

# INDIAN PHILOSOPHY AND YOGA IN GERMANY

Owen Ware



“Owen Ware’s instructive and at times even entertaining study of the reception of Yoga philosophy in nineteenth century Germany is a valuable contribution to current attempts to look beyond overly narrow constructions of the philosophical canon. And the final chapter, which addresses the early twentieth century Calcutta philosophers, is an important addition to the study of world philosophies.”

**Robert Bernasconi**, *Penn State University, USA*

“The monolithic civilizational narrative of ‘Western philosophy’ is undergoing serious critical reflection, and Owen Ware builds on existing scholarship and offers further revision in this study. Following ‘yoga’ down its pathways in post-Enlightenment German philosophy, Ware offers an accessible account of the cross-cultural anxiety of influence that lingers in modern philosophy, and – even more importantly – an account of the South Asian intellectuals who came to know this narrative and answered in no uncertain terms.”

**Bradley L. Herling**, *Marymount Manhattan College, USA*



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# Indian Philosophy and Yoga in Germany

This book sheds new light on the fascinating – at times dark and at times hopeful – reception of classical Yoga philosophies in Germany during the nineteenth century.

When debates over God, religion, and morality were at a boiling point in Europe, Sanskrit translations of classical Indian thought became available for the first time. Almost overnight India became the centre of a major controversy concerning the origins of western religious and intellectual culture. Working forward from this controversy, this book examines how early translations of works such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Yoga Sūtras* were caught in the crossfire of another debate concerning the rise of pantheism, as a doctrine that identifies God and nature. It shows how these theological concerns shaped the image of Indian thought in the work of Schlegel, Günderrode, Humboldt, Hegel, Schelling, and others, lasting into the nineteenth century and beyond. Furthermore, this book explores how worries about the perceived nihilism of Yoga were addressed by key voices in the early twentieth century Indian Renaissance – notably Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya – who defended sophisticated counter-readings of their intellectual heritage during the colonial era.

Written for non-specialists, *Indian Philosophy and Yoga in Germany* will be of interest to students and scholars working on nineteenth-century philosophy, Indian philosophy, comparative philosophy, Hindu studies, intellectual history, and religious history.

**Owen Ware** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. His previous books include *Fichte's Moral Philosophy* (2020), *Kant's Justification of Ethics* (2021), and *Kant on Freedom* (2023).



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**For Leah.**





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# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xix</i>
Introduction	1
<b>PART 1</b>	
<b>Indian Pantheism and the Threat of Nihilism</b>	<b>11</b>
1 The Perils of Pantheism: Schlegel and Karoline von Günderrode	13
2 The Song of God: Humboldt's Philosophical Poem	35
3 "Abstract Devotion": Yoga in Hegel and Schelling	55
<b>PART 2</b>	
<b>God, Morality, and Freedom</b>	<b>85</b>
4 Yoga in the Late Nineteenth Century: Pal, Mitra, Vivekananda, and Müller	87
5 The Bengali Philosophers: Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya	112

Conclusion: Yoga, the “True Proteus”	133
<i>Appendix: Images of India – Voltaire and Herder</i>	140
<i>Bibliography</i>	158
<i>Index</i>	170

*yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*

Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of the mind.

**Patañjali**

Yoga is the striving in absolute contemplation and reflection to arrive at complete liberation.

**Schelling**



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# Preface

This study seeks to explain how systems of classical Yoga philosophy were received by German thinkers during the post-Kantian era. As one may gather from the table of contents, I have calibrated my historical scope to the nineteenth century, using Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800) and Max Müller's *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (1899) as bookends. But I have not restricted myself entirely to this period, and in the final chapter I begin to explore how Bengali academics worked to defend classical Yoga in the twentieth century. During the early stages of research I conceived the idea of a wide-ranging project that would track the reception of Yoga philosophies across Europe, and vestiges of that grander vision survive in the present study. Over time, however, I came to see that foregrounding the German reception was more effective, because Yoga philosophies ended up becoming more intertwined with the legacy of post-Kantian thought than with any other intellectual movement across Britain or Continental Europe. At the centre of this reception was a fear that both post-Kantian thought and Indian systems of Yoga are unavoidably *nihilistic*: that they destroy our understanding of the world, of morality, and of ourselves.

As I tried to understand the root of this fear, it became clear to me why classical Yoga philosophies stirred so much discussion and debate in Germany. By the final decade of the eighteenth century, writers such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1804) and Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), along with the group of men and women we know today as the “early Romantics” (*Frühromantiker*), had begun to embrace the heterodox ideas of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), who taught the identity of God and nature known as “pantheism.” Many of these writers, from an initial burst of enthusiasm, detected an affinity between their own pro-pantheistic thinking and the doctrines of Yoga which had recently become available to Western readers in translations of Sanskrit texts. As the fortunes of pantheism turned in Germany from celebration to fear,

so too did the fortunes of Yoga, and all the same worries that had been directed at the doctrine of Spinoza – above all its perceived nihilism – soon shifted onto these ancient Indian systems. This is what made the German context unique, I realized, since no version of the pantheism controversy arose in other European countries at the time. My task then became to tell the story of this reception and its aftermath.

Once I began writing, my intention was not to produce a work of comparative philosophy, as I felt that my topic demanded more historical awareness and sensitivity to context. At the same time, I was not comfortable describing my project as a work of intellectual history either, since I often found myself delving into the texts in ways more typical of a philosopher, focusing on ideas, claims, and arguments. From the start it was important for me to frame the context of reception so that readers could see the often unstated ways in which systems of classical Yoga were misunderstood by German writers. But it was equally important for me to present the original Sanskrit texts in ways that would allow them to have their own voice outside of their European reception. This is why I chose to organize my study into two parts, starting with German authors in Part 1 and turning increasingly to Indian authors in Part 2, as my aim is to work toward a perspective at once critical and cross-cultural. In the final chapter I propose that these Indian authors can serve as models of emulation for us today as we attempt to make philosophy a global discipline.

One of my reasons for pursuing what the Germans call “reception history” (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) is that I was guided by the conviction that the first step toward a genuine cross-cultural dialogue between the systems of post-Kantian thought and classical Yoga is a reckoning of historical accounts. I held this conviction for a long time, at least since my first study of Edward W. Said’s book *Orientalism* in the year 2000. But it was not until twenty years later, when I taught Said’s work in a graduate seminar devoted to the reception of Indian systems in Europe, that this conviction acquired new weight for me. I recall being struck by Said’s comment about “the most important task” facing post-colonialist scholarship: that it must learn “how one can study other cultures and peoples” from a “nonrepressive and nonmanipulative perspective” – a task, Said added, left “embarrassingly incomplete” in his book.<sup>1</sup> Rereading those words in 2020 led me to wonder what progress scholarship had made on this front, and the students in my seminar – coming from all different disciplines in the humanities – assured me that the task is as pressing now as ever before.

Teaching this seminar also afforded me the opportunity to experience some of the ways in which the ripple effects of this Indo-German encounter have become part of our present-day academic reality. This came to my attention even before classes started, as graduate students were petitioning for ways to make the MA and PhD programmes more

inclusive of non-Western fields of study. I had titled my seminar “Yoga Philosophies in the West,” not thinking what havoc this would cause administrators who have the task of assigning pre-existing course codes to each class. My seminar ended up being listed as a credit in “Medieval Philosophy,” which was strange by any standard, but highlighted the fact that even one of the largest philosophy departments in the world was still bound to a narrow, Western-focused conception of what it was teaching. Even when the students’ concerns were addressed and concrete action was taken to diversify the curriculum, I couldn’t help but feel that the task Said had identified was only just beginning. The hard work now lay in engaging the texts and contexts of this encounter, one that introduced manifold challenges for everyone, myself included.

One challenge is that many of the German figures we studied enjoy a certain dignity in the history of philosophy. Encountering their hostile or dismissive attitudes to the Yoga systems of India then lent itself to different reactions, either rejecting their work wholesale, or apologizing (in the old-fashioned sense of the word) on their behalf. By far the most controversial figure is G.W.F. Hegel. I came to see that the degree to which a student was inclined toward apologetics could often be gauged by their prior commitment to his system; those without any background in Hegel, on the other hand, were quite happy to dismiss his philosophy on the grounds of its link to Eurocentrism. Yet what struck me over time was that a similar polarization has come to divide much of the discipline of philosophy today, where many stand either on the side of rejecting a major historical figure or on the side of defending them, even if that defence takes the form of refusing to engage with the problematic issues at hand, perhaps by spotlighting their work on metaphysics while looking past their theories of race.

A more specific challenge I faced had to do with issues of translation – not only of texts, but also of ideas from their original homes in nineteenth-century Germany and pre-modern India to North America in the twenty-first century. I kept telling my students that the more time they spent studying these traditions, the deeper the understanding and appreciation they would gain of their ideas. Almost as an afterthought, I said that the work of acquiring perfect fluency in a foreign language is like one’s understanding of a foreign system, a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense: a goal to which one can only ever approximate. I have since found this to be a useful way of framing any problem of translation, whether of texts or ideas: the emphasis should be on striving toward the goal rather than attaining the goal itself. These were thoughts I carried with me as I worked to unpack the reception of Yoga philosophies in Germany, all the while trying to make those philosophies intelligible. It is a never-ending process of interpretation, but I would like to think that progress in our understanding is still possible.



One translation problem anyone working on this topic must sooner or later confront is the meaning of the word “yoga” itself, along with the equally elusive concept of “Yoga philosophy.” The difficulty is not etymological – “yoga” derives from *yuj* in Sanskrit, meaning *yoke*, *union*, or *junction* – but has rather to do with the signifiers at play: a yoking of what, by whom, and to what end? To complicate matters, different schools of classical Indian thought provide different answers, depending on their metaphysical and theological commitments, so that the meaning of “yoga” shifts according to the framework in which it is employed. And that is just the beginning of the difficulty, since many schools of classical Indian thought uphold their own doctrine of Yoga (where the capitalization refers to a philosophical system). The meaning can then encompass both the *goal* of a spiritual practice – such as union with the supreme Godhead, or liberation from one’s mistaken self-identity – and the *means* of attaining this goal – such as forsaking the fruits of one’s actions, or cultivating awareness of the distinction between soul and nature. A *Yoga philosophy* is what spells out those methods and their aim within an overall theory.

Once it became clear to me that the questions driving my project had received little attention from previous scholars, I felt that much more grateful for the few studies that have made headway in exploring the European reception of Indian Yoga systems. Bradley L. Herling’s *The German Gita* and David Gordon White’s *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali* became regular companions on my writing desk, and much of the direction of the present book is indebted to these two studies. What I came to see, however, was that even their work left an important lacuna when it came to the topic of how systems of Yoga were first encountered by German writers in the nineteenth century, at a time when knowledge of orthodox Indian “schools” (*darśanas*) was not yet a centerpiece of European scholarship. While Bradley’s book charts the reception of the *Gītā*, and White’s that of the *Yoga Sūtras*, many key figures of the post-Kantian tradition read these works without any awareness of a doctrinal or practical difference between, say, Bhakti, Vedānta, and the kind of classical Yoga espoused by Patañjali. Telling this neglected story, then, is one of the contributions my study offers.<sup>2</sup>

Those conversant with classical Indian thought will know that when one speaks of “Yoga” as a single system, one is usually referring to the work of Patañjali and the ideas contained in his *Yoga Sūtras*, composed sometime between 200 and 400 CE. Recorded instances of Yoga doctrine are much older, of course, found in texts like the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (ca. 500 BCE) and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (ca. 200 BCE); and efforts to define and defend a theory of Yoga continue to the present day, making this network of Indian systems both very *ancient* and very *alive*. My choice to speak of Yoga philosophies in the plural stems from the fact that there is no

single tradition of Yoga; rather, there is a family of traditions, with each family itself admitting of internal variation and even discord. From the beginning, it was important for me to keep these traditions distinct, as I began to see that part of the complexity in the reception of Yoga philosophies is due to the fact that early nineteenth-century German readers often lacked knowledge of their original frameworks. These readers were not aware of the underlying metaphysical and theological commitments of these systems, without which the import of any given “yoga” or “Yoga” becomes unclear.<sup>3</sup>

I have wanted to share some of my teaching experiences in this Preface because it was in that setting that much of the material for this book took shape. Prior to the graduate seminar I taught, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to design an introductory course on South Asian philosophy for undergraduate students at the University of Toronto in Mississauga, and teaching that course on a regular basis was another setting in which I worked through some of the fundamental questions addressed in this study. For me, these were rewarding experiences, and my initial motivation for venturing into this terrain was that I was drawn to teach material that I had been studying for over two decades. At the time I did not foresee a project that would bring together my work on post-Kantian thought with my much earlier interest in the systems of Indian Yoga. As with any introductory course, mine merely touches the surface of an incredibly vast history that would require many years to unfold. But even a peek into this other world is often enough to stir my students’ curiosity, and many of them then want to learn more. In the end, that is all I hope to achieve in my classes.

As for what I hope to achieve in this book, my aim is to show why it is urgent to undertake reception histories of this sort, both as a way of learning to work critically with the legacies we have inherited from our philosophical predecessors, and as a way of making room for new conversations across both historical, cultural, and geographical borders. When I teach this material to my students, I like to remind them – especially when we examine the more disturbing moments of the Indo-German encounter – that learning this history is of the utmost importance, lest we risk repeating history through ignorance. To be sure, this is a message I often have to remind myself of, since it *is* uncomfortable to study thinkers who try to exclude the philosophical traditions of ancient India. Yet I also want to show in the coming chapters that there is room for optimism too, and that we can find attempts to engage in global dialogue even in the depths of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> We have much to learn from these past attempts, I believe, as we reflect on the history of philosophy, and as we ask ourselves where we want the discipline of philosophy to go in the future.

## Notes

- 1 Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978), 25.
- 2 My focus on Yoga doctrines and yoga practices explains why Schopenhauer plays no role in this study: for despite his well-known interactions with classical Indian thought, Schopenhauer did not contribute to the debates surrounding Yoga at the time. Those interested in the Schopenhauer-Indian connection may wish to consult Stephen Cross, *Schopenhauer and Indian Philosophy: A Dialogue between India and Germany* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2013); and Urs App, *Schopenhauer's Compass: An Introduction to Schopenhauer's Philosophy and Its Origins* (Wil: University Media, 2014).
- 3 For a clear overview of this history, with a focus on Patañjali, see Philipp A. Maas, "A Concise Historiography of Classical Yoga Philosophy," in *Periodization and Historiography of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Eli Franco, 54–90 (Vienna: Sammlung De Nobili, 2013).
- 4 I share Francis X. Clooney's conviction on this point: "We have much to learn from the scholarship of early nineteenth-century Germans and, truth be told, at times we may not measure up to their standards of making maximum use of all available knowledge" (52). See his "Much Ado about Nothing? Some Reflections on Hegel's Encounter with *Bhagavad Gītā* 6.25," *The Owl of Minerva* 52, no. 1–2 (2021): 51–71.

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Owen Ware

# Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an extraordinary growth of interest in Yoga movements, doctrines, and philosophies, both in their classical and post-classical developments. Since the early 2000s this growth has increased in a variety of disciplines, from scholarship devoted to South Asian cultures, to comparative religion and literature, and to the emerging field of global philosophy, which seeks to bring Western and non-Western classics into conversation.<sup>1</sup> With the wealth of information we now possess, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of “Yoga” in the singular. There were and are many yoga traditions, from *rāja* or *aṣṭāṅga* to *tantra* or *haṭha*, and even more Yoga philosophies, from Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavi Bhakti yoga to Buddhist Yogācāra. Indeed, one need only look at the *Bhagavad Gītā* (part of the great Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*) to see how many forms of yoga practice are in circulation: the yoga of action (*karma yoga*), the yoga of meditation (*dhyana yoga*), the yoga of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*), and the yoga of devotion (*bhakti yoga*). Add to this the many forms of postural yoga popular around the world today, and the list of possible Yogas and yogas quickly grows.

The aim of the present book is not to write a history of these doctrines or practices, from their birthplace in northern India to their later migrations around the world. My point of departure concerns a more specific set of questions: how were Yoga philosophies first received in the Western world? How were they understood and misunderstood? And lastly, how were they bound up with the course of modern European – especially *post-Kantian* – philosophy? These questions invite us to retrace a largely neglected story of reception that begins around the turn of the nineteenth century and ends around the turn of the twentieth century, a span of one hundred years marked by many tumultuous shifts within the field of European thought. At the centre of these shifts was a recurring question over the nature of God: not the question of *whether* God exists, but of *how* God exists. As we shall see, it was when this question reached a boiling point that

## 2 Introduction

Sanskrit texts first became available to European readers, and questions about India's ancient systems of philosophy acquired sudden urgency.

These tensions reached their peak during one of great intellectual controversies of the late eighteenth century. The controversy was sparked by the revival of interest in Spinoza and what critics derided as the “monstrous hypothesis” of his pantheism, the idea that God and nature are one, standing in a relation of identity.<sup>2</sup> When this debate grew in intensity, the first English translation of the *Gītā* was published, and its pantheistic overtones were greeted with either celebration or fear. All the accusations that surrounded Spinoza's doctrine of pantheism – that it denies the transcendence of God, the reality of freedom, and the grounds of morality – soon shifted onto the idea of Yoga, and much of Indian thought would bear the burden of these charges for decades to come. This anxiety about Yoga as a system and way of life was best captured by Friedrich Schlegel, who once spoke of the “spirit-crushing martyrdom of the Yogis” and their highest end of “self-annihilation.”<sup>3</sup>

Once we embark upon this history of reception, it is surprising to learn how many German thinkers of the period engaged with Indian thought in general or Yoga philosophies in particular. This includes Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Karoline von Günderode (1780–1806), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), among others. Yet it is odd that despite the attention these figures have received for over two centuries, studies devoted to their engagement with Sanskrit texts remain relatively few. It was with a feeling of excitement, for example, that I first read Humboldt's 1825–1826 lectures on the *Gītā*, but I was puzzled by the fact that the intellectual history of the period leading up to these lectures and their aftermath had found its way into only a few specialized articles and monographs. Reading these original sources, I came to hear the pieces of a conversation between modern Europe and ancient India, a conversation about the most fundamental questions of God, religion, faith, rationality, the self, freedom, and morality. The challenge posed by Yoga philosophies, I discovered, brings these questions into new and unfamiliar light.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, with few exceptions these listed thinkers failed in their encounters with Indian systems of thought.<sup>5</sup> And their failures took a variety of forms: some idealized the traditions of India, and many criticized them, but few took the time and effort to learn from them. Now if it is true, as I believe, that there is no better way to guard against repeating the failures of history than by studying them, the prospect of understanding this Indo-German encounter promises to open up new perspectives on the field of global philosophy that is growing in momentum. We shall take steps in this direction at the end of the book, where I will turn to examine how three Indian philosophers during the early twentieth century worked

to reclaim the value of Yoga doctrines after so many years of misperception. I wish to show how their work gives us resources for countering many of the objections that German thinkers levelled against Indian systems, and we shall see why their methods of interpretation are of lasting importance and value.

## Chapter Overview

This book unfolds over the course of five chapters.

If it was exuberance that led the early Romantics of Jena to associate Indian systems with pantheism, this would soon become a shadow haunting the legacy of these systems well into the nineteenth century. In Chapter 1, I introduce the background of this association in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, who in 1800 issued a call to seek the “highest Romantic” in the Orient.<sup>6</sup> Among those who answered the call, we find a striking example in the work of Karoline von Günderrode, who wrote a series of philosophical fictions inspired by Indian doctrines of reality, the self, and the existence of the soul after death. As will become clear, both Schlegel and Günderrode were influenced by a form of pantheism defended by Johann Gottlieb Herder (1744–1803), who was the first German writer to make portions of the *Gītā* available in translation. However, these early zealous responses soon gave way to a period of skepticism, and Schlegel himself went on to identify the whole of Indian philosophy with nihilism in *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (*On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, 1808).

When Schlegel’s text first appeared, available source material on Indian thought was far from abundant, and European readers had to rely largely on secondary expositions to obtain information about these non-Western systems. For many decades, one of the most influential of these expositions was “On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” which Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1865–1837) delivered at the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland on June 21, 1823, and February 21, 1824. As Chapter 2 will show, Colebrooke’s lectures were of significance for providing readers with an account of the different “schools” (*darśanas*) making up Indian philosophy, including the doctrine expounded by Patañjali in his *Yoga Sūtras*. I will show the extent to which Humboldt’s 1826 account of the *Gītā* was motivated by a desire to challenge Colebrooke’s presentation of Yoga, which in turn incited a rejoinder from Hegel in 1827. While Humboldt’s view was that the *Gītā* is a poem of the highest philosophical worth, Hegel felt obliged to overturn this claim, given his commitment to denying ancient India a place in the history of philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

On one level Humboldt and Hegel were struggling over the linguistic point that *yoga* means “yoke,” “union,” or “junction,” deriving



#### 4 Introduction

from the Sanskrit *yuj*. Following this etymology, the question of what “yoga” means elicited a number of proposals at the time, such as “devotion” or “equanimity.” Criticizing Humboldt’s choice of “absorption” (*Vertiefung*), Hegel coined the expression “abstract devotion” (*abstrakte Andacht*) in an effort to show that the spiritual exercises making up Yoga systems amount to “annihilation.”<sup>8</sup> My first task in Chapter 3 is to unpack the details surrounding Hegel’s line of argument, before considering a late (and largely overlooked) rejoinder by Schelling in his *Vorlesungen zur Philosophie der Mythologie* (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Mythology*, 1842). Schelling, like Humboldt, was not committed to excluding non-Western systems from his account of the history of philosophy, and his late lectures show him attempting to defend a sympathetic reading of Indian metaphysics. Schelling would even draw connections to the pantheistic ideas expressed in the *Gītā* and his own philosophy as a system that seeks to reconcile our personal freedom and our dependence on God.

Questions about the translation of the term “yoga” were complicated by the fact that, even in the mid-nineteenth century, there was little consensus on how Yoga systems fit within the larger family of schools making up classical Indian thought. While Colebrooke’s lectures introduced readers to the division of six orthodox *darśanas* (Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta) and two heterodox ones (Jainism and Buddhism), the referent of Yoga philosophy was not always clear. On this division, Yoga was identified with the work of Patañjali, which is thought to have been compiled between 200 and 400 CE. But this ordering was unhelpful for understanding the references to “yoga” in the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā*, not to mention the “yogas” of later *tantra* and *haṭha* traditions. As a religious text that contains elements of theism and pantheism, the *Gītā* expounds different spiritual exercises, all identified as a kind of “yoga,” whose shared aim is to bring about union with Brahman, the supreme Godhead. But as scholars became more familiar with the ideas of Patañjali, they were surprised to learn that his system makes no such appeal to the divine.

Chapter 4 shows how this puzzle shaped much of the landscape of Yoga scholarship in the second half of the nineteenth century. A breakthrough occurred when Rājendralāla Mitra (1822–1891), a librarian for Bengal’s Asiatic Society, presented the first complete edition of the *Yoga Sūtras* in a European tongue, titled *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* (1881–1883).<sup>9</sup> Mitra, who was trained in the rich commentarial tradition, was well positioned to distinguish the orientation of Patañjali’s system, which posits our highest end in terms of soul liberation, from the more religiously inflected systems of Vedānta or Bhakti, which posit our highest end in terms of union with God. I show how a growing awareness of the distinction between religious and non-religious forms of Yoga guided the work of

Max Müller (1823–1900) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Müller used this distinction to defend Yoga from the charge of nihilism, and Vivekananda, going further still, worked to harmonize Patañjali’s Yoga with Vedānta and Bhakti by showing how the paths of soul liberation and union with God are in the end compatible.

Between Schlegel’s call to seek the “highest Romantic” in the Orient (in 1800) and Müller’s treatment of Yoga (in 1899), the material discussed in the first four chapters of this book falls squarely within the nineteenth century. Chapter 5 ventures into the first decades of the twentieth century and shifts geographical locations from Europe to India, where we shall examine the work of Surendranath Dasgupta (1887–1952), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1887–1975), and Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya (1875–1949), all professors of philosophy at the University of Calcutta. Dasgupta’s first book, *A Study of Patañjali* (1914), presents a novel reading of Yoga as a system of freedom oriented by the ethical law of non-violence; his work was continued by Radhakrishnan who, in addition to defending Yoga from the charge of amorality, went on to characterize Patañjali’s system as a practice of self-perfection and self-realization. On the reading I develop, it was Bhattacharyya who offered the most sophisticated reconstruction of Yoga as a unified metaphysical and ethical system, the details of which we shall explore at the end of Chapter 5.

After the Conclusion, I devote the Appendix to supplying further background to the present study, with a focus on the question of India’s place in human history. I explore how Voltaire (1694–1778) praised the ancient Brahmins on purely strategic grounds, above all, to show that a pre-Mosaic source of monotheistic religion existed in India (his aim being to question the biblical chronology central to the Catholic church). I then turn to the person considered to be the founder of Indomania in Germany, Herder, who I show upholds a much more ambivalent attitude toward ancient India than what is often supposed. This material, while falling outside the main scope of our investigation, is aimed at readers who want to understand why India was such a controversial topic among scholars in the eighteenth century, decades before Sanskrit systems were excluded by the likes of Hegel from the history of philosophy itself.

### **Guiding Threads: Pantheism and Nihilism**

Once we begin to unpack this story of reception, it becomes clear that the Romantic writers in Jena were drawn to ancient Indian texts on the grounds of their promise to bring forth a revival of culture in modern Europe. Their first reactions, illustrated so vividly by Schlegel’s call for an “oriental renaissance,” were tied to a broader vision of overcoming a kind of spiritual sickness they saw afflicting the age of Enlightenment. The

## 6 Introduction

Romantics' engagement with pantheistic thinking was tied to their project of articulating non-conflictual relationships with the world, and so they were attracted to unorthodox theologies which closed or at least narrowed the gap between God and nature. However, the lack of clarity around their notions of the divine gave rise to a growing anti-pantheist sentiment, even among those who, like Schlegel, were leading lights in Jena's Romantic scene. Many anxieties that shifted onto Indian systems are captured in the work of Günderröde, whose preoccupation with mystical self-dissolution seemed to find expression in her own act of suicide.

My goal in this book is to situate the reception of Yoga philosophies within the intellectual contexts that served to mediate perceptions of Indian thought in the nineteenth century, paying attention to the German writers who shaped these contexts. Much of what the coming chapters contain will be of interest to historians and intellectual historians of philosophy, religion, and literature, as well as those who study the migration of ideas across the cultural boundary lines of India and Europe (in both directions). At the same time, I shall be engaging with issues that will also be of interest to those working on systematic problems of the self, God, morality, faith, and freedom of will. Among the problems that will emerge over the course of our study, the connection between pantheism and nihilism will serve as one of our guiding threads.

As we shall see, the vagueness around the early Romantics' notions of theology set the stage for Schlegel's later denouncement that Indian thought as a whole reduces to *nihilism*.<sup>10</sup> But a closer inspection reveals that his charge of nihilism shifted in different contexts: sometimes it means (1) a *metaphysical nihilism* that eliminates real distinctions between things; at other times it means (2) a *moral nihilism* that eliminates normative distinctions between actions; and at still other times it means (3) a *practical nihilism* that entails the literal destruction of the self. One of Humboldt's aims was to counter these forms of nihilism in his account of the *Gītā*, and the key to his alternative was to distinguish between "identity pantheism," according to which God and nature are the same, and "dependence pantheism," according to which all things in nature depend on God. For textual support he cites *ślōka* 9.4, where Kṛṣṇa declares: "All beings abide in me / I do not abide in them." As Humboldt understood these lines, while all beings are not the same as Brahman, the supreme Godhead, they nonetheless all depend on Brahman.

When Humboldt published these views in 1826, Hegel had been lecturing extensively on the place of ancient India in the history of religion, art, and philosophy, and he had restricted the traditions of the so-called Orient to the realm of human "prehistory." Humboldt's claim that the doctrine of Yoga expressed in the *Gītā* is of lasting philosophical worth was not something Hegel could let stand unchallenged, and the sixty-page review

he published in the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* set out to show that Humboldt was mistaken in his praise. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Hegel attacked the *Gītā* on the grounds that it oscillates between two theological extremes: contracting into an increasingly void idea of Brahman (the absolute “Being of beings”) or expanding into an increasingly chaotic idea of many deities (the pantheon of Hindu mythology). Hegel detected a similar problem in Kṛṣṇa’s rule of cultivating indifference to the results of one’s actions – the doctrine of *karma yoga* from *ślōka* 2.48 – which Hegel likened to an empty imperative devoid of moral content.

If Humboldt wanted to answer Schlegel’s charge of nihilism by clarifying a form of dependence pantheism, one that makes all beings depend on Brahman without identifying the two, then it was Hegel who wanted to revive Schlegel’s earlier verdict. What makes the philosophy of the *Gītā* nihilistic, he argued, is not that it equates God and nature, but that it reduces God to the idea of an empty ground, one that recedes into emptiness because it lacks all determinate content. When Hegel settled on the term “abstract devotion” to describe the practices of yoga, his point was that all such efforts end in the “stupefaction of consciousness” (*Verdampfung des Selbstbewußtseins*) – since the consequence of becoming absorbed in the thought of nothingness is to become nothing oneself.<sup>11</sup> Although Humboldt never replied to such claims, we find Schelling addressing them years later in the lectures on mythology he delivered in Berlin after Hegel’s death. There Schelling worked to develop elements of Humboldt’s sympathetic reading, arguing that the grounding relation between beings and God is a creative one, such that the freedom of beings and their dependence on God are compatible.

The number of Indian philosophers who pursued similar ideas in the twentieth century introduces more material than any single volume could contain. As an illustration of how philosophers working in the colonial era found strategies for defending historical and analytical accounts of their own intellectual heritage – all the while immersing themselves in the traditions of European thought – I have selected the following Bengali academics: Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya. Considering their writings in light of the previous chapters will show how they worked to absolve Patañjali’s Yoga of the charge of nihilism by recovering the moral principles that make up the system of classical Yoga itself. Starting with Dasgupta, who initiated a tradition of interpreting Patañjali’s Yoga as a system of freedom rooted in the ethical law of non-violence, we shall see how these non-nihilistic readings reached a peak in the work of Bhattacharyya, whose *Studies in Yoga Philosophy* remains one of the most powerful reconstructions of Patañjali to date.

Among his insights, Bhattacharyya argues that Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* contain a new model of the will that solves one of the great mysteries of

salvation theology: if we are not already free, how can we choose the path of liberation itself? On Bhattacharyya's account, the *Yoga Sūtras* solve this problem by distinguishing between two kinds of freedom, one pertaining to the absolute freedom (*kaivalya*) that is the highest end of yogic practice and the other to an individual's choice to disentangle herself from the realm of nature (*prakṛti*) and abide in her essential self (*puruṣa*). Yoga counts as a system of freedom because it characterizes total independence as the supreme goal of one's striving, while also making room for acts of free choice within the otherwise deterministic matrix of nature. On this interpretation, we find Bhattacharyya making good on Humboldt's intuition that Yoga philosophies presuppose an idea of freedom, and it is to Bhattacharyya's credit that he gives this claim a rigorous defence. The goal of Yoga is freedom, he argues, and the methods that make up yogic practice are themselves aimed at the progressive perfection of freedom.

Bhattacharyya's work also makes for a natural conclusion to the present study because of its unique method of interpretation.<sup>12</sup> As conversations about the state of scholarship today shift increasingly to questions about the possibility of comparative, cross-cultural, and global philosophy, it becomes all the more important to have role models for emulation and inspiration. Vivekananda and the three Bengali philosophers I will be discussing in the final chapters of this book embody an exemplary approach to doing philosophy that engages with a plurality of traditions. What makes Bhattacharyya stand out in particular is the attention he gives to the virtue of sympathy in scholarship. "The historian," he writes, "cannot begin his work at all unless he can live in sympathy into the details of an apparently outworn creed" and try to recognize it as a "recipe for the human soul."<sup>13</sup> Whether the doctrines of Yoga to be examined here are recipes for the soul is a question I shall leave the reader to decide. But in the coming pages I will try my best to follow Bhattacharyya's rule, and take this principle of sympathy to heart.

## Notes

- 1 Important work has been done recently on the origins and development of Yoga. See Anya Foxen and Christa Kuberry, *Is This Yoga? Concepts, Histories, and the Complexities of Modern Practice* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021); Anya Foxen, *Inhaling Spirit: Harmonialism, Orientalism, and the Western Roots of Modern Yoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Karen O'Brien-Kop, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020); Alistair Shearer, *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2019); Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz,

- eds., *Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2018); Knut A. Jacobsen, *Yoga in Modern Hinduism: Hariharānanda Āraṇya and Sāṃkhyayoga* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017); Mark Singleton and Ellen Goldberg, eds., *Gurus of Modern Yoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Andrea R. Jain, *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne, eds., *Yoga in the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2008); Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006); and Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). For studies and sourcebooks on classical Yoga, see Stuart Ray Sarbacker, *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2021); Mark Singleton and James Mallinson, eds., *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin, 2017); David Gordon White, ed., *Yoga in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 2012); and David Carpenter and Ian Whicher, eds., *Yoga: The Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2003). For studies focused on Yoga philosophy, see Ian Wicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998); Stephen Phillips, *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Christopher Key Chapple, *Yoga and the Luminous: Patañjali's Spiritual Path to Freedom* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008); Shyam Ranganathan, *Ethics and the History of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007); and Mikel Burley, *Classical Samkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007).
- 2 Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1697), 259.
  - 3 Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* [*On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, 1808], eds. Ernst Behler and Ursula Struc-Oppenber, vol. 8 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1975), 245. Translations are my own.
  - 4 Literature on the European reception of Yoga is far from exhaustive. There are, however, two excellent books that cover aspects of this reception: David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography*, and Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the Early German Reception of Indian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2006). I have benefited from their works, as well as from the older studies of Karl Baier, *Yoga auf dem Weg nach Westen: Beiträge zur Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998) and Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).
  - 5 The most noteworthy exception is Wilhelm von Humboldt (discussed in Chapter 2), and, to a lesser extent, F. W. J. Schelling (discussed in Chapter 3).

## 10 Introduction

- 6 Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie* [*Dialogue on Poetry*, 1800], ed. Hans Eichner, vol. 2 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1967), 320.
- 7 The question of whether Hegel's assessment of Indian philosophy changed over time remains a contested issue among scholars. For entry-points into the literature, see Michel Hulin, *Hegel et l'Orient* (Paris: Vrin, 1979); Clemens Menze, "Das Indische Altertum im der Sicht Wilhelm von Humboldts und Hegels," *Hegel Studien* 27 (1986): 245–294; Saverio Marchignoli, "Canonizing an Indian Text?" in *Sanskrit and 'Orientalism': Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany, 1750–1958*, eds. Douglas T. McGetchin, Peter K. J. Park, and Damodar SarDesi (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 54–65; Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern Germany* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009); Lucia Staiano-Daniels, "Illuminated Darkness: Hegel's Brief and Unexpected Elevation of Indian Thought in On the Episode of the Mahābhārata known by the name Bhagavad-Gītā by Wilhelm von Humboldt," *The Owl of Minerva* 43 (2011–2012): 75–99; and Jon Stewart, "Hegel's Criticism of Hinduism," *Hegel Bulletin* 37, no. 2 (2016): 281–304. I revisit this topic briefly in Chapter 3.
- 8 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* [*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*; first delivered in 1822], vol. 18 of *Hegel, G. W. F. Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Theorie-Werkausgabe*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 165.
- 9 Rājendralāla Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali, with the commentary of Bhoja Rājā, and an English translation by Rājendralāla Mitra* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1881–1883).
- 10 Schlegel first voiced this charge in *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie* [*The Development of Philosophy*; private lectures delivered in 1802–1804], ed. Jean-Jacques Anstett, vol. 12 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1964), 243.
- 11 This turn of phrase comes from his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* [*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*; delivered in 1831], vol. 16 of *Hegel, G. W. F. Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Theorie-Werkausgabe*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 361.
- 12 This is what Jonardon Ganeri has recently called Bhattacharyya's "immersive cosmopolitanism." See his "Freedom in Thinking: The Immersive Cosmopolitanism of Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri, 718–736 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 13 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Vedantism*, in *Studies in Philosophy*, ed. Gopinath Bhattacharyya, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1956), 1–2.

