that in both traditions there is a distinction between (a) “debate with an eye to the truth” (*vāda* matching “scientific inquiry”) and (b) rhetorical stratagems to be used to sway an audience. Good reasoning transcends the merely cultural and belongs to a community in a deeper sense than “culture” in the pluralizable use of the word where there are said to be many cultures. As centered on discovering the truth, the two traditions articulate common rules of evidence if not also procedure. Like the institution of counting, different societies stipulate the same rules presumably because transculturally we share common purposes growing

out of a common human nature, a common endowment of desires and needs and a basic behavioral repertoire. It matters not a whit in what language one counts or the notation. Similarly, the activities of human beings trying to arrive at right views through argument simply does not admit much leeway in the development of skills and tools, not even much cultural coloring. (This is then unlike music and art where cultural coloring is more important, echoes and repetitions stacking up more favorably against technical principles.) Modus ponens is universally a valid inference, and “begging the question” (*anyonyâśraya*) is universally a bad move, given that we would evaluate reasoning from an impersonal point of view, as do logicians in both traditions.¹

Let us turn to the hard case, the subject most hotly contested within the culture and philosophy debate, ethics and canons of right ethical judgment including which human characteristics are to be judged virtues and which vices and why. This is an area where commentators on both sides—in the West and in India—have found the other side to be deficient both in what has been proposed and in what has not, and also where to other commentators cross-societal judgments according to standards forged in foreign cultures have looked particularly ethnocentric. This then becomes a basis for panic, for recoil and skepticism about one’s own standards in a recognition that the bizarre and irrational seen in the other culture may be the result of—as seen from the other perspective—the “bizarre” and “irrational” in one’s own. But human beings should be taught to see commonalities as well as differences. Were, for example, Western ethicists to become familiar with classical Indian culture as portrayed in the great epics, the Purāṇas, the *Hitôpadeśa*, the broadly Vedāntic literature, they could hardly miss a certain uniformity of moral standards and ideals of character commonly recognized in classical Indian society. Indeed, the more one knows, the more the best Western values seem a

1. That there is some leeway here is not to be denied, some small scope for cultural explanations. The five-step paradigm of a good inference in Nyāya, for example, can be *reconstructed* as depending on *modus ponens*, but *modus ponens* is not explicitly identified in Nyāya as an inference rule. In other words, it is perfectly legitimate to explicate the Naiyāyika pattern by saying that it is a two-step inferential pattern, universal instantiation followed by *modus ponens*: given (x) ($Fx \rightarrow Gx$) and *Fa*, it follows that *Ga* by UI and MP. But Nyāya recognizes only an embedded version of MP. This fact itself signals a philosophic issue about induction and systems of natural reasoning—none of which can be addressed in a brief space.

subset. Even political values such as justice, tolerance, and liberty are hardly exclusively Western, any more than compassion and self-sacrifice are exclusively Buddhist or Jaina. How ethnocentric are those who group together all true values as Western and rational as opposed to an irrational Asian set! It's embarrassing. In my view, the best explanation of the prominent convergences we find is that ethics, like logic, involves an impersonal evaluative perspective, and when practices are pushed in that direction, they do not stop at borders but extend to the universally human.

In this regard, the life and writings of Ram Mohan Roy are instructive. All his life Roy remained a true Vedāntin in the sense of subscribing to a philosophy of Brahman, but also condemned the practice of "suttee." Due to his and others' efforts the Hindu ideal of the "good wife" was irreversibly changed. Was Roy's judgment parochial? Did he sacrifice his Indianness and become so anglicized that only with a pair of English eyeglasses did he see suttee as wrong? This is what ethnocentric Westerners might like to believe. But no, Roy's writings show us intimately a process of reflection on an array of norms and practices among Hindus, Muslims, and Englishmen, and an arriving at, by taking an impersonal point of view, his own attitudes about what to foster and what not, what to tolerate and what to oppose. Roy's deliberations were of course informed by first-hand familiarity with the high and low cultures of the early nineteenth century, a familiarity made possible in part by a genius for learning languages (Arabic, Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, and English, in addition to his native Bengali, whose grammar he was among the first to systemize). But Roy's epistemically privileged vantage point concerning customs of the diverse communities of Bengal and Delhi does not shape—at least, does not shape nearly so much as does a uniformly moral point of view—his deliberations about policy and his commentary on customs. Note that Roy's most biting criticism is of practices of the English such as encouraging Christian conversion through job offers (that is, in his writings in English—the work in Bengali I have not read). Roy's was not an arbitrary view; otherwise, he would not have been able to defend it among his diverse audiences. He listened to and argued with his compatriots, both English and Indian. His moral and political deliberation was not private but social in a broad and transcultural way. By not confining himself to any one cultural inheritance, Roy was led beyond the merely cultural. He found his own mix of values, and "fathered," as it is said, a broader, more inclusive society, "secular" in the contemporary Indian sense.

Many moral norms are the product of contingent social circumstance

and have changed, or will change, with the broadening of sympathies or other factors. Maybe in fact all norms evolve as social expedients. Morality, it may be argued, depends on the evolution of social interests, restrictions on individual actions defensible from a community point of view, and coöperative possibilities secured only by the existence of community. But this does not mean that there are not objective moral norms. Condemnation of murder, for instance, may be socially expedient, but it is also common to practically every society for obvious reasons and thus objective in a sense sufficient to refute the cultural relativist.

