

An East and West Divide or Convergence? Similarities between Ancient Indian and Greek Philosophy on Human Flourishing

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There is a common assumption that the ancient philosophies of Greece and India are vastly different; the former conceived of as more 'logical', the latter as more 'mystical'. Any parallels between the two civilisations are often attributed to Plato or Pre-Socratic thinkers, who are considered to be 'more eastern' in their outlook. This paper will assess the aforementioned assumption by examining basic ideas about human flourishing in both cultures. What does it mean to 'live well' and how is this related to 'happiness'? These are basic questions underlying most conceptions of human flourishing. In this paper I will examine these questions with specific reference to Plato, Aristotle and ancient Indian philosophical thought, and will draw attention to particular implications of this investigation.

There is a common supposition that the ancient philosophies of Greece and India are vastly different; the former conceived of as more 'logical', the latter as more 'mystical' (for example, see Guthrie, 1965; Dodds, 1951). In his introduction to *A History of Philosophy: Volume I, Greece and Rome*, Copleston asserts that:

this philosophy of the Greeks was really their own achievement, the fruit of their own vigour and freshness of mind, just as their literature and art were their own achievement. We must not allow the laudable desire of taking into account possible non-Greek influence to lead us to exaggerate the importance of that influence and to underestimate the originality of the Greek mind (Copleston, 1946, p. 11).

In other words, though we can and should accept that the Greeks' profound work influenced the ideas of many others, it seems implausible to suggest that they themselves were influenced by any group.

Copleston's observation is not uncommon among scholars. Two decades later, Guthrie stated 'The motives and methods of the Indian schools, and the theological and mystical background of their thought, are so utterly different from those of the Greeks that there is little profit in the comparison' (Guthrie, 1965, p. 53).

Any parallels between the two civilisations are often attributed to Plato or Pre-Socratic thinkers, who are considered to be 'more eastern' in their outlook. This paper challenges the aforementioned assumptions, and in the subsequent sections I will show that there are striking similarities between ancient Indian and Greek

philosophies, some of which will be outlined in this paper. Specifically, I will examine works of Plato and Aristotle, as well as Indian philosophy, in relation to the idea of human flourishing, and will briefly identify some implications of these similarities.

A NOTE ON THE USE OF THE TERM 'INDIAN' PHILOSOPHY

It is necessary to explain the term 'Indian' philosophy, as it will be used throughout this work. In discussing ancient Indian philosophy, I am referring to a large body of philosophies, which dominated Indian thought from the Vedic Period through the Epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to various 'schools' of thought such as the Sāṃkhya and Yoga, and perhaps, some Buddhist thought. These periods range from 1500 B.C.-200 A.D., though these dates are at best, very rough estimations, as the writings themselves were continuous sets of thought, which remained un-authored, and largely undated. As Radhakrishnan writes, '... so unhistorical, or perhaps so ultra-philosophical, was the nature of the ancient Indian, that we know more about the philosophies than about the philosophers' (Radhakrishnan, 1999, p. 57). This is perhaps a mark of Indian philosophy; that is, its reverence for and emphasis upon 'truths' and ideas rather than for the ephemeral bodies who expounded them. All these philosophies, barring Buddhism, either accept as authority, derive from, or complement the most ancient philosophical texts in India, the *Vedas*, which are sometimes referred to as ancient 'Hindu' scriptures. It may seem that the discussion is dominated by 'Hindu' texts, but the emphasis on *ancient* Indian philosophy suggests that the discussion will centre around a particular period of time; the 'ancient' philosophies of India were primarily (what is now referred to as) 'Hindu' philosophy.