Part 1

# Indian Pantheism and the Threat of Nihilism





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# 1 The Perils of Pantheism

## Schlegel and Karoline von Günderrode

*This completely new understanding of oriental antiquity, the deeper we penetrate into it, shall lead us back to knowledge of the divine and to that power of spirit which gives light and life to all art and all knowledge.*

Friedrich Schlegel<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 German Poetry, Eastern Promises

A major shift was taking place during the final decades of the eighteenth century. A doctrine created for malicious ends – to defend materialism, to undermine morality, and to spread the image of a godless universe – had remained suppressed for over a century. This canker, an object of scorn for all sane, intelligent, and pious persons, then began to reconfigure itself until it broke open, and corrupted otherwise honourable thinkers across Europe. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), a leading representative of the Enlightenment, was one of its first victims, and others would soon follow. By the year 1800 the wave of intoxication generated by this philosophy had infected Herder, Goethe, Schelling, and nearly every member of the small but influential group of writers who were living in Jena at the turn of the century, the *Frühromantiker*, all of whom were shameless in confessing their affection for the work of Spinoza. Or such, at least, was the assessment of Spinoza’s critics.<sup>2</sup>

When one Philolaus was asked in 1787 whether he had ever read Spinoza, his reply captured a whole generation of antipathy toward this excommunicated Jew who had died over a hundred years earlier:

No, I have not read him. And who would want to read every obscure book an insane person might write? But I have heard from many who have read him that he was an atheist and pantheist, a teacher of blind necessity, an enemy of revelation, a mocker of religion. ... In short, he

was an enemy of the human race, and as such he died. He therefore deserves the hatred and aversion of all friends of humanity and of true philosophers.<sup>3</sup>

Philolaus was not a real person, of course. He was a character invented by Herder in his dialogue *Gott: Einige Gespräche* (*God: Some Conversations*, 1787), written at the height of the pantheism controversy that had swept over Germany only two years earlier. The controversy itself was set in motion when Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) published Lessing's "confession" that he was a Spinozist, a confession Jacobi used to attack the entire Age of Reason. Was it an accident that Lessing had fallen prey to Spinoza's seductive ideas? Materialism, pantheism, atheism – all the repugnant implications of Spinoza's philosophy that Jacobi would later bring under the heading of "nihilism" – were not errors of reason, but the results of its most consistent use. The source of the illness, Jacobi argued, was not Spinoza's system; it was the Enlightenment age itself that had produced a Spinoza.

Pantheism, that "monstrous hypothesis" that Pierre Bayle had decried in 1697, was the symptom of a problem Jacobi wanted to avert before it was too late. And his message rang clearly: down with the Age of Reason, down with Speculation, down too with Philosophy. That Herder was quick to come to Lessing's defence is not surprising in view of his long-standing interest in Spinoza. *God: Some Conversations* was Herder's opportunity to organize a number of ideas he had been working on for years before the pantheism controversy broke out. Yet it remains puzzling that a Lutheran pastor who was a vocal critic of the over-rationalizing tendencies of his age would see no contradiction between the "mockers of religion" and his own faith. Jacobi had forced Herder to seek a reconciliation between the two, and his efforts, while largely unsuccessful, were pivotal in creating a culture of reading Spinoza seriously, even sympathetically.

Nor is it by accident that Herder has Philolaus boast of his ignorance of Spinoza's writings, as this had long been a habit among Europe's intelligentsia. The character of Philolaus also expresses the well-worn formula that pantheism is equivalent to atheism, the verdict Bayle had drawn in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697). But Herder's ambition was not to save Spinoza's doctrine through the work of interpretation. He thought that Spinoza's concept of substance was too static to explain the intelligent and purposeful character of the natural world. And Herder attributed this shortcoming to a historical contingency, pointing to the fact that in Spinoza's day scientists had yet to formulate the hypothesis of dynamic forces internal to natural phenomena. Those who wish to defend Spinoza's system, Herder maintained, must replace the idea of lifeless matter with

that of forces; and this yields a new “vitalistic pantheism,”<sup>4</sup> the view that all things in nature are vital, living expressions of the divine.

Herder was in the privileged position of having read early drafts of Jacobi’s book before it appeared in print. The two men kept an active correspondence for years, and many of Herder’s letters show him urging Jacobi to read Spinoza in a more charitable light. In a letter dated December 20, 1784, for instance, Herder makes the following plea to his friend:

I must confess to you that this philosophy makes me very happy; if only I could unlock my innermost sense to enjoy it completely and undeniably! I wish you the same; for it is the only one that unites all kinds of ideas and systems. Goethe has read Spinoza since you left; and it is a great touchstone for me that he understood it exactly as I understand it. You must come over to us too.<sup>5</sup>

Jacobi never accepted the offer, despite Herder’s frequent invitations and despite the pull that Spinozism was generating after the first fireworks of the pantheism controversy had died down. By the time Goethe took his administrative duties to Jena in the mid-1790s, the tide had officially turned: Spinozism was in vogue. After a century of ridicule, Spinoza’s philosophy became a source of inspiration for authors who, like Herder and Goethe, wanted to find creative ways of synthesizing pantheism with all the cutting-edge discoveries of physics, chemistry, and biology. And no one was more excited by the prospects of this synthesis than Friedrich Schlegel, the man who would soon stand at the centre of the Romantic movement in Jena.

My task in this opening chapter is three-fold. The first is to show how the early German Romantics became interested in ancient India as a site of cultural rejuvenation, and how this interest shaped Schlegel’s call to seek the “highest Romantic” in the Orient. Next, we will examine some of the ways in which this call was answered in the philosophical fictions of Karoline von Günderrode, who combines elements of Indian thought into her poems and short stories. Günderrode is an important figure in our inquiry for several reasons, not the least of which is that her life raised real questions about the connection between Indian philosophy and the problem of self-negation. As we shall see, Schlegel would eventually denounce Indian systems in his 1808 book *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, claiming that they lead to the same place: pantheism and nihilism. To identify God and nature is to deny the reality of metaphysical and moral distinctions, he argued, and in practice that amounts to the very abolition of the self. Working through this material will further help us understand, in anticipation of Chapters 2 and 3, why the concept of Yoga attracted so much debate at the time.

## 1.2 The Romantic Orient

A casual reader would be forgiven for thinking that Schlegel's collected works were composed by multiple authors of diverse tastes, styles, and commitments. Born in 1772, Schlegel enjoyed a prolific writing career of over three decades. During those years he wore many literary hats: from the passionate neoclassicist of the early 1790s to being the main theorist of Romanticism at the turn of the century. This was followed by a brief but intense period of Sanskrit study that culminated in his most influential work, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, published the same year he converted to Catholicism and entered a final phase of political conservatism, until his death in 1829. Precocious, prone to controversy, and voracious in his appetite for new knowledge – Schlegel's eclecticism put him in good intellectual company with the young visionaries of Jena, until events set the Romantics on different paths.<sup>6</sup>

It would be an understatement to say that the Romantics worked in a time of great upheaval. The controversy over pantheism that caused so much debate in Germany occurred just prior to a set of much greater social events. All of Europe would soon have its eyes fixed on the spectacle of the French Revolution: the storming of the Bastille in 1789, the trial and execution of Louis XVI in 1793, Robespierre's "Decree on the Cult of the Supreme Being" in 1794, and the final coup that brought Napoléon Bonaparte to power in 1799, to name only a few episodes. The fact that Robespierre had made explicit use of Enlightenment principles in his Decree – the belief in a supreme being that Voltaire and others had argued lies at the basis of natural religion – gave philosophical ideas a political impact that few could have foreseen. For German thinkers, standing at a distance from the tumult, the events in France served as a stimulus to think through their own metaphysical and theological commitments, and Lessing's alleged confession was but one of many challenges they had to contend with.

When Schlegel listed the "greatest tendencies of the age," he was being deliberately provocative in placing the French Revolution alongside two German creations: Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, and the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814).<sup>7</sup> Goethe had even helped Fichte secure a professorial Chair at the University of Jena, and by 1794 Fichte was delivering lectures on what would become the basis of his new system, the "science of knowledge" (*Wissenschaftslehre*).<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Kant's critical idealism, Fichte wanted his *Wissenschaftslehre* to institute nothing less than a new principle of knowledge. "My system is the first system of *freedom*," he wrote, comparing its underlying spirit to the early days of the Revolution.<sup>9</sup> And yet, whereas the revolution in France was securing freedom externally, in the social conditions of human life, Fichte

viewed his system as securing freedom internally, in the absolute activity that makes up each individual self. Such was the promise of a new philosophy which for a while held the Romantics in awe, inspiring them to be revolutionaries, not in deed, but in thought.<sup>10</sup>

While the Romantics admired the spirit of the Revolution from afar, they were not attracted to natural religion or anything like Enlightenment deism. Even Kant's moral theology was for them lacking in the emotive power needed to form a viable alternative to conventional modes of faith. The phrase on their lips was that of a "new religion" – and the even more provocative expression of a "new mythology" – which gave the study of ancient cultures and world history added importance.<sup>11</sup> Their yearning for a new religion, despite what the name implies, was not a desire to break with past traditions but a wish to unite their views with those traditions in novel ways. The quest for a new religion led Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), for example, into some of the most creative forms of syncretism that Germany had ever seen, blending the figure of Dionysus, the wine god, with the figure of Christ, "the coming god," creating a fusion of Greek and Christian symbols.<sup>12</sup> Similar attempts defined the writings of Schiller, Schelling, and Friedrich von Hardenberg – better known by his pen name Novalis (1772–1801) – all of whom converged in Jena during its Romantic heyday.

It is not easy to say what was new about the search for a new religion, other than its method. The Romantics refused to accept that the only alternative to natural or moral theology was the darkness of superstition, fanaticism, and intolerance. In this regard, they were following in the footsteps of Herder, who claimed that ancient myths contain truths veiled in a language of symbols that we moderns, disconnected from nature, from our senses, and from others, have forgotten how to speak. In their view, the problem with Enlightenment thinking was not that rational speculation leads to materialism, atheism, and nihilism, as Jacobi had argued. It was rather that such thinking could not render intelligible the unity of the self, a unity which the Romantics found expressed in the poetry of ancient peoples (in their myths, art forms, and religious practices). Thus, the Romantics often spoke of the need for a new religion and for a new mythology in the same breath, as they amounted to the same thing: a system of uniting intellect and feeling, philosophy and poetry, and above all, a system of bringing wholeness to society by bringing wholeness to the self.

If these statements about a new mythology sound vague, it is because the Romantics themselves were vague (sometimes by design) about the content, scope, and limits of this new system. The need for a spokesperson became clear, and Schlegel stepped into the role with enthusiasm, presenting the main lines of Romantic thought in the form of a dialogue between characters who were inspired by his own friends in Jena. This

*Gespräch über die Poesie* (*Dialogue on Poetry*, 1800) has the character of Ludovico give a “Speech on Mythology,” and it begins with a plea not to doubt the possibility of a new mythology:

If a new mythology can emerge only from the innermost depths of the spirit and develop only from itself, then we find a very significant hint and noteworthy confirmation of what we are searching for in that great phenomenon of our age, idealism!<sup>13</sup>

Schlegel’s character proceeds to argue that idealism alone is not enough, however. The absolute activity of the self needs something real as its ground – and this, he claims, is provided by the philosophy of Spinoza.

What can we then do to bring about this synthesis of idealism and Spinozism and “accelerate the genesis of the new mythology”? Ludovico’s answer is that “the other mythologies must also be reawakened according to the measure of their profundity, their beauty, and their form.” By the “other” mythologies, he meant mythologies other than Greek and Christian ones. “If only the treasures of the Orient were as accessible to us as those of antiquity,” he reflected, and if only we resolved to translate those non-Western classics.<sup>14</sup> Yet this tone of lament comes to an end when Schlegel has Ludovico issue the following task: “In the Orient we must search for the highest Romantic” (*Im Orient müssen wir das höchste Romantische suchen*), which in the context of the *Dialogue* means tracing poetic activity back to its Indian source.<sup>15</sup> As a voice for Jena Romanticism at the turn of the century, Schlegel’s message was clear. The search for a new mythology requires us to combine Fichte and Spinoza, as well as to draw upon the results of current science, but it also requires us to go back to the roots of our cultural history, all the way back to our heritage in the so-called East.

Just how the Romantics responded to this “call” to the Orient is harder to tell. The call was well timed, not only because the Romantics were keen to push the boundaries of classical scholarship and learn about Egypt, Persia, China, and India, but also because oriental texts were becoming available in English, French, and German translations. Sure enough, oriental themes soon became pronounced in the literary creations of the Jena circle, and this interest in India was later matched by a large-scale effort among scholars to uncover and interpret Indian mythology, religion, and philosophy. Schlegel himself played an active role in this enterprise; for when the Jena coterie dissolved in 1802, he set off with his new wife, Dorothea Schlegel, to Paris, where he began a study of Sanskrit. Little did he know that this yearning for the Orient would play a far more central role in the work of Günderröde, for whom ancient India would become a symbol of her deepest love, and her deepest heartbreak.

### 1.3 Love, Death, and Despair

Karoline von Günderrode's name is not widely known,<sup>16</sup> and if she is mentioned at all, it is often in the context of her relationship with Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1771–1858), a historian whose *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, Besonders der Griechen* (*Symbolics and Mythology of the Ancient Peoples, Especially the Greeks*, 1810–1812) solidified his academic standing in Germany.<sup>17</sup> Born in 1780, Günderrode was only in her teens when the Jena Romantics were engaged in their discussions about poetry, philosophy, religion, and mythology, discussions that Günderrode studied from afar as a reader of their works. A self-taught thinker, Günderrode absorbed the ideas of Romanticism at arm's length, and that distance gave her room for originality of insight and expression. During her lifetime she published two volumes of work, both under male pen names, containing dramas, dialogues, and poems, as well as essays and philosophical fragments. It is a rich corpus, but one often overshadowed by a single, tragic event: Günderrode's suicide at the age of twenty-six.

Assessing Günderrode's relationship with Indian thought is complicated by the fact that we do not know what source material she had access to. At the time of her writing, only a few Sanskrit texts were available to German readers. There was Kālidāsa's play *Śakuntalā*, translated by Georg Forster in 1791,<sup>18</sup> and the *Gītā*, selections of which had appeared in German as early as 1792. Since Günderrode did not have reading knowledge of English, she would not have been able to study the travelogues of John Zephaniah Holwell and Alexander Dow, or the more academic expositions of Sir William Jones. She likely had indirect access to these works through her connection with Creuzer, who we know shared discoveries from his extensive ventures into the world of South Asian literature. Fortunately for us, Günderrode's engagement with Indian thought comes through in some of her most detailed experiments in philosophical fiction, of which "Geschichte eines Braminen" ("Story of a Brahmin," 1805) and "Briefe zweier Freunde" ("Letters of Two Friends," 1806) are two clear illustrations.

In "Story of a Brahmin," Günderrode's speaker makes the following claim about reality:

It is an infinite force, an eternal life, everything that is, that was, and will be, that creates itself in mysterious ways, that remains eternal during all change and dying.<sup>19</sup>

In this passage we can hear an echo to Herder's brand of Spinozism, according to which an "original force" (*Urkraft*) dwells within all things.<sup>20</sup>



Note too the further qualification, that this infinite force extends over all modes of time, the past (“everything that was”), the present (“everything that is”), and the future (“everything that will become”), an allusion to Kṛṣṇa’s account of divine nature in the *Gītā*: “I am the beginning and the middle ... and the end as well” (*ślōka* 10.20).<sup>21</sup> Günderrode’s “Story of a Brahmin” left no room to doubt the pantheistic basis of these claims, as her speaker goes on to say that this force is “at the same time the ground of all things and the things themselves, the condition and the conditioned, *the creator and the creature*.”<sup>22</sup> Whoever grasps this truth, we are told, is granted everlasting peace.

In Günderrode’s story, the character of Armin describes his journey to India, where a Brahmin teaches him Sanskrit and Armin learns about the splendours of India’s past. Over time the youth wins over the Brahmin’s trust, and he reveals to Armin the secrets of his traditional wisdom, the most important of which is the idea of an infinite spirit in all things. Similarly, in “Letters of Two Friends,” Günderrode has us follow an exchange between an unnamed narrator and her mentor, Eusebio, who describes to her the mystical state of uniting one’s consciousness with the absolute. At one point Eusebio writes:

So that you can see more clearly what I mean by this, I am sending you a few books on the religion of the Hindus. The wonder of ancient wisdom, laid down in mysterious symbols, will touch your mind; there will be moments in which you feel stripped of this personal individuality and feel surrendered again to the whole.<sup>23</sup>

Günderrode often characterized the spiritual journey in terms of a feeling of “longing,” a state that no normal object of desire could satisfy, since such longing is the soul’s way of expressing its original (but now forgotten) kinship with the divine. In one place she describes this state of objectless longing as a desire “to return to the source of all life” which finally breaks open one’s sense of limited individuality:

I was released from the narrow limits of my being, and not a single drop was left, I was given back to everything and everything belonged to me; I thought, I felt, swayed in the sea, shone in the sun, circled with the stars; I felt myself in everything and enjoyed everything in me.

In this state of mind, the limits between self and world are open, expansive, and permeable. “I could no longer find my boundaries,” Günderrode writes. “My consciousness had exceeded them; my consciousness was bigger, different, and yet I felt myself somehow in all this.”<sup>24</sup>

There is obviously a paradox lurking in these expressions. When I overcome my limited sense of self, I feel a greater connection between my being and the world around me. My sense of self becomes less firm or contracted, and so I feel myself expanding, as G nderrode says. On the other hand, my consciousness of self cannot be eliminated altogether, for if it were, who would be left to experience these sensations of union? Evidently the “I” who dissolves into the ocean of experience is different from the “I” who remains conscious of belonging to this ocean; otherwise, mystical self-overcoming would amount to a contradiction. But then we must ask: How can I remain an “I” when, as the doctrine of pantheism teaches, all is one, and one is all? G nderrode’s answer changes from work to work, and we can see her struggling with these questions at various points in her brief career: does the self exist, and if it does, should it be affirmed or negated? And not far off we hear a more chilling question: if the self *should* be negated, why go on *living*?

G nderrode’s work tends to alternate between speculative and personal standpoints, and wherever the reader runs up against her most abstract musings and flights of reflection, the pangs of a tortured heart are never far off. This wavering between the otherworldly and the worldly is characteristic of her poetic vision: in matters of love, she is a mystic, inviting us to see the divine in our most intimate attachments; in matters of faith, she is a lover, inviting us to see the workings of desire everywhere in nature. Considering these themes, it is safe to say that G nderrode was inspired by *Śakuntalā*, a play that was highly popular in Germany at the time, and one that would have struck a painful chord in G nderrode, had she read it. In the play, the character of the king eventually “recognizes” his beloved, Śakuntalā, and remembers their bond when he recovers his lost ring. But such a happy outcome was not to be G nderrode’s fate. Lacking a magical ring of recollection, she had to suffer her love unrequited when Creuzer, a married man, broke off their affair in 1806.

#### 1.4 G nderrode and the *Urkraft*

That G nderrode was drawn to the philosophy of pantheism is evident from the texts we have reviewed, and one would be hard pressed to find a better statement of this doctrine than what she has Armin declare: that the infinite spirit is “creator and creature” at the same time. This was, and is, a heterodox view of divine nature in the West. If no strict difference exists between the creator and creature, then we cannot say God entirely transcends nature, but without this claim of transcendence it is hard to preserve the traditional notion of a Deity who differs from His creation. It also becomes hard to say that nature, including the nature of human

beings, is damaged, fallen, or sinful, since on this view nature *is* God. The closer creator and creature become, the closer we come to the idea that “All is God,” just as the Greek etymology of the word suggests: *pan* (“all”) and *theos* (“god”).

But why was G nderrode so fascinated by these ideas? At one level, her attraction to pantheism was likely driven by a need to make sense of her passions in a world indifferent or hostile to them. The thought of releasing one’s individuality and merging with the infinite was solace for someone caught in a web of mounting social restrictions. There is no shortage of examples of how this desire appears in her writings: she describes it as “surrender,” as “dissolution in the divine,” or more vividly, as the desire “to throw myself into the red dawn and dive into the shadows of the night.”<sup>25</sup> This likely made the world of pantheism attractive for G nderrode: she could envision herself in a world without sharp distinctions, a world where all elements of nature are open to interact, freely and reciprocally, because they are only so many expressions of a single force, the *Urkraft*.

However, while G nderrode was drawn to the idea that everything in nature is an expression of an infinite force, it was crucial for her that individual expressions of this force are still real entities. All of her thinking would rest on this possibility: that a *reunion* of distinct elements is possible after their material death. And this is what led G nderrode to claim that because forces of nature are never eliminated, they must eventually recombine under a law of attraction. “I said that your self and mine should be dissolved into the old primordial materials of the world,” G nderrode has the character of Eusebio say, “and then I consoled myself that our friendly elements, obeying the laws of attraction, would seek themselves again in infinite space *and join each other*.”<sup>26</sup> Love may be forsaken in human society; but G nderrode affirmed that love animates every part of nature, even down to its most fundamental forces.

### 1.5 Revelation and the Threat of Nihilism

The further we explore G nderrode’s writings, the more we find ourselves confronted with the question of her relationship with classical Indian thought. The fact that she often framed her insights with reference to oriental sources – as the wisdom of a “Brahmin,” for example, or as the teachings of “Hindu books” – makes this question all the more pressing. We know that G nderrode was drawn to some kind of pantheism, which on closer inspection seems to be a vitalistic pantheism espoused by Herder. We also know that G nderrode was drawn to some kind of philosophy of nature, which on closer inspection seems to be a philosophy articulated by her Romantic contemporaries (such as Schelling). Her relationship with Creuzer gives us reason to think that she had access to the most up-to-date

scholarship on ancient India, yet it is difficult to say what sources Creuzer shared with her, and even more difficult to say which texts she studied on her own.

This problem, I should add, is not unique to Günderröde. Despite Schlegel's call to seek the "highest Romantic" in the Orient, the Romantics themselves often went no further than adopting oriental tropes at a distance, more for the sake of adding an exotic air to their work. This gave their writing a syncretic style, as they mixed different traditions, modern and ancient, Eastern and Western, orthodox and heterodox. In their literary experiments, the Romantics could portray ancient India as a well-spring for spiritual renewal. As we have seen with Günderröde, they could even depict their characters as becoming disciples of Brahmins and learning all the secrets of the South Asian world. But in the beginning the Romantics had little incentive to pursue a scholarly engagement with this world. Their ignorance, we could say, gave wings to their imaginations, and they could fill in the missing details with their own ideas. Schlegel's call had to remain initially unanswered, then, which is why everything would change when Schlegel himself began to learn Sanskrit.

In the summer of 1802, at the age of thirty, Schlegel moved to Paris and embarked upon a study of oriental languages under the direction of Antoine-Léonard de Chézy and Alexander Hamilton. By this time the happy days of Jena were a faint memory. In 1801 Novalis, Schlegel's friend and fellow Romantic, died of tuberculosis, the same year Schlegel was forced to leave Jena after his hopes of securing a permanent post at the university were dashed. Schlegel's personal life was partly to blame: his affair with Dorothea (at the time married to Simon Veit) was the inspiration for a fictional work, *Lucinde* (1799), which caused a scandal upon its publication. With these tensions on the rise, the young couple wanted a fresh start, and after Dorothea secured a divorce, the two set their sights on Paris. Once settled there, Schlegel began to explore oriental systems in earnest, the results of which appeared in one of his most important studies, *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*.

Only eight years separate the publication of this book from the *Dialogue on Poetry*, but they can appear divided by a gulf. While the book on poetry takes the form of a conversation between friends, the book on India takes the form of a research monograph; and while the former issues a call to study the Orient as a means of securing the much-needed content for a new mythology, the latter frames the stages of oriental thought as so many *degradations* of divine revelation. To the surprise of his readers, the Indophilia of Schlegel's earlier period seems to have given way to an attitude of skepticism toward the East as a whole. Gone is the youthful optimism of the Jena years, when the Orient promised to be a source of lasting wisdom. The Schlegel of 1808 shows a different face: more conservative

and more inclined to nationalism and Eurocentrism. As evidence of this perceived change, scholars often cite the fact that only months after the publication of his India book, Schlegel and his wife converted to Catholicism.

The India book itself is by no means a large tome – the first edition, printed in generously sized fraktur font, comes in at just over two hundred pages<sup>27</sup> – but the author’s aim is ambitious. From the start Schlegel drew attention to the effects that the revival of classical antiquity had upon Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. “The influence of the Indian study would be no less great and universal now, we dare to assert, if it were seized with the same strength and introduced into the sphere of European knowledge. And why shouldn’t it?”<sup>28</sup> This sphere had been suffering the effects of rationalism gone awry, leaving our deepest spiritual needs unmet. Thus, the vision of an oriental renaissance was all the more important for Schlegel because of its potential for cultural rejuvenation. It promised to “lead us back to knowledge of the divine,” as he puts it, and thereby invest art, science, and literature with new “light and life” (*Licht und Leben*).

But what was this new life if not the life of a new mythology that Schlegel had summoned years before? Was this not what he had hoped for in issuing a call to seek the “highest Romantic” in the Orient? Let us not forget that in 1800 Schlegel still lamented the lack of access to Sanskrit originals which kept European scholars in a state of ignorance. Having spent two years in Paris learning the language itself, Schlegel wanted to play an active role in this second renaissance. From what we have seen, his efforts at translation were motivated by a far-reaching vision of what Europe needed: a lasting unification of religion and reason, faith and understanding, heart and head. So whatever shifts characterized his intellectual development over these years, there is no question that Schlegel felt the same way about ancient India in 1808 – namely, that it could help remedy the spiritual crisis that afflicted modern Europe.

None of this is to say that *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* is a repetition of Schlegel’s earlier standpoint. It does mark a shift in orientation, but the shift, I believe, was more in Schlegel’s attitude toward post-Kantian philosophy, especially as he saw it evolve (or devolve) in the work of Schelling. Though Schelling’s name nowhere appears in the text, it is not difficult to figure out whom Schlegel took to be the main representative of “modern European philosophy” at the time. Nor did these insinuations escape the notice of Schelling himself, who was roused in part by Schlegel’s remarks to defend his system of philosophy in the *Freedom Essay* of 1809, as we shall see in Chapter 3. One wonders what led to Schlegel’s harsh assessment of his former dinner guest, whose system he had presented glowingly through the character of Ludovico. (It could not have helped that in 1803, Friedrich Schlegel’s sister-in-law Caroline divorced his brother August and moved to Würzburg with Schelling, her new husband.)

Whatever caused this rift, the fact remains that Schlegel came to see European philosophy as beset by the same illness that had, he claimed, corrupted oriental philosophy in the final stages of its development. The illness was known as *pantheism*. “Pantheism,” Schlegel writes, “is the system of pure reason, and in that respect it already marks the transition from the oriental to the European philosophy.”<sup>29</sup> Obviously, for a defender of the Enlightenment, “pure reason” would be an expression of praise, referring to our autonomy of mind. But it had acquired a sour tone for Schlegel, who by this time was close in spirit to the counter-Enlightenment sentiments of Jacobi. The two men, while differing on many issues, agreed that reason without the assistance of revelation is a source of despair. And that was Jacobi’s basic charge against Spinoza: that his philosophy was the product of speculation alone, and that speculation alone leads to the same place: the denial of God, the denial of freedom, and with that, the denial of meaning. In 1799, in his well-known “Open Letter” to Fichte, Jacobi popularized a term to warn us of the abyss he believed pantheism threatened to open: the abyss of “nihilism” (*Nihilismus*).<sup>30</sup>

Already we find Schlegel using this term in a set of private lectures he delivered in Cologne in 1804 and 1805, soon after departing from Paris. In these lectures he offers the now familiar definition of pantheism as a doctrine that “regards all things as only *one and the same*.”<sup>31</sup> But then, in a surprising move, he goes further and claims that this way of understanding reality leads to *Nihilismus*:

In Europe, of course, this way of thinking never existed in its purest form, but it did far more so in the Orient; indeed, it was actually expressed in Asia by several sects, all of which descended from India, from the Indian ascetics, the *yogis*. These yogis immersed and lost themselves completely in the negative concept of the deity, striving for an absolute abstraction from everything positive, not only in sensual but also in spiritual respects, *toward a complete annihilation of themselves*. ... Thus they were actually better pantheists than European philosophers could ever be.<sup>32</sup>

Only four years later, we find the same verdict. Indian pantheism, Schlegel concludes, “has frequently prompted a system of voluntary and self-inflicted torture” – like the “spirit-crushing martyrdom of the Yogis,” he adds, “who posited *self-annihilation* as the highest good.”<sup>33</sup>

## 1.6 Annihilation of the Soul

When Jacobi introduced the term into philosophical discourse, “nihilism” is a problem he thought threatened all methods of justification. Whatever we try to demonstrate as real, he argued, ends up becoming doubtful,

and thus our own reasoning ends up “annihilating” – that is, rendering *illusory* – the very things we wished to prove. In saying this Jacobi was thinking not only of lofty ideas like God and the soul, but also of things we can touch, taste, and see, the whole sensible world around us. Nihilism is the result of reducing this world to a mere appearance, quite literally, to “no thing.”

Schlegel for his part found this line of criticism compelling.<sup>34</sup> He was inclined to view nihilism as a problem of justification; like Jacobi, he did not think that reason is capable of “proving” or “demonstrating” the reality of things. Yet Schlegel also wanted to show that nihilism has more faces than this; after all, the thread common to Indian pantheism and European philosophy, he believed, is a tendency to regard all things as one. As a doctrine of what ultimately exists, pantheism “annihilates” all those distinctions that, according to our conventional way of seeing the world, separate one thing from another. In a more radical vein, pantheism even denies the reality of that undifferentiated unity lying at the ground of all being; as some schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism uphold, there is no such ground, only “void” or “emptiness.” Since Schlegel had studied Mahāyāna texts during his Paris years, he had seen just how far nihilism can go as a doctrine, further than anything Jacobi would have suspected.<sup>35</sup>

Schlegel’s remarks about the “yogis,” however, bring another face of nihilism to light. It is true that European philosophers have on occasion pursued the idea that all things are one, and have devised theories along the lines of Spinoza (as Fichte and the young Schelling did), according to which all things are but expressions of a single substance or a single principle. But only in the Orient, Schlegel argued, do we find persons who sought to *live* by such ideas. That is why he believed that the ancient yogis were better pantheists than any modern philosopher. They did not just deny reasons for believing in the reality of individuals, but also their entire disposition toward this belief; in effect, they denied their attachments to the world, to others, and last but not least, to themselves. What might be called the practical nihilism of the ascetics was a process of self-annihilation: in its highest form, it was the attempted dissolution of the self, which was taken as the only means of becoming one with the divine source of reality.

To be sure, these were not new concerns at the time. Since Plutarch’s celebrated *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (also known as the *Parallel Lives*), readers had been exposed to tales of asceticism from Alexander the Great’s campaign in northern India.<sup>36</sup> One of the more memorable of these tales involved ten Brahmins whom Alexander supposedly encountered during his travels, described by Plutarch as *gymnosophistai*, or “naked philosophers,” some of whom were reported to have performed self-immolation as proof of their mastery over bodily life. Such feats of

self-denial made an impact on the European imagination long before Schlegel wrote his India book, although the slant he gave these concerns would exert a lasting influence on orientalist studies into the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Schlegel made the following question unavoidable: are systems of Indian philosophy problematic for their denial of the self? And do they all lead down the same road, to *nihilism*? Not everyone thought so, but Schlegel's worry gained wide appeal, even among his critics.

To add to this growing set of worries, Schlegel's India book voiced yet another view that would have alarmed its readers:

Pantheism teaches that everything is intrinsically good and pure; that everything is originally one; and that every appearance of wrong or guilt is but an empty illusion. Hence its dangerous influence on life. ... For if this destructive principle be admitted as a ruling fact, the conduct of individuals will be of trivial importance, and the eternal distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, will be set aside and finally rejected.<sup>38</sup>

The worry now is that by positing everything as one, pantheism leaves us without grounds to distinguish actions that are good from actions that are bad. Likewise, it leaves us without grounds to say that we should strive to be virtuous, to uphold our obligations, or to live our lives by ethical aims. All we could say is that everyone's actions are intrinsically pure, even an evildoer's, because everyone's actions are intrinsically divine. Accordingly, in the same way that pantheism "annihilates" distinctions that separate one being from another, so too it "annihilates" the distinctions of one action from another. Everything "blends" together. And that was Schlegel's worry: if pantheism is true, morality is yet another illusion to be dispelled.

Any one of these varieties of nihilism – the *metaphysical*, the *practical*, or the *moral* – forms a challenge to the pantheistic systems of India. But Schlegel's intention was not to dissuade his readers from engaging with these ancient traditions. He was convinced that reviving these traditions, and going all the way back to their source, is the only way to recapture the one touchstone of truth human beings had ever possessed – the touchstone of "revelation." The conclusion Schlegel draws, then, is that the earliest expressions of oriental philosophy show that the ancient Indians possessed "knowledge of the true God." Because these expressions predate our Hebrew heritage, he maintains, there is no reason to think that the Indians were under the influence of another religious worldview. Indian systems are chronologically prior in the history of religion, Schlegel argued, and so the inspiration that sparked their first doctrines is evidence of a deeper insight, what he called *ursprüngliche Offenbarung* ("original revelation").<sup>39</sup>



If we now look at this claim more closely, much of Schlegel's position comes into sharper focus. The pantheism of Indian systems is supposed to show what happens when philosophy unfolds without the guidance of revelation. It leads to the denial of a transcendent deity, of individuals, even of free persons whose actions can be judged good or evil, virtuous or vicious, moral or immoral. Schlegel's tirade against pantheism in 1808 was therefore part of an indirect strategy: it was meant to expose the shortcomings of "pure reason" that had, in his view, come to dominate much of German philosophy since the 1790s. A study of Indian thought was meant to present pantheism as the last – and *worst* – stage of its development, making pantheism a warning sign of what happens when generations of thinkers turn away from "true" knowledge of God. Schlegel's target of criticism was not the Orient, but the Occident: like Jacobi and Herder before him, he was challenging the very framework of Enlightenment thinking itself.