Let me address briefly the complication of moral pluralism, which is, I suspect, where the cultural relativists get their thunder. Both theoretically and practically, it is difficult to list and weigh correctly all possibly relevant factors for moral judgment since life circumstances vary enormously and along many different lines. But this does not mean that there are no objective standards but rather that in some situations too many. In other words, moral objectivism is compatible with competition among moral values, and recognizing moral pluralism makes it easy to see why we might not all agree. The point is not, however, simply that moral objectivism does not require consensus, since lack of consensus could be explained by cognitive deficiencies. The point is that a plurality of moral values, each exerting universally its pull, make moral and political deliberation dependent on situation-specific factors that normally a moral agent herself or himself is in the best position to know. Typically, one weighs and adjusts a range of values—friendship, gratitude, sympathy, self-development—where the right mix is individually fixed because of first-person epistemic privilege concerning possible courses of action. Furthermore, normally an agent is epistemically privileged about her own desires and interests, which presumably would in most situations carry some moral weight. Nevertheless, as we see in the case of Roy's deliberations as well as presumably some of our own, a mix arrived at can be defended transculturally, since people can and do consider their own and others' interests from an impersonal point of view.

Against the non-holistic view of culture that I have been promoting, a *pūrvapakṣin* might claim that I miss the centrality of, for example, caste to Hindu society. There is in fact, she might contend, a whole nexus of beliefs and practices—rebirth, karma, station in society and stage of life, performance of rituals, and, perhaps most prominently, pride in being *śiṣṭa*, “acculturated,” “learned” or “taught” in Vedic traditions of learning. (A footnote: Gaṅgeśa, the great Naiyāyika of the fourteenth

century, reserves the term *śiṣṭa* for those learned in the ways of Hindu culture, not counting any Buddhist “cultured” in this sense though the person had studied the Vedas, was charitable, etc.—in the *maṅgala-vāda* of his *Tattvacintāmaṇi*.) There may be changes of practice or mores along a culture’s peripheries, but core values prove resilient. Thus we would have a social model like the Quinean’s web of belief. As with principles of logic, central attitudes and practices would resist change. New practices and attitudes—for example, concerning widows—could change without much affecting the center out of which numerous practices flow. The cultural relativist and the traditional brahmin may be strange bedfellows, but philosophically they seem allied. As Arthur Danto declared with regard to the ethics of the *Gītā*, the core is “unavailable” to the outsider, to anyone not properly acculturated, someone who, for example, does not accept karma and rebirth.

The fallacy of this *pūrvapakṣa* can be seen by reflecting on the nature of cultural practices and principally on the fact that, by definition, a cultural practice is learned. This means that different practices can be learned and different norms adopted. Also, as I have already pointed out, bundles of practices are subject to unbundling and rebundling, another word for reform, as with the abolition of slavery. A culture is like a Humean self except without a body or personal memory. There are no genes for cultural practices, but only genes that make the human sorts of learning possible. Fortunately, we need not learn everything at once. We never learn the whole of a language—there are spaces of scientific English that are as unintelligible to me as Devanāgarī to someone who has not learned the script—we become masters of a great plurality of socially established practices. Historically, there are particular bundles that have marched along without much interruption, it may seem. And societies seem to encourage a kind of nationalistic self-admiration that gives bundles a kind of unity. However, we should not mistake tribalism for cultural essentialism. Admittedly, much here is properly the subject of social science. But whatever the right genetic and anthropological view, cultures are bundles of *non-mutually entailing* practices, such as bowling and wine-tasting, ghazals and mandi. There are no coherence relations that tie a cultural periphery to a core. The whole picture is wrong.

The culture of the Indian subcontinent is as much a “melting pot” as that of the Americas. “Medea’s cauldron” might be a better metaphor, a stew of diversity and recombination restoring youth. Caste has been opposed in every period of Indian civilization, and there is no essential tie between Hinduism and caste. Even the *dharma-śāstra* authors such as

Manu, who uphold caste in the most fundamental fashion, admit a distinction between universal duties binding everyone and duties restricted by preconditions such as caste, *sādhāraṇa* and *viśeṣa dharma*. The very distinction implies that *viśeṣa dharma* could cease while the *sādhāraṇa* would hold so long as there were any society. The *dharma-sāstra* is not my favorite genre of Sanskrit literature, but here the authors have the basic point right.

This paper has sketched a view and a project concerning philosophic convergences, about lessons to be learned about transculturally objective canons of judgment. What has Karl Potter contributed here? Well, everything. Not only does his *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* make available the details of the Indian theories that permit discernment of congruences, he has helped found the field, or philosophy subfield, of the philosophic study of Indian philosophy, without which, too, no project or view such as I have sketched could fly. The willingness Potter has shown—indeed his insistence—on hazarding evaluative judgments and large-scale interpretations is an essential prerequisite (*adhikāra*) of his and our discipline. It has to be a philosophic study, not mere history, that is required to make clear whatever universal canons there are, because bare uninterpreted convergences are too exposed to doubt and skepticism. We have to be able to explain why they are there. Personally, I sometimes think that Potter shows bad influence from Quine and Goodman, but this does not prevent him from recognizing convergences, or, more importantly, in making us evaluate Indian systems. The project I have sketched of showing the wrongheadedness of cultural relativism is just one of his legacies, in sum, made possible by his attending to philosophic details from a philosophic perspective.

An addendum and parting shot at the opposition. As mentioned, most of us are acutely aware of our philosophy colleagues' ignorance of Indian philosophies, which is, particularly after the labor of Potter and others, disappointing. My own take is that much of the problem is due to the prevalence of cultural relativism, the presumption being that Indian philosophy has to be very different. Here ethnocentrism is evident. An assumption of "otherness" blocks interest on the part of philosophers. Too much history would have to be learned, and connections to current interests seem unlikely. Thus by opposing cultural relativism in the way outlined here a larger goal of our subfield may be served, broader recognition of classical Indian accomplishment and better integration into a standard philosophy curriculum.

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