SIMILARITIES

Regardless of whether they are considered to be coincidence¹ or conscious², McEvilley observes that there is an array of parallel between Indian and Greek thought, (McEvilley, 2002, p. xx). Yet, most thinkers don't actually appear convinced by any such links, even though Plato's ideas are frequently considered to have more of a 'spiritual element', (with comparison to Aristotle). Instead, it is speculated that Plato's influence naturally came from the Pythagorean's.³ Though the philosophical foundations of this group will not be discussed in detail, for the purposes of this work, it is significant to acknowledge that 'for the Pythagoreans philosophy was tied up with a way of life, and intellectual endeavour was connected to an ideal of fulfilment. Their values included such typically Greek values as limit, moderation and order ...' (Barrow, 2007, p. 20). Barrow's observation is important for one particular reason: that being that although the ideas of the Pythagorean's were more mystical in nature, their ideas were still representative of 'typically Greek values'. In other words, their ideas weren't a 'drop of alien blood in Greek veins,' as it has been wrongly alleged (Rohde cited in McEvilley, 2002, p. 338). This is a crucial shift from those that believe that there are particular philosophers within the Greek tradition that are 'more Greek' than others. Though it seems reasonable to deduce that one may never know for certain the particular influences upon Plato's thinking, Barrow rightly admits that

working this out 'is a matter of interpreting and extrapolating from his own texts ...' (Barrow, 2007, p. 13). This will be done in the sections below.

SOME ASSUMPTIONS

As in any philosophical tradition, there are particular claims put forth, which are later established as axioms. These claims and the concepts they encompass are thoroughly detailed and complex; encompassing rich ideas and arguments which entire theses could be dedicated. This is very much the case for the notion of 'human flourishing'. One could dedicate an entire thesis to the idea of 'human flourishing'; a thorough examination into ancient Greek and Indian philosophies on the concept is no doubt a complex task which is beyond the scope of this paper. So for the purposes of this work, I will establish a few basic points concerning the notion of 'human flourishing'; I will make these assumptions explicit below.

For one, although there is often emphasis placed upon the differences in the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato, there are also fundamental similarities.⁴ More specifically, I take for granted that the two shared basic teleological and metaphysical views about human beings, such as the idea that there is structure to the world 'which exists independently of human opinion or desire' (Wild, 1960, p. 74). The two (Plato and Aristotle) share the teleological view that all humans endeavour to obtain 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*), and that the performance of actions is a means of achieving 'happiness'. In this way, both thinkers set out to outline the best sort of life worth living; for, they both take for granted that human flourishing consists in leading a good life, and that a person who leads a 'good life' is 'happy'. Hence, they both emphasise that a person's 'way of life' largely determines whether or not she flourishes (Plato, 1993, 353d-e; Aristotle, 1925, NE 1.4 1095a18). For this reason, much time is spent on looking at the 'path' that a person should follow in order to secure happiness: the 'good life'.

So far the above can be said to be in line with ancient Indian philosophy. Most Indian philosophers consider there to be one ultimate 'end', at which all activities aim. However, unlike Aristotle and Plato, the ancient Indians emphasised that though the 'goal' may be one, there are many ways to reach it. And so, they talk about three particular 'paths' which are known as *jñāna* Yoga, *karma* Yoga, *bhakti* Yoga, representing the path of knowledge, the path of action and the path of devotion, respectively. Hence a person's life and duties are very much shaped by this path. Accordingly, there isn't one 'good life', nor is any one path superior to the others.⁵

The final assumption above is a deviation from both Plato and Aristotle, who despite their fundamental similarities emphasised two different paths; arguing that the good life consisted in either the life of activity or the life of contemplation. Indian philosophy, on the other hand, acknowledges that people often differ in their beliefs, habits, understandings, etc, and so with such a variety of people, there cannot be a 'one size fits all' path which underscores a good life.

Much emphasis has been placed upon establishing the best 'path' that a pursuit of happiness ought to tread: is a life of deep philosophical contemplation inferior to a life of active service to mankind? This paper will not assess this, for, although there are many theories on the best sort of life that one should live, there is perhaps a more fundamental element of human flourishing within these ancient philosophies which is often overlooked: that, one's 'way of life' is determined by one's *psyche*⁶.