But then what is the point of reviving systems of Indian philosophy if, as Schlegel wants us to see, they represent only so many ways of deviating from revealed truth? From everything we have seen, it may be tempting to read Schlegel's India book as nothing more than a counter-Enlightenment polemic, all the more so when we hear Schlegel warning that unassisted reason is a source not of light, but of darkness: the darkness of a life without God, without individuality, and without morality. Yet this fails to explain why he opens and closes his book with a call for an oriental renaissance: for if Schlegel wanted merely to criticize rationalistic philosophy, why would he go so far as to say that the study of Indian texts promises to give new "light and life" to European religion, literature, art, and science? Was this merely for rhetorical effect?

In reply, it is important for us to see that Schlegel's polemic was unique. It inverted the position of those like Voltaire, for instance, who idealized aspects of ancient India in order to criticize the church and praise the Enlightenment. Schlegel's India served the opposite end: to criticize the Enlightenment and praise revelation. Nor should we find this contrast surprising; it captures the Enlighteners' antagonism to institutions of faith and the Romantics' longing for a new religion and a new mythology. That Schlegel continued to harbour this longing is evident from the fact that he viewed the project of recovering ancient texts as the only way of moving forward in the present: it was the only way, he believed, to escape the nihilism of the modern age. In this way Schlegel's appeal to the concept of "original revelation" is less an apology for the church and more a plea to see ancient India as the site of divinely given knowledge. To that extent, his call for an oriental renaissance was not at all rhetorical: it was, rather, a call for a regenerative research programme.

By making ancient India the first site of revealed truth, Schlegel was also criticizing the approach we find in Herder. As I discuss in the Appendix,

Herder had worked to assert the cultural primacy of Hebraic sources as the “childhood” of human history, while conceding the temporal primacy of ancient India as humanity’s “birthplace.”<sup>40</sup> Schlegel, however, was asserting the very point Herder had spent years trying to circumvent: that the spiritual wellspring of humanity lies in ancient India. On his view, a study of the Orient is necessary because it puts us closer to this source, making the systems of classical Indian thought an essential point of reference. While it is true that Schlegel viewed these systems as successive misrepresentations of divine truth, his affirmation of a pre-Mosaic revelation was a controversial thesis, and one that no orthodox Christian at the time – Protestant *or* Catholic – would have accepted. He was effectively claiming that the pre-Christian and pre-Jewish traditions of ancient India hold the key to knowledge of God.

All of this helps to dispel some of the mystery of Schlegel’s conversion to Catholicism only months after the publication of *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. If we read this book not as a departure from his earlier invitation to the Orient, it is possible to see a more continuous thread of development in Schlegel’s thinking. The appeal to an original revelation suggests that his growing preoccupation with Catholicism did not signal a break with his Romantic call for a new mythology. Rather, it indicates that Schlegel had found a way of answering this call. To be clear, it was not the institution of Catholicism that Schlegel wanted to affirm, but rather its “catholic” spirit. For it was this spirit, forced to lie dormant through centuries, that Schlegel thought would serve as the best vehicle for a new religion made of a syncretic union with the Orient. By 1808, at least, his idea of a new mythology had emerged as a kind of new Catholicism.<sup>41</sup>

### 1.7 Closing Remarks

When we read Schlegel’s book today, we can see how much it captures the Romantics’ ambivalent attitude toward India. By speaking of an original revelation in the Orient, Schlegel found himself in the unusual company of writers who, like Voltaire, had affirmed the primacy of Brahmanic religion as a tactic for undermining the church’s authority in matters of faith. At the same time, by interpreting the systems of Indian philosophy as a history of decline, we can see that Schlegel was guilty of instrumentalizing the value of those systems, making the study of Indian thought nothing more than a *means* for accessing “true” knowledge of God. At no point in his career did Schlegel think such knowledge had ever been secured in the Orient, and to that extent he never granted Indian systems the honour of being valuable *in their own right*. For Schlegel, as for the Romantics at large, true religion and philosophy were not to be found in the past at all; they were, they believed, to be found or created anew.

The changing fortunes of pantheism are anything but shocking from the standpoint of the eighteenth century as a whole. “Spinozism” itself was a word that elicited different reactions in the period: fear, hatred, repulsion, curiosity, attraction, reverence, and love, among others. The fact that Spinozism was gaining followers in Germany during the last decades of the century, at a time when Sanskrit texts were becoming available, set off a series of encounters that no one could have foreseen. Drawn into the crossfire, “Indian pantheism” would be praised as a forerunner of the new vitalistic philosophy that held Herder and the early Romantics in thrall, inspiring some of Günderrode’s most evocative writings. As we have seen in this chapter, however, this same doctrine suffered criticism at the hands of Schlegel, who saw the problematic tendencies of Indian pantheism resurfacing in the work of his contemporaries. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, many of the fears that had circulated around Spinoza had shifted to the emerging field of orientalist scholarship, prompted by the alleged threat of nihilism which Schlegel made prominent in his India book.

Years later, Schlegel would return to these issues in a lecture series he delivered in the late 1820s, and his views of Indian nihilism remained largely unchanged. After the publication of *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, his interests centred on European topics – politics, art, and literature – and his view of religion eventually took the shape of a “philosophy of life” that Schlegel defended in one of his last works. By that time his India book had already acquired a life of its own, inspiring a generation of scholars in the fields of linguistics, mythology, and history. To be sure, not everyone was willing to accept Schlegel’s depiction of Indian systems of philosophy, or to accept his verdict of their problematic consequences. As we shall see, the debate prompted reactions from some of the most distinguished thinkers of the early nineteenth century, including Schlegel’s own brother, August Wilhelm, as well as Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel. Our task over the next two chapters is to unpack this debate, before we turn – in Part 2 – to consider some powerful rejoinders by Indian thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## Notes

- 1 Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* [*On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, 1808], eds. Ernst Behler and Ursula Struc-Oppenberg, vol. 8 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1975), 317.
- 2 Though Spinoza’s ideas about God were the source of ongoing intellectual scandal from the time his *Ethics* was first published in 1677, the so-called

- “pantheism controversy” (*Pantheismusstreit*) was launched only in 1785, when Jacobi published *On the Doctrine of Spinoza*. It was Lessing’s alleged confession of sympathy with the *Ethics* that drew responses from Herder, Kant, and many others at the time. For helpful overviews of this controversy and its aftermath, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); George di Giovanni, “Introduction to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi,” *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008); and George di Giovanni, *Hegel and the Challenge of Spinoza: A Study in German Idealism, 1801–1831* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- 3 Johann Gottfried Herder, *God: Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940), 2.
  - 4 The term “vitalistic pantheism” (*vitalistische Pantheismus*) was coined by Windelband to describe the new Spinozism of Herder, Goethe, and Schelling; see Wilhelm Windelband, *Die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1880), 290. More recently, Beth Lord has described Herder’s position as a “vitalist naturalism” which aspires to be “consistent with Christian faith”: see her *Kant and Spinozism: Transcendental Idealism and Immanence from Jacobi to Deleuze* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 56. For discussion, see Jennifer Mensch, *Kant’s Organicism: Epigenesis and the Development of Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2013), and Joan Steigerwald, *Experimenting at the Boundaries of Life: Organic Vitality in Germany around 1800* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).
  - 5 Johann Gottfried Herder, letter to Jacobi, December 20, 1784, in vol. 5 of *Briefe: Gesamtausgabe, 1763–1803*, ed. Karl-Heinz Hahn (1977–1996), 91.
  - 6 For helpful treatments of Schlegel’s earlier views, see Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Alison Stone, “Friedrich Schlegel, Romanticism and the Re-enchantment of Nature,” *Inquiry* 48, no. 1 (2005): 3–25; Jay Bernstein, “Poesy and the Arbitrariness of the Sign: Notes for a Critique of Jena Romanticism,” in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (London: Routledge, 2006), 143–172; and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).
  - 7 This comes from #216 of the *Athenäums-Fragmente*, originally published in 1798: “Die Französische Revolution, Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre, und Goethes Meister sind die größten Tendenzen des Zeitalters,” in vol. 2 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Hans Eichner (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1975).
  - 8 See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre [Foundation of the Entire Doctrine of Science]* (Leipzig: Gabler, 1794).
  - 9 See Johann Gottlieb Fichte, letter to Jens Baggesen, dated April/May 1795, in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 385–386.
  - 10 Understanding the exact nature of Fichte’s new system has generated much discussion among scholars. For discussion, see Daniel Breazeale, *Thinking through the Wissenschaftslehre: Themes from Fichte’s Early Philosophy*

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Gabriel Gottlieb, “Fichte’s Deduction of the External World,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2015): 217–234; and Allen Wood, *Fichte’s Ethical Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). I also discuss Fichte’s idealism in *Fichte’s Moral Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 11 For discussion of the “new mythology” of the early German Romantics, see Frank-Peter Hanse, *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus: Rezeptionsgeschichte und Interpretation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989); Christoph Jamme, *Mythos als Aufklärung: Dichten und Denken um 1800* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013); and George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
  - 12 See “Brod und Wein” [“Bread and Wine”], in vol. 2 of *Friedrich Hölderlin: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Friedrich Beißner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1953), 96.
  - 13 Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie* [*Dialogue on Poetry*, 1800], vol. 2 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Hans Eichner (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1967), 313.
  - 14 Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie*, 319.
  - 15 Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie*, 320. For more detailed treatments of Schlegel’s orientalism, see Gary Handwerk, “Envisioning India: Friedrich Schlegel’s Sanskrit Studies and the Emergence of Romantic Historiography,” *European Romantic Review* 9, no. 2 (1998): 231–242; Peter K.J. Park, “A Catholic Apologist in a Pantheistic World: New Approaches to Friedrich Schlegel,” in *Sanskrit and Orientalism: Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany*, eds. Douglas T. McGetchin, Peter K.J. Park, and Damodar Sardesai (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 83–106; Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi, “India and the Identity of Europe: The Case of Friedrich Schlegel,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 713–734; and Robert Bruce Cowan, “Fear of Infinity: Friedrich Schlegel’s Indictment of Indian Philosophy in *Über die Sprache und die Weisheit der Indier*,” *The German Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008): 322–338.
  - 16 Fortunately, Günderröde is now becoming more well known. See Dorothy M. Figueira, *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Barbara Becker-Cantarino, “The ‘New Mythology’: Myth and Death in Karoline von Günderröde’s Literary Work,” in *Women and Death 3: Women’s Representations of Death in German Culture since 1500*, eds. Claire Bielby and Anna Richards (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 51–70; Anna C. Ezekiel, “Metamorphosis, Personhood, and Power in Karoline von Günderröde,” *European Romantic Review* 25, no. 6 (2014): 773–791; Dalia Nassar, “The Human Vocation and the Question of the Earth: Karoline von Günderröde’s Philosophy of Nature,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 104, no. 1 (2022): 108–130; Joanna Raisbeck, *Karoline von Günderröde: Philosophical Romantic* (Oxford: Legenda, 2022); and Karen Ng, “The Idea of the Earth in Günderröde, Schelling, and Hegel,” in *Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers in the German Tradition*, eds. Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

- 17 Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*. 4 vols. (Leipzig: Heyer & Leske, 1810–1812).
- 18 *Śakuntalā* was first translated into English by Sir William Jones as *Sacotalá: Or, The Fatal Ring* (London: Edwards, 1789). It is traditionally known as *The Recognition of Śakuntalā (Abhijñāna-śakuntalā)*.
- 19 Karoline von Günderrode, “Geschichte eines Braminen,” in vol. 1 of *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, ed. Walter Morgenthaler (Frankfurt am Main: Roter Stern, 1990), 308. All references to Günderrode refer to this edition.
- 20 See Herder, *God: Some Conversations*, 63.
- 21 While translation decisions are my own, I have drawn from Winthrop Sargeant’s version of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009). Hereafter all citations to the *Gītā* will be to the individual *ślokas* found in most editions.
- 22 Günderrode, “Geschichte eines Braminen,” 308; emphasis added.
- 23 Günderrode, “Briefe zweier Freunde,” 354.
- 24 Günderrode, “Ein apokaliptisches Fragment” [“An Apocalyptic Fragment”], 54.
- 25 Günderrode, “Ein apokaliptisches Fragment,” 54.
- 26 Günderrode, “Briefe zweier Freunde,” 351; emphasis added.
- 27 This does not include the appendix, containing selections from the *Gītā*, the *Laws of Manu*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the *Mahābhārata*.
- 28 Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 111.
- 29 Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 243. Following this remark, he adds that pantheism “flatters one’s self-conceit as much as one’s indolence.”
- 30 See Jacobi, “Jacobi an Fichte” (“Open Letter to Fichte,” 1799), in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1994), 116.
- 31 Schlegel, *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie*, 243.
- 32 Schlegel, *Die Entwicklung der Philosophie*, 265, emphasis added.
- 33 Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 245, emphasis added.
- 34 As did other Romantics at the time. For discussion, see Jacqueline Mariña, “Religion and Early German Romanticism,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Millán Brusslan, 95–117 (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
- 35 I revisit this issue in Chapter 4.
- 36 See Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).
- 37 While Edward Said’s *Orientalism* remains a benchmark study for post-colonialist theory, a number of scholars have pointed out that Said’s conception of Orientalism as a political-economic structure of power is too narrow to capture the more subtle forms of intellectual colonialism that underpinned much scholarship in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For discussion, see Sheldon Pollock, “Indology, Power, and the Case of Germany,” in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 302–323; Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India’s Rebirth in Modern Germany* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009); Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism*

34 *Indian Pantheism and the Threat of Nihilism*

*in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

38 Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 201.

39 Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 207. In other words, Schlegel wants to distinguish the “original revelation” given to the ancient Indians from the subsequent “corruptions” of that revelation in their systems of philosophy. This explains why Schlegel thinks a study of those systems will put us closer to “true knowledge of God.” By studying these corruptions, he thinks, we can approach their authentic wellspring.

40 This is the important insight of Suzanne L. Marchand, “Herder and the Problem of Near Eastern Chronology in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 157–175. See the Appendix for further discussion.

41 Here Schlegel’s position was anticipated by Novalis, whose “Christianity or Europe? A Fragment,” delivered as a private speech to the Jena circle in mid-November 1799, offered a sympathetic portrait of the Roman Catholic church. For a rich account of Novalis’s “romantic cosmopolitanism,” see Pauline Kleingeld, “Romantic Cosmopolitanism: Novalis’s ‘Christianity or Europe.’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, no. 2 (2008): 269–284.

## 2 The Song of God

### Humboldt's Philosophical Poem

*The word yoga is a true Proteus.*

August Schlegel<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.1 The Pious Yogi

In 1789, a man of Indian descent appeared before a European audience. He sat “motionless as a pollard, holding his thick bushy hair, and fixing his eyes on the solar orb.” Stranger yet, ants had made a clay edifice around his body, which was covered by nothing more than a thin sheet of snake skin at his waist. Nobody could say how long he had been sitting in such a position; the plants encircling his upper body suggested it was longer than anyone might have supposed. The man had no name, and he was referred to simply as “a pious Yogi.”<sup>2</sup>

This yogi emerged in the West as a figure in Kālidāsa's play *Śakuntalā*, and his image would leave a lasting influence on European readers for years to come. In his late lectures on the philosophy of history, for example, Friedrich Schlegel made reference to Kālidāsa's character, adding that “the Indian Yogi is just such a hermit or penitent who in this mystical immersion often remains immobile in one place for years.”<sup>3</sup> Schlegel, who we know became highly critical of the ancient Indian tradition, describes the yogi's practice in less than flattering terms. The yogi is someone seeking “magical spiritual self-exaltation,” he writes, and in extreme cases this may lead “not merely to a figurative but to a real intellectual self-annihilation.” While the yogi's feats of concentration are impressive, Schlegel concluded that we must in the end feel “profound regret at the sight of so much energy wasted for a purpose so erroneous, and in a manner so appalling.”<sup>4</sup>

What Schlegel found erroneous was precisely the aim of *yoga*, a Sanskrit term he took to mean the self's union with the divine. Attaining such union, he explains, would require not only that I abstract my mind from everything pertaining to the external world – all impressions, perceptions, and



feelings – but also that I fix my awareness entirely upon God. This is why Schlegel describes the aim of yoga in terms of “total absorption” in the thought of God, an absorption that, if carried to its highest degree, would entail the disintegration of the mind and the body. Hence, the emphasis Schlegel places on the literal self-annihilation effected by the yogi’s practice: it is, he argues, a practice of inner concentration that risks leading to mental disorder or, worse still, to physical death. The penitent from Kālidāsa’s play, who sat motionless, half-naked, staring at the sun: what is he, Schlegel asks, if not a warning of the extremes to which Indian asceticism may lead?

By the time Schlegel delivered these lectures in 1828, twenty years had passed since the publication of *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. During that time, scholarship on ancient India and its cultural traditions had grown at an exponential rate in Germany, France, and England. Reading his late lectures now, it is not clear what inspired Schlegel to return, after two decades of virtual silence, to the topic of Indian philosophy – although one factor was likely a recent development in the field, namely, a recovery of the *Yoga Sūtras*. By the 1820s new Sanskrit texts had led scholars to ponder over the word “yoga,” and this raised discussion over its translation and meaning. Schlegel’s own brother August Wilhelm was at the centre of this debate, and it would draw responses from Wilhelm von Humboldt and others, each of whom sought to improve upon existing definitions.

The fact that Schlegel felt obliged to comment on the translation of “yoga” late in his career suggests that he thought it was urgent to repeat his warning from *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*: that Indian philosophy leads to pantheism and that pantheism leads to nihilism. As we saw in Chapter 1, it was crucial to Schlegel’s previous account that the stages of oriental philosophy mark a history of decline; and his larger point was that modern European philosophy has followed a similar downward path, whereby reason has become gradually divorced from revelation. After the publication of his India book, however, new scholarship from England posed a threat to Schlegel’s view of the history of philosophy: a previously unknown school of Yoga, attributed to the ancient sage Patañjali, appeared to uphold a non-panteistic view of God. For anyone who had found Schlegel’s account compelling, it was only natural to ask where Patañjali’s doctrine fits within his conception of oriental thought.

In *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, Schlegel identified the first stage of oriental thought as a system of *emanationism*, according to which creation flows from God as a distinct metaphysical source, to which created beings may or may not return. According to this doctrine, all of created reality is estranged from its source, and for beings with consciousness like us, this estrangement engenders feelings of melancholy,

longing, and despair. The remaining stages of Indian philosophy speak to this problem, in Schlegel's view. The doctrine of *materialism*, he explains, frames the emanation and return of creation as an ongoing cycle, like a fixed pattern of sleeping and waking, or inhaling and exhaling. What he calls *dualism*, by contrast, positions all of creation in a battle between two irreducible powers, the power of light (coming from God) and the power of darkness (coming from outside of God); and this doctrine states that we must choose sides in the cosmic struggle. *Pantheism*, in denying any real distinction between creator and creation, renders the idea of such a struggle meaningless.

When Schlegel presented this outline in 1808, no European scholar had access to the ideas of classical Yoga compiled by Patañjali. For this reason, Schlegel was bound to be surprised by the religious dimension of Patañjali's system, whose *Yoga Sūtras* distinguish individual persons from the supreme person, or "Lord" (*Īśvara*). Yet rather than explore this dimension further in his 1828 lectures, Schlegel drew attention to the meditative practices of yoga, all of which he took to involve the "appalling" aim of uniting oneself with the Godhead. That was enough, he thought, to reveal yoga as nihilistic, insofar as it posits "self-annihilation" as our highest end. In drawing such conclusions, however, Schlegel showed no interest in consulting the *Yoga Sūtras* in detail, and he was content to follow the summaries of a certain "learned Englishman" who had recently made Patañjali's doctrine known to Western readers. For Schlegel, this doctrine is best captured by that pious yogi from Kālidāsa's play, whose motionless posture was, in his estimate, a symbol of Indian nihilism.

This chapter has two chief objectives. First, I will examine "On the Philosophy of the Hindus" by Colebrooke, showing how this work was the first European account to distinguish the Yoga system of Patañjali from other orthodox schools of Indian thought. Colebrooke's exposition was also influential for raising the question of what distinguishes Patañjali's doctrine from the Sāṃkhya school of Kapila, the central issue being the presence or absence of God in the path to soul liberation. Second, I will show that Colebrooke's focus on Patañjali and Kapila inspired Humboldt to appeal to the *Gītā* as an alternative source for interpreting Yoga philosophy, as he believed that the *Gītā* contains ideas missing from these other systems. On the reading I hold, Humboldt was responding to Schlegel, though indirectly, by defending the *Gītā*'s system as a form of pantheism that leaves room for freedom.

## 2.2 Colebrooke's Recovery of Yoga

The "learned Englishman" who won Schlegel's praise was none other than the author of "On the Philosophy of the Hindus," Henry Thomas

Colebrooke. Born in 1765, Colebrooke left England at the age of seventeen to take up administrative posts with the East India Company, and while in India he acquired a strong command of Sanskrit. His initial motive for learning the language was independent of any interest in philosophical or religious literature: he made his mark as a Sanskritist by completing a translation of the *Digest of Hindu Laws*, which had been left unfinished by his predecessor Sir William Jones.<sup>5</sup> Eventually his interests expanded beyond the juridical sphere, and by the time he returned to London in 1814, Colebrooke's knowledge of Indian thought was impressively detailed. For the inaugural lectures he delivered at the Royal Asiatic Society on June 21, 1823 and February 22, 1824, Colebrooke gave the first exposition of the main schools of South Asian philosophy, including the Yoga of Patañjali. The four-part published version in the Society's 1824 *Transactions* served as a gateway study for years to come.<sup>6</sup>

Colebrooke's preference for studying "schools" of philosophy was a breakthrough approach at the time. He worked to distinguish the teachings of "Hindu" thought as they emerged among groups of individuals, without attending to either their chronological or conceptual ordering. Rather than abstracting from the literary traditions of South Asia and reconstructing their "epochs," as Schlegel had done, Colebrooke divides his exposition into the six major *darśanas* of Indian philosophy – Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta – in addition to two of the heterodox schools, Jainism and Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Between Schlegel's approach to general systems and Colebrooke's approach to specific figures and texts, the latter became paradigmatic for future scholarship. While there is no question that Colebrooke's strategy had textual evidence to speak in its favour, his study was far from impartial; as we will see, his portrait of Patañjali's Yoga contained a number of harsh judgments that later readers – often without knowing it – would adopt and repeat in their own work.

Colebrooke argues that Patañjali's Yoga is close to the school of Sāṃkhya, and that the *Yoga Sūtras* bear many affinities to the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikas* of Kapila.<sup>8</sup> This is because both subscribe to a fundamental *duality* of principles: (1) *puruṣa*, referring to pure consciousness, or the absolute *subject* of experience, and (2) *prakṛti*, referring to material reality, or the absolute *object* of experience. As Colebrooke explains, both schools maintain that creation, including the conditions of possible experience and their manifest forms, arises from the "conjoining" of these two principles. That is to say, it is when *puruṣa* joins with *prakṛti* that all subsequent principles of experience flow forth, creating a dynamic evolution that extends all the way to our sense faculties and their material objects. According to Kapila and Patañjali, this outward flow leads us to misidentify our proper self (*puruṣa*) with some form of material reality (*prakṛti*). Thus, it is only by "disjoining" the two, and reversing the flow of experience, that we can hope to achieve lasting liberation.

In this respect the *darśanas* of Sāṃkhya and Yoga are interlinked in their aim to teach “the means by which eternal beatitude may be attained.”<sup>9</sup> Attaining beatitude amounts to salvation, Colebrooke explains, yet it is salvation that requires a special kind of self-recognition. In fact, both Kapila and Patañjali maintain that *ignorance* of the self is the root of all suffering. What I might think of as myself, such as my mental capacities, my thoughts, or my intelligence, are all mere “evolutes” of *prakṛti*, and not my essential Self – hence the importance that Sāṃkhya and Yoga place on discrimination, separation, and analysis, methods for disentangling all the “non-self” elements that pass themselves off as “self” elements in the stream of one’s inner experience. To achieve liberation, on this view, is to effect a process of involution toward one’s consciousness until one reaches its innermost core, pure awareness as such. That is the moment when one can finally “abide in one’s own essence,” as Patañjali says.<sup>10</sup>

In what respect, then, do the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali depart from original Sāṃkhya teachings? Colebrooke’s answer in his lectures is ambivalent.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, he considers the method of Sāṃkhya superior because it is more rational in its execution and more philosophical in its aim: to attain liberation through the perfection of knowledge. But he thinks that Sāṃkhya is flawed in its view that the material world exists without divine support, a contrast with Yoga, he adds, “which is the most important of all: the proof of existence of supreme God.”<sup>12</sup> As Colebrooke notes, the metaphysical principles of Yoga are nearly identical with Sāṃkhya. In addition to positing an individual *puruṣa*, Patañjali also posits a supreme *puruṣa*, namely, *Īśvara*, which Colebrooke translates as “God” and “ruler of the world.”<sup>13</sup> He does not hide the fact that he thinks that this aspect of Yoga is a step in the right direction: Patañjali’s work makes up for the “deficiency” of Kapila’s, Colebrooke writes, “by declaring the existence of God.”<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Colebrooke has no kind words for the methods of Yoga, and on two separate occasions he refers to the *Yoga Sūtras* as “fanatical.” While the methods of Sāṃkhya are, in his judgment, more rational, the methods of Yoga are more “mystical”: instead of working toward the perfection of knowledge through a process of analysis, Yoga places high regard on spiritual exercises that subdue “body and mind.” Granted, both schools aspire to the same goal, that of entering into what Colebrooke terms “absorbed contemplation,” but the main difference, he argues, is that Patañjali’s school places greater emphasis on non-cognitive measures for attaining such absorption, one of which is the ritual chanting of *Om*, the sacred sound Patañjali associates with *Īśvara*. Colebrooke dismisses this as “repeated muttering.”<sup>15</sup> The details of his criticism are admittedly thin, but Colebrooke’s worry seems to be that the practices upheld in the *Yoga Sūtras* risk undermining the achievement of lasting liberation, perhaps because they risk blocking the yogi’s insight into the essential Self.

To support this worry, Colebrooke focuses much of his account on the third chapter of the *Yoga Sūtras*, the *Vibhūti Pāda* on mystic powers. This part of Patañjali's text, he writes,

is full of directions for bodily and mental exercises, consisting of intensely profound meditation on special topics, accompanied by suppression of breath, and restraint of the senses, while steadily maintaining prescribed postures. By such exercises, the adept acquires the knowledge of every thing past and future, remote or hidden; he divines the thoughts of others, gains the strength of an elephant, the courage of a lion, and the swiftness of the wind; flies in the air, floats in water, dives into the earth, contemplates all worlds at one glance, and performs other strange feats.<sup>16</sup>

After characterizing this as a belief in magical powers, Colebrooke adds that a “*Yogi*, imagined to have acquired such faculties, is, to vulgar apprehension, a sorcerer, and is so represented in many a drama and popular tale.”<sup>17</sup> With this portrait, Colebrooke leaves the impression that the *Yoga* of Patañjali, while praiseworthy for declaring the existence of God, clouds the spiritual path with empty exercises, vain devotions, and even superstitious beliefs.

Almost as an afterthought, Colebrooke writes that such mystic powers do not suffice “for the attainment of beatitude” but would only “prepare the soul for that absorbed contemplation.”<sup>18</sup> While this is close to what Patañjali actually says, it fails to mention that the *Vibhūti Pāda* catalogues possible mystic powers only to warn students against becoming attached to them. Patañjali's message is unequivocal: to cultivate power or *vibhūti* for its own sake is to remain in a state of bondage. The *yogi* seeking lasting liberation will assign no importance to such power; and in that respect *vibhūti* is not essential for the spiritual path. Nevertheless, the emphasis Colebrooke puts on this chapter was enough for future readers to make the tempting slide from Patañjali's school to the much older tradition of Indian asceticism that did pursue *vibhūti* for its own sake. Colebrooke's remarks about the sorcerer “*yogi*” of popular tale only served to reinforce an opinion Europeans were disposed to accept, that the practice of *yoga* is bent on the acquisition of magical abilities.

What is arguably most revealing about Colebrooke's portrait of *Yoga* is not what it includes, but what it leaves out. To give a point of comparison, his exposition of Kapila's teachings surveys all of the *Sāṃkhya-Karikas* from beginning to end. But when he turns to the *Yoga Sūtras*, Colebrooke only touches upon some aspects of the first book (the *Samadhi Pāda*) and the third (the *Vibhūti Pāda*), making no mention of the second and fourth *pādas*. As a result, readers of his 1824 study are left with the idea that *Yoga* is silent on matters of ethics: between its emphasis on subduing

the body and the mind through devotional exercises and its final aim of lasting liberation, Colebrooke's Yoga seems indifferent to questions of moral duty to self and others. For his readers on the Continent, this was more evidence that Schlegel was right to claim that Indian philosophy falls into some form of nihilism. As we have seen, this is how Schlegel himself came to understand Yoga soon after reading Colebrooke's lectures.

With these lectures as the only available report on Patañjali at the time, early nineteenth-century scholars were not in a position to discover an important fact about the *Yoga Sūtras*. In the second chapter of the text, the *Sādhanā Pāda*, we find a detailed account of yogic practice founded upon ten moral principles, consisting of five *yamas*, or other-regarding duties, and five *niyamas*, or self-regarding duties. It is possible to view these moral principles as preliminary and perhaps dispensable rules for those seeking higher states of consciousness, but the *yamas* and *niyamas* are granted a much stronger role in the text: Patañjali places them at the *foundation* of yogic practice, indicating that right action is constitutive of the spiritual path and hence not optional at all. In fact, Patañjali even declares that the five *yamas* constitute a "great vow" (*mahā-vratam*) that binds all persons irrespective of caste, gender, or location: they are categorical imperatives that remain valid for practitioners at any level of self-development. On this point, his view is clear: without an ethical foundation, the higher aims of yoga cannot be achieved.

This is not a side of Patañjali that readers would have been able to see through Colebrooke's study. Instead, they were offered a version of Sāṃkhya that benefited from the additional principle of God but suffered from an excess of mysticism. Naturally, for those already critical of oriental systems, such a portrait of Yoga was a welcome addition to the scholarship, and it would soon play an important role in Hegel's denunciation of Indian thought (to be discussed in Chapter 3).<sup>19</sup> But not everyone was quick to accept Colebrooke's verdict, and dissenting voices could soon be heard. The task of a rebuttal fell to the multitalented Wilhelm von Humboldt, who had been studying Sanskrit for some years and was venturing upon an improved interpretation of Yoga. Before long, in a two-part lecture he delivered in the summers of 1825 and 1826, Humboldt would argue that Colebrooke was mistaken to give primacy to the writings of Kapila and Patañjali. There is, he claimed, another Indian classic that merits our attention, one that is "perhaps the deepest and most sublime thing the world has to show."<sup>20</sup>

### 2.3 Humboldt's *Gītā*

True to his reputation as a man of letters, Humboldt's correspondence at the time affords us insight into the back story of his work on the *Gītā*. In

the course of praising August Schlegel's Latin edition of the text, published in the first volume of the *Indische Bibliothek*, Humboldt confesses to interrupting his projects early in the spring of 1825 "for the sake of love of the *Gītā*." That summer he gave the first of a two-part lecture before the Berlin Akademie der Wissenschaften, published in 1826 under the title *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita bekannte Episode des Mahā-Bhārata (On the Episode of the Mahābhārata Known by the Name Bhagavad Gītā)*.<sup>21</sup> However, it was not just love of the poem that motivated Humboldt to present the results of his interpretation to a wider audience. In a letter to August Schlegel, he makes the underlying purpose of his study clear:

Colebrooke's treatises ["On the Philosophy of the Hindus"] in particular prompted me to do this. He does not mention the *Gītā* at all, and I can hardly imagine that it is his intention to dedicate a treatise of his own to it. Since the *Gītā* is basically the doctrine of Yoga, and he discusses it in his first treatise after Patañjali, it does not seem as if he wanted to devote his own work to it.<sup>22</sup>

"I tried," Humboldt adds, referring to the lecture he was about to deliver in Berlin, "to be less dry than Colebrooke, and to give a clear concept of the original."

As this letter shows, Humboldt wanted to remedy what he thought was an oversight on Colebrooke's part, which helps to explain the repeated emphasis he puts on reading the *Gītā* as a *philosophical* work, as opposed to a merely poetic or religious one. Humboldt wanted to vindicate the place of the "Song of God" among the ranks of India's intellectual classics, thereby improving upon the scholarship of his English colleague. As his remarks to August Schlegel show, he did not think Colebrooke's study was at fault simply for lacking comprehensiveness; the stakes were much higher, as they concerned the doctrine of Yoga that Colebrooke – wrongly, in Humboldt's judgment – had interpreted through the lens of the *Sāṃkhya-Karikas* and the *Yoga Sūtras*. While Humboldt found himself in agreement with Colebrooke's presentation of Patañjali's system, he believed that only the *Gītā* promises to unlock the deeper meaning of Yoga (as a doctrine) and so deserves "special attention" in its own right.<sup>23</sup>

Humboldt says this, I believe, to justify his approach to the *Gītā*. He wants to view the text as a "complete philosophical system," whereby the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is like a "painting obscured by mist," he writes, which every now and then lifts to reveal the totality of its image.<sup>24</sup> As a philosophical poem, the *Gītā* turns on a vision of the human being as an "undivided whole" whose essential Self is connected to all things; yet this vision, Humboldt maintains, is intuitive and immediate,

which is to say, it cannot be arrived at by a process of ordinary reasoning. One can of course dissect the *Gītā*'s maxims for following the spiritual path, and one can do that as a scholar; but the guiding thesis of Humboldt's lecture is that the truth of those maxims is tied to experience. Yoga philosophy, he argues, cannot be reduced to a body of speculative knowledge alone; for it is a system that also bears upon one's conduct, action, and way of life.

Of the practical rules that emerge from the conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Humboldt highlights four:

- Rule 1. Focus on action itself, not the fruits of action.
- Rule 2. Between opposing desires, strive for equanimity.
- Rule 3. Recognize the essential Self in all beings.
- Rule 4. Devote the fruits of action to God.

In the case of the first rule, when Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna to avoid becoming attached to the fruits of action, he is introducing a concept of indifference that leads to the practice of equanimity. When we are faced with a variety of desires that draw us in different directions, equanimity is the virtue of standing aloof from their motivational pull, and it is a virtue that goes hand in hand with standing aloof from the perceived consequences of what we do. Action itself is unavoidable – on this Kṛṣṇa is clear – but the perfection of action requires ridding oneself of the illusion, “I am the doer,” the very illusion that nourishes selfish tendencies of choice. The further we read into the *Gītā*, for Humboldt, the more we see that indifference to the results of action and equanimity are two sides of the same coin: they are how we can live, make choices, and enter into the affairs of the world without succumbing to egoism. To cultivate this is *karma yoga* or the yoga of action.

As Humboldt notes in his lecture, the *Gītā* teaches us that the perfection of action requires the absence of attachment, inclination, and egoism. This stipulates what yoga is *not*: *karma yoga* requires that we do not become invested in the perceived rewards of our labour, that we do not get drawn into our desires, and that we do not think that we are the self-made authors of our destinies. At the same time, Humboldt recognizes that this is preparatory for the adept to grasp the positive side of Kṛṣṇa's teachings. If I can see through the illusion of my *separate* self, then it becomes possible for me to see my common *identity* with other beings:

*He who is disciplined by yoga sees  
The Self present in all beings,  
And all beings present in the Self.  
He sees the same Self at all times.  
(ślōka 6.29)*



To see my essential Self – my *puruṣa* or *ātman* – is to recognize my deep interconnection with other beings. This in turn allows me to recognize my equal standing in the world:

*The wise see the same Self  
In a Brahmin endowed with wisdom and cultivation,  
In a cow, in an elephant,  
And even in a dog or in an outcaste.*

(ślōka 5.18)

As this last passage makes clear, the concept of an essential Self is not restricted to the human community: it includes non-human animals (e.g. cows, dogs, and elephants) as well as high- and low-ranked members of society (e.g. Brahmins and outcasts). To recognize this deep identity is the yoga of insight, or *jñāna yoga*, and Humboldt views it as complementary to the path of *karma yoga*. My practice of indifference guides my insight into an identity shared in common with all beings, and my insight into a common identity guides my practice of indifference.<sup>25</sup> For Humboldt, the yoga of action and the yoga of insight mutually support each other.

But this raises the question: what is the *ground* of that essential Self that I share in common with the cow, the dog, and the outcast? Humboldt shows sensitivity to this question when he writes that the paths of yoga all lead to an “intuition of divinity” (*Anschauung der Gottheit*). The *Gītā* is closer to the system of Patañjali, he argues, because it posits the existence of God, and both systems characterize the highest form of yoga in terms of *uniting* with the supreme Godhead through contemplation. Yet in light of our discussion from Chapter 1, it is urgent to ask what notion of divinity is operative in the text, as Humboldt understood it. By the time of his study, the worry that Yoga is nihilistic was already in the air, thanks to Schlegel, and Colebrooke’s lectures only served to fuel this worry by characterizing Yoga as a kind of irrational mysticism. So if Humboldt wanted to defend an improved account of Yoga that would forestall these worries, why would he place so much emphasis on the identity of all beings? Would this not justify the charge of pantheism?

Surprisingly, Humboldt’s answer is “yes,” it does justify the charge of pantheism; however – and this is his decisive point – it does *not* justify the further charge of nihilism.

## 2.4 Humboldt’s Non-Nihilistic Pantheism

### 2.4.1 Clarifying the Charge of Nihilism

While the topic of Indian pantheism never makes an official appearance in *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata*, this is not because it was absent from

Humboldt's thinking at the time. Once again Humboldt's correspondence with August Schlegel sheds light on what motivated his study of the *Gītā*. August himself initiated the topic in the course of discussing the views of his brother Friedrich. "My brother," he writes in a letter of February 2, 1826, "has previously declared the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gītā* to be pantheism." Right away August makes his own position clear: "I contradicted him." August goes on to propose that what appears to be evidence of pantheism in the *Gītā* is rather a doctrine of God's "dynamic omnipresence." From the fact that God dwells in all things, he argues, we have no reason to infer that "nature and divinity" are one and the same, as the doctrine of pantheism upholds.

A month later Humboldt replied to convey his agreement:

In my treatise on the teachings of the *Gītā*, I have already expressly warned against applying to Krishna's teachings what is commonly predicated of pantheism. I am also pleased to see, my esteemed sir, that I do not agree with your brother's ideas about the *Gītā*, which I cannot share.<sup>26</sup>

This friendly exchange highlights the fact that August's brother, Friedrich, despite his aversion to pantheism, says little to define pantheism itself. As we saw in Chapter 1, Friedrich's readers were left to fill in the details on the basis of his scattered criticisms in *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* and elsewhere: (1) that pantheism erases distinctions separating one being from another (leading to *metaphysical* nihilism), (2) that pantheism erases distinctions separating one action from another (leading to *moral* nihilism), and (3) that pantheism ultimately teaches the annihilation of the self (leading to *practical* nihilism). His unstated view was that pantheism upholds a strict relation of identity between creator and creation, such that all boundaries that define our view of the world dissolve into mere illusion. Yet the suggestion that Humboldt hinted at in his lecture, and which his letter to August makes explicit, is that this "commonly predicated" idea of pantheism does not apply to the teachings of Kṛṣṇa. Humboldt's conviction was that the *Gītā*'s system, once fully understood, escapes Schlegel's indictment altogether.

Humboldt understood why someone would be disposed to ascribe a simple form of pantheism to this Indian classic. The *Gītā* is full of passages in which Kṛṣṇa, speaking as a personal avatar of the supreme Godhead (or Brahman<sup>27</sup>), uses language that would have struck many non-Hindus as unusual. In Book 7, for example, he declares:

*Nothing higher than Me exists, o Arjuna.  
On Me all this universe is strung  
Like pearls on a thread.*

(ślōka 7.7)

By way of illustration, Kṛṣṇa adds in subsequent *ślōkas* that he is the “liquidity in the waters” (7.8), the “brilliance of fire” (7.9), the “sun and the moon” (10.21), the “Himalayas” (10.25), the “sacred fig tree” (10.26), and the “lion” (10.30), to name just a few self-attributions. Due to the strong metaphysical language here – concerning what Kṛṣṇa *is* and what *exists* – it is tempting to suppose that the *Gītā* is equating the sum total of all existing things with God. The string analogy from Book 7 might be taken to support this reading; for the analogy implies that Kṛṣṇa, the “string,” is none other than the collection of “pearls” (the sum total of existing things), in which case God and Nature would stand in a relation of simple identity after all, as the common version of pantheism maintains.

#### 2.4.2 *Two Kinds of Pantheism: Identity and Dependence*

This is not the only kind of pantheism available, however. Friedrich Schlegel may have given his readers this impression, yet it was not a view shared by Humboldt. In his letter to August Schlegel, he goes on to explain why he thinks pantheism is still the best label we have for the teachings of Kṛṣṇa:

In my opinion, however, the system must be called pantheism. In my view the matter seems to be based on the fact that the criterion of theism is creation out of nothing. This is precisely what the Indian system completely rejects. Now, where the world is not created but is eternal with God, there is dualism between an independent world and God, but where the world is taken to be immanent in God, there is pantheism. The sentence cannot even be reversed, as clear passages of the *Gītā* show.<sup>28</sup>

Humboldt’s reasoning is as follows: to say that the world is “immanent in God” means that the world depends on God in the same way that, say, a wave depends on the ocean. While we are happy to say that a wave is immanent to, or contained in, the ocean, it seems strange to reverse the proposition and claim that the ocean is immanent to, or contained in, the wave. Our intuition is that while the wave needs the ocean to exist, the ocean does not need the wave to exist. Take away the wave, and the ocean is still there; but take away the ocean, and the wave is gone.

These are subtle distinctions, to be sure, but as Humboldt came to see, they carry far-reaching implications. Once we formulate a relation of *dependence* between God and nature, in place of a relation of *identity*, a new way of interpreting the *Gītā*’s pantheistic metaphysics opens up. We can see that the force of the string analogy is to claim that all existing things depend on their divine source, as the pearls of a necklace

depend on a string. And that is just to say that the entire manifestation of material reality – “from Brahma to a blade of grass” – stands in a relation of dependence on God like so many waves standing in a relation of dependence on the ocean. All states of reality “proceed from Me,” as Kṛṣṇa declares. “I am not in them; they are in Me” (*ślōka* 7.12) – a claim we hear again in *ślōka* 9.4:

*This whole universe is pervaded  
By Me in My unmanifest aspect.  
All beings abide in Me;  
I do not abide in them.*

As Humboldt understood these lines, Kṛṣṇa’s system is best described as “pantheistic,” but only because it teaches the dependence of all things on God. In the *Gītā* the world manifests qualities that pre-exist in God, and to that extent God does not transcend the world the way a watchmaker, say, transcends the watch he creates. It is axiomatic in the *Gītā*, Humboldt notes, that “nothing comes from nothing.” The world manifests qualities that pre-exist in God and depend on God for their continued existence, without God having “created” them from a void. On Humboldt’s account, focusing on *ślōka* 9.4, the *Gītā* offers a sophisticated form of pantheism that upholds the deep presence of God in nature, without compromising the separation between the two.

### 2.4.3 The Problem of Freedom

The larger implications of this reading become clear when Humboldt turns to Kṛṣṇa’s claim that action is unavoidable.<sup>29</sup> The claim occurs in the context of Arjuna’s initial reluctance to join battle. Kṛṣṇa replies by explaining that all action is unavoidable, because everything in the material realm of *prakṛti* consists of an interplay of three “powers” (*guṇas*) that never rest. The powers themselves – *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, which might be translated as organization, activity, and inertia – are the building blocks of everything in the universe, including the human mind. The mind is in a state of constant activity due to the sense impressions it receives, and the thoughts these impressions generate are in turn potential “seeds” for further seed-bearing thoughts, without end. Kṛṣṇa’s point is that the inner life of the mind is just as active (and just as agitated) as the external world around us, and even if one could successfully refrain from acting, the whirling of one’s own mind would betray any outward repose.

Now at this point of Humboldt’s discussion, a worry surfaces that the *Gītā* appears to reduce to a system of “necessary fatalism.”<sup>30</sup> As Humboldt

points out, it seems to be promoting a system that reduces all human activity, including those inner choices that have yet to find expression in the world, to the determinations of nature. On the surface, at least, it does seem that Kṛṣṇa rules out freedom of choice in his claim that action is unavoidable; for this seems to entail that every action is dictated by powers that have always existed as part of the structure of *prakṛti*. Needless to say, none of this would come as a surprise to someone like Friedrich Schlegel, who argued that every system of Indian philosophy leads to the denial of freedom and hence to fatalism, the doctrine that reduces freedom to a mere illusion. Yet this was not a verdict Humboldt wanted to draw, and here his previous rereading of Indian pantheism comes back to play a defensive role.

Nor is it an accident that Humboldt's lecture culminates in his thesis that Kṛṣṇa's "doctrine of Yoga" is "grounded in the necessity of moral freedom," for this is precisely his *coup de grâce* to Schlegel's India book.<sup>31</sup> For Schlegel, as we know, the story of Indian philosophy leading to pantheism is a story of the gradual divorce of reason from revelation; with that divorce, he argued, it foreshadowed the darkness of nihilism gathering over the modern European age. Humboldt's choice to associate Yoga doctrine with moral freedom is a striking rejoinder, since it works to undermine what Schlegel claimed was the greatest threat of pantheism: its destruction of morality. Humboldt's view is not just that the *Gītā* allows for morality, but that it demands the purest form of morality by characterizing our highest end, not as the self's annihilation, but as its freedom. As Humboldt explains, the final end of human striving as conceived of by the *Gītā* presupposes "absolute freedom" (*absoluter Freiheit*).<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, Humboldt does not offer a full defence of this claim. But from the surrounding text it becomes clear that he takes Kṛṣṇa's doctrine to presuppose absolute freedom in at least two ways. First, it posits freedom as our final end, that of our liberation from the determinations of nature; and second, it posits freedom as our fundamental essence, that of our true Self. On this reading, the *Gītā* is not a "system of fatalism," as Schlegel maintained, but just the opposite: it is a "system of freedom," since it posits total liberation as what the yogini *is*, and what she aspires to recognize (and in that sense *become*) through her practice. Humboldt even comes close to suggesting that the unity of the *Gītā*'s system consists of these two viewpoints: the path of action and the path of insight are complementary methods for uprooting the ignorance that keeps one from knowing one's true nature. They are methods of returning to one's free but forgotten soul.

The key to Humboldt's non-nihilistic reading of Yoga comes, I think, from the version of pantheism he first ascribed to Kṛṣṇa's teachings. His observation that the *Gītā* makes God the supreme ground of all things was sufficient to answer much of the criticism Schlegel had levelled in his India

book. Schlegel, while never quite defining pantheism, had assumed that it entails the strict identification of nature and divinity. Humboldt found this assumption problematic in the case of the *Gītā*; moreover, his emphasis on the metaphysical grounding relation between God and world helps to avert a related accusation that was traditionally levelled against Spinoza's system, namely, that it reduces to materialism by identifying God with the sum total of existing things.<sup>33</sup> By distinguishing this sum total from its underlying ground, the God of the *Gītā* stands aloof from the deterministic matrix of *prakṛti*. Humboldt's insight is that the individual soul of every being also stands aloof in this way: each soul is, like God, absolutely free.

Admittedly, it is not clear whether this concept of freedom speaks to the initial worry that led Schlegel to regard the teachings of the *Gītā* as fatalistic. The concept Humboldt derives from his reading is that of total independence from *prakṛti*, an independence enjoyed by the soul (*ātman* or *puruṣa*) and God (*Brahman* or *Īśvara*). Yet the initial worry was that our actions are dictated by material powers or *guṇas*, and this problem is made more acute by the fact that our inner mental life also belongs to the matrix of *prakṛti*; for it seems that the *Gītā* rules out not only freedom of action, but also freedom of thought. This concern is only magnified by Kṛṣṇa's claim that the presumption of one's agency – “I am the doer” – misrepresents the source of action as being in the self rather than in nature. For even if we concede that some part of ourselves, the pure witness of experience, is unaffected by nature and thus “free” from its determinations, it remains unclear how freedom could ever be a property of one's individual will.

Humboldt's reply may at first sound like an admission of defeat, since he writes that the question of how we can be both free and determined remains an “unsolvable problem” in all philosophical systems.<sup>34</sup> Still, there is enough material in his lecture to put together a more satisfying reply. Humboldt is aware that while every action is bound to the matrix of *prakṛti*, we have enough wiggle room to cultivate behaviour patterns that diminish, rather than increase, the otherwise perpetual “attachments” to aversion and desire that distort our view of the essential self within. Indeed, this is the import of Humboldt's claim that yogic action leads to yogic insight. The practice of detachment from the fruits of one's labour is how one can both participate in the world (by performing actions) and stand aloof as a witness (by not clinging to outcomes). Moreover, that practice is what prepares an adept to recognize her true Self in that aloof, independent aspect: it prepares her to *see* the free witness within.

In fairness to Humboldt, *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata* was not intended to solve the perennial mysteries of philosophy, least of all the co-existence of freedom and causal determination. Judged by the standard of filling a gap in Colebrooke's exposition of Yoga, which focused exclusively on the work of Kapila and Patañjali, Humboldt's lecture can still be

deemed a success. His lecture took important steps toward uncovering the philosophical substance of the *Gītā*, and his careful rereading of Kṛṣṇa's moral and metaphysical principles was enough to call Schlegel's charge of nihilism into question. But in the end, it is fair to say that *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata* raises more questions than it answers, and one could well apply the same description Humboldt gave the *Gītā* to his own lecture: it is like a painting "engulfed in mist" that, every so often, "reveals a beautiful image."

## 2.5 Yoga, the "True Proteus"

By the time Humboldt's lecture was published in 1826, European scholars were already embroiled in debate over the question of how to translate the word *yoga*, and one of Humboldt's aims was to put this debate to rest. As early as 1785, Charles Wilkins had remarked that "there is no word in the Sanskrit language that will bear so many interpretations as this,"<sup>35</sup> a sentiment August Schlegel echoed thirty years later: "The word *yoga* is a true Proteus: its intellectual metamorphoses compel us to use cunning and force to tie it down and make it present itself to us and reveal its secrets."<sup>36</sup> As I have already mentioned, the controversy was never about its literal etymology: everyone was in agreement about the linguistic point that *yoga* derives from the Sanskrit *yuj*, meaning "yoke," "union," or "junction." The question concerned what exactly this means – a yoking of *what*, in what *way*, by *whom*, and to what *end*? The fact that each literary context subtly shifts the word's significance only added to the frustration of translators.

The debate itself was sparked when Alexandre Langlois, a French Sanskritist, wrote a harsh review of August Schlegel's 1823 Latin edition of the *Gītā*.<sup>37</sup> Among his criticisms, Langlois objected to the variety of cognates Schlegel employed for key terms like *yoga* – *applicatio*, *destinatio*, *devotio*, *exercitatio*, *maiestas*, and *mysterium* – the result of which, he argued, destroyed the unity of the original. When Humboldt came to Schlegel's defence, his point was that the impossibility of direct translation between languages necessitates choosing among multiple options, just as Schlegel had done. Yet Humboldt found it perplexing that for Wilkins, Schlegel, and Langlois, the privileged translation for *yoga* had become "devotion" in English, French, and German (all stemming from the Latin *devotio*), as he thought the connotations of this term were sure to obscure the meaning of the Sanskrit. Humboldt himself settled upon *Vertiefung* ("absorption") as the best translation of *yoga*, and *Insichgekehrtheit* ("turned into oneself") as the best description of what a *yogi* does.<sup>38</sup>

What is surprising is that when Humboldt attempted to unpack the meaning of "absorption," he ended up relying upon Colebrooke's exposition of Yoga, which was derived, as we have seen, from the *Yoga Sūtras*

of Patañjali. Speaking to Colebrooke's account of the schools of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, Humboldt writes that Yoga "takes God not only as the pinnacle of all things, but also posits the deepest observation of his being as the true means for attaining eternal bliss."<sup>39</sup> To this he adds:

In a philosophical sense, then, *yoga* is the persistent direction of the mind toward divinity, whereby all other objects, including one's own thoughts, are inhibited in their movement, so that one can sink into the essence of divinity and unite with it.<sup>40</sup>

In translating *yoga* as absorption, however, Humboldt risked undoing the progress he had made in defending a non-nihilistic reading of the *Gītā*. This is because the language of "absorbing" or "sinking" into divinity lends itself to the charge that Yoga is a simple pantheistic system that erases all distinctions between creator and creature. Nor did it help matters when Humboldt referred at the end of his lecture to yogic meditation as "enthusiastic mysticism,"<sup>41</sup> as this only lent support to Colebrooke's denunciation of Yoga as a non-rational system. In all this, the status of Yoga philosophy was left in a precarious position, to say the least.

True enough, not having access to the *Sāṃkhya-Karikas* and the *Yoga Sūtras* themselves meant that Humboldt's understanding of Yoga was mediated by Colebrooke's "On the Philosophy of the Hindus," which left him in no position to question anything Colebrooke said about Kapila or Patañjali. The fact that Colebrooke's study failed to mention the *yamas* and *niyamas* – the ten ethical principles at the heart of yogic practice – only served to reinforce a view of Yoga as an "otherworldly" asceticism that was silent on questions of duty to self and others. In light of this growing impression, Humboldt's effort to retrieve a commitment to moral freedom in the *Gītā* was a brave act of interpretation, and his attempt to read the "Song of God" as a form of poetic philosophy remains of lasting value. As we shall see, however, not everyone in the early nineteenth century shared his admiration. Humboldt's praise of the *Gītā* soon inspired a critical rejoinder from Hegel, who detected in *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata* a threat to his own system of philosophy. The real debate over Yoga was only just beginning.

## Notes

- 1 August Schlegel, "Ueber die Bhagavad-Gita. Mit Bezug auf die Beurtheilung der Schlegelschen Ausgabe im Pariser Asiatischen Journal. Aus einem Briefe von Herrn Staatsminister von Humboldt." *Indische Bibliothek*, 2 (1827): 257.
- 2 William Jones, trans., *Sacotalá: Or, The Fatal Ring* (London: Edwards, 1789), 87.



- 3 Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte* [*Philosophy of History*, 1828], ed. Jean-Jacques Anstett, vol. 8 of *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (Munich: Thomas Verlag, 1971), 130.
- 4 Schlegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte*, 131.
- 5 Henry Thomas Colebrooke, trans., *A Digest of Hindu Law, on Contracts and Successions*, 3 vols. (London: Oriental Press, 1801).
- 6 Henry Thomas Colebrooke, “On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” Parts I-IV. *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1 (1824): 19–43, 92–118, 439–466, 549–579.
- 7 While the issue falls outside the scope of this study, it is important to bear in mind that the very idea of Indian “schools” (and their division) is a controversial topic among scholars. For a review of this larger debate, see chap. 15 of Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).
- 8 While the author/compiler of the *Sāṃkhya-Karikas* is known by the name of Íśvarakrishna, Kapila is considered to be the founder of the school. However, nothing further is known about either person, and the dating of the *Sāṃkhya-Karikas* remains a topic of controversy. The same is true of the author/compiler of the *Yoga Sūtras*, Patañjali, of whom no biographical information survives. One estimated date of the *Yoga Sūtras* is around 200 CE, although some believe it was composed as late as 400 CE.
- 9 Colebrooke, “On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” 25.
- 10 In translating the *Yoga Sūtras* I have consulted Edwin E. Bryant, ed. and trans., *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (Albany, NY: North Point Press, 2009). Hereafter, references to the *Yoga Sūtras* will be by book and *sūtra* number.
- 11 The question about the relationship between *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* set in motion by Colebrooke continues to generate debate. See, for example, Georg Feuerstein, *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 109:

Of the plethora of misrepresentations of Patañjali’s *darśana*, both by foreign and indigenous scholars, none proved more inveterate and damaging than the claim that Classical *Yoga* is but a *Spielart* [variety] of *Sāṃkhya*. This infelicitous assumption was first proposed by H. T. Colebrooke in his now classical essay on *Yoga*. According to him there is but one single difference between *Yoga* and *Sāṃkhya*, namely, the affirmation of the doctrine of *Íśvara* by the former and its denial by the latter school of thought.

Feuerstein goes on to identify Dasgupta as the first scholar to break decisively with this tradition of interpretation and defend the autonomy of Patañjali’s *Yoga*. For further discussion, see Marzenna Jakubczak, “The purpose of non-theistic devotion in the classical Indian tradition of *Sāṃkhya-Yoga*,” *Argument* 4, no. 1 (2014): 55–68.

- 12 Colebrooke, “On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” 25.
- 13 Colebrooke, “On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” 31.
- 14 Colebrooke, “On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” 22–23.

- 15 Colebrooke, "On the Philosophy of the Hindus," 37.
- 16 Colebrooke, "On the Philosophy of the Hindus," 36.
- 17 Colebrooke, "On the Philosophy of the Hindus," 36.
- 18 Colebrooke, "On the Philosophy of the Hindus," 36.
- 19 For recent discussions of Hegel's engagement with India, see Robert Bernasconi, "With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel's Eurocentrism," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 22, no. 2 (2000): 171–201; "With What Must the History of Philosophy Begin? Hegel's Role in the Debate on the Place of India within the History of Philosophy," in *Hegel's History of Philosophy: New Interpretations*, ed. David Duquette (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002): 35–49; and Jon Stewart, *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 20 Wilhelm von Humboldt, letter to Friedrich von Gentz, May 21, 1827, in *Ungedruckte Denkschriften, Tagebücher und Briefe von Friedrich von Gentz*, ed. Gustav Schlesier (Mannheim: Heinrich Hoff, 1840), 230.
- 21 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita bekannte Episode des Mahá-Bhárata* [*On the Episode of the Mahābhārata Known by the Name Bhagavad Gītā*, 1826]. vol. 1 of *Gesammelte Werke*. Berlin: G. Reimer, 1841.
- 22 Wilhelm von Humboldt, letter to August Schlegel, June 17, 1825, in *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Online-Edition der sprachwissenschaftlichen Korrespondenz*, <https://wvh-briefe.bbaw.de/Briefe>. References to the Humboldt–A. Schlegel correspondence are to this edition.
- 23 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 28.
- 24 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 84.
- 25 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 37.
- 26 Humboldt, letter to August Schlegel, March 5, 1826.
- 27 Note that *Brahma*, as the "creator deity" or divine creative force, is distinct from the concept of *Brahman*, as the supreme divine ground of all reality.
- 28 Humboldt, letter to August Schlegel, March 5, 1826.
- 29 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 31.
- 30 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 34.
- 31 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 83.
- 32 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 83.
- 33 It goes beyond the scope of this study to consider whether Spinoza's pantheism does in fact lead to such nihilistic consequences. For discussion, see G. H. R. Parkinson, "Hegel, Pantheism, and Spinoza," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 3 (1977): 449–459; Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Acosmism or Weak Individuals?: Hegel, Spinoza, and the Reality of the Finite," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 48 no. 1 (2010): 77–92; Brady Bowman, "Acosmism, Radical Finitude, and Divine Love in Mendelssohn, Schelling, and Hegel," *The Owl of Minerva* 45, no. 1 (2013): 61–83; James Kreines, *Reason in the World: Hegel's Metaphysics and Its Philosophical Appeal*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Karolina Hübner, “Spinoza on Negation, Mind-Dependence, and Reality of the Finite,” in *The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed, 221–237 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

34 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 83.

35 Charles Wilkins, *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon, in Eighteen Lectures, with Notes* (London: C. Nourse, 1785), 140.

36 Cited in Helmut Gipper, “Understanding as a Process of Linguistic Approximation: The Discussion between August Wilhelm von Schlegel, S.A. Langlois, Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel on the Translation of the Bhagavadgita and the Concept of ‘Yoga,’” in *Studies in the History of Western Linguistics*, eds. Theodora Bynon and F.R. Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 119. As Wilkins goes on to write:

Its first signification is *junction* or *union*. It is also used for bodily or mental application; but in this work it is generally used as a theological term, to express the application of the mind to spiritual things, and the performance of religious ceremonies. The word *Yogee*, a devout man, is one of its derivatives. If the word *devotion* be confined to the performance of religious duties, and a contemplation of the Deity, it will generally serve to express the sense of the original; as will *devout* and *devoted*.

(*The Bhagvat-Geeta*, 140–141, n12)

37 August Schlegel, ed. and trans., *Bhagavad-Gita, id est Thespesion melos sive almi Krishnae et Arjunae colloquium de rebus divinis, Bharateae episodium* (Bonn: Weber, 1823). For further discussion of Langlois’s review, see Herling, *The German Gita*.

38 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 68.

39 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 67.

40 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 68.

41 Humboldt, *Ueber die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita*, 72.

### 3 “Abstract Devotion”

#### Yoga in Hegel and Schelling

*One thereby remains unsullied by action in the hustle and bustle, just as the lotus leaf floating on the water in the middle of the water remains unsoaked by the water.*

Schelling<sup>1</sup>

By the time his lecture *On the Episode of the Mahābhārata* appeared in 1826, Wilhelm von Humboldt was defending a minority view in presenting the *Gītā* as a system of freedom. By that time, the status of Yoga had already received two blows: one directly by Friedrich Schlegel, who denounced Indian systems of thought for succumbing to nihilism, and the other indirectly by Henry Thomas Colebrooke, who passed over the ethical principles of Patañjali’s Yoga in his exposition of Hindu thought. Humboldt was aware that in praising the *Gītā* he was going against the grain of current scholarship. But he could not have anticipated how much this praise would strike a chord in Hegel, who wasted no time in making his judgment of Humboldt’s work public.

The first task of this chapter is to review Hegel’s engagement with Indian thought. We shall see that he had systematic reasons for wanting to contest Humboldt’s praise of the *Gītā*, given Hegel’s commitment to a “Christian-Teutonic” model of human history. We shall also see that Hegel worked to undermine the *Gītā*’s philosophical value, and that he was at pains to show that Indian philosophy cannot sustain a notion of moral freedom at all. My second task is to show how Schelling worked to address these objections in his late lectures on mythology, which he delivered in Berlin after Hegel’s death. For Schelling, a proper understanding of the *Gītā*’s metaphysics shows that the dependence of all things in Brahman does not undermine the possibility of freedom (nor, for that matter, the reality of finite individuals). Schelling argues that a correct view of yoga shows that an adept seeks to attain, not self-annihilation, but self-realization. Like Humboldt before him, Schelling claims that the *Gītā* is a genuine work of

philosophy, and his late lectures show him pursuing a new definition of yoga that avoids the criticisms of both Schlegel and Hegel.

### 3.1 Hegel, between Hinduism and Hellenism

Born in 1770, Hegel spent his formative student years at a seminary in Tübingen, where he shared room and board with Schelling and Hölderlin. Though his early writings display a preoccupation with questions of religion, art, and history, including the issue of a “new mythology,” Hegel was never an official member of the early Romantic circle. He worked as a private lecturer at the University of Jena in 1801, when Romanticism was just past its zenith, and his views eventually turned to a system of philosophy that was hostile to the Romantics and the work of his former flat mate Schelling. In nearly all of his writings from the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807) onward, including his lectures on aesthetics, religion, and history, Hegel almost always positions his philosophy in contrast to the work of Schelling and the Romantics: the former he characterizes in terms of “pantheism,” the latter in terms of “phantasy” – two labels Hegel would redeploy in his assessment of Indian thought.

When Humboldt’s two-part lecture was published, Hegel was well established at the University of Berlin. At the time, he was busy revising and expanding his monumental textbook, the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (*Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*); and in a letter from that year he complains of having to “interrupt” his work, referring to an article he was composing “on Mr. W. Humboldt’s treatise on the *Bhagavad Gita*.”<sup>2</sup> This is the first time Hegel hinted at his forthcoming “review” of Humboldt’s contribution, which appeared in the January and October issues of the 1827 *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*. At over sixty pages of small typeface, this two-part article was not so much a review as a long research essay, the aim of which was to criticize what Hegel took to be the foundational tenets of ancient Indian thought. Hegel felt that a prompt rejoinder to Humboldt was urgent enough to put his existing projects on hold, and he certainly wanted to challenge Humboldt’s praise of the *Gītā* as the “greatest philosophical poem” ever composed.

Now why, we must ask, did Hegel consider it necessary to overturn Humboldt’s assessment of the *Gītā*? One answer that suggests itself is that Humboldt’s praise of an oriental classic risked undermining the model of human history Hegel had spent over two decades defending. Hegel’s view was that history has staged the development of human reason, or “spirit” (*Geist*), which was reaching the final stages of completion under the guidance of the Protestant church, the German state, and the “science”

of their genesis (which Hegel believed his system of philosophy had articulated).<sup>3</sup> The stakes of the Humboldt review were high: alarmed by the idea that ancient India could have birthed a genuine form of thought, due to the praise the *Gītā* had just received, Hegel’s aim was to show that this text fails to meet the minimal standards of philosophical thinking. As a result, Hegel wanted to justify his choice of excluding ancient India from any role in world history or the history of philosophy proper.<sup>4</sup>

Hegel was careful to distinguish the beginning of intellectual “history” (his specific date was 600 BCE, the time Thales was assumed to have lived) and the period of “prehistory” that encompasses the oriental world. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, for example, we find Hegel restricting his discussion of Chinese and Indian thought to the Introduction, that is, *before* Part 1 on Greek philosophy. By way of justification, he writes:

The first is the so-called oriental philosophy. But it does not enter the body and realm of our representation; it is only provisional, of which we only speak in order to give an account of why we do not deal with it more extensively and in what relation it stands in thought to true philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

In other lectures Hegel seeks to justify his choice by calling the spread of Indian culture “prehistorical,” adding that “history is limited to that which makes an *essential epoch* in the development of Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

It is still not clear, however, why Hegel would need to deny the presence of history, religion, or philosophy in the sphere of ancient India. In the context of the early nineteenth century, one did not have to be a Romantic to appreciate the growing number of Indian texts that pointed to a pre-Hellenic and, at least in the case of the Vedas, a pre-Hebraic religious culture originating in India. Nor would it alter the basic structure of Hegel’s conception of “world-history” (*Weltgeschichte*) to grant India a place in the emergence of human spirit, if only to say that it was a stage that needed to be overcome. That was precisely how Hegel had categorized the various stages of history leading from the ancient Greeks to nineteenth-century Europe. What was it, then, that led Hegel to press such a hard line against the inclusion of India into the category of “history”? What was the threat, or the perceived threat, that he wanted to avert? And why was Hegel so opposed to apply the title of “philosophy” to any ancient Indian system?

Some light can be shed on these questions by considering Hegel’s view that there are only two “epochs” in the history of philosophy, the Greek and the Teutonic. He defines the latter as “philosophy within Christendom insofar as it belongs to the Teutonic nations,” adding that “the Christian-European people, inasmuch as they belong to the world of science, possess

collectively Teutonic culture.” What is relevant is that Hegel conceives of the two as standing in an organic relationship: with Greek thought, he claims, we see glimpses of a “potential ground that already contains the whole,” like a seed that contains the blueprint for the emergence of philosophy within Christendom and its final flowering on Germanic soil. On this model, only Greek thought serves as a proper *starting point* for the history of philosophy, because only Greek thought foreshadows the most “advanced” form of philosophy in the West. To bring the Greco-Germanic lineage to completion, then, was Hegel’s own aim and ambition.<sup>7</sup>

Hegel’s fear was that granting India admission into the ranks of history threatened to undermine the ideal of “Christian-Europe” that was central to his project. In this respect, he was reacting against the “oriental renaissance” that the Romantics had set in motion, but not for the reasons usually cited by scholars. Hegel’s resistance to this renaissance was not a response to the idea of returning to the wisdom traditions of the East, but rather a response to the idea of an “original revelation” at the fount of Indian culture. After all, it was this idea that allowed Friedrich Schlegel to level a wholesale rejection of Enlightenment thought and to advocate for its replacement by a kind of non-rationalist philosophy inspired by elements of Catholicism. Ironically, though Schlegel, like Hegel himself, saw no intrinsic value in the wisdom traditions of the East, his claim that only the recovery of oriental traditions gives us access to the truth of Catholic faith was anathema to Protestant philosophers. Needless to say, Hegel would have none of it.

What drove Hegel to defend a Greek-centred narrative of history and the history of philosophy was prompted in part by Schlegel’s *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*; for Schlegel’s account lent weight to the idea that Catholic religion alone is equipped to restore a revelation given to – but lost by – the first Brahmins of ancient India. And while Schlegel never intended to reject philosophy *tout court* in the manner of Jacobi, his “philosophy of life,” as he called it, was far too sensuous for Hegel’s taste. Long before Schlegel shocked his contemporaries by converting to Catholicism after the publication of *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, Hegel had spilled much ink criticizing Catholic religion for its sensuousness, its use of symbols, and its attachment to the world of nature. Not surprisingly, all of these concerns resurface in his assessment of Indian religion, and it would not be too far a stretch to say that Hegel’s later denunciation of Hinduism was shaped, in large measures, by his perception of its tacit affinity to Catholicism.<sup>8</sup>

These observations help to explain why Hegel was such a vocal critic of the oriental renaissance and why, in 1826, he could not let Humboldt’s positive image of the *Gītā* stand unchallenged. At issue was nothing less than the Teutonic lineage of philosophy within Christendom that, Hegel

believed, would only find completion within the speculative system he had worked so hard to establish.

### 3.2 The Dream of Spirit

Schlegel’s passage to Catholic religion through ancient India was not the only event that alerted Hegel to the dangers of Romantic orientalism. Another threat closer to home came from Hegel’s friend and colleague during his years at the University of Heidelberg – the same man whose legacy will forever be bound up with the death of Günderrode: Georg Friedrich Creuzer. After this tragic event, Creuzer rose to prominence with the publication of his *Symbolik*, first issued in four volumes from 1810 to 1812, and later reissued in 1819 and 1837.<sup>9</sup> Unlike his publicly antagonistic relationship with Schlegel, Hegel was one of Creuzer’s long-time supporters, and he even came to Creuzer’s defence when the publication of his *Symbolik* triggered a backlash from classicists. Yet Hegel’s sympathies did not extend to Creuzer’s work of myth and symbolism. If anything, this work only moved Hegel to adopt a stronger anti-Hindu position, as his writings from the 1820s attest.