THE GUNAS AND THE *PSYCHĒ*

In the *Republic* Plato gives a lot of importance to the divisions within the *psychē*, claiming that they are fundamental to understanding *dikaionē* (righteousness) (see Plato, 1993, 353d-e). Closely studying ancient Greek and Indian texts, McEvelley observes that Plato's tripartite notion of the *psychē* presented in the *Republic* (439c-441a) (which is parallel to the divisions within society) is similar to the idea of the three *Gunas* (a Sanskrit word which connotes 'qualities' or 'attributes') described by various Indian schools of thought (McEvelley, 2002).⁷ Plato describes the rational, passionate and appetitive elements, which McEvelley purports corresponds in Indian tradition, to the *sattvic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic* elements of the 'human personality' (p. 182).⁸

At the most basic level, the *Gunas* represent the characteristics of purity (*sattva*), activity (*rajas*), lethargy (*tamas*) (Raju, 1960). However, these aren't by any means meant to be direct translations of the concepts, as they are identified using various descriptions. They can primarily be distinguished as follows: *sattva* is that which provides illumination and is closely associated with concepts such as 'purity', 'harmony', 'goodness'; *rajas* is considered to be the passionate element, which brings about restlessness, and outward movement; *tamas* represents the element of sloth and is related to concepts such as dullness and inertia (Radhakrishnan, 1948; Raju, 1960).

Of importance to this paper is the relationship between the *Gunas* and human beings. As with other types of 'matter' or creation, it is theorised that humans also contain the *Gunas* and that humans are, to a certain extent, 'bound' by them. That is, who you are and the type of life you lead is said to be the result of the interaction between the *Gunas* (Radhakrishnan, 1999). The *Bhagavadgītā* explicitly outlines the significance of these qualities in human life; the *Gunas* take on an ethical sense, with *sattva* translated as 'goodness', *rajas* as 'passion' and *tamas* as 'dullness' (Radhakrishnan, 1948, p. 316). Interestingly, *sattva* appears to be given preference as a means to happiness, followed by *rajas*, and with a note of caution on the *tamasic* element. Of significance, we are not told to get 'rid of' the *tamasic* element, but rather to 'rise above' the limitations of this quality; this may be due to the belief that one cannot dispose of any of these elements as they are the basic constituents of one's nature.

Although McEvelley (2002) explains that the *Gunas* are similar to the divisions of the *psychē* which Plato describes in his *Republic*, this might be misleading. For, the *Gunas* aren't aspects that develop *out of* a soul or human life, and they aren't particular to human beings. And so, it isn't the case that because there is a 'soul' therefore there are *Gunas*, rather these qualities are said to exist in all forms of matter.⁹ Nonetheless, an examination into Plato's discussion of the three faculties and the *Gunas* make the similarities between the Indian and Greek notions more apparent.¹⁰ For one, Plato would have agreed that the way in which a person leads her life is very much determined by these faculties. For this reason, he places much importance on these three elements, arguing that *dikaionē* and other virtues are determined by ones 'state of mind' (see Waterfield, 1993, p. xxxvi). Plato also indicates that a person can be, to a certain extent, controlled by a particular faculty, 'And we know that anyone whose predilection tends strongly in a single direction has correspondingly less desire for other things' (Plato, 1993, 485d), in the same way that the *Gita* explains that one of the elements may dominate over the other two.¹¹ This point is significant as it underpins part of Plato's educational ideal: that it ought to strengthen the 'rational' faculty. For, if there is a particular element that is considered

to be of great consequence, it would seem logical that Plato emphasises the education of this particular element. And similar to the *Gita*, Plato stresses the importance of the 'rational' faculty, insisting that it should dominate, followed by the 'passionate' element, and that if this happens, then the desirous/appetitive element will fall under the command of these. Waterfield explains Plato's underlying position here: 'people must be prevented from feeding their baser parts too often' (Waterfield, 1993, p. xxxviii).

Though, that is not to say that a person should depend entirely upon one aspect alone, as the three elements are qualities that all beings need, to a certain extent. That is, the three elements serve different purposes: *tamas* longs to satisfy the appetite, *rajas* is motivated into action and dedication, while the element of *sattva* guides a person towards goodness and intellectual knowledge. Accordingly, one particular element cannot replace another, as all have to be harnessed towards the betterment of the individual. So, for example, if a person is particularly led by *sattva*, it is not necessarily to her benefit to subdue or ignore the other two facets; if she ignores her appetitive element, she may end up starving herself of food and water, under the pretext that she is 'overcoming' these desires. But it is important to point out that neither Plato nor the *Bhagavadgītā* endorse such an extreme ascetic lifestyle.