On the surface, Hegel was happy to acknowledge his indebtedness to Creuzer’s scholarship. A different picture only emerges when we examine more closely how Hegel came to appropriate the category of symbolism in his own writings.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen, Hegel required of ancient peoples a high degree of self-understanding to merit their inclusion in the history of human “spirit,” which is why he always privileged the Greeks and what he called their classical “ideal” of beauty. By reading ancient myths as symbols of transcendent truths, Creuzer was effectively inverting Hegel’s model of history. For instead of those truths emerging at the end of a progressive sequence (in which philosophy finally triumphs over myth), Creuzer’s view was just the reverse. Those truths already existed in antiquity, he argued, but they lay hidden in symbolic form. For Creuzer, the category of the symbol was the key to a Neoplatonic theory of mythology, according to which the myths of ancient peoples contain truths that, once properly decoded, can afford the interpreter an “exalted philosophic experience.”<sup>11</sup>

Creuzer’s emphasis on the Eastern origins of Greek religion did not help his reputation among the classicists of his day. His position struck many as controversial, that the mysticism of the ancient Brahmins was the basis of an esoteric doctrine preserved and passed down by the priests of Phoenicia and Egypt. Yet it was not Creuzer’s narrative that posed a problem for Hegel. Hegel was happy to accept the chronological fact that oriental cultures were older, if not the oldest on record; for he had strategies for separating temporal primacy from cultural primacy. The problem was Creuzer’s Neoplatonism, for on this model the idea of a



historical development of human spirit was called into question. If we follow Creuzer in reinterpreting the myths of ancient peoples as truths in symbolic form, then the idea of a progressive unfolding of spirit no longer appears compelling. The myth systems of all ancient peoples, including those non-Western peoples that Hegel was forced to exclude, were symbol systems and hence, by implication, *truth* systems.

After reading the second edition of the *Symbolik*, Hegel wrote to Creuzer to convey his thanks: "My renewed occupation with aesthetics this summer is related to your *Symbolik*. ... I have reason to be grateful to you for it in many ways."<sup>12</sup> This letter was dated May 6, 1823. But again, when we turn to read the lectures on aesthetics that Hegel composed at the time, we find anything but agreement with Creuzer's theory of symbolism. Instead, Hegel was now cautious to draw a distinction between "symbolism *proper*," which he defined as symbolism elevated to a degree of self-understanding, and what he called "*unconscious* symbolism," which he likened to the imaginings of a dream-like state.<sup>13</sup> Hegel was also careful to place Indian culture in this latter category, so as to distinguish it from the "awakened" creations of the ancient Greeks. By introducing the concept of unconscious symbolism, then, Hegel was seeking to reaffirm his own position, which was that pre-Hellenic cultures are inherently empty of genuine religious, philosophical, and even artistic content. They are products of what Hegel termed "phantasy," and nothing more.

The second edition of the *Symbolik* would also have given Hegel occasion for concern because of a newly composed chapter titled "On the Religions of India." Not only did Creuzer praise the purity of Indian morality and the manner in which Indian religion presented "great moral truths in nature"; he also argued that the most ancient Indian texts exhibit an original pantheism, whereby "God is everything, in him everything is, outside of him the world is and yet again in him, all beings come out of him and fall back again in his eternal bosom."<sup>14</sup> The symbol of this expansion and return, Creuzer explained, is the sacred fig tree (*Aśvattha*) whose structure of upward roots and downward branches serves as a symbol of divine reality.<sup>15</sup> But if Creuzer stepped over a line in Hegel's view, it was when he went on to assert that the Indian doctrine of Trimūrti (three divinities) contained the same truth as the Christian Trinity. Creuzer himself did not try to hide this connection, as he wrote that Brahma is "God the Father," thereby implying that Śiva is to be thought of as the Son and Vishnu as the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

In a later lecture, Hegel argues that the Indian idea of "trinity in unity is indisputably the most striking and greatest feature in Hindu mythology," adding that to Europeans "it must have been in the highest degree astonishing to encounter this lofty principle of the Christian religion here."<sup>17</sup> However, Hegel is still adamant that insight into God's *triune* nature (three persons

in one supreme being) was disclosed only in Christendom, and he was clear that any hint of Trinitarian theology in pre-Christian traditions was not a real expression of the “truth” of the Christian Trinity. Accordingly, he immediately follows this comment on the Indian Trimūrti with the remark that “we shall become acquainted with it in its truth later on,” that is, when we make the transition to a study of Christian religion. The Trimūrti is yet another instance of “unconscious symbolism” generated in the dream world of spirit. Among those Europeans deceived by its affinity with the real Trinity, Hegel was of course implicating Creuzer.

As evidence that the symbol of the Hindu Trimūrti does not contain the truth of the Christian Trinity, Hegel points to the fact that the final moment of the Indian triad of gods, Śiva, signals destruction and a return to the cyclical process of creation. This is enough to show, Hegel argues, that the Trimūrti has not yet developed into the proper dialectical idea of a triune God; as he often claims, this idea requires a third stage to mediate and reconcile the previous two. The historically unique insight of Christianity, which Hegel does not find in any Eastern tradition, is the insight that God the Father, once individuated in the birth of the Son (Incarnation), must then find reconciliation with the Son in his death (Crucifixion) and return to life (Resurrection).<sup>18</sup> As early as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we find Hegel arguing that “the incarnation of God, which is to be found in oriental religion, has no truth because its actual spirit lacks that reconciliation,”<sup>19</sup> a point he would repeat years later in describing the world-destroying force of Śiva.

### 3.3 Hegel’s Critique of Hinduism

What we learn from studying Hegel’s reactions to Schlegel and Creuzer is that his exclusion of ancient India was a principled decision, one that reflected his commitment to the ideal of “Christian-Teutonic” philosophy and the model of its historical unfolding. While Humboldt’s lecture on the *Gītā* was published in 1826, after Hegel had already situated Indian religion, philosophy, and art in the realm of spirit’s prehistory, it provided Hegel with an important opportunity to collect his criticisms of Indian thought into a single place and make it available to an audience much wider than his lecture attendees. The *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* was an ideal venue for this task.

Only weeks after the first installment of the review was published, Humboldt wrote a cordial note to Hegel:

Having just now read your review of my last academic paper, I am truly inspired, excellent sir, to convey my lively and warm thanks for the kind and flattering manner in which you have introduced my work to

the public. Concerning the ideas of Indian philosophy, which you have developed in such a lively and sharp-sighted manner, I hope to have your permission to speak about them next time we meet in person.<sup>20</sup>

The “kind and flattering manner” mentioned here is a reference to Hegel’s remark that “Humboldt has dealt with the famous episode of the *Mahābhārata* and greatly enriched our insight into the Indian conception of the highest spiritual interests.” Hegel adds:

Real teachings can only emerge from the rare combination of thorough knowledge of the original language, familiar acquaintance with philosophy, and a prudent reluctance not to go beyond the strict meaning of the original, to see no more and no less than what is precisely expressed therein.<sup>21</sup>

However, by the time the second installment of Hegel’s review appeared in the October issue, Humboldt felt differently, as he confided to his friend Friedrich von Gentz in a letter dated March 1, 1828:

I am by the way on very good terms with Hegel outwardly. Inwardly, I have great and true respect for his ability and talent, without failing to recognize the deficiencies of his system. But I cannot at all approve of his long review. It mixes philosophy and fable, the authentic and inauthentic, ancient and modern – what kind of philosophical history can that give? But the whole review is directed against me, although covertly.<sup>22</sup>

If Hegel’s real sentiment toward Humboldt’s article was masked in the first installment of his review, the second (much lengthier) installment made no pretensions to build upon Humboldt’s “intimate acquaintance” with Indian philosophy. Nor would it have taken readers much time to see, upon comparing their respective contributions, that Hegel wanted to undermine two of Humboldt’s most central claims: that the *Gītā* is a philosophical system with (1) a sublime conception of the Deity and (2) an equally sublime conception of freedom.

With respect to point (1), Hegel was willing to grant Humboldt’s claim that the *Gītā* contains a sophisticated form of pantheism that makes all things depend on Brahman as their ultimate ground, without collapsing the distinction between God and nature. To this extent Hegel was siding with Humboldt against Schlegel, who characterized Indian pantheism in terms of a “melting” away of all distinctions that make up our material and moral worlds. In fact, many of Hegel’s discussions of pantheism during the 1820s (and there are many) show him distinguishing (i) the view that all

things are “immanent” in God from (ii) the view that God is “identical” to all things. But for Hegel this distinction is not enough to save Indian theology from the charge of reducing God to an empty concept, just as little as it is enough to save the modern idea of the “Being of beings.” The notion of Brahman, Hegel argues, remains an “abstract *Being*, the universal, *substance without subjectivity*, and is therefore not the *concrete*, not the spirit (just as little as God, the modern *Being* of beings, is thus determined as concrete, as spirit).”<sup>23</sup>

One side of the problem, Hegel explains, is that by making all things depend on Brahman, Indian theology is driven to limit the attributes of God to increasingly rarefied terms. Brahman is said to be that which is “essential” – as Kṛṣṇa claims, “I am the goodness of the good” (*ślōka* 10.36), the “knowledge of the wise” (*ślōka* 10.38), and the “seed of all creatures” (*ślōka* 10.39), among other epithets. In effect, the notion of Brahman gradually becomes devoid of concrete qualities because it points to what is ultimate, highest, and supreme, just like the modern “Being of beings.” On the other hand, Hegel’s point is that this view of God lies at the basis of Indian mythology, for the pantheon of Indian gods that animate all things in the most dizzying array of forms is, in his estimate, an attempt to compensate in the imagination what the idea of Brahman lacks for the intellect: particularity. The result, Hegel concludes, is a contradiction between an “abstract” monotheism and a “wild” polytheism that Indian religion does not resolve. Brahman is both *everything* and *nothing*.

With respect to Humboldt’s claim (2), that the *Gītā* upholds a sublime conception of freedom, Hegel is far less concessive. Much of the Humboldt review is devoted to showing the dangers of imposing European definitions on original texts; and while Hegel lacked any knowledge of Sanskrit, he was critical of August Schlegel’s Latin edition for this very reason. When the *Gītā* begins, Arjuna feels what appears to be a crisis of conscience at the brink of battle, and he expresses to Kṛṣṇa his unwillingness to fight the opposing army, which consists of many family relatives. In reply, Kṛṣṇa summons Arjuna to find courage and enter the battle, for reasons that lead him to unravel the nature of the Self, the supreme divine reality on which all things depend, and the various yogic techniques that allow one to escape the wheel of birth and death. Hegel’s point, however, is that there is nothing truly moral about Arjuna’s hesitation to fight or even about Kṛṣṇa’s exhortation to find courage, and he finds Schlegel’s translation guilty of misleading the reader on these issues.

What was the nature of Arjuna’s hesitation, then, if not a moral opposition to causing harm to clan and kin? Hegel’s answer is that the Latin translation imports a European sense of duty that stems from a love of one’s family. What the text of the *Gītā* reveals, he explains, is Arjuna’s

fear of breaking a taboo: to bring death upon his relatives would have the consequence of upsetting caste distinctions. So rather than feeling something like Christian love, Arjuna is paralyzed by fear of the cosmic baggage that would ensue from an intermingling of bloodlines. His hesitation is rooted in what Hegel judges to be the highly immoral belief in a caste system alongside the idea of intergenerational karmic rewards and punishments. And Hegel is quick to add that Kṛṣṇa's summons to fight invoked Arjuna's status as a member of the *Kshatriya*, or warrior caste, which once again differs from our notion of a soldier's duty. In all of this, the *Gītā* rests upon a system of external mores without "elevating itself to moral freedom."<sup>24</sup>

As further evidence that the *Gītā* lacks a system of morality, Hegel turns to the doctrine of *karma yoga*, according to which one ought to act with indifference to the fruits of one's labour (*śloka* 2.48). While he admits that this doctrine appears to be evidence of the poem's "pure moral principles," Hegel argues that it suffers the same shortcoming as "modern morals," by which he means Kant's theory of the categorical imperative. Crucially, Hegel even brings the same charge against Kṛṣṇa's imperative as he brings against Kant's, saying that the rule of indifference to the results of one's deeds only speaks to how one should be motivated – for the sake of duty, as Kant would say. But without specifying the actions one ought to perform, Kṛṣṇa's rule, like Kant's, remains an "empty formalism." As a result, the poem's reliance upon a caste system is evidence that it must import the content of moral actions from one's social rank, but since this system is antithetical to freedom, Hegel argues, the resulting system of duties is not an ethical one.

As if these problems were not enough, Hegel goes a step further and claims that the whole of the *Gītā* reveals a contradiction between two overarching ways of life. We are told to take action and to descend into the world of human affairs, yet we are also told to cultivate an attitude of indifference to the fruits of our labour and to renounce all attachments – even, at the most extreme, to renounce our egoistic sense of self. The problem here, Hegel observes, goes to the heart of what he calls the "Indian worldview." In the same way that the idea of Brahman is gradually emptied of all concrete attributes, the way of renunciation gradually negates all qualities of the self; and in the same way that Hindu mythology compensates for divine abstraction by creating a multiplicity of gods, the way of action compensates for self-abstraction by creating a multiplicity of duties. As a result, the Indian worldview oscillates between a life way of acting *too little* and a life way of acting *too much*.

All of these problems come to a head, on Hegel's account, when we turn to examine the doctrine of Yoga more closely. What appears to be the *Gītā*'s resolution of the contradiction of action and renunciation takes the

form of Kṛṣṇa’s injunction to devote oneself to God, as when he speaks of “thinking of Me” constantly (*ślōka* 10.9) and “renouncing All actions in Me” (*ślōka* 18.57). As Hegel interprets these lines, the negating dimension of Yoga is simply a mirror for the emptiness of Brahman itself, and this brings him to the same conclusion Schlegel had reached in his India book: that Yoga posits “annihilation of the self” as our highest end. Hegel adds only that this practice of self-annihilation is a symptom of a deeper, *theological* nihilism: the ascetic will to nothingness, on his reading, reflects the inherent nothingness of Brahman. To become absorbed in the thought of an empty God is to become empty oneself – and that, Hegel states, is the aim of Yoga: to enter into a state of total “thoughtlessness” and “unconsciousness.”<sup>25</sup>

Hegel would even use this line of criticism to intervene in the debate over how to translate “yoga” and capture its meaning in a European tongue. Between the two main proposals on offer – “devotion” (Wilkins, August Schlegel, Langlois) and “absorption” (Humboldt) – Hegel settled on a hybrid position, describing *yoga* as “abstract devotion” (*abstrakte Andacht*). Neither “devotion” nor “absorption” is a suitable correlate, he argues, because devotion implies an attitude of religious piety and absorption implies meditation upon a specific object of thought:

*Yoga* is rather a meditation without any content, a surrender of all attention to external objects, the activity of the senses, and any inner sensation, the absence of any wish, hope, or fear, the silence of all inclinations and passions as well as the absence of all images, ideas, and all particular thoughts ... . *Yoga* could only be called abstract devotion, therefore, because it moves toward the total emptiness of the subject and object.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the “union” to which *yoga* aspires, as Hegel explains in another text,

consists in the *annihilation* and stupefaction of self-consciousness. This is not affirmative liberation and reconciliation, but is rather a wholly negative liberation, complete abstraction. It is the complete emptying that renounces all consciousness, will, passions, needs ... . To the Hindu, then, the complete submergence and stupefaction of consciousness is what is highest, and one who remains at this abstract level and is dead to the world is called a *Yogi*.<sup>27</sup>

Not surprisingly, Hegel’s final word on *Yoga* is of a piece with his assessment of the Indian worldview in general: that it sinks into the imagination, into phantasy, and into the great “sleep of spirit” which the modern West has, after many steps and stages, finally awoken from and surpassed.

### 3.4 Hegel and the Task of Reception

We can now begin to appreciate Humboldt's complaint to his friend Gentz, that Hegel's review was covertly directed against him. In seeking to topple the *Gītā's* ideas about God, morality, action, and meditation, Hegel was not just attempting to knock the Indian poem down a few notches, but to negate its intellectual worth entirely. After the publication of Humboldt's lecture, the *Gītā's* fortune had never seemed more promising in its reception; but now, after Hegel's rejoinder in 1827, it had been demoted from the world's "greatest" philosophical poem to a "tedious" mixture of superstition and half-religion, all of which was held together by a caste system that, in Hegel's judgment, rendered moral freedom "impossible."<sup>28</sup>

Among the points on which Humboldt must have felt under attack was Hegel's assertion that Colebrooke had done scholarship a lasting service by presenting "extracts from truly philosophical works of the Indians," thereby implying that he agreed with Colebrooke that only the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikas* approximate to the honorific title of "philosophy." Nevertheless, while Hegel was willing to take Colebrooke's distinction between *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* on authority – viewing the former as "atheistic" and "rational" and the latter as "theistic" and "fanatical" – his assessment of *Kapila* was hardly effusive. Hegel considered *Sāṃkhya* a sham in its purported "method" of analysis, and in his eyes Patañjali's system was just as nihilistic as anything he had encountered before. Naturally, with nothing more than Colebrooke's "On the Philosophy of the Hindus" on hand, the only side of the *Yoga Sūtras* Hegel could have seen was one that focused on the cultivation of mystic powers. Hegel did not have a chance to consider the ethical principles making up Patañjali's *yamas* and *niyamas*, since Colebrooke does not mention them; and we can only speculate about what Hegel would have said about them.

What is nevertheless clear is that the time Hegel must have devoted to composing his Humboldt review was not motivated solely by a wish to one-up a fellow scholar. His anti-orientalist programme had been long in the making, as his lectures prior to 1827 attest; and Humboldt's published lecture was, if anything, what finally broke his silence. This goes some way toward explaining the concluding lines of the Humboldt review, which carry the tone of heralding a new epoch of scholarship on India. Speaking of the challenge European scholars now face, Hegel writes:

The task of reception is all the more difficult, not so much because the Indian way of representation differs completely from ours, but rather because it intervenes with the most sublime concepts of our own consciousness – but in that wonderful profundity it abruptly falls down to what is most degraded. The highly esteemed author [i.e., Humboldt],

who has enlightened us for the first time, has spared no troubles to collect and construct, from the diffuse presentation of the poem under consideration, its foundation stones. Thanks to him we are now in a position to interrelate the scattered material and to investigate it more thoroughly.<sup>29</sup>

To investigate Indian texts “more thoroughly” was Hegel’s way of saying how future scholars should proceed: not like someone lost in the deceptive “profundity” of Indian thought, but like someone disillusioned, someone who has seen Indian thought “fall” to what is most “degraded.” Such was Hegel’s parting word of gratitude to Humboldt: that “thanks to him” the doorway to this new phase of reception is open.

Years of service as a diplomat for the Prussian ministry must have taught Humboldt to choose his battles wisely. He showed no interest in settling scores with Hegel; and while Hegel’s review disappointed him, Humboldt decided in the end to avoid polemics, and the matter was left at that.<sup>30</sup> If anything, the review served as a reminder for Humboldt to remain indifferent to the fruits of his labour. As he wrote to Gentz, in the same letter quoted earlier:

As much as I am indifferent to external judgment, I attach great importance to the Indian philosophical poem, which I have worked on in the reviewed treatise. I will send a copy of it to you, though it will arrive later than my letter. You will certainly get a taste for what is deep and engaging in the poem, and at the same time you will understand how it must affect me. I am not unlike those who are absorbed in it, of whom it is spoken. I read the Indian poem for the first time in the countryside of Silesia, and my heartfelt feeling was that of gratitude to Fate for letting me live long enough to know this work.<sup>31</sup>

The *Gītā* was a source of consolation for Humboldt, which might explain why he felt disinclined to engage in debate with Hegel or others who felt differently about the text; and many years would pass before a writer of Humboldt’s stature would bestow such praise for the “Song of God.”

### 3.5 Schelling’s Journey to the East

In a letter dated May 9, 1809, Schelling wrote the following to Karl Windischmann, a friend and fellow philosopher:

I know that you don’t think like F. Schlegel, whose hidden polemic I tried to transform into an open one. His extremely crass and general concept of pantheism does not allow him to intuit the possibility



of a system in which, with the immanence of things in God, there is freedom, life, individuality, as well as good and evil. He only knows the three systems of his India book; but the truth lies right between these three, in the organically intertwined components of each ... . I have shown these points with unparalleled clarity in my treatise.<sup>32</sup>

The “treatise” in question was the *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (*Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*), commonly known as the *Freedom Essay*, which Schelling published in 1809. The “hidden polemic” was a reference to Schlegel’s remarks about the dangers of Indian pantheism and its connection to modern European philosophy, which Schelling recognized as a shot against his own system. What makes his letter to Windischmann revealing is that, in retrospect, it sheds light on the impetus behind what many consider to be Schelling’s greatest published work. That Schelling was intent on defending the ideas of freedom, individuality, and morality within a system of pantheism is evident from the first few pages of his treatise. But that his defence was sparked in part by Schlegel’s India book is something that few scholars have fully appreciated.<sup>33</sup> To make matters more intriguing, Schelling confessed to Windischmann his view that pantheism “correctly understood” is not only the “oldest system” of philosophy but also “the true one.”

Schelling’s name does not often appear in discussions of the oriental renaissance in Europe. Unlike Herder, Colebrooke, Schlegel, Günderrode, Creuzer, Humboldt, and Hegel, Schelling never engaged extensively with Indian thought in his written work. Yet it would have been impossible for him to remain ignorant of the recently translated texts from India that were causing such a stir across England and Continental Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. During the late 1790s in Jena, Schelling was a regular guest at the gatherings hosted by the Schlegel brothers and their wives, and he made enough of an impression to serve as the prototype for the character of Ludovico in Schlegel’s *Dialogue on Poetry*, who made the now famous call to seek the “highest Romantic” in the Orient. Ideas from Indian religion, philosophy, and culture were in the air, and it did not take Schelling long to feel their pull: references to *Śakuntalā* soon appeared in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Art* from 1802 to 1805, and it is likely that Schelling was familiar much earlier with Herder’s 1792 introduction to Kālidāsa’s play.<sup>34</sup>

Evidence of this familiarity is hinted at in a passage of Schelling’s 1802–1805 lectures, titled “Derivation of Mythology as the Content of Art”:

One can best comprehend the spirit of Indian religion, customs, and poesy by referring to the plant organism as their basic model. Viewed in

and for itself, the plant is the allegorical element in the organic world. The quiet language of color and fragrance is the only organ through which it can be recognized.<sup>35</sup>

In 1792 Herder had praised Indian thought for giving us a “metaphysics ... of plant life,”<sup>36</sup> adding that the secrets of the ancient Indian system are contained in the flower symbol. “Every flower teaches us this system,” he wrote, and “the Indians loved flowers.” To be sure, Schelling and Herder may have been drawing from a common source, namely, Georg Forster’s 1791 translation of *Śakuntalā*, which included a detailed appendix of terms.<sup>37</sup> In the entry for “lotus,” Forster highlights no fewer than fifteen symbolic uses of the flower in the play, and he cites a passage that some scholars believe may have helped inspire the celebrated “blue flower” of Jena Romanticism:<sup>38</sup>

*The moon has now disappeared, and the night-flower pleases no more: it leaves only a remembrance of its odour, and languishes like a tender bride whose pain is intolerable in the absence of her beloved.*

Forster adds no further commentary here, other than to stress the importance of flower imagery in South Asian literature. He concludes the entry by alluding to an old Indian maxim:

*The moon sees many night-flowers – the night-flower sees but one moon.*<sup>39</sup>

Many German authors at the time would have rejoiced at this passage, not only for its aesthetic qualities, but also for the way it captures the kind of dependence pantheism central to Humboldt’s account. While all things are contained in God (as there are many flowers for the moon), God is not contained in all things (as there is but one moon for all the flowers). While this symbol of divine immanence never made its way into Schelling’s writings, his lectures on art show that by 1802 he had read *Śakuntalā*, either through Forster or through Herder, and that the flower image affected him enough to say that the plant organism is a model for understanding the spirit of ancient India. Whether Schelling encountered the pantheistic ideas of the *Gītā* during this period remains unknown, but there is no question that he encountered Herder’s version of it.<sup>40</sup>

Still, none of this explains why Schelling was the target of Schlegel’s insinuations in *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*. On a theoretical level they seem out of place: since 1794, Schelling had advertised his philosophy as a system that promises to reconcile pantheism and idealism, Spinoza and Fichte, nature and freedom, and the solution he struck

upon was to place these oppositions into a mutually entailing relationship. Nevertheless, Schelling's emphasis was always on freedom, and his excursions into natural science were aimed at revealing that the most elemental forces of nature, in chemistry, biology, and physics, are alive with activity. "Nature is petrified intelligence," as he would say. So as much as Schelling was influenced by Herder's vitalism, which opted to speak of dynamic "forces" in place of static "substances," he was opposed to the determinism of Spinoza's philosophy that Herder was happy to accept. Are not all forces of nature, Schelling asked, even the so-called "lowest," early expressions of spirit?

Understanding Schlegel's motives for singling out Schelling is complicated by the fact that his "hidden polemic" was a mixture of intellectual disagreement and personal bitterness. By the time of his affair with Dorothea Veit that drove the couple to Paris, Schlegel's disillusionment with philosophy had reached an all-time low; and while he never became an anti-rationalist in the manner of Jacobi, Schlegel grew sympathetic to Jacobi's argument that philosophy leads to Spinozism, which is pantheistic, deterministic, and so nihilistic. At the same time, and for entirely different reasons, Schlegel had cause to resent Schelling for the affair he had had with his sister-in-law Caroline, who petitioned to divorce August Schlegel in 1802 and became Schelling's wife in 1803. Whether it was devotion to his brother or the fact that Friedrich had feelings of unrequited love for Caroline, his friendship with Schelling came to an abrupt end. It is perhaps no accident that after this turn of events his allegations of Schelling's "pantheism" began to circulate.

Whatever Schlegel's motives were, the publication of his India book proved to be a pivotal moment in Schelling's intellectual development, as it forced him to defend the compatibility of pantheism with freedom, individuality, and morality. To recall our discussion from Chapter 1, Schlegel's objection was that pantheism erases real distinctions between things (metaphysical nihilism) as well as normative distinctions between actions (moral nihilism), thereby making self-annihilation our highest end (practical nihilism). In the *Freedom Essay*, Schelling argues that pantheism can accommodate a distinction between all things and their source, enough to preserve the reality of individuals in the world. He also argues that pantheism can accommodate a purpose for human life, and that the morality of our actions can be understood in terms of our freedom to participate in the greater whole of being (inclining toward "good") or to act as though we alone, in separation from the whole, are exclusively valuable (inclining toward "evil"). For Schelling, the choice to reunite with the whole is the essence of "love."<sup>41</sup>

In saying this, Schelling's point is that the idea of divine immanence (that "all things are contained in God") does not preclude freedom,

individuality, and morality, and so it does not fall into the abyss of nihilism. However, the key to making this new system work lies in Schelling’s rejection of divine immanence as it was traditionally defined; and this is what Schlegel’s *India* book forced him to confront. As Schelling came to see, the doctrine of divine immanence is flawed not because it erases the distinction between God and nature: that is the “crass” definition of pantheism in circulation. The problem goes deeper, Schelling realized; for if we grant the idea of a metaphysical grounding relation between all things and their source, the unavoidable implication is that all things exist with absolute *necessity*. Of course, this implication did not trouble Spinoza himself: “All things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist,” he writes, “and to produce an effect in a certain way.”<sup>42</sup> For Schelling, however, this idea was the antithesis of freedom.

The only way forward, Schelling maintains, is to rethink the very ground of all things as absolutely *free* and to rethink ourselves as expressions of this absolute freedom. That is how we can hold onto both pantheism and freedom: God is free, and we depend on God for our existence, *but this dependence is not determined*. We exist out of freedom, not out of necessity. Indeed, Schelling’s insight is that our dependence on God does not require that our existence will be determined. That is where the traditional doctrine of divine immanence is mistaken: to depend on a free God is, in a limited but essential way, to be free ourselves. Thanks to Schlegel, then, Schelling was pressed to defend this claim, which signalled his advance beyond Spinoza’s pantheism and Herder’s vitalistic version of it. For these reasons, the *Freedom Essay* has earned its reputation as Schelling’s most important later work. Yet Schelling himself had little time to celebrate his achievement: soon after he composed the treatise, his wife, Caroline, died on September 7, 1809, an event that would cast a shadow over the rest of Schelling’s career.

### 3.6 Yoga as Inwardness: Schelling’s Interpretation

After Caroline’s death, Schelling promised much but published little, and his influence on the academic world diminished as Hegel’s grew. The former flatmates in Tübingen had become estranged from one another, for reasons both personal and intellectual. After Hegel’s death, Schelling was invited to fill his vacant chair at the University of Berlin, which Schelling accepted in 1841 at the age of sixty-six. His task, as expressed by the new Prussian minister of culture, was “to expurge the dragon’s seed of Hegelian pantheism.”<sup>43</sup> Schelling stunned his audience by delivering lectures on what many felt were obscure topics, the “philosophy of revelation” and the “philosophy of mythology.” Abbreviated versions of these lectures appeared after his death in 1856, though they remained largely ignored. In

reading them today, it is surprising to learn that the aging Schelling made a literary journey to the East, and that he attempted to defend the doctrine of Yoga from its European critics.

That Schelling made such a journey is not odd given his life-long fascination with ancient systems of religion. His second publication, *Über Mythen, historische Sagen und Philosopheme der ältesten Welt* (*On Myths, Historical Legends, and Philosophemes of Earliest Antiquity*), appeared in 1793, when he was only eighteen years old, and the topic of mythology would reappear in many of his subsequent writings. While Schelling later argued for the superiority of Christian revelation, his approach to the study of myth was different from Hegel's. Schelling was closer to the Platonic theory of Creuzer – which he in fact helped shape – according to which myths are truths veiled in the form of symbols. Even more significantly, Schelling rejected the distinction that served to motivate Hegel's exclusion of oriental thought, between "history proper" and "prehistory." For Schelling, the core of any ancient system of mythology, while prior to the recording of historical events, is intrinsically bound up with a people's historical consciousness. As a result, he was not inclined to dismiss pre-Hellenic traditions of thought as non-philosophical, as the Hegelian school did on principle; to the contrary, Schelling was happy to assign the ancient doctrines of Egypt, China, and India full philosophical status.

Schelling was especially impressed by the *Gītā*, which he once referred to as "undoubtedly one of the deepest and most delicate products of the Indian spirit."<sup>44</sup> In his 1842 lectures on mythology, Hegel's name appears only once, in a footnote, but in another place Schelling alludes to "a well-known philosopher" – namely, Hegel – "who also dealt with the *Bhagavad Gita* and who wanted to translate the word *yoga* as 'devotion' [*Andacht*]."<sup>45</sup> Schelling goes on to criticize Hegel's choice for failing to capture the full meaning of *yoga*, and while he thought that "absorption" was a better option, he found that unsatisfactory too. Faced with such alternatives, Schelling went on to defend a new translation:

I am amazed that no one has settled upon the German word *Innigkeit* [inwardness], which at the same time encompasses the concept of intimacy in itself, in its depth – not in the periphery, in the world of being and its separate properties – and *inwardness* also captures the concept of unity and that of union.<sup>46</sup>

Now if the word *yoga* risks being lost in translation, the same can be said of "inwardness," since *Innigkeit* in German conveys not only what is "inner" but also what is intimate, deep, and intense. Nor should we overlook the fact that *Innigkeit* held a special significance for Hölderlin, meaning what is held together, in balance, and in harmony. The term acquired a negative connotation only much later for Hegel when he spoke

of Romantic art and its “beauty of inwardness” as a foil for the ideal of beauty found in classical antiquity. It is safe to assume, given his rejection of Hegel’s translation, that Schelling’s preference for *Innigkeit* was not by accident, and that he perceived in the Sanskrit term an element of “holding together opposites” which other translations failed to capture. Even in the passage just quoted, we find Schelling tying the meaning of inwardness to “unity” and “union.” *Yoga*, he recognized, refers to both.

Nor is Schelling’s allusion to the “well-known philosopher” insignificant. It is clear that Schelling’s choice to translate *yoga* as “inwardness” was part of his strategy for defending the concept of *karma yoga* from the criticism of Hegel discussed earlier in this chapter. As Hegel argued in his Humboldt review, Kṛṣṇa’s rule of cultivating indifference to the fruits of one’s labour is as formal and empty as Kant’s rule of acting for the sake of duty. Both prescriptions speak about how one ought to be motivated, Hegel claims, but they fail to specify the content of our duties, since that content always comes from the aim or end one intends to realize. Moreover, Hegel thinks that Kṛṣṇa’s rule reflects a larger contradiction that the *Gītā* leaves exposed: on the one hand, we are told to renounce attachment to the anticipated results of our actions, even to renounce our very desires; but, on the other hand, we also are told to honour our obligations as members of a caste system, as Arjuna was said to honour his duties as a *Kshatriya*.

On Schelling’s reading, this criticism misrepresents the problem to which *karma yoga* is the solution. The problem is that the only way to preserve equanimity of mind is to foreswear action itself, because not acting keeps us distant from the world’s causal structure and our own frustrated desire to control it. In this respect, retreating from action and cultivating knowledge seem to be the superior life path:

Whoever acts steps out of himself and leaves the calm in which alone godliness consists. Whoever acts becomes engrossed in the real world and its conditions: only the non-acting person is actually free, for whoever has acted once is thereby bound by his deed. In this respect, knowledge is better than action.<sup>47</sup>

But therein lies our dilemma. For, as Kṛṣṇa reminds Arjuna, action is *unavoidable*. In Schelling’s words:

Action cannot be omitted either. The human being must act and is also driven to act against his will.<sup>48</sup>

As we know from the *Gītā*, “action” broadly construed refers to the activity of the *guṇas* that permeate the entire field of material reality, or *prakṛti*, which includes the human mind and its cognitive operations. Hence, the

dilemma we face is that not acting is the only way to be free from suffering, but this freedom seems forever beyond our reach, since all of our actions are part of the field of *prakṛti*, including the “inner” actions of the mind.

It is here that Schelling interjects, arguing that “the practical doctrine of yoga shows the way out”:

The human being dissolves this contradiction when he acts as if he did not act, namely, without attachment to his actions, and with an attitude of perfect calm about their success. Then he unites both systems, the system which sees value in the active life and in the performance of deeds, and the other system, which sees value in the contemplative life above activity and upholds the true value of life in the acquisition of pure knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

Kṛṣṇa’s rule embodies the concept of yoga as inwardness, but it is what Schelling calls the inwardness of action. It amounts to holding together opposites in deed, or balancing between *performing action outwardly* and *withdrawing action inwardly*. What looks like a contradiction between acting and not acting is removed when we see that *karma yoga* holds elements of both together. It allows one to be *in* the world without being a *part* of the world, which is exactly how Schelling understands the “true yogi.” The true yogi, he says, is someone who acts in this way, “who is in the midst of the most active and agile life as a non-doer; he remains unsullied by action in the hustle and bustle, just as the lotus leaf floating on the water in the middle of the water remains unsoaked by the water.”<sup>50</sup>

For Schelling, *yoga* amounts to a joining of opposites or an intimate act of balancing: the yogi inhabits a space between action and non-action, like the space between the lotus leaf and the water. In reaching this conclusion we can see how Schelling is upholding a reading inspired by what Kṛṣṇa himself says in *ślōka* 2.48:

*Fixed in yoga, perform actions,  
Having abandoned attachment,  
Arjuna,  
And having become indifferent to success  
or failure.  
It is said that equanimity is yoga.*

In the Latin edition of the text, August Schlegel translates “equanimity” (*samatvam*) as *aequabilitas*, which Schelling could see inflected in the concept of yoga more broadly. Like Humboldt’s reading discussed in Chapter 2, Schelling found a connection between the practice of *karma yoga*, as one’s indifference to outcomes, and the knowledge of *jñāna yoga*,

as one’s insight into the essential Self. From this standpoint, to practice equanimity toward the results of one’s labour just is to renounce one’s attachment to being an isolated, separate self, and that renunciation is what allows one to recognize or “see” the *puruṣa* or *ātman* (divine Self) equally in all beings. What Schelling adds to this line of interpretation, building upon Humboldt, is that the synthesis of action and knowledge, *karma yoga* and *jñāna yoga*, is none other than one’s reorientation to the supreme Being of beings, Brahman, which is why devotion to God, or *bhakti yoga*, serves to complete the previous two systems.

In light of the Humboldt review, however, one might worry that Schelling’s account of yoga remains vulnerable to Hegel’s more serious objection: that the underlying theology of the *Gītā* is nihilistic. Recall that Hegel’s complaint is that the idea of Brahman, as the supreme Being of beings, is devoid of all concrete attributes, and that the yogini who aspires to sink into contemplation of Brahman must likewise abstract from the contents of her own consciousness. At one level, Schelling has already preempted this criticism by defining yoga as inwardness, for the ideal of equanimity to which the adept aspires – in action, knowledge, and devotion – is nothing like an ideal of *emptiness*. Schelling’s claim is that the character of *Innigkeit*, as a balancing act, is neither positive nor negative, yet it is not for that reason void. Nor for that matter is the path of yoga best understood as leading to mental “dullness” and “stupefaction,” as Hegel had argued. Instead, Schelling understands the path of yoga as leading ultimately (in *bhakti yoga*) to a heightened consciousness of the divine, without that amounting to the annihilation of one’s individual self.

What is surprising is that Schelling believes that the notion of God in the *Gītā* had been mischaracterized by previous thinkers. More surprising still, when he reveals the details of his own reading, is that we find an unmistakable affinity with the theory of pantheism that Schelling had defended thirty years prior in the *Freedom Essay*. If it is possible to explain “how all things are and are not in God,” Schelling goes on to argue in his 1842 lectures,

then this poem, undoubtedly one of the deepest and most delicate products of the Indian spirit, has already tried to offer a resolution to the contradiction by asserting the being of things in God, but not in turn the being of God in things.<sup>51</sup>

As evidence of this metaphysical distinction, Schelling quotes the same passage that carried so much weight for Humboldt: *ślōka* 9.5, “All beings abide in Me / I do not abide in them.” Yet Schelling goes a step beyond Humboldt in framing the nature of divine immanence in a way that makes room for freedom, and it is striking that he attributes this view to the “Song of God” itself.



Schelling even repeats the insight behind his reconciliation of freedom and pantheism in the *Freedom Essay*: to say that all things necessarily depend on God does not commit us to say that all things are determined by God to exist (and to produce effects) with necessity. That was the seemingly innocuous inference behind Spinoza's fatalistic doctrine – from Part I, Proposition 29 of the *Ethics* – which Schelling had grounds to question years before. Now, in his late lectures on mythology, and in the context of discussing Yoga, we find Schelling defending the opposite thesis on textual grounds. In these lectures he argues from the outset that all things “existing in Brahman” leave open the question of *how* they exist; and it is not self-evident that they exist with necessity, or that they are determined to exist (and produce effects), which would leave no room for freedom. The *Gītā*, in Schelling's view, presents an entirely different view.

To support this claim, Schelling cites the first half of *ślōka* 9.5 (in the Latin translation) where Kṛṣṇa says: “Ecce mysterium meum augustum!” (Behold my secret majesty!), which is how August Schlegel rendered *paśya me yogam aiśvaram*, a phrase Kṛṣṇa repeats in *ślōka* 11.8 in the context of granting Arjuna a mystical vision of his true nature.<sup>52</sup> In this context, *yogam aiśvaram* means something like “divine energy” or “divine power,” which is how Schelling expands upon Kṛṣṇa's invitation: “See there my sublime, awe-inspiring secret – the secret of my *majesty*, my *glory* (in the real sense), that is, my *creative glory*.”<sup>53</sup> The “majesty” we are asked to behold is the majesty of God's glory, and here Schelling is careful to emphasize its creative dimension. This is God's glory “in the real sense.” Thus, immediately following the cited passage, Schelling goes on to say that the creative glory of God “consists only in *freedom*.” This, on his reading, is proof that the awe-inspiring majesty of God's power is, by its very nature, the majesty of God's creative freedom, his *Schöpferherrlichkeit*.

In saying this, Schelling left his lecture attendees no room to doubt that the way things depend on God is not necessary, contrary to the Spinozist view of divine immanence. The key to understanding the relationship between all things and their metaphysical ground in God lies in the *glory* of God's freedom. At least that is how Schelling views the underlying theology of the *Gītā*: “The Creator himself,” he explains, “never enters the process of creation, and thus into the world of things,” even though all things abide in God. “Still less” – and this is the main point Schelling has been leading up to – “is there a *necessary* connection of things with the Creator in the sense taught by common pantheism.”<sup>54</sup> Instead, Schelling argues, the entire manifestation of the universe is a free, non-necessary expression of God's glory. As Kṛṣṇa says in *ślōka* 3.24:

*If I did not perform action  
These worlds would perish.*

Not surprisingly, Schelling invokes *ślōka* 3.24 as the key to his own interpretation:

Here, then, the whole world exists only through a constant and unrelenting work of God, which, by the way, he too could omit, and that would be a free act. The world would disappear without a trace if he stopped the work of sustaining. The world is an appearance, but an appearance *freely produced*.<sup>55</sup>

Contrary to Hegel, then, who thought that the notion of God in the *Gītā* recedes into emptiness, Schelling’s point is that this God is “overflowing” with the awe-inspiring majesty of his absolute freedom. To become united with God is not to sink into nothingness, as Hegel believed, but to rise to absolute freedom oneself. As if worried that his listeners might have missed this point, we find Schelling repeating it later on:

*Yoga* is the striving in absolute contemplation and reflection to arrive at complete liberation (called *mokṣa*), at dissolution into God, *which is, however, by no means a substantial absorption and annihilation of the human being*.<sup>56</sup>

In drawing this conclusion, Schelling found himself in good company. The aim of *yoga* is not the annihilation of the soul, but its liberation, as all traditions of classical Indian philosophy have taught.

## Notes

- 1 F.W.J. von Schelling, *Vorlesung zur Philosophie der Mythologie* [Lectures on the Philosophy of Mythology; delivered in 1842], in Part II, vol. 2 of *Schellings Sämmtliche Werke* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1857), 489.
- 2 G.W.F. Hegel, letter to Karl Daub, December 19, 1826, in *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Karl Hegel (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1887), 231.
- 3 As David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), has well noted, Hegel’s goal was to show that “the German Romantics’ vision of the *Bhagavad Gītā* as philosophy was null and void, on the ground that the notion that Indian thought had a philosophical content was itself null and void. To not attack Humboldt on this point would have been tantamount to allowing that India had a philosophy, and that it was, by extension, ‘historical’ ” (86–87).
- 4 In a recent study, Aakash Singh Rathore and Rimina Mohapatra have proposed that Hegel’s view of Indian philosophy underwent a *re-evaluation* as he became more acquainted with the details of Sāṃkhya doctrine. See *Hegel’s India: A Reinterpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017). For textual support, they point to the late *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, where Hegel refers to Sāṃkhya as a “science” (*Wissenschaft*), an honorific title that he had

previously denied systems of Indian thought. Rathore and Mohapatra point to the following passage from his lectures as evidence of this positive shift:

The Sanc'hya only differs from Religion in that it has a complete system of thought or logic, and that the abstraction is not made a reduction to what is empty, but is raised up into the significance of a determinate thought. This science is stated to subsist in the correct knowledge of the principles – which may be outwardly perceptible or not – of the material and of the immaterial world.

(Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 130; Haldane translation.)

On first glance, it seems that Hegel was willing to grant the existence of a genuine system of philosophy in pre-modern India. As Rathore and Mohapatra see it, the shift turns on Hegel's new-found view of Samkhya as a kind of logical system distinct from religion:

Hegel says that Sankhya may be different from religion only insofar as “it has a complete system of thought or logic,” and that the abstraction it deals with cannot be reduced to what is *empty*, but is “raised up into the significance of a determinate thought.” Yet it is decisive in many ways that Sankhya is defined by Hegel immediately afterward as a *science* (a word hardly ever used by him in a loose or careless way) “stated to subsist in *correct knowledge* of the *principles* which may be outwardly perceptible or not of the material and of the immaterial world.”

(Hegel's *India*, 61)

A different picture begins to emerge, however, when we re-examine the original lectures that Rathore and Mohapatra draw upon. It is striking that Hegel seems to describe Samkhya as a “science” consisting of “correct knowledge,” given his earlier dismissal of Indian thought. But the evidence suggesting that Hegel changed his mind is less decisive than it first appears. This is because the passage Rathore and Mohapatra cite comes from a nineteenth-century translation of Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* by Elizabeth Sanderson Haldane, and a side-by-side comparison of Haldane's translation and the German original brings several important facts to light (with boldface added):

*Haldane:* The Sanc'hya only differs from Religion in that it has a complete system of thought or logic, and that the abstraction is not made a reduction to what is empty, but is raised up into the significance of a determinate thought. **This science is stated to subsist in the correct knowledge of the principles—which may be outwardly perceptible or not—of the material and of the immaterial world.** (Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 130; Haldane translation.)

*Hegel:* [Samkhya] ist daher von der Religion nur dadurch verschieden, daß sie eine ausführliche Denklehre hat—die Abstraktion nicht zu etwas Leeren bloß macht, sondern zur Bedeutung eines bestimmten Denkens erhebt. **Diese Wissenschaft besteht, wie sie sagen, in der**

richtigen Erkenntnis der Prinzipien, die äußerlich wahrnehmbar sind oder nicht wahrnehmbar—der materiellen Welt und der immateriellen Welt. (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Meiner edition, 6:379.)

What this comparison reveals is that when Rathore and Mohapatra quote Hegel characterizing Samkhya as (1) a “science” consisting of (2) “correct knowledge,” they are *in fact* quoting Henry Thomas Colebrooke, whose exposition of Samkhya Hegel drew from throughout his lectures. The original German makes this clear. When Hegel writes that “‘Diese Wissenschaft besteht,’ wie sie sagen, ‘in der richtigen Erkenntnis der Prinzipien,’” he is *paraphrasing* Colebrooke’s remark about the method of Sankhya:

True and perfect knowledge, by which deliverance from evil of every kind is attainable, consists in rightly discriminating the principles, perceptible and imperceptible, of the material world, from the sensitive and cognitive principle which is the immaterial soul.

(“On the Philosophy of the Hindus,” 27)

By omitting Hegel’s reference to Colebrooke’s exposition (captured in the phrase “wie sie sagen”), the translation of Haldane gives the impression that these were Hegel’s words, not Colebrooke’s. Sure enough, Colebrooke was happy to view classical systems of Indian thought as genuine forms of science, and his comparison with Patanjali’s Yoga shows a clear preference for the more “rational” procedures of Samkhya. We know that Hegel studied Colebrooke’s essays carefully during the 1820s, and his later lectures show him attempting to refine the image of Indian thought from his earlier writing. But the claim that Hegel *changed his mind* after reading Colebrooke is far from certain. Nor is it certain that Hegel ever tried to accommodate Samkhya doctrine into the history of philosophy proper. On this topic, I find myself in agreement with Bernasconi and Herling that Hegel’s attitude to Indian philosophy was on the whole negative.

- 5 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* [*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*; first delivered in 1822]. In *Hegel, G. W. F. Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Theorie-Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 138.
- 6 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, 178, emphasis added.
- 7 In this light, Hegel’s strategy of receiving the Orient was not unlike Herder’s – to be examined in the Appendix – which was to grant the temporal primacy of ancient India, as the birthplace of humanity, but then to affirm the cultural primacy of ancient Judah, as the childhood of humanity. Hegel was employing the same category of “prehistory” from Herder, and he merely shifted the starting point from a Hebrew to a Greek origin.
- 8 For a different reading of this issue, see Peter K.J. Park, “A Catholic Apologist in a Pantheistic World: New Approaches to Friedrich Schlegel,” in *Sanskrit and Orientalism: Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany*, eds. Douglas T. McGetchin, Peter K.J. Park, and Damodar Sardesai, 83–106 (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004).

- 9 Georg Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Heyer & Leske, 1810–1812).
- 10 For further discussion, see George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Nicholas A. Germana, “The *Creuzerstreit* and Hegel’s Philosophy of History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 80, no. 2 (2019): 271–288.
- 11 To borrow a phrase from Alan Cardew, “The Archaic and Sublimity of Origins,” in *The Archaic: The Past in the Present*, ed. Paul Bishop (London: Routledge, 2012), 93–146. Here it should be noted that, for Creuzer, myths are of lower representational power than symbols, an idiosyncrasy explained well by Robert F. Brown in his introduction to *Schelling’s Treatise on “The Deities of Samothrace”*: *A Translation and an Interpretation* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977):

In one respect Creuzer was a key spokesman for the Romantic movement’s view that religious myth and symbolism are not just dispensable products of primitive ignorance, but instead are profound and spiritual functions of human consciousness. What aroused the opposition of other Romantics was the way in which Creuzer relegated myth to a secondary status. In his view a symbol is a form of divine manifestation, a sign which both reveals and conceals something which cannot be given direct conceptual expression. ... Myth, on the contrary, is a second-hand representation or narration which is about the gods, an interpretation geared to the understanding of a general audience.

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- 12 Hegel, letter to Georg Creuzer, May 6, 1823, in G.W.F. *Briefe von und an Hegel*, ed. Karl Hegel (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1887).
- 13 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst [Lectures on the Philosophy of Art]*; first delivered in 1823]: “The first stage is itself neither to be called symbolic proper nor properly to be ranked as art. It only builds the road to both” (319). This translation comes from T. M. Knox, vol. 1 of *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Hegel also spoke of this stage as sitting at the “threshold of art,” adding that “it belongs essentially to the East and only after all sorts of transitions, metamorphoses, and intermediaries does it carry us over into the genuine actuality of the Ideal as the classical form of art” (319).
- 14 Creuzer, vol. 2 of *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (Leipzig: Heyer & Leske, 1810–1812), 642.
- 15 Compare to the *Katha Upanishad*, in *The Upanishads*, vol. 1, ed. Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949).
- 16 Creuzer, *Symbolik*, vol. 2, 569–570.
- 17 This comes from the 1832 version, cited in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 587n208.
- 18 For a discussion of Hegel’s Trinitarian theology, see Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Cyril O’Regan, “The

- Trinity in Kant, Hegel, and Schelling,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, eds. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 254–266.
- 19 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1807], vol. 3 of *Hegel, G. W. F. Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Theorie-Werkausgabe*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), §684.
  - 20 Humboldt, letter to Hegel, January 25, 1827, in the Online-Edition der sprachwissenschaftlichen Korrespondenz. <https://wvh-briefe.bbaw.de/Briefe>
  - 21 G.W.F. Hegel, “Über die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita bekannte Episode des Mahá-Bhárata; von Wilhelm von Humboldt.” *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* (1827): (First Article, January) 51–63, (Second Article, October): 1441–1491. Hereafter I will refer to this as the “Humboldt review,” vol. 11 of *Hegel, G. W. F. Werke in zwanzig Bänden. Theorie-Werkausgabe*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer und Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).
  - 22 Humboldt, letter to Friedrich von Gentz, March 1, 1828, in *Ungedruckte Denkschriften, Tagebücher und Briefe von Friedrich von Gentz*, ed. Gustav Schlesier (Mannheim: Heinrich Hoff, 1840), 230.
  - 23 Hegel, “Humboldt review,” 11: 186 (emphasis in the original).
  - 24 Hegel, “Humboldt review,” 11: 154.
  - 25 Hegel, “Humboldt review,” 11: 151.
  - 26 Hegel, “Humboldt review,” 11: 151, emphasis added.
  - 27 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1832), in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Hodgson, 596n293, emphasis added.
  - 28 For discussion of this point, see Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the Early German Reception of Indian Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
  - 29 Hegel, “Humboldt review,” 11: 203–204.
  - 30 Hegel continued lecturing on aspects of ancient Indian thought right up to the time of his unexpected death in 1831 at the age of sixty-one. Hegel’s own attitude toward the topic became increasingly negative, to the point that he declared that the “fate” of Asian nations was to be ruled by a foreign power, nodding approvingly to the presence of Britain in India.
  - 31 Humboldt, letter to Gentz, March 1, 1828.
  - 32 F.W.J. von Schelling, letter to Karl Windischmann, May 9, 1809, in *Aus Schellings Leben in Briefen*, ed. G.L. Plitt (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1869), 156.
  - 33 For an important exception, see Daniel Whistler, “The Schlegelian Context to Schelling’s Account of Freedom,” in *Schellings Freiheitsschrift–Methode, System, Kritik*. ed. Thomas Buchheim, 71–89 (Berlin: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).
  - 34 For discussion, see Nicholas A. Germana, *The Anxiety of Autonomy and the Aesthetics of German Orientalism* (New York: Camden House, 2017). For a different reading of Schelling’s intellectual debt to Indian philosophy, see Dorothy M. Figueira, *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994).
  - 35 Friedrich Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. and trans. Douglas W. Scott (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 57.

- 36 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, vol. 4 (Gotha: Carl Wilhelm Ettinger, 1792), 68.
- 37 Georg Forster, trans., *Sakuntala: Oder der entscheidende Ring* (Mainz: Fischer, 1792).
- 38 This hypothesis is put forward by Amos Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964). It gains plausibility in light of Novalis's personal notes for the preparation of his novel, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (composed 1799–1800), where *Śakuntalā* is referred to twice, with the first entry making an explicit reference to the “blue flower” (*der blauen Blume*): see Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenburg], *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, vol. 1 of *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenburgs*, eds. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1977), 341 and 541. What must have struck Novalis as significant, however, is that the symbol of a blue flower also appeared in a literary tradition much closer to home. As Mario Zanucchi points out, the symbol appears in a fairytale by the evangelical pedagogue Christian Gotthilf Salzmann, whose *Unterhaltungen für Kinder und Kinderfreunde* (1783) refers to “a certain blue flower that blooms on this mountain every hundred years” (*eine gewisse blaue Blume findet, die alle hundert Jahre auf diesem Berge blüht*). See Mario Zanucchi, “Nachwort,” in Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen: Ein Roman* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2022), 272.
- 39 Thomas Moore in his *Irish Melodies* (Philadelphia, PA: Carey Press, 1815), 59n, attributes this translation of the “Indian maxim” to Sir William Jones.
- 40 Schelling had been an avid reader of Herder since his late teens, as Michael Forster demonstrates in *Herder's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 41 See F.W.J. von Schelling, *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit [On the Essence of Human Freedom]*, 1809, vol. 3 of *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling: Werke* (Leipzig: Reutigen, 1834).
- 42 Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, proposition 29, in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- 43 Cited in Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 258. For an excellent discussion of this strange chapter in the history of German philosophy, see Fred Rush, “Schelling's Critique of Hegel,” in *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*, ed. Lara Ostaric (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 216–237.
- 44 Schelling, *Vorlesung zur Philosophie der Mythologie*, 494. As Jason Wirth observes in *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 222:

What is immediately striking about Schelling's analysis of India is its utter lack of the condescension that typified the nineteenth-century reception of India, from English colonial interests to Christian proselytizing interests to Max Müller's refusal to visit India. Beyond the Scylla and Charybdis of exoticism and Orientalism, Schelling found in India one of the world's great philosophical traditions.

For a helpful, albeit brief, discussion, see also Baier, *Yoga auf dem Weg*, esp. 101–102.

- 45 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 488.
- 46 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 488.
- 47 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 488.
- 48 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 488.
- 49 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 488.
- 50 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 489. Compare with *Gītā* 5.10: “Offering his actions to Brahman, / Having abandoned attachment, / He who acts is not tainted by evil / Any more than a lotus leaf by water.”
- 51 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 494.
- 52 August Schlegel, *Bhagavad-Gītā*, 158.
- 53 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 494.
- 54 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 494.
- 55 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 494–495, emphasis added.
- 56 Schelling, *Philosophie der Mythologie*, 574, emphasis added.





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Part 2

# God, Morality, and Freedom



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## 4 Yoga in the Late Nineteenth Century

Pal, Mitra, Vivekananda, and Müller

*He is a little more than a god, but he is certainly not what we mean by God.*

Max Müller<sup>1</sup>

Looking back to Part 1 of this study, what Schelling's late lectures reveal is that from the time Spinoza's controversial ideas were first published, thinkers across Europe were able to defend pantheism from many of the charges brought against it. By the mid-nineteenth century, Schelling was in a position to show that pantheism can accommodate a view of divine immanence according to which all things abide in God, without that undermining God's transcendence, that is, his status as a supreme ground that is "more" than nature. For much of his career, Schelling worked to show that pantheism, correctly understood, does not compromise the reality of finite individuals, the morality of human actions, or even our freedom as self-determining agents. He could then bring these insights to bear upon the Indian philosophical systems that had occasioned so much fear in the minds of their critics. As we saw in Chapter 3, Schelling even proposed a new translation of the Sanskrit word *yoga* as "inwardness" (*Innigkeit*), according to which the practice of yoga consists in the equanimity of acting in the world without being attached to it.

As we now move in Part 2 to the latter half of the nineteenth century, there is no question that these refinements in pantheistic theology, alongside an emerging awareness of distinct Indian schools, helped scholars such as Max Müller to present a more nuanced account of Patañjali's Yoga as a doctrine of soul liberation. Still, some of the most original developments in Yoga scholarship would appear in the work of Swami Vivekananda, who went further than Humboldt and Schelling in defending a non-nihilistic form of Indian pantheism. As we shall see, Vivekananda claimed that the yoga of insight (*jñāna yoga*) is equivalent to the yoga of devotion (*bhakti yoga*), since the philosopher's highest insight is that of Brahman's unlimited freedom, an insight which is parallel to the devotee's highest

emotional state, that of joyful love. Vivekananda even proposed that the appearance of a divide between the religious idea of union with God and the non-religious idea of soul liberation is misleading. If we understand such a union in the right way, he maintained, isolation of the soul is equal to becoming one with the divine.

The plan for this chapter is as follows. After touching upon Müller and his debt to Schelling, I will examine two key texts in the nineteenth-century reception of Yoga: *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* by Navina Chandra Pal, and *Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* by Rájendralála Mitra. While both studies were published around mid-century, they marked very different approaches to the interpretation of Yoga, with Pal blending Patanjali's ideas with various methods of breath control, mental concentration, and bodily purification, and Mitra advocating for the autonomy of Patañjali's doctrines. The emphasis Mitra placed on the meaning of yoga as "dis-union" would also exert influence on Müller's scholarship. However, by the close of the nineteenth century, efforts to defend the underlying unity of classical Indian schools were by no means obsolete. As will become clear over the course of our discussion, one of Vivekananda's larger aims was to show that Patañjali's system is consistent with the idea (coming from the traditions of Vedānta and Bhakti) that "yoga" involves joining oneself to God.

#### 4.1 Liberation, with or without God

In the spring of 1844, Müller wrote to his mother about his experience of meeting Schelling for the first time:

I spoke to him of my time in Leipzig, of Weiss and Brockhaus, and then we came round to Indian philosophy. Here he allowed me to tell him a good deal. I especially dwelt on the likeness between Sankhya [i.e., Sāṃkhya] and his own system, and remarked how an inclination to the Vedanta showed itself. He asked what we must understand by Vedanta, how the existence of God was proved, how God created the world, whether it had reality. He has been much occupied with Colebrooke's *Essays*, and he seemed to wish to learn more.<sup>2</sup>

Müller, who had attended the University of Berlin to hear Schelling's late lectures, was one of many who had high hopes for his long-promised system. "Lecture Hall No. 6," wrote Friedrich Engels in 1841, was the "battlefield where dominion over German public opinion in politics and religion, that is, over Germany itself, is being fought."<sup>3</sup> As scholars have noted, many of those in attendance were disappointed: Søren Kierkegaard, for example, who had made the journey from Denmark, found Schelling's

lectures unintelligible. As if to foreshadow the emerging trends of later nineteenth-century thought, the negative impressions shared by Engels and Kierkegaard were signs of a shift within the discipline. For Marxists and existentialists alike, revelation and mythology, let alone the traditions of ancient India, held no allure. At the time, Müller's passion for the East was atypical for those studying post-Kantian philosophy.

This interest eventually led Müller outside the field of philosophy, and in 1868 he became the first Professor of Comparative Philology at the University of Oxford. There he helped organize the team of translators who assembled *The Sacred Books of the East*, a fifty-volume series which was nearing completion at the time of Müller's death in 1900. Though Schelling left no direct intellectual heirs, Müller credited him with making the study of mythology a prerequisite for the study of philosophy, and Müller's fascination with the East bore the unmistakable imprint of the Berlin lectures discussed in Chapter 3. Like Schelling, he believed myths were the key to understanding how ancient cultures fashioned their experiences of the world, experiences that he argued remain encoded in symbolic form. "If there is continuity in the growth of the human mind," Müller maintained, "and if mythology by its irrational appearance has long seemed to break that continuity, the Science of Mythology undertakes to remove what seems irrational and to vindicate the postulated continuity of human reason."<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, in speaking of a "science of mythology" Müller wanted to distance himself from thinkers of the early nineteenth century. Later in life he recounted the feeling of disillusionment he experienced when comparing Hegel's lectures on oriental religion with the primary sources. Hegel was not so much recording the real history of Eastern traditions, he realized, as presenting a version that fit his own views.<sup>5</sup> What Müller aspired to do with the *Sacred Books* project was to allow those traditions to speak for themselves. "In order to have a solid foundation for a comparative study of the religions of the East," Müller wrote in the Preface to the inaugural volume of 1879, "we must have before all things complete and thoroughly faithful translations of their sacred books." The aim was that of presenting the "whole truth; and if the whole truth must be told, it is that, however radiant the dawn of religious thought, it is not without its dark clouds, its chilling colds, its noxious vapours."<sup>6</sup>

As much as Müller aspired to avoid the theoretical indulgences of earlier orientalists, his own scholarship was not entirely free of speculation. Müller was a proponent of the view that religious consciousness had dawned in India some few thousand years BCE and reached an initial state of perfection in the final book of the Vedas, commonly known as the *Upaniṣads*, and that the core doctrine of the *Upaniṣads* is the system of Vedānta. He also subscribed to the belief that religious consciousness

underwent a subsequent decline, but that it re-emerged and ascended to even higher states of perfection during the late Middle Ages, specifically in the work of the German mystics (who Müller believed came to the same conclusions as Vedānta). Finally, he believed that religious consciousness had declined again within the church, but that reviving the sacred books of the East – especially the *Upaniṣads* – would serve to confirm the truths of Christianity, and hence precipitate another rise of religious consciousness in the future.

In this way, as much as Müller was breaking new ground in the world of oriental scholarship, his philosophy of history was anything but novel. Consider, for example, what he says in the Gifford Lectures of 1892:

Many things which seem imperfect, are seen to be most perfect, if only understood as a preparation for higher objects. If we have once brought ourselves to see that there is an unbroken continuity, a constant ascent, or an eternal purpose, not only a mechanical development, in the history of the world, we shall cease to find fault with what is as yet an imperfect germ only, and not yet the perfect flower or the final fruit; we shall not despise the childhood of the world, nor the childhood of the religions of the world, though we cannot discover therein that mature and perfect manhood which we admire in later periods of history. We shall learn to understand the imperfect or less perfect as a necessary preparation for the more perfect.<sup>7</sup>

Such lines could have been written a century earlier by Herder, who characterized human history with the organic metaphor of life stages, starting from a state of “childhood” and evolving through successive phases to “adulthood.” Nor was Müller departing from convention in locating the childhood of human civilization in ancient India, where the “imperfect germ” of religious consciousness was first planted, and then the adulthood of human history in modern Europe, where the “perfect flower” of this consciousness has blossomed. Müller makes this connection clear when he speaks of the comparative method as yielding the “strongest confirmation of the truth of the Christian religion,” concluding by way of summary:

It was the chief object of these four courses of Lectures to prove that the yearning for union or unity with God, which we saw as the highest goal in other religions, finds its fullest recognition in Christianity, if but properly understood.<sup>8</sup>

That is the goal Müller believed a historical study of ancient religions would disclose.

Müller's remark about Christianity "if but properly understood" is, of course, loaded with meaning. Despite following an older tradition of "honouring" ancient India as a precursor to modern Europe – a view we traced to Schlegel in Chapter 2 – Müller's vision of Christian faith makes no effort to follow orthodoxy. Nor did this escape the attention of Robert Thomson, a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, who in 1891 asserted that Müller's scholarship is "subversive of the Christian faith, and fitted to spread pantheistic and infidel views amongst the students,"<sup>9</sup> a criticism echoed by Alexander Munro, an officer of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland. The Gifford Lectures, Munro wrote, were "nothing less than a crusade against Divine revelation, against Jesus Christ, and against Christianity," amounting to "atheism under the guise of pantheism."<sup>10</sup> Evidently Müller did not have to praise Vedānta to elicit such reactions: his love of the German mystics – above all Meister Eckhart – was enough to disturb his theologically conservative readers. Union with God was not the "perfection" of Christianity in the eyes of Thomson and Munro: in their judgment, that is pantheism, and pantheism is heresy.

## 4.2 Yoga Philosophy in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

None of this boded well for the reception of Indian philosophy, which had briefly captured the minds of some of Europe's greatest thinkers. And yet, amidst the social and political clamour of the nineteenth century, this reception found a resurgence of interest from two unlikely persons: Navina Chandra Pal (1829–1880), a Bengali physician, and Rājendralāla Mitra (1822–1891), a librarian and member of Bengal's Asiatic Society.

### 4.2.1 N.C. Pal's *Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy*

Navina Chandra Pal's contribution came in the form of a slim volume titled *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* (1851), published under his anglicized name, N.C. Paul.<sup>11</sup> The first book in a European tongue devoted to Yoga theory, Pal's *Treatise* mobilized a distinction that Western scholars had not previously encountered between the systems of *hatha yoga* and *rāja yoga*. Yet what is perhaps most significant of all, Pal spoke of "yoga" in ways that would have seemed unusual to many at the time:

Yoga has been defined differently by different authorities. Some have defined it mental abstraction; some have defined it silent prayer; some have defined it the union of the inspired to the expired air; some have defined it the union of mind to soul. But by Yoga I understand the art of suspending the circulation and respiration.<sup>12</sup>



As a practice, Pal characterized yoga as the “power of abstaining from eating and breathing for a long time, and of becoming insensible to all external impressions.” For this reason, he settled on a definition of yoga as the power of “human hibernation.”<sup>13</sup> The first half of his treatise is an exposition of the different effects that movement, speech, and diet have upon the consumption of oxygen in the human body, with recommendations (pertaining to exercise, food, sleep, etc.) for optimizing the yogi’s consumption of air – all with the aim of promoting the yogi’s longevity. Such was what Pal meant by *haṭha yoga*, or the yoga of physical health.

His treatise then turns to *rāja yoga*, although here Pal is less clear about what he means by this term. Literally meaning “royal yoga,” this was a description of Patañjali’s system first used by the philosopher-king Bhoja in the eleventh century CE.<sup>14</sup> Pal (without making reference to Patañjali) divides the second half of his treatise into “eight limbs,” following the same order we find in *sūtra* 2.29 of the *Yoga Sūtras*:

*The eight limbs of yoga are yama (abstinences), niyama (observances), āsana (yoga postures), prāṇāyāma (breath control), pratyāhāra (withdrawal of the senses), dhāraṇā (concentration), dhyāna (meditation), and samādhi (absorption).*

Further inspection shows that Pal’s understanding of the eight limbs was shaped not by the *Yoga Sūtras* themselves, but by the later tradition of *haṭha yoga*. In fifteenth-century texts like the *Haṭhapradīpikā* we find a complex regimen of purification (*śaṭkarma*), posture (*āsana*), and breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), prescribed in order to activate spiritual centres in the body (*chakras*) and ultimately release the root of its subtle energy (*kuṇḍalinī*). The *Haṭhapradīpikā* itself considers all such steps as preparatory to *rāja yoga*, which is the state of highest meditation (*samādhi*) and final liberation (*kaivalya* or *mokṣa*).

Much of this organizational scheme resurfaces in Pal’s treatise, and Pal even speaks of final liberation in openly theological terms:

When the passions are restrained from their desires, the mind becomes tranquil and the soul is awakened. The yogi becomes full of Brahma (the Supreme Soul). His eye penetrates all the secrets of nature, he knows the events of the past, present, and future, ... and his soul not only holds communion with the invisible, inconceivable, unalterable, omnipresent, and omnipotent Being, but he becomes absorbed into the essence of the same.<sup>15</sup>

When the passions are restrained, tranquillity of mind ensues and the aim of *rāja yoga* becomes attainable. It is revealing that Pal chose to characterize

this final aim as “becoming absorbed” into the essence of the “Supreme Soul,” for it shows that he understood Yoga in a mystical light, following the traditions of Vedānta and Bhakti (or their sources in texts like the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā*). From directions on how to lower one’s oxygen consumption, to speculative metaphysical claims about uniting with God, *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* is an eclectic book, all the more so for its quasi-scientific style. Before its publication in 1851, nothing quite like it existed.

#### 4.2.2 Rājendralāla Mitra’s *Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*

A decisive event in Yoga scholarship occurred one year after the publication of Pal’s treatise when a partial translation of the *Yoga Sūtras* became available in English for the first time. After a period of twenty-five years, Colebrooke’s “On the Philosophy of the Hindus” was no longer the exclusive entry point for European readers interested in Patañjali’s system. The translation appeared in two volumes, the first in 1852 (of Book 1 of the *Yoga Sūtras*) and the second in 1853 (of Book 2), under the title *The Aphorisms of the Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali*, published by the Presbyterian Mission Press. It also contained, as the subtitle indicates, “illustrative extracts from the commentary by Bhoja Rājā.” The translator was the Scottish orientalist James Robert Ballantyne (1813–1864), who since 1845 had worked as superintendent of the Sanskrit College in Benares.<sup>16</sup> Even though Ballantyne’s work was incomplete, and his choice to translate *yoga* as “concentration” was misleading, the *Aphorisms* marked a step forward in the emerging scholarship on classical Yoga.

Still, twenty more years would have to pass before Ballantyne’s translation was finished, thanks to the efforts of his former colleague in Benares, Rājendralāla Mitra, who presented the full *Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali* in 1881.<sup>17</sup> With the ninety-page preface added by Mitra – not to mention his running commentary that supplemented the Bhoja Rājā extracts – this publication was the longest exposition on Patañjali’s Yoga available to readers without knowledge of Sanskrit, and it would remain so for decades to come. While Mitra makes no mention of Pal’s treatise, his few comments on the *hatha* school are largely negative. After characterizing *hatha yoga* as the pursuit of mystic powers, he distinguishes the true path of yoga in terms of absolute freedom, aligning this path with the system of Patañjali. Mitra’s account is also important for comparing Sāṃkhya and Yoga more closely than what previous writers had done; and while he was sympathetic to Colebrooke’s work, Mitra’s knowledge of Patañjali and the commentarial tradition of the *Yoga Sūtras* was superior. As we shall see, one of his most significant contributions came in the form of insisting that Patañjali’s Yoga was not a religious system at all.