If the elements are neither meant to be eradicated nor to be fully relied upon, then what is the proper use of them? McEvelley explains that 'the soul is to arrive at an inner balance of its three elements in which reason dominates, ambition serves reason, and the appetites are submissive, lacking fuel to fire them up' (McEvelley, 2002, p. 186). He shows how Patanjali's¹² explanation of the 'mind', as dependent upon the interaction between the three *Gunās*, also correlates to Plato's view above: 'The nature of the mind's activity depends on how the three qualities are interacting ... The opposing qualities—*rajas*, activity, and *tamas*, passivity—are finally brought, through austerities and ethical practices, into balance in which reason (*sattva*) is the ruling element' (*ibid.*).

IMPETURBABILITY

The *Bhagavadgītā* theorises that ideally, a person should move beyond the pull and attachment to the *Gunās*. The metaphysical point being made here is that a person isn't simply these three qualities; she is something 'more' than this, and the realisation of this point as well as the dissociation to these three faculties allows a person to achieve happiness. One need not accept the metaphysical claims in order to appreciate the practical point being made: that the highest good for a person is to lead a life where she isn't a slave to her emotions, desires (even the 'desire' for 'goodness'), whims, etc. This notion is often referred to as imperturbability, and reveals another similarity between Indian and Greek philosophy. The concept of imperturbability¹³ relates to a particular attitude 'which regards with the same emotion or valuation those events which are to one's personal worldly advantage—such as pleasures and fulfilled intentions—and those which are not—such as pains and frustrated intentions' (McEvelley, 2002, p. 595). An examination into Indian philosophy readily reveals the importance placed upon this notion.¹⁴ This concept is closely aligned with the theory of the *Gunās*; it is suggested that if these three elements were in balance with each other then imperturbability would ensue.

Think of this one point ... Man is happy at one time, miserable at another. He is afraid one moment and courageous at another. Why? Because he is shaped by the *Gunas*. They alone can transform man from one phase to another like this... It is always out of balance (Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, 2002, p. 241).

The suggestion being put forth here is that one ought to maintain a state of 'internal' equanimity by getting beyond the fluctuations of life; this can easily be interpreted as imperturbability. Similarly, Waterfield explains that in the *Republic*, *dikaiosonē* involves 'harmony or concord between the three parts of the mind under the rule of reason' (Waterfield, 1993, p. xxxix).

It was suggested above that the notion of imperturbability is fairly uncontroversial in Indian philosophy, but interestingly enough, McEvelley suggests that this was the case for Greek philosophers as well, and that this stance corresponds to the Greek notion of *ataraxia* (McEvelley, 2002, p. 595). However, McEvelley claims that Aristotle doesn't necessarily endorse imperturbability, as this conflicts with Aristotle's idea that people should perform actions with 'full-feeling'; in particular, McEvelley notes that 'he does not recommend that his students attempt to extirpate the passions' (p. 600). But there are several assumptions being made here that need to be looked at more carefully. For one, McEvelley wrongly assumes that imperturbability automatically entails that one become indifferent to life. He considers this as a 'transcendentalist approach', in which one becomes 'dead to this world', and associates this with Platonism, Neoplatonism, the Vedanta and schools of Mahayana Buddhism (p. 596). Yet, there are many examples, in particular within Plato's *Republic*, which suggest that a person be fully engaged in 'this life'. The suggestion which is made both in Plato's *Republic* as well as in the *Gita* is that a person ought to live in a spirit of lifelong service to their community; and that one's duties should always be fulfilled with the benefit of others in mind (Plato, 1993, 519c-520d, 540a-b). These points suggest that these thinkers aren't concerned with creating a society of ascetics who live in the forest, dissociated from the world; on the contrary it seems these views endorse an altruistic vision of human flourishing which is very much based in the world we live in.

Another assumption that McEvelley makes is that imperturbability demands the complete eradication of passions, and for this reason he says that Aristotle would not have endorsed this. However, within the doctrine of the *Gunas*, it is acknowledged that one cannot get rid of *rajas* (the passionate element). The 'passionate' element is an important facet; it is what stirs a person into action. Plato gives importance to this element with his insistence that it be 'properly educated' so as to be in balance with a person's 'rational' element (or what in Indian philosophy is identified as *sattva*). Accordingly, it is not that the passions are to be discarded; rather they are channelled into productivity. Aristotle would have most certainly agreed with this view, indicating that the passions need not be cast aside, but they do need to be modified (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 78). Hence these so-called 'differing' views are actually in line with one another.

One implication of this view is that Aristotle and Plato, as well as those Indian philosophers who endorsed the theory of the *Gunas* felt that an action should be performed with 'full-feeling'. However, McEvelley (2002) seems to imply that the notion of 'full-feeling' is something that is *particular* to Aristotle. This misperception might be rooted in the idea that Aristotle emphasised that one should express 'emotion'¹⁵ whereas Plato supposedly endorsed the view that emotions should be

suppressed. This assumption is misleading, though. For one, Aristotle didn't endorse a view of a person who was 'emotional' (in the narrow sense).¹⁶ For, there is a difference between expressing an emotion and being emotional. Whereas, Aristotle views emotions as 'essential forces motivating to virtuous action,' he also acknowledges that emotions aren't always correct, and that above all else, they need to be guided by 'reason' (Nussbaum, 1994, pp. 94-96). And so expressing emotion, where one's higher faculty sees fit, is different from 'being emotional' which is often considered to be unnecessary or irrational. For this reason, we are told that the passionate or *rajasic* element within us must fall into line with the rational or *sattvic* element. Hence the notion of 'full-feeling' doesn't mean that one ought to perform an action with a full bout of emotions, but rather, whatever work one undertakes, the three elements are in harmony with that. Consequently, it seems as though Aristotle wouldn't have rejected the notion of imperturbability.

IMPLICATIONS

An important point that one can make with more certainty, is that this paper debunks the myth that Indian or 'Oriental' philosophy is more mystical and therefore poles apart from ancient Greek philosophy.

In response to the nineteenth-century imperialist view that the western tradition is logical, the eastern mystical, this investigation has shown that every mystical element in Indian thought can be found in Greek thought too, and every rational element in Greek thought can be found in Indian (McEvilley, 2002, p. 643).¹⁷

Cooper makes a similar observation, that 'there is no serious account of perception familiar to Western readers ... which was not developed in one or another Indian system' (Cooper, 1996, p. 14).

Translation and interpretation of ancient texts could benefit from a wider consultation of sources, if one truly endeavours to 'find meaning'. For example, Aristotle places a lot of emphasis on the notion of *logos*, particularly as a unique function of humans. Though it is translated as 'rational principle', 'rule', 'argument', 'reasoning', Ross admits that of all the frequently occurring words in the Ethics, *logos* is the hardest to translate, (Ross, 1925, p. 4). He explains that though 'reason' was often an accepted translation of the word, he says it is 'quite clear' that this word isn't meant to represent the faculty of reason, but rather something 'grasped by reason', (*ibid.*). Though there is clearly a level of scholarship involved in the translation of ancient Greek, and perhaps the more confident translations have provided a deeper understanding into Aristotle's ideas, it seems odd that there is a general acceptance to such translations. Particularly, when such translations are embedded within cultures and ideologies; it is important to remember that these translations are, to a certain extent *interpretations*, and that it is quite difficult to make sense of such work, flawlessly. I suggest that further investigation into Indian philosophy could lend itself to understanding this concept of *logos*, as well as other concepts related to the good life.

One particular implication from the work presented in this paper is that the Greeks as well as the Indians emphasised that ‘who we are’ determines the type of life we lead; an individual’s flourishing is largely related to her *psychē*, to something *internal*. This observation is contrary to the claim that human flourishing largely consists in securing particular external goods; it implies that happiness, or a good life, is not one that is dictated by the outside world. Rather, it is something which is under the control of each individual; it is related to one’s inner being. This is one strong implication from the work presented in this paper. What’s more, if each individual is in control of her own ‘good life’, then what about the so-called relationship between luck and happiness?