During this time, Mitra was aware that the perception of Yoga was “exceedingly unfavourable among Anglo-oriental scholars. It is mystical, it is fantastical, it is dreadfully obscure, are among the mildest charges brought against it.”<sup>18</sup> Part of the problem, he explained, is that Yoga is often confused with distinct schools. Even Indian scholars, Mitra noted, “frequently, if not invariably, mix up the tenets of Patañjali’s Yoga with those for the Tantras, the Puranas, the Tantric Sanhitas, the Pancharatras, and the Bhagavadgita – works which have very dissimilar and discordant tenets.”<sup>19</sup> While Pal’s name is not mentioned here, one wonders if Mitra had him in mind, since Pal’s treatise is very much a menagerie of diverse traditions. Either way, Mitra’s insight was long overdue. In its European reception, Patañjali’s Yoga had been associated with ascetic practices of self-denial, with devotional practices of uniting with God, and now, due to his fellow Benares resident, with *hatha* practices of entering into self-hypnosis or activating subtle energy centres. Mitra’s claim was that “true Yoga” is none of these.

In defending this claim, Mitra wants to revisit the relationship between Sāṃkhya and Yoga, building upon Colebrooke’s thesis that the two are fundamentally the same. Mitra explores their parallels further, and the presence of the Lord (*Īśvara*) in Patañjali’s system did not deter him. On inspection, he claims, the presence or absence of *Īśvara* “makes no difference in their systems,” since both Kapila and Patañjali uphold the same end of yoga:

Isolation of the soul from the thinking principle is the end sought in either case, and meditation in Samādhi is the only means available. The believer in the existence of the Godhead assumes that divine grace facilitates the end sought, but he does not dispense with Samādhi, and his belief, therefore, is of no material importance.<sup>20</sup>

By way of textual proof, Mitra highlights the fact that in the *Yoga Sūtras* “devotion to *Īśvara*” is not presented as the exclusive (or even the best) means of arriving at the highest state of meditative absorption. Instead, devotion is presented as one option among many, as Patañjali makes explicit in *sūtra* 1.23.

Mitra translates *Īśvara* as “God,” and in his commentary on *sūtra* 1.23 he notes that the inclusion of “devotion to God” marks Patañjali’s *departure* from traditional Sāṃkhya. But again, his point is that this marks no real difference between the schools of Patañjali and Kapila:

God, however, is not made the end, but the means to an end of which He forms no integral portion. The theory of resignation or dedication of the fruits of all actions to Him, is evidently borrowed from the Bhakti

system in which it plays the most important part. In entire reliance on the providence of the Godhead, the Bhakta wishes for no fruition whatever. Whatever he does is for the service of the Divinity, and He in His mercy is to grant whatever He thinks proper. In the Bhagavad Gita this is made the cardinal point of faith (*ślōka* 9.27), and there it appears quite consistent; but in the Yoga system Capila [i.e., Kapila] found no necessity for it, and Patanjali adopts it as a sort of compromise to give a theistic character to his system; but it plays only a very subordinate part.<sup>21</sup>

As this passage makes clear, Mitra views the Yoga of Patañjali as being closer to the spirit of Sāṃkhya philosophy. The thrust of his argument is that Patañjali conceives of liberation, *kaivalya* or *mokṣa*, not as union with God, but as isolation of the soul. In the latter case, Kapila teaches us that such isolation comes about through knowledge of the distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, subject and object, pure consciousness and material reality. Patañjali agrees, but adds that one path to this insight is through devotion to *Īśvara*. However, such devotion serves only as a means to soul liberation, the moment one “disjoins” oneself from a mistaken attachment to the world of things. At no point, Mitra argues, does Patañjali speak of uniting with God or realizing one’s essential identity with the divine; in this respect, the *Yoga Sūtras* depart from orthodox Vedānta and Bhakti frameworks. Patañjali “makes his Divinity one of several means to an end, and not the end sought.”<sup>22</sup>

Not stopping here, Mitra goes further and argues that the very definition of the Lord in the *Yoga Sūtras* falls below the idea of God (as Brahman) in the *Gītā*. If we turn to the *sūtras* that follow Patañjali’s introduction of devotion to *Īśvara*, he explains, we can see that Patañjali’s theological commitments are rather minimal. After *sūtra* 1.24, he says in 1.25:

*Īśvara is a distinct, incorruptible puruṣa, utterly independent of cause and effect, and lacking any store of latent impressions.*

In Mitra’s judgment, the author of the *Yoga Sūtras* “could have scarcely put God and his name to a more subordinate position.” To be sure, Patañjali is clear that *Īśvara* exists, but on Mitra’s reading *Īśvara* is not “the avowed Creator and preserver of the universe.”<sup>23</sup> In saying this, Mitra is departing from the commentarial tradition of King Bhoja, who argued that the etymology of the name *Īśvara* from the root *śi*, to “possess power,” indicates that the Lord is able to “uphold the world by his mere will.”<sup>24</sup> For Mitra, the evidence suggests that far from counting as the supreme Being of beings – or as the God who “sustains the entire universe,” as the *Gītā* says in *ślōka* 10.42 – Patañjali’s “Lord” is rather on par with other persons.

His point is that if we take *sūtra* 1.25 seriously, it turns out that *Īśvara* is a person *par excellence*, different only in degree from the personhood of beings who are, like us, afflicted by the conditions of their material embeddedness.

As much as Mitra was expanding on ideas that Colebrooke had conveyed sixty years earlier, there is no question that he was working to vindicate Yoga from the charge made by Colebrooke and repeated by Schlegel and Hegel – that Patañjali’s system is “fanatical” and “mystical.” A more careful understanding of Patañjali’s view of liberation, Mitra argues, shows that he was of one mind with Kapila, according to which *kaivalya* or *mokṣa* consists in *separating* oneself from the field of material reality. If anything, Patañjali’s departure from Sāṃkhya is a point of methodology, as Patañjali is more concessive than Kapila in his view of how many yogic practices can lead the adept to a *samādhi* state. In Mitra’s eyes, the addition of devotion to *Īśvara* is nothing more than a “compromise,” as he puts it, “to give a theistic character to his system,” suggesting that Patañjali may have been catering to the religious impulses of his age.<sup>25</sup> Either way, it is by no means a concession to *mysticism*, for at no point does Patañjali characterize union with God as the aim of yoga.

### 4.3 Is Yoga Nihilism? Müller and Mitra

In terms of scholarly sophistication, Mitra’s *Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali* was unmatched in the European-language literature of the time, and its publication in 1881 marked a watershed in the revival of Patañjali’s system. Among his insights, Mitra’s argument for the distinctiveness of Patañjali’s Yoga stands out for the influence it exerted on subsequent scholarship. For early nineteenth-century writers, as we have seen, the idea of what constitutes Yoga philosophy was quite expansive, covering the *Upaniṣads*, the *Gītā*, the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikās*, and the *Yoga Sūtras*; but due to Mitra, readers now had a more fine-grained portrait of the Indian traditions animating these texts. One of the first scholars to build upon this portrait was Müller, who devoted a seventy-page chapter in his *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* to “Yoga Philosophy,” the final section of which raises the question, “Is Yoga Nihilism?”<sup>26</sup>

The appearance of this question in 1899 happened to coincide with the centennial anniversary of the coining of the term “nihilism” by Jacobi. In his “Open Letter” of 1799, Jacobi had declared that idealism transforms objects of experience into “mere appearances” and hence “annihilates” their reality. Schlegel, as we saw in Chapter 1, found occasion to apply this term to Indian pantheism, which he thought was guilty of destroying our basic moral and metaphysical commitments. Turning to the second half of the nineteenth century, concerns over nihilism arose from different

quarters, and like most popular *isms*, it suffered the fate of overuse. In Ivan Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*, for example, the character of Arkady Kirsanov defines a nihilist as "a person who does not bow down to any authority, who does not accept any principle on faith."<sup>27</sup> For many decades, "nihilism" was even synonymous with anarchist movements, and in the popular imagination of Europe it became associated with an attitude of rebellious rejection. As Turgenev puts it, the nihilist is not someone who "recognizes nothing," but is someone who "respects nothing."

When Müller invoked this term in 1899, he had a more philosophical problem in mind. The problem of nihilism, he explains, is one of reducing our highest end, the liberation of the soul, to *nothingness*. Müller had already applied this view of the problem in his 1869 *Lecture on Buddhist Nihilism*, in which he concludes that Buddhism denies that the soul can "dissolve itself in a higher Being, or be absorbed in the absolute substance, as was taught by the Brahmins."<sup>28</sup> Instead, he argues, Buddhism conceives of liberation, when one has escaped all future transmigrations, in terms of becoming "extinct." Thus, the worry of nihilism is not one of "recognizing nothing" or "respecting nothing," but of "becoming nothing." Müller admits that Yoga might appear to be nihilistic in this latter sense, since it posits the highest end of human striving in terms of isolation, but he seeks to defend a more charitable verdict. Granted, the yogini aspires to isolate her *puruṣa* from its material embeddedness, but upon attaining that isolation, Müller argues, the yogini's soul is "not thereby annihilated."<sup>29</sup>

The crux of the issue is what exactly "isolation" means in Patañjali's system, and this is one of many places where Müller builds upon the work of Mitra. "Isolation" was Mitra's primary choice for translating *kaivalya*, the highest end that Patañjali assigns to the practice of yoga and his last topic in the *Yoga Sūtras*. Mitra also speaks of *kaivalya* in terms of "liberation," "emancipation," and "final beatitude," and to this list Müller adds "freedom," "aleness," "aloofness," and "self-centredness." Based on its derivation from *kevala*, meaning "isolated" in Sanskrit, it is easy to see why Mitra settled on "isolation," but there is an additional basis for his decision: Patañjali, following the Sāṃkhya school, frames liberation in terms of separating *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*, as that separation allows one to "abide in one's essential nature" (*sūtra* 1.3). The idea, then, is that liberation comes about when I stand independent from the field of material reality; in that independence I am thereby centred, or isolated, in my true Self.

But the worry is that in Yoga, like in some schools of Buddhism, there is no real "self" for one to abide in, and hence self-isolation would amount to non-existence after all. To complicate matters, the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikās* at times seem to speak of liberation as amounting to self-negation, in the knowledge that "neither I am, nor is aught mine, nor do I exist" (*śloka*

64). Naturally, when this text first became available in translation, worries about nihilism soon surfaced. “*Voilà*,” wrote the French philosopher Victor Cousin in 1829, “in India there is absolute nihilism, the last fruit of skepticism,” citing *ślōka* 64 as proof. In reply, Mitra observes that the “eternal quietude of the soul after isolation amounts, in the opinion of M. Cousin, to *nihilisme absolu*.” Yet this, he claims, is a false inference: “Where existence forms the primary condition of the theory, nihilism cannot logically and fairly be predicated.”<sup>30</sup> To attain isolation is to see that *I am not* my ego, my passions, or my thoughts; yet these negations yield a positive result, the insight that *I am* the inner witness, free and unfettered.

Still, even if we grant that each *puruṣa* has substantial reality, and is hence a genuine “self,” the question remains of how we can understand a yogi’s liberated existence. After all, if it does not amount to annihilation, there must be something we can say about such a life. Patañjali himself is mostly silent on the issue, which Müller takes as a sign that ordinary language fails to capture the state of *kaivalya*. The *Sāṃkhya-Kārikās* resort to metaphor to describe this state of embodied enlightenment: we are told that after an adept has attained knowledge of her essence, consciousness and materiality remain together, “as the potter’s wheel continues whirling from the effect of the impulse previously given to it” (*ślōka* 67). On the account given by Mitra, embodied enlightenment amounts to living with detachment, much as the life of the *karma-yogin* is described in the *Gītā*: it amounts to acting – remaining in the play of *prakṛti* – without losing oneself in the game. The cause of ignorance has been uprooted, and nothing activates the potter’s wheel, but its whirling continues for the duration of a yogi’s life.

Whatever else one can say about this state, it is clear to Müller that *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* systems do not characterize *kaivalya* in theological terms. The process of discrimination has cut through the many layers of misidentification obscuring one’s true self, and that knowledge brings about release from the suffering that such misidentifications cause. Neither Kapila nor Patañjali speaks of this release in terms of realizing one’s identity with the divine, or anything like a fusion, absorption, or dissolution of one’s self into the Godhead. Müller echoes Mitra’s reminder, drawn from the commentary of King Bhoja, that the practice of yoga, despite what the etymology of the word suggests, is more about “disunion” than union. Müller goes so far as to say that disunion – that is, the separation of consciousness from its material embeddedness – signals one of Patañjali’s departures from the traditions of the *Upaniṣads* and the *Gītā*. As Mitra puts it, “the idea of absorption into the Godhead forms no part of the *Yoga* theory,”<sup>31</sup> and here Müller agrees.

The burden of interpretation facing Müller involves the question of how to understand the religious elements in Patañjali’s *Yoga*. If Patañjali sided with the *Sāṃkhya* view that isolation is the ultimate freedom of the

individual Self, why does he then introduce the concept of *Īśvara*? Why not leave God out of the picture altogether, as Kapila had done before him? While Müller agrees that devotion to *Īśvara* is only one option among many for attaining release, he considers *Īśvara* to be a subordinate notion of the deity. As we have seen, Mitra too advances this line of interpretation when he claims that *Īśvara* is not “the avowed Creator and preserver of the universe” but simply another *puruṣa* who enjoys a maximal degree of perfection. Müller concurs, adding that *Īśvara* does not even deserve the lofty title of “Supreme Godhead.” He prefers “Lord” as a translation, adding that this weak theological element in the *Yoga Sūtras* seems like a “forced confession of faith” on Patañjali’s part. *Īśvara*, Müller writes, “is a little more than a god, but he is certainly not what we mean by God”:

Iśvara, with the Yogins, was originally no more than one of the many souls, or rather Selves or Purushas, but one that has never been associated with or implicated in metempsychosis, supreme in every sense, yet of the same kind as all other Purushas. The idea of other Purushas obtaining union with him could therefore never have entered Patanjali’s head. According to him, the highest object of the Yogin was freedom, aloneness, aloofness, or self-centeredness. As one of the useful means of obtaining that freedom, or of quieting the mind previous to liberating it altogether, devotion to the Iśvara is mentioned, but again as one only out of many means, and not even as the most efficacious of all.<sup>32</sup>

On all these points Müller was effectively siding with Mitra: Yoga is not a form of mysticism, nor a form of pantheism, nor even a form of religion in any traditional sense of the word. Simply put, the God of Patanjali’s Yoga is no God at all.

#### 4.4 The Return of the King: Vivekananda’s Yoga

In 1896, Müller received a visit in his Oxford residence from Narendranath Datta (commonly known as Vivekananda), who had recently achieved international acclaim for his speech at the Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions three years prior. Vivekananda is widely considered to be one of the first major popularizers of Yoga philosophy in the West, and he held Müller and his work in high esteem. In an essay titled “On Professor Max Müller” (1896), Vivekananda shares his impressions of this “silver-headed sage”:

It was neither the philologist nor the scholar that I saw, but a soul that is every day realising its oneness with the Brahman, a heart that is every



moment expanding to reach oneness with the Universal. Where others lose themselves in the desert of dry details, he has struck the wellspring of life. Indeed his heartbeats have caught the rhythm of the Upanishads तमेवेकं जानथ आत्मानमन्या वाचो वमिञ्चथ – “Know the Atman alone, and leave off all other talk.”<sup>33</sup>

His feeling of kinship was due, we may suppose, to their mutual love of the *Upaniṣads*, as both Vivekananda and Müller regarded Advaita (or “non-dual”) Vedānta as the highest expression of this system, according to which Brahman alone is the ultimate and all-pervading reality. Like Müller, Vivekananda worked to defend a kind of universalism that would overcome boundaries between world religions. Vivekananda’s vision was of a religion that would embrace all of humanity without requiring a doctrinal commitment of faith from the outset; he believed that the true path of any yoga practice must begin, not with revelation, but with consciousness itself. Thus, Vivekananda’s maxim, “Believe nothing,” was not an appeal to skepticism, but an invitation to make consciousness the touchstone of truth. When consciousness evolves through yoga, he claimed, the truth of Vedānta will reveal itself; and that is why he considered Vedānta a form of a universal religion, going so far as to call it “the religion of the enlightened future of humanity.”<sup>34</sup>

As the Gifford lectures make clear, Müller also held Advaita Vedānta in high regard, yet he believed that an even better version of Vedānta had found expression in the German mystic tradition of the Middle Ages, as I noted earlier. On one occasion he even remarked that the *Upaniṣads* are “the very best preparation for a proper understanding of Eckhart’s Tracts and Sermons.”<sup>35</sup> Curiously, Müller’s preference for Eckhart’s mysticism, like Vivekananda’s preference for Vedānta, was rooted in an appeal to experience: what Müller called the high point of religion is “the perception of the essential unity of the soul with God.” However, Müller thought that Christianity, properly understood, offers a better account of the soul’s perfection, first in the way it explains the soul’s striving for God in terms of “love,” and second in the way it explains the soul’s union with God in terms of “sonship.” This sonship may be reached along different paths, Müller explained, but “by none so truly as what Master Eckhart called the surrender of our will to the Will of God.”<sup>36</sup>

These differences between Vivekananda and Müller may be more a matter of presentation than of substance, for while Vivekananda’s universal religion wears the clothing of Indian Vedānta, Müller’s wears that of German mysticism.<sup>37</sup> What is nevertheless clear is that they both appeal to a non-doctrinal starting point in experience, and they both maintain that a progressive perfection of consciousness is what leads to the recognition of one’s identity with the divine. Why Müller would think

that union with God in “sonship” marks a distinctly Christian theme is puzzling, especially since he was aware of Bhakti traditions that make religious love a guiding thread for practitioners. Whatever the case may be, a more difficult question remains for us to address: why do Vivekananda and Müller arrive at such different interpretations of classical Yoga, with Vivekananda affirming a link between Patañjali and the system of Vedānta, and Müller denying it? To answer this, we must take a closer look at Vivekananda’s work.

#### 4.5 Identification with the Divine

One of Vivekananda’s most important publications appeared in 1896 under the title *Rāja Yoga*, reissued a year later in an expanded edition under the title *Vedānta Philosophy: Lectures on Rāja Yoga and Other Subjects*, which included both a commentary on Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* and lectures on *bhakti yoga*. In the preface to *Vedānta Philosophy*, Vivekananda claims that all orthodox schools of Indian thought have a common aim: “the liberation of the soul through perfection.”<sup>38</sup> He also speaks of the method of liberation in terms of “yoga,” adding that the word includes both the systems of Sāṃkhya and Vedānta.<sup>39</sup> On Vivekananda’s account, as we learn from reading this text, there are two main paths for the soul to realize its oneness with the divine: what he calls the Path of Knowledge and the Path of Love. The former achieves its highest expression as *rāja yoga*, the latter as *bhakti yoga*. Vivekananda’s point, though, is that these two paths ultimately converge.

At first glance, Vivekananda might be found guilty of creating more confusion than clarity by placing Patañjali’s system so close to other philosophical traditions. In light of the work of Mitra and Müller, one might worry that he was perpetuating a long-standing mistake of assuming theological commitments that are absent from the *Yoga Sūtras*. Considering too that Vivekananda was more of a popularizer than a scholar of Indian philosophy, it might then be tempting to discount his work as unsystematic, as many have done over the years. As Gordon David White voices this concern, it seems that Vivekananda did a service to classical Yoga by bringing it into mainstream discussions of religion, but his unconventional approach seems to have come at a “heavy price: the severing of the *Yoga Sūtras* from its original historical and cultural context.”<sup>40</sup> Voicing a concern shared by many today, White deems Vivekananda’s work a “bold, modern fusion of Yoga philosophy and western science, religion, and the occult,” all of which made Indian ideas accessible to non-Indians, but at the “expense of accuracy.”<sup>41</sup>

While there is no question that Vivekananda’s approach to classical Yoga is unorthodox, his writings show a sincere effort to work within

the orthodox schools, including the commentarial traditions that they generated. His method was different from that of his academic peers; for rather than being preoccupied with distinguishing schools by way of analysis, Vivekananda was more focused on the task of unifying them by way of synthesis. His preference for Vedānta doctrine was, I believe, based on his belief that it contained better resources to bring this synthesis to completion. That being said, what Vivekananda's critics tend to overlook is that he never attributed to Patañjali the claim that liberation consists in realizing one's identity with the divine. And therein lies the puzzle of his account: why would Vivekananda claim that Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* are the "highest authority" on *rāja yoga*, when he was aware that Patañjali's system culminates not in the soul's union with God but in its disunion from material reality? Why, for all of his love of Vedānta, did he not, *pace* White, "Vedānta-ize" Patañjali?

That Vivekananda was aware of the distinctiveness of Patañjali's Yoga is clear from his opening remarks in *Vedānta Philosophy*. "The system of Patañjali is based upon the system of the Sankhyas," he writes, "the points of difference being very few." Among those differences, Vivekananda points to Patañjali's admission of a "Personal God in the form of a first teacher," which is absent from Kapila's system.<sup>42</sup> What is noteworthy is that he goes on to define *rāja yoga* as a method for bringing about a direct experience of divinity based on the meditative practice of withdrawing the senses from their outward flow and redirecting conscious awareness upon itself. Speaking to the importance of experience, Vivekananda asks:

What right has a man to say he has a soul if he does not feel it, or that there is a God if he does not see Him? If there is a God we must see Him, if there is a soul we must perceive it; otherwise it is better not to believe.<sup>43</sup>

Vivekananda's view of universal religion is rooted in the claim that everyone, not just the sages and prophets of ancient times, can have an encounter with the infinite reality we call God. "The science of Raja Yoga," he writes, "proposes to put before humanity a practical and scientifically worked-out method of reaching this truth."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in his introduction to the *Yoga Sūtras*, Vivekananda characterizes this truth in terms familiar to the Vedānta school, namely, "returning" to our original source and "recognizing" our inner divinity.<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, it is surprising to read such claims in a preliminary exposition of Patañjali, given that one never finds Patañjali speaking in terms of uniting with a higher Being. Yet rather than imposing that claim onto Patañjali's work, as we might expect, Vivekananda proves himself to be a careful interpreter. In one place where we would expect him to have imported Vedānta assumptions into

the *Yoga Sūtras* – namely, when Patañjali introduces the idea of *Īśvara* – Vivekananda remains faithful to the text.<sup>46</sup>

In his running commentary, for instance, Vivekananda uses the original Sanskrit, translating *sūtra* 1.23 as “devotion to *Īśvara*”:

We must again remember that *Patañjali’s* Yoga Philosophy is based upon that of the *Sankhyas* [i.e., the *Sāṃkhya* school], only that in the latter there is no place for God, while with the *Yogis* God has a place. The *Yogis*, however, avoid many ideas about God, such as creating. God as the Creator of the Universe is not meant by *Īśvara*. ... The *Yogis* want to establish a God, but they carefully avoid this question [of creation].<sup>47</sup>

As we have seen, it was this non-creative aspect of *Īśvara* that Mitra and Müller took as evidence against the claim that the “Lord” of Yoga is equivalent to Brahman. Vivekananda was sensitive to this point too, and his subsequent observations on the “deductions” of *Īśvara* show him building upon the commentarial tradition. As Vivekananda glosses *sūtra* 1.25, that *Īśvara* is “omniscient,” and 1.26, that *Īśvara* is the “first Teacher,” Patañjali is employing an argument from degrees. According to such an argument, with any limited piece of knowledge one possesses, there must be a greater amount of knowledge, and where there is a degree of *greater*, so the claim goes, there must be an unlimited degree, that is, the *greatest* – which could only pertain to an infinite person, that is, God. Relatedly, Vivekananda clarifies, with any limited piece of knowledge one has received from a teacher, there must have been a teacher for that teacher, and so on, until we reach all the way back to the first teacher, who must stand outside time – which again could only pertain to an infinite person.

Lastly, when Vivekananda examines the concluding chapter of the *Yoga Sūtras*, he does not reframe the idea of isolation in theological terms. Instead, he elaborates on a metaphorical description of one’s final “dis-union” from nature:

Nature’s task is done, this unselfish task which our sweet nurse Nature had imposed upon herself. As it were, she gently took the self-forgetting soul by the hand, and showed him all the experiences in the universe, all manifestations, bringing him higher and higher through various bodies, till his glory came back, and he remembered his own nature. Then the kind mother went back the same way she came, for others who also have lost their way in the trackless desert of life. And thus is she working, without beginning and without end. And thus through pleasure and pain, through good and evil, the infinite river of souls is flowing into the ocean of perfection, of self-realisation.<sup>48</sup>

As passages like this show, Vivekananda understands “independence” (*kaivalya*) in terms of the soul’s return to itself, such that it recognizes its essential nature.

But now our initial question resurfaces: if Vivekananda was a careful reader of the *Yoga Sūtras*, as I am arguing, why does he elsewhere speak of the highest paths of yoga practice in terms of “uniting with God,” either through *knowledge* or through *loving devotion*? One way to explain this brings us to Patañjali’s presentation of Yoga itself, which follows an ancient Indian practice of leaving many doors open, as it were, for spiritual seekers to find their way to the truth. To take one case, when Patañjali introduces different ways of settling the mind in meditation, he goes so far as to say that such a state may come about “from meditation upon anything of one’s inclination” (*sūtra* 1.39) – which Edwin E. Bryant has rightly noted is as “undogmatic a position as one can take.”<sup>49</sup> Generalizing from this example, we can see why someone like Vivekananda would feel inclined to bring the *Yoga Sūtras* into connection with other systems, especially since Patañjali’s approach is inclusive of such connection in principle. The openness of his system does not rule out a set of links to other doctrines, say, those coming from Vedānta or Bhakti schools of thought.

The crucial point at issue, I think, is whether anything Patañjali says in the *Yoga Sūtras* rules out the idea of union with God, and this is where Vivekananda found a point of synthesis. On the one hand, it could be argued that the *Yoga Sūtras* rule out the idea of an individual *puruṣa* merging into *Īśvara*, since Patañjali is committed to a *quantitative* difference between the two. The reason is that individual *puruṣas* have fallen into misidentification with the field of material reality, *prakṛti*, whereas *Īśvara* has always remained independent of that field. Furthermore, an individual *puruṣa* has to remember its essential nature through the “work” of yoga, whereas *Īśvara* has always remained self-illuminated and is hence free. Thus, *Īśvara* enjoys attributes that could never apply to an individual *puruṣa*: *Īśvara* is a first Teacher, possessed of unlimited knowledge, and standing above the conditions of time. It is a pre-eminent Soul in the strictest sense of the word, and assuredly a “God” relative to other souls.

On the other hand, further study shows that Patañjali does not rule out the possibility of a *qualitative* identity between all *puruṣas*, including the pre-eminent Person, *Īśvara*. He defines *Īśvara* as a “special” *puruṣa*, indicating that it is a perfect and complete Self because it is unafflicted by the ignorance that keeps individual souls in bondage. The fact that *Īśvara* is a *puruṣa* means that in Patañjali’s system, it belongs to the same category as other *puruṣas*. Indeed, in light of the Sāṃkhya ontology that Patañjali inherits, all of reality can be divided into twenty-five basic principles (called *tattvas*), among which *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are primary. Thus, there is only one category that could in theory apply to *Īśvara*: He/She/It is a

person, one among many. Yet according to the argument from degrees that Vivekananda invokes, it is a supreme person whose perfections are unsurpassed; *Īśvara* alone then deserves the title of Lord, although it is also correct to ascribe this quality of lordship to all persons, since they all participate in the same essence.

On this reconstruction of Patañjali's argument, we can understand the import of Vivekananda's claim that the more one becomes cognizant of one's own lordship, the more one embodies the quality of the Lord, namely, *independence from material reality*.<sup>50</sup> His point is that the more one embodies the quality of such independence, the more one becomes like *Īśvara*, the supremely perfect *puruṣa*. None of this entails that the liberated yogi will literally "merge into God," since the quantitative difference between *puruṣas* always remains; qualitatively speaking, however, with respect to their common essence, we can say that the two enjoy a relation of identity as persons. And this explains why a reader could interpret Patañjali's Yoga in the spirit of Vedānta, as Vivekananda does, without doing violence to the text.

Even if we begin with a non-theological view of the *Yoga Sūtras*, then, Vivekananda's insight is that an adept who attains isolation recognizes her nature as a person, and in that recognition she abides in her essence. It is consistent to say, in a more religious mode, that if this adept recognizes her nature as a person, she thereby abides *in her divinity*. In fact, we could go further and say – still keeping to the letter of Sāṃkhya ontology – that if the adept abides in her essence as a person, she thereby becomes "one with God." Remember, the "God" in question here is a perfect person, *Īśvara*, who has never been confused by the play of material reality. It is therefore possible to say that the adept who attains isolation thereby realizes her identity with *Īśvara*, at least if we take this to mean that the adept attains a qualitative identity with God. Quantitative differences notwithstanding, she becomes like *Īśvara* in being pure, free, and unafflicted.

Notice too that we can say this while respecting the fact that Patañjali only ever appeals to *Īśvara* as a means of attaining liberation. Mitra and Müller take this as proof that Patañjali's Yoga is bound by weak theological commitments, and both authors suggest that Patañjali's introduction of God was a concession to his religious followers. On the alternative account suggested by Vivekananda, we can acknowledge the instrumental value that *Īśvara* plays in the *Yoga Sūtras* without going so far as to say that the underlying system is non-religious. Patañjali's recommendation is that if an adept's sensibilities are such that she would rather focus on a non-religious object to settle the turnings of her mind, then she should do what works for her; what matters is for her to make progress on the path toward recognizing her essence. But given that *puruṣas* do not differ in quality, would not the adept's insight into her true nature disabuse her

of the illusion that she is qualitatively different from other *puruṣas*? Would she not thereby become a “seer of oneness,” as the *Upaniṣads* describe those special, enlightened minds?<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.6 The God of Philosophy and the God of Devotion

Evidence that Vivekananda understood Patañjali along the lines I am presenting here comes from his claim that the path of *rāja yoga*, as a method for attaining liberation through meditative absorption and discriminating knowledge, leads to the same end as the devotional path of *bhakti yoga*. Later in *Vedānta Philosophy*, for example, Vivekananda argues that the highest forms of knowledge and love lead to the same end: “With perfect love true knowledge is bound to come even unsought, and ... from perfect knowledge true love is inseparable.”<sup>52</sup> In a section titled “The Philosophy of Īśvara,” Vivekananda explains the reciprocal entailment of knowledge and love by referring to the dual character of God in the orthodox schools: the God of the *philosophers*, who speak of Him as an impersonal Being of beings, and the God of the *devotees*, who speak of Him as a personal figure. Vivekananda’s point is that, on closer examination, the God of Knowledge and the God of Love turn out to be one and the same.

To defend this thesis, Vivekananda highlights the fact that the methods of *rāja yoga* and *bhakti yoga* proceed along the same lines. In moving further away from her misidentified self (oriented around her thinking faculty), the adept moves closer to her true self (oriented around her pure consciousness). In following the path of knowledge, then, the adept works to calm those turnings of mind that entice her into misidentification; with such calming (*nirōdha*) she can distinguish what she is, as the subject of experience, from the field of material reality to which her thinking faculty belongs. We can say that she is working to “undo” the misidentifications that have kept her in ignorance – until she can separate her consciousness from what is most like her consciousness, namely, her mind and its operations. If the adept can attain that final discrimination, she can undo the last mistaken identity that has blinded her to the recognition of her essence, which for Vivekananda amounts to recognizing her identity with God, the supreme Soul. This is the sense in which, even for the Yoga system of Patañjali, *rāja yoga* is a path to divine union.

But if the practice of *rāja yoga* requires the strictest form of volitional and cognitive work – namely, the redirection of consciousness from its outward flow – the practice of *bhakti yoga* is not so much a spiritual discipline as a spiritual celebration. This is because in *bhakti yoga*, though the adept concentrates on the divine as an object of devotion, the results turn out to be similar to the hard labours of meditative absorption. When

the adept follows the path of love, the turnings of mind that entice her into misidentification cease spontaneously. The more the adept fixes her thoughts on God (or her chosen avatar of God, such as Kṛṣṇa or Śiva), the less she is preoccupied with herself. As a result of that reorientation, the adept of *bhakti* naturally disjoins from her identification with the field of experience, and ascends, not intellectually but emotively, to ever higher sentiments of love. As Vivekananda explains, this is why the path of love is so much easier than the path of knowledge: every step of detachment from thinking – from the ego, and from ignorance – comes effortlessly. All these layers dissolve in the feeling of love that characterizes the devotee’s experience.

This is why Vivekananda thinks Patañjali’s admission of *Īśvara* is consistent within his system. Devotion to God reaches the same goal as meditative absorption: the realization of one’s real Self. Vivekananda is still aware that, at a conceptual level, the path of knowledge and the path of love end up representing God very differently, at least on first glance. The path of knowledge ends up abstracting from any limited, finite, earthly attribute when presenting the infinite ground of being, to the point that “God” becomes the name for the most abstract notion of all – the Being of beings, or the transcendent source of reality, for which words fail us. When we discipline the mind through *rāja yoga*, we engage in a process of conceptual negation that leads us to the impersonal divinity in which all things abide. In the language of the *Gītā*, this is the concept of God the “unmanifest,” in contrast to God the “manifest” (see *ślōka* 9.4).

Vivekananda’s first point is that while the path of knowledge yields an increasingly abstract notion of God, the path of love yields an increasingly concrete one. Within the progressive stages of love that mark the path of *bhakti yoga*, the divine is initially represented as an object of reverence, God as Father, but once the adept’s love deepens, the symbol transforms into an object of deeper affection, God as Child. As Vivekananda observes, these stages reflect a deepening in the adept’s personal relationship with the divine: the shift from God as Father to God as Child tracks the adept’s intensity of devotion, as the affective attachments to a child – “for whom one would do anything” – are incomparably greater than the attachments one has to a parental figure. Hence, we find a *reversal* of the stepwise process of conceptual negation that characterizes the philosopher’s approach to God, for in *bhakti yoga* the devotee approaches the divine by way of (increasingly intense) attitudes of affirmation. Indeed, as Vivekananda points out, the highest forms of devotion reflect our most intimate relations of all, those to God the Lover and God the Friend.

This is not to say that affective representations of God, while moving in a different direction from the path of knowledge, are themselves devoid of philosophical content. This is, I believe, the further insight behind



Vivekananda's attempt to effect a synthesis between Rāja and Bhakti doctrines of Yoga. As we have seen, the terminus of the path of knowledge is the realization that God is the supreme ground of all reality, the impersonal Brahman (in neuter form), who freely sustains the entire universe through a mere fraction of its power. God could not be more abstract and further away from us. But interestingly, the terminus of the path of love is realizing that God is the supreme person, the Lover or Friend with whom one can intimately relate. As Vivekananda describes this point:

We may well say that we are all playing in this universe. Just as children play their games, just as the most glorious kings and emperors play their own games, so is the Beloved Lord Himself in sport with this universe. He is perfect; He does not want anything. Why should He create? Activity is always with us for the fulfilment of a certain want, and want always presupposes imperfection. God is perfect; He has no wants. Why should He go on with this work of an ever-active creation? What purpose has He in view?... It is all really in sport; the universe is His play going on.<sup>53</sup>

Building upon these remarks, he adds:

God is our eternal playmate. How beautifully He is playing! The play is finished when the cycle comes to an end. There is rest for a shorter or longer time; again all come out and play. ... He plays in every atom; He is playing when He is building up earths, and suns, and moons; He is playing with the human heart, with animals, with plants. We are His chessmen; He puts the chessmen on the board and shakes them up. He arranges us first in one way and then in another, and we are consciously or unconsciously helping in His play. And, oh, bliss! we are His playmates!<sup>54</sup>

At the two extreme ends of knowledge and love, we then find a point of convergence. Why? Because God as an infinite power that sustains the world without having to do so – from “creative glory,” as Schelling would say – parallels at the highest level of abstraction those intimate stirrings of the heart that make up the delight of playing with a friend.<sup>55</sup> The philosopher's wisdom that for God nothing is necessary is the truth behind the devotee's love of the divine. God's creative glory means that God does not have to do anything from compulsion or constraint.<sup>56</sup> And that is why the yoga of knowledge and the yoga of love arrive at the same end, simply along different paths. For Vivekananda, what the philosopher understands as divine freedom is what the devotee feels as divine play.