Though these are just a few observations, surely the study of ancient Indian philosophy could conceivably enhance the study of ancient Greek philosophy, and future work in the study of the two could address many of the interesting points listed above.

NOTES

- 1 As it was mentioned in the previous section, many thinkers, be it out of genuine uncertainty or blind rejection, would consider similarities to be happenstance (for example, see Radhakrishnan, 1999, pp. 23-24).
- 2 McEvelley (2002) cites M. L. West’s *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* as uncovering an ideological connection between the two civilisations, writing: ‘This single instance of a rigorous scholarly proof demonstrates that philosophical doctrines *were* in fact travelling between India and Greece in the pre-Socratic period. Prior to West’s book that premise, however plausible, remained hypothetical, but it now must be taken as established ...’ (McEvelley, 2002, p. xxxi).
- 3 For example, Barrow writes, ‘There is also an unmistakably spiritual side to Plato’s thought and this too may owe something directly to Pythagorean theory, even while it’s clearly distinct from it’ (Barrow, 2007, p. 19).
- 4 As Wild rightly observes, ‘We cannot ignore the fact that Aristotle was nurtured during his formative years in a definitely Platonic atmosphere, with which he was intensely sympathetic. He reached his own position gradually through a careful and searching criticism of the ideas of his master. But the *basic* notions are the same’ (Wild, 1960, p. 74).
- 5 That is not to say that there aren’t *theories* about which path is the best. Also, to say that there isn’t a solitary conception of ‘human flourishing’ is *not* to say that there isn’t a particular way to achieve flourishing. In other words, though people may ‘flourish’ differently, depending on their chosen path, there might still be a primary means by which they ‘flourish’. This will be discussed further below.
- 6 Also *psuchē*, *psukhē*, *psykhē*.
- 7 McEvelley (2002) attributes this observation to Marlow (1954).
- 8 Wadia acknowledges that Dr. Urwick in his *Message of Plato* also made this link between the faculties in Plato’s philosophy with the *gunas* in Indian philosophy (Wadia, 1953, p. 65).
- 9 Though, this may also be the case with Plato.
- 10 Though, not everyone seems convinced by this. Wadia (1953) claims that the Indian concepts are ‘more ethical’ than Plato’s concepts; though, what he means by this isn’t entirely clear. For, the very purpose of describing the elements of the *psychē* is to talk about the ‘right use’ of it, and the relationship between these elements and righteousness. It is difficult to claim that Plato thought that these faculties could be anything but ethical, as they engender ethical living. Wadia is mistaken in his claims. It is, perhaps an effort to lessen the implications of similarity between the two.
- 11 ‘Sometimes *sattva* may prevail over *rajas* and *tamas*, at others *rajas* over *tamas* and *sattva*, and at others *tamas* over *sattva* and *rajas*’ (Mascaró, 1962, p. 67); The *Bhagavadgītā* Chapter 14, verse 10.
- 12 Ancient Indian scholar, said to have authored the *Yoga Sūtras*
- 13 McEvelley (2002) says this is the translation of the Sanskrit word *upeksā*.

- 14 McEvelley says 'In the case of India it is not controversial that the ideal of imperturbability dominated ethical systems of all periods' (McEvelley, 2002, p. 601).
- 15 Though I will not go into depth about the concept of 'emotion', it is useful to take note of some features. Nussbaum outlines particular features of 'emotions' that 'any major ancient Greek thinker held.' She says that emotions are *not* bodily reactions, but rather 'forms of intentional awareness' which are particularly directed at or are about some object. Emotions are thought to be connected to beliefs, in that beliefs are a sort of necessary condition of an emotion. Finally, emotions can be understood as either 'rational' or 'irrational' and also 'true' and 'false' depending on the beliefs they are attached to (Nussbaum, 1994, pp. 80-81).
- 16 The narrow sense of 'emotion' and 'emotional' refers to a strong feeling that one may have that is considered to be separate from reason, or the display of such emotion, respectively.
- 17 That is, McEvelley notes, aside from the practice of Yoga, which he considers as a 'distinctively Indian accomplishment' (McEvelley, 2002, p. 655).

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