Whether Vivekananda's synthesis of Yoga works from a systematic standpoint raises questions that go beyond the scope of our investigation here. In this chapter, I have simply tried to show that Vivekananda was more of a careful interpreter of Patañjali than is often supposed, and that his work was part of a larger movement to defend Patañjali's system from its critics. We have seen that Mitra's commentary on the *Yoga Sūtras* marked a turning point in Yoga scholarship, as it countered a long-standing tendency to import religious concepts into Patañjali's system. Building upon Mitra's work, Müller could then vindicate Yoga from the charge of nihilism by showing how soul liberation does not amount to the soul's destruction, as writers such as Schlegel and Hegel had previously claimed. By the late nineteenth century, a growing awareness of the uniqueness of Patañjali's system helped to correct many misconceptions surrounding both the concept of Yoga and its respective practices. However, it was not until the early twentieth century that the charge of nihilism would finally be put to rest due to the works of Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya – three Indian philosophers that we shall examine in the next chapter.

## Notes

- 1 Max Müller, *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899), 421.
- 2 Max Müller, Letter to Müller's mother, 1844, in *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller*, ed. Georgina Adelaide Müller (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), 23.
- 3 Cited in Giles Whiteley, *Schelling's Reception in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (London: Springer, 2018), 122.
- 4 Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1897), 43.
- 5 "This," Müller confessed, "shook my belief in the correctness of Hegel's fundamental principles more than anything else" (*Contributions to the Science of Mythology*, 1: 144).
- 6 Max Müller, General Editor's Preface, in *The Upanishads*, part 1, trans. Max Müller, *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), xi–xii.
- 7 Max Müller, *Theosophy, or, Psychological Religion: The Gifford Lectures* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1893), 2.
- 8 Müller, *Theosophy*, 8.
- 9 Quoted in Müller, *Life and Letters*, 275.
- 10 Quoted in Müller, *Life and Letters*, 276.
- 11 Navinda Chandra Paul, *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy* (Benares: Recorder Press, 1851).
- 12 Paul, *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy*, 28.
- 13 Paul, *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy*, 28.
- 14 His commentary is titled *Rājamārtaṇḍa, on Patañjali's Institutes of the Yoga*.

- 15 Paul, *A Treatise on the Yoga Philosophy*, 61.
- 16 James Robert Ballantyne, trans., *The Aphorisms of the Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali*, 2 vols. (Benares: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1852–1853).
- 17 Rājendralāla Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali, with the Commentary of Bhoja Rājā* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1881).
- 18 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, lv.
- 19 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, lvi.
- 20 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, xxii.
- 21 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, 28.
- 22 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, xxix.
- 23 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, xxix.
- 24 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, 30.
- 25 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, 28.
- 26 Müller, *The Six Systems*, 471.
- 27 Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Modern Library, 1943), 23.
- 28 Max Müller, *Lecture on Buddhist Nihilism* (London: Trübner & Co., 1869), 11.
- 29 Müller, *The Six Systems*, 472.
- 30 Victor Cousin, vol. 2 of *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie moderne* (Paris: Ladrangé & Didier, 1847), 250.
- 31 Mitra, *The Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali*, 208.
- 32 Müller, *The Six Systems*, 426.
- 33 Vivekananda, “On Professor Max Müller,” in *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, digital edition (Mumbai: Partha Sinha Press), 943.
- 34 As Vivekananda puts the point in a letter dated June 10, 1898:

Whether we call it Vedantism or any ism, the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from which one can look upon all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity.

(Letter CXLII)

- 35 Müller, *Theosophy, or, Psychological Religion: The Gifford Lectures*, 511.
- 36 Müller, *Theosophy*, 542.
- 37 For further discussion, see Thomas J. Green, *Religion for a Secular Age: Max Müller, Swami Vivekananda and Vedānta* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).
- 38 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy: Lectures on Raja Yoga and Other Subjects* (New York, NY: Baker & Taylor, 1899), xi.
- 39 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, xi.
- 40 David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 124.
- 41 White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, 125. This worry was anticipated by Elizabeth De Michelis. See chap. 3 of *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).
- 42 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, xii.
- 43 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 4.
- 44 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 5.

- 45 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 100.
- 46 For an excellent account of Vivekananda's complex philosophical position, see Swami Medhananda, *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
- 47 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 123–124.
- 48 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 223.
- 49 Edwin E. Bryant, ed. and trans., *The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary* (Albany, NY: North Point Press, 2009), 248. Such “methodological pluralism” is also at the heart of Stephen Phillips's exciting work, which draws upon classical Indian doctrines, including Patañjali's system and tantric Shaivism, to present a “New Yoga.” See his *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- 50 On the idea of cultivating “lordship,” see also Shyam Ranganathan, “Patañjali's Yoga: Universal Ethics as the Formal Cause of Autonomy,” in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Ethics*, ed. Shyam Ranganathan, 177–202 (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- 51 See *Isha Upaniṣad* 6–7, in *The Upanishads*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Berkeley, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1987):

Those who see all creatures in themselves / And themselves in all creatures  
know no fear. / Those who see all creatures in themselves / And themselves  
in all creatures know no grief. / How can the multiplicity of life / Delude the  
one who sees its unity?

- 52 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 254.
- 53 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 332–333.
- 54 Vivekananda, *Vedānta Philosophy*, 332–333.
- 55 This is one way to translate the Sanskrit word *līlā*. Compare with Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* [ca. 1919], *The Complete Works of Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2005), 98:

If, then, being free to move or remain eternally still, to throw itself into forms  
or retain the potentiality of form in itself, it [Brahman] indulges its power of  
movement and formation, it can be only for one reason, for delight.

- 56 One might still wonder: How could there be convergence between these two paths, if one proceeds by way of negation and the other by way of affirmation? While a full answer to this question falls outside the scope of this study, we can begin to make progress here by recognizing that the path of knowledge “negates” descriptive claims of the divine, whereas the path of devotion “affirms” feelings of love for the divine. This means that there is no tension between the yoga practices of approaching God through knowledge or through devotion. Vivekananda's further point is that these two paths converge at their highest stages of development. Thanks to Sarah Ratzlaff for raising this question.

# 5 The Bengali Philosophers

Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and  
Bhattacharyya

*The true philosopher is a physician of the soul.*

Radhakrishnan<sup>1</sup>

## 5.1 The Bengali Philosophers

In light of our discussion from the previous chapter, it is natural to wonder whether Müller and Vivekananda ever turned to the topic of classical Yoga during their time together in Oxford. While Müller’s Yoga centres on meditative discipline, free of theological commitments, Vivekananda’s Yoga is a blend of traditions that puts God at front and centre. Comparing their works today, it is striking how much their presentations shaped the course of Yoga scholarship into the twentieth century. Vivekananda was one of many swamis who wedded Patañjali with Vedānta or Bhakti doctrines for a general audience; and Müller was one of many academics who produced studies of Indian thought for scholars and students. And yet, while academic engagement with Yoga began to decline in Europe and North America during the first half of the twentieth century, it witnessed a renaissance in India, at a time when many intellectuals there were struggling to reclaim their country’s traditions during the colonial era.<sup>2</sup>

Among this group of intellectuals, three stand out for their scholarship on Patañjali. Accordingly, our discussion in this final chapter will be organized into three sections, starting with Surendranath Dasgupta, whose work on the *Yoga Sūtras* opened up new avenues for reading classical Yoga. Dasgupta approaches the *Yoga Sūtras* as a unified system of metaphysics and ethics, and this orientation informs the work of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who places emphasis on the moral principles of Patañjali’s system. What their studies leave open, however, is the question of how Patañjali’s Yoga can sustain a notion of freedom – and this is a gap their colleague Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya works to address. On his account, Patañjali’s system is unique for offering a “two-directional” model of

willing: one aiming at enjoyment and another aiming at liberation. For Bhattacharya, the key to understanding the *Yoga Sūtras* lies in the idea that perfection of the will, and not mere knowledge, is the path to liberation.

## 5.2 Patañjali as Philosopher

Dasgupta's reputation was largely shaped by his work on the first comprehensive history of Indian thought, which was nearing completion at the time of his death in 1952. He explains his motivation for writing this *History of Indian Philosophy* in the preface to its first volume, published in 1922. After making reference to the forgotten "integrity of Hindu culture," Dasgupta complains that "much harm has already been done by the circulation of opinions that the culture and philosophy of India was dreamy and abstract," adding: "It is therefore very necessary that Indians as well as other peoples should become more and more acquainted with the true characteristics of the past history of Indian thought and form a correct estimate of its special features."<sup>3</sup> For Dasgupta and his Bengali colleagues, the task was to rescue the intellectual traditions of India from distortion, misunderstanding, and neglect.

Dasgupta was known for his effective oration, so much so that after his stay at the Société des Amis du Monde in Paris, the Indologist Louis Renou wrote to him saying that everyone felt as if "Patañjali was born again and moved among us."<sup>4</sup> The compliment was all the more fitting given that the *Yoga Sūtras* formed the topic of Dasgupta's first book, *A Study of Patañjali*, for which he won the prestigious Griffith Prize in 1915. Written one year prior in 1914, the study was published in 1920, and a new edition appeared in 1924 under the title *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*.<sup>5</sup> Coming in at over two hundred pages, it contains what was at the time the most detailed reconstruction of Patañjali's system in any language. It is also distinguished by the fact that it is not a line-by-line commentary of the *Yoga Sūtras*; instead, Dasgupta's book develops an analysis of Yoga philosophy aimed to establish a connection between its metaphysical and ethical principles (the topics of parts I and II, respectively).

What Dasgupta came to see is that the *Yoga Sūtras* is not just a manual for attaining liberation, as is often supposed. It is true that Patañjali's work is distinctive for its practical focus, and Dasgupta is aware that this sets it apart from the Sāṃkhya school: if Sāṃkhya (as presented by Kapila) lays stress on the perfection of knowledge for releasing the soul from ignorance, then Patañjali's Yoga lays it on the perfection of the will.<sup>6</sup> Yet Dasgupta's insight is that Patañjali's privileging of the will is a philosophical premise that plays a central role in his system. More than just laying emphasis on the centrality of practice for attaining liberation, Dasgupta considers Patañjali to be advancing a more far-reaching claim: that our experience

of the world is structured by the will, so that it is only by *transforming the will* that we can transform our experience. If an intellectualist philosopher is someone who thinks that knowledge alone can set us free, Patañjali would then count as a strong non-intellectualist. On Dasgupta's account, what makes Patañjali's Yoga unique is precisely the emphasis it places on willing and our practical powers in general.

### 5.3 Dasgupta's Interpretation of Patañjali

This gives Dasgupta a novel framework for explaining the main points of contrast between the theories of Kapila and Patañjali, which we may summarize as follows.

#### 5.3.1 *The Metaphysics of Experience*

For Dasgupta, the doctrine of Sāṃkhya explains the metaphysics of experience in terms of the conjoining of consciousness (*puruṣa*) and materiality (*prakṛti*).<sup>7</sup> The evolution of materiality that results is a matter of successive misidentifications between the subject of experience and its field of experience: it begins with a misidentification of consciousness and intelligence (*buddhi* or *citta*), the first evolute of *prakṛti*, followed by a further misidentification of consciousness and the ego (*ahaṃkāra*) through which intelligence functions, the second evolute of *prakṛti*. It is due to the emergence of this intelligent ego that I am able to organize my bodily capacities for sight, touch, hearing, etc., along with their respective objects, into a cohesive whole. This material series is not a mere illusion, however, as other systems of Indian philosophy claim. Kapila's point is that the association of myself with any of these evolutes is a cognitive mistake. My consciousness is what illuminates the entire field of materiality, all the way from my mind to the concrete objects I touch, taste, and see in the world, but my consciousness itself is not part of that field.

The doctrine of Yoga, as presented by Dasgupta, departs from Sāṃkhya in characterizing the successive stages of misidentification between consciousness and materiality as more than a mere cognitive mistake. When I confuse my self with my mind, my ego, or my body, I am not just a victim of illusion. Granted, the illusion that entices me to misidentify my self with my mental apparatus is due to the fact that it bears a *likeness* to consciousness as such. My mental apparatus is, in its inherent translucency, much like the self-illuminating source of *puruṣa*; so I am prone to mistake my self in that cognitive structure, as if by an optical illusion. Above all, I am prone to mistake my intelligent ego operator, the "I" that accompanies all of my mental states, for my true Self, without realizing that this ego operator is still a material animation of *prakṛti*. According to Dasgupta,

Patañjali thinks that this misidentification is due to a positive error – that of ascribing my mind to my Self.

### 5.3.2 Freedom and Bondage

In this way, both Sāṃkhya and Yoga posit “ignorance” (*avidyā*) as the causal source of experience, for it is only through the primal coupling of consciousness and materiality that nature “evolves” through its various stages. Yet Dasgupta’s insight is that their contrasting accounts of this ignorance shape their respective theories of soul liberation. By framing ignorance as a cognitive mistake, Sāṃkhya characterizes the path to liberation as a process of acquiring ever more subtle degrees of *knowledge*, until the adept can see (having retraced the outward flow of experience) the distinction between *puruṣa* and the mind. Yoga, on the other hand, without denying that discriminative knowledge is necessary for the adept’s liberation, maintains that knowledge is not sufficient. As was touched upon earlier, the reason why is that Yoga does not frame our root *avidyā* in strictly intellectual terms: the misidentification of the self and the mind is, for Dasgupta, an *active misidentification* – hence, the emphasis Patañjali places on acquiring ever more subtle degrees of *control* over the mind and its modifications. Since we are active in our bondage, only a transformation of our inner dispositions can set us free.

As Dasgupta goes on to argue, the idea that *avidyā* is sustained rather than merely endured is what leads Patañjali to develop a more elaborate account of those “afflictions” (*kleśas*) that block our path to freedom. In the *Yoga Sūtras*, for example, we find the idea that all suffering can be traced back to an original act of self-deception: that of regarding “the not-Self as the Self” (*sūtra* 2.5), which is *avidyā* in its original or “primitive” form. For this reason, “ignorance” is not the best translation of the term, as other scholars have observed, since the concept of *avidyā* covers a wide spectrum of meaning. It can imply ignorance as a mere lack of knowledge, as when one complains about being left in the dark, but it can also include stronger forms of ignorance, as when one “sticks one’s head in the sand,” so to speak, or worse yet, when one holds onto beliefs against contrary evidence. *Avidyā* in the more active sense also captures those moments of self-deception in which one is conscious of harbouring a false attitude, all the while pretending (to oneself) that it is true.

For Patañjali, *avidyā* is the first of many self-imposed afflictions that characterize the human condition. If I identify with the ego operator, I will become attached to my sense of “I,” and that will give rise to the affliction of egoism (*asmitā*). Moreover, if I identify with the ego, I will mediate my connection to the world through my individual will: pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, suffering passion (*rāga*) and aversion (*dveṣa*) in turn. My



entire outlook will then be dominated by a desire to preserve my body, my ego, my mind – everything I identify as *my own* – and with that desire I will suffer the great fear of death (*abhiniveśāḥ*), which is a consequence of my clinging to life. Patañjali’s claim is that all of these afflictions have *avidyā* at their basis, and this is what Dasgupta wants to foreground: “These five afflictions are only different aspects of *avidyā* and cannot be conceived separately from *avidyā*,” and they “lead us into the meshes of the world, far from our final goal –the realisation of our own self-emancipation.”<sup>8</sup>

### 5.3.3 *Suffering and Ethics*

What Sāṃkhya and Yoga both uphold, then, is the idea that the source of experience is also the source of suffering. This is a feature of Sāṃkhya-Yoga systems that they share with Buddhism: to understand how the world appears to us and to understand why we suffer are one and the same endeavour. Dasgupta’s point is that even if the theories of Sāṃkhya and Yoga converge on this Buddhist premise, they still end up producing different accounts of what we might call the “mind/world” structure. As we have seen, Patañjali’s innovative move is to locate the cause of this structure in an original act of self-deception (that of taking “the not-Self as the Self”), which leads him to describe the evolution of materiality in strongly conative terms, involving an interplay of attachment and suffering. On Patañjali’s account, the mind/world structure is shot through with affect: everything we experience is coloured by passion and aversion, varying only in degree of intensity. In this respect, Patañjali agrees with the Buddhists that “existence *is* suffering.”

This brings Dasgupta to yet another difference between Sāṃkhya and Yoga. Because Sāṃkhya makes knowledge the key to liberation, it places less emphasis on the various techniques of self-governance that one finds in Yoga, with its focus on moral duty (limb 1), self-perfection (limb 2), posture (limb 3), sense control (limbs 4–5), and meditation (limbs 6–8). To be sure, both systems maintain that the soul’s liberation can come about only by redirecting the flow of experience that keeps us chained to mistaken identifications. But since Yoga denies that mere ignorance is the cause of the outward flow itself, it also denies that mere knowledge suffices to “turn one around” and work toward a state of isolation. On the contrary, because the outward flow is a product of the will on Patañjali’s account, the process leading to the soul’s liberation requires a moment of involution, whereby the adept commits to transforming her entire disposition. All the techniques of self-governance that Patañjali lays out in the *Yoga Sūtras* serve this single end.

Among the virtues of Dasgupta’s study, his insight into the ethical foundation of these techniques marked an important advance in the scholarship.

As we know, since the publication of Colebrooke's lectures, most European interpreters were left with the impression that Patañjali's work is silent on questions of duty to self and others, given that Colebrooke makes no mention of the *yamas* and *niyamas* that make up the first two "limbs" of Yoga. With the exception of Humboldt, who attempted to rescue a concept of moral freedom in the *Gītā*, few scholars challenged Colebrooke's assessment, even when the *Yoga Sūtras* became available in translation across Europe and elsewhere. Müller and Vivekananda, too, while otherwise charitable in their interpretations of Patañjali, say very little about his moral philosophy, beyond highlighting the practice of *yama* and *niyama* as preparatory steps for meditation. In the early twentieth century, the task of correcting this long-standing misreading fell to Dasgupta, who maintains that ethical principles play a foundational role in Patañjali's philosophy.

#### 5.4 The Ethics of Yoga

Dasgupta's breakthrough came from seeing that the ethical theory of Yoga forms the positive counterpoint to its metaphysics. While the metaphysics explains the outward flow of experience from a condition of original ignorance (as a process of *evolution*), the ethics explain the redirection of experience that brings the agent back to an awareness of her essential Self (as a process of *involution*). For Patañjali, then, the metaphysics explains the great problem of life, why existence is suffering, whereas the ethics present the solution, how the soul can return to itself and overcome suffering. What Dasgupta calls the "ethical problem" of Patañjali's philosophy is precisely how such a return is possible: that is, how it is possible to "uproot" the condition of our bondage, *avidyā*, and work toward final liberation.<sup>9</sup>

According to the answer Dasgupta reconstructs from the *Yoga Sūtras*, this uprooting of ignorance requires two things: (1) an "ethical ideal" and (2) a "line of action" for approximating this ideal.<sup>10</sup> The ethical ideal is that of absolute freedom (*kaivalya*), and the line connecting us to this final end is action in the world that realizes *kaivalya*. The kind of ethical action that Patañjali prescribes in his philosophy is thus constitutive of how we can become independent of *prakṛti*. Properly understood, ethical action is action *tending toward freedom*, and to that extent it is action that embodies the ideal of our final end even before we have attained it. What Dasgupta calls "yoga ethics," therefore, is the theory of actions (including the "inner" actions of concentration) that serve to uproot our ignorance, thereby allowing us to *undo* the layers of misidentification that have kept us in bondage. Since the least visible of these layers are also the most difficult to uproot, this process of conversion will eventually lead the yogini to "act" upon her own mind and its subtle operations.

But what does such “action” look like in practice? Dasgupta explains that all the moral prescriptions of Yoga have their basis in *ahiṃsā*, the Sanskrit term for non-violence, non-injury, or non-harming. “It is by *ahiṃsā* alone,” he writes, “that all other virtues of truthfulness, non-stealing, etc., only serve to make non-injury more and more perfect.”<sup>11</sup> The striking suggestion here is that *ahiṃsā* is a first principle of ethics insofar as it serves to justify further requirements of moral action. As we learn in 2.30 of the *Yoga Sūtras*, the first limb of yoga contains a total of five such requirements, the five *yamas*:

- 1 *Ahiṃsā* (अहिंसा): non-violence
- 2 *Satya* (सत्य): truthfulness
- 3 *Asteya* (अस्तेय): non-theft
- 4 *Brahmacharya* (ब्रह्मचर्य): sexual control
- 5 *Aparigraha* (अपरिग्रह): non-possessiveness

On Dasgupta’s account, to say that non-violence is the first principle of ethics means that it is where the buck stops when questions of moral justification arise. If the question surfaces, “Why ought I to cultivate truthfulness?,” the answer is: Because doing so prevents the harm of deceit. Similarly, if the question becomes, “Why ought I to cultivate non-theft, or sexual control, or non-possessiveness?,” the answers again refer us back to the rule of *ahiṃsā*. Dasgupta’s larger point is that all of the prohibitions listed by Patañjali refer to specific actions that serve to cultivate our commitment to the basic imperative of “doing no harm,” whether that concerns the direct harms of injury, deception, theft, or sexual objectification, or even (as with the last *yama*) the indirect harm of possessiveness.

Dasgupta also highlights the fact that among Patañjali’s preparatory exercises for stilling the mind, he stresses the importance of counteracting our tendency to reactive attitudes:

*By cultivating an attitude of friendship toward those who are happy, compassion toward those in distress, joy toward those who are virtuous, and equanimity toward those who are non-virtuous, lucidity arises in the mind.*

(sūtra 1.33)

On closer inspection, Dasgupta explains, we can see that Patañjali means to draw a link between the four moral attitudes of friendliness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*), and the state of lucidity required for meditation. Dasgupta takes this as more evidence that yoga demands an inner transformation of one’s personality: what matters is not just *what* one does, but *how* one does it. To perfect one’s

commitment to non-violence and its corollary prohibitions (against lying, theft, etc.), one must cultivate feelings of fellowship toward others. Everything then flows from non-violence as a basic ethical imperative.

In a lecture titled “A Hindu View of Religion,”<sup>12</sup> delivered in 1938, Dasgupta goes so far as to claim that the perfection of duty is the *key* to self-transformation:

The process of transforming one’s own personality takes place through the exertion of one’s own will by means of psychological exercises in meditation and concentration associated with moral purification of the highest order. On the negative side it involves absolute non-injury as the fundamental creed and on the positive side it emphasizes the imperative need for training the mind to the attitude of universal friendship, charity and compassion. ... The moral elevation aimed at involves a thorough transformation of one’s own nature and personality in the interest of the self-illumination of one’s spiritual nature.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, moral action is more than just a prerequisite for liberation, as Dasgupta seemed to imply in his previous study of Patañjali. The argument of his 1938 lecture is now stronger: that the cultivation of moral action is how a yogini can effect the transformation of her disposition so as to “realise the supreme spiritual principle within her” – namely, her *puruṣa*. Whether this is only a clarification of his earlier position is difficult to tell, but there is no doubt that Dasgupta understood the ethics of classical Yoga to flow from an ideal of absolute freedom (as our highest end) and the principle of non-violence (as our method for approximating this end). Dasgupta may not have been the first commentator of Patañjali to draw this link, but he was the first to give it a systematic account. Without non-violence, freedom is impossible, which is to say: no *ahimsā*, no *kaivalya*.<sup>14</sup>

In drawing this conclusion, Dasgupta was aware of the many affinities between Yoga and other schools of South Asian philosophy, notably Buddhism and Jainism, and he even commented on parallels between Patañjali’s system and the Stoics as well as modern German philosophers (especially Fichte). Yet one of the virtues of his work is the way he portrayed the *Yoga Sūtras* as a unified philosophical system. He let the reader see how the various elements of this text can be reassembled, under a charitable hand, into an interconnected theory of metaphysics and ethics. What is more, Dasgupta never advocated for the superiority of Yoga over other systems, and his approach to the history of philosophy was in principle open, stemming from the conviction that all schools contain aspects of the truth. In the same lecture in which Dasgupta summarizes his view of Hindu religion, for instance, we find him advocating this kind of inclusive approach to past systems of thought:

In some forms there is an emphasis on the metaphysical consciousness, in others on the determinate controlling of will, and in others again on the outflow of spontaneous love. But all forms of Hindu religion mean a spiritual awakening of the nature in man through an internal transformation of personality, just as art in its varied forms means the creative transformation of a sensuous content for the revelation of the spirit in nature.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, Dasgupta regarded Yoga as one of many traditions of spiritual self-illumination, no better and no worse than others. True religion, on his view, is that which transforms human beings and brings them to an awareness of their essential nature. For Dasgupta, there are many paths to attaining this end.

### 5.5 Yoga, beyond Good and Evil

Dasgupta was not the only Indian intellectual working to rehabilitate Patañjali's Yoga in the early twentieth century, nor was he the only person who felt the need to write the history of Indian philosophy afresh. His colleague Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan published the first volume of his *Indian Philosophy* in 1923; and in the second volume, which appeared in 1927, Radhakrishnan offered a detailed account of Sāṃkhya and Yoga in two long chapters, with a combined length of over one hundred pages.

Radhakrishnan was one year younger than Dasgupta, although his upbringing was marked by a different set of cultural encounters. Radhakrishnan experienced the anti-Indian and anti-Hindu attitudes of the West at a young age, first at Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees College in Vellore (1900–1904), where he was taught by Lutheran Christian missionaries, and then at Christian College in Madras (1904–1908), where he was taught by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries. Later in life, Radhakrishnan described the hostile environments of these institutions, which for him served as a catalyst to understanding his own heritage. “The challenge of Christian critics,” he wrote in his autobiography, “impelled me to make a study of Hinduism and find out what is living and what is dead in it.”<sup>16</sup> During these early years Radhakrishnan discovered the writings of Vivekananda, which gave him confidence in the philosophical sophistication of Hinduism, and by the time he completed his degrees in Madras, Radhakrishnan had already made an extensive study of Western systems, with a focus on Kant and the post-Kantian traditions.

It is puzzling that much of Radhakrishnan's approach to the history of philosophy is Hegelian in spirit. While he never addresses Hegel's arguments for denying Indian systems the title of “philosophy,” he would have likely encountered these arguments during the course of his studies. At times Radhakrishnan appears to be offering a rejoinder to Hegel, as when he

claims that it is “untrue to say that philosophy in India never became self-conscious or critical.”<sup>17</sup> At other times, he seems sympathetic to Hegel’s method, and he even suggests that this method was foreshadowed in the work of Mádharma Áchárya, a fourteenth-century scholar who wrote the first account of the six orthodox schools of Indian thought. “In the spirit of Hegel,” Radhakrishnan explains, Mádharma “looks upon the history of Indian philosophy as a progressive effort toward a fully articulated conception of the world. The truth is unfolded bit by bit in the successive systems, and complete truth is reflected only when the series is completed.”<sup>18</sup>

This is how Radhakrishnan views the history of Indian philosophy. Unlike Hegel, however, who believed that the historical series finds completion in a Christian-Teutonic system, Radhakrishnan believes that it is completed in the school of Advaita (“non-dual”) Vedānta. While he is happy to acknowledge an overlap between this system and Hegel’s, he does not think that they are equal representations of absolute reality. And in this respect Radhakrishnan follows in the footsteps of Vivekananda, who believed that non-dual Vedānta is the best of all systems, and that Hinduism (understood through the lens of Vedānta) is the best of all religious faiths. Radhakrishnan even regards the history of Indian philosophy as a “progressive effort” toward a final synthesis that outstrips Hegelianism itself; for he believes that Vedānta goes beyond Western thinking in its fundamental modes of cognition. The highest truth of all, he claims, is accessible only through a “supra-intellectual” insight, one that marks the pinnacle of religious experience beyond the domain of reason.

While Radhakrishnan is critical of classical Yoga for its inherent dualism, he still judges Yoga ethics with approval. In one place he even comes to Patañjali’s defence against a criticism put forward by James E. Leuba, an American professor of psychology, who argued that “an ethical purpose and practice of Yoga is not logically demanded by the goal of Yoga.” In Leuba’s judgment, “ethical considerations have no logical place in a system that aims at the breaking of all bonds connecting the individual to the physical and social world.”<sup>19</sup> While the objection was not new, Radhakrishnan makes a point of directing the reader to Leuba’s article as an illustration of a common misreading. “Yoga is said to be an unethical system,” he writes, because of its emphasis on independence, the worry being that “ethical considerations cannot have any place in a system that aims at the breaking of all bonds connecting the individual to the world.”<sup>20</sup> In characterizing Yoga as a system of self-negation, Leuba was only repeating what Schlegel and others had said nearly a century prior: that Yoga reduces to a form of pernicious nihilism about morality.

By way of reply, Radhakrishnan follows Dasgupta in arguing for the opposite view, but with an added twist; for he thinks the goal of yoga practice lies “beyond good and evil”:

The ethical pathway alone helps us to reach the goal of perfection, though the latter takes us to a region beyond good and evil. Salvation is the realisation of the true nature of the self which is obscured by so many impurities. We can get rid of them only by effort and discipline. The yoga is much more emphatic than many other systems in holding that philosophy cannot save us. What we stand in need of is not subtleties of disquisition but control of will. We must subdue the inner turmoil of emotion and passion. The true philosopher is a physician of the soul, one who helps us to save ourselves from the bondage of desire.<sup>21</sup>

In saying this, Radhakrishnan is agreeing with the main points of Dasgupta's account: (1) that Patañjali posits absolute freedom as our final end, (2) that he makes perfection of the will through moral-psychological discipline the means for attaining this end, and (3) that Yoga is therefore a system of self-transformation. If by "philosophy" we understand a form of knowledge based on principles, then Dasgupta would agree with Radhakrishnan's verdict: the true yoga philosopher is a "physician of the soul," for she recognizes that mere formulas will not set us free. But Radhakrishnan wants to push this thesis in a different direction by claiming that liberation itself does not fit within our conventional categories of good and evil either; this is the sense in which he deems it "beyond" morality altogether.

All of this raises the question of how striving for liberation is possible. Setting aside the issue of how we should characterize our final end – whether as an ethical or a non-ethical ideal – the problem of freedom remains. The worry takes the form of a dilemma: for if we are not free (because we have not attained liberation), then there is nothing we can do to take steps toward this goal, as all of our actions, choices, and thoughts are determined by the operations of *prakṛti*. But if we are already free (because our essential Self is never entangled in *prakṛti*), then striving for liberation loses its rationale. Either we are not free, in other words, in which case striving for freedom is *impossible*, or we are already free, in which case such striving is *pointless*. While both Dasgupta and Radhakrishnan show sensitivity to this problem, neither ventures to offer a solution within their studies of the *Yoga Sūtras*. That task fell to their senior colleague at the University of Calcutta, K.C. Bhattacharyya, to whom I now turn.

## 5.6 Yoga as Freedom

Described as "warm and generous in his temperament" but "shy and almost afraid of publicity,"<sup>22</sup> Bhattacharyya was less in the limelight than either Dasgupta or Radhakrishnan, neither travelling extensively nor venturing into the field of politics. Like his Bengali colleagues, he acquired a strong grasp of Western philosophy and used that knowledge

to interpret and defend Indian systems of thought. Unlike his colleagues, Bhattacharyya never wrote a new narrative of the major Indian schools, preferring instead to write smaller, isolated studies of specific figures and texts. Such is the case in his *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, originally a set of lectures delivered in 1937, where we find Bhattacharyya working to solve the mystery of freedom at the heart of Patañjali's system.

If Dasgupta had paved the way for reframing Yoga as a unified philosophy of the will, then it was Bhattacharyya who developed this idea into a systematic reading of the *Yoga Sūtras*. His guiding claim is simple yet far-reaching: that what is distinctive in the system of Patañjali is the idea that our faculty of will is *two-directional*, capable of moving toward either "enjoyment" or "emancipation." The relevant contrast is the *one-directional* model found in Sāṃkhya, according to which our faculty of will moves in only one direction, namely, toward enjoyment (and hence toward further entanglement with nature). As Bhattacharyya explains this contrast, Sāṃkhya conceives of willing merely as flowing from one's "lower" ego, whose aim is to pursue pleasure and avoid pain; but Yoga goes further and also conceives of a form of willing that flows from one's "higher" ego, whose aim is freedom from the pleasure/pain matrix itself. In this higher form, Bhattacharyya argues, willing displays a tendency toward self-transformation.

Bhattacharyya develops this concept of "spiritual willing," as he calls it, to offer a more detailed picture of the differences between Sāṃkhya and Yoga. First of all, he explains, because willing is only ever the "lower" variety in Sāṃkhya, the highest meditative state (*samādhi*) comes about through discriminative awareness (*viveka*), which, Bhattacharyya observes, is a "cognitive and not a conative process."<sup>23</sup> The common ground between the two systems is the idea that we can attain liberation by overcoming ignorance (*avidyā*). "In Sāṃkhya," he writes, "such illusion is finally corrected or eliminated through knowledge, while in Yoga, the final elimination is possible only through the practice of yoga."<sup>24</sup> In one sense, the result is the same: we see the distinction between the self and the mind, between *puruṣa* and *buddhicitā*. However, Bhattacharyya argues that even here we find a contrast between the two schools. In Yoga, he points out, discriminative awareness is itself sustained by willing, the willing for unconditional independence. Such awareness is born from discipline and cannot be acquired through intellection alone.

Bhattacharyya even draws on this idea to fill a gap left open in the accounts of Dasgupta and Radhakrishnan. Recall that in their accounts it is unclear how we can strive for absolute freedom, since it is also unclear what capacity for free will we enjoy prior to *kaivalya* or *mokṣa*. Much of the strong intellectualism we find in the Sāṃkhya school seems to emerge from a model of the will that is conditioned by the dynamics of nature: on



such a model, the will is only ever a movement toward bondage, not toward emancipation. Both Dasgupta and Radhakrishnan acknowledge that Patañjali attempts to go beyond this model of the will and make room for genuine spiritual activity in the practice of yoga itself, but it is only in Bhattacharyya's *Studies in Yoga Philosophy* that the component parts of this new interpretation come together. "Spiritual willing," Bhattacharyya writes, "is free willing in this sense and yoga would be this free willing explicitly to secure free being of the spirit."<sup>25</sup> In short, Patañjali's Yoga affirms that we are free to be free.

In saying this, it might sound as though Bhattacharyya has merely answered the mystery of freedom with a riddle. For what could it mean to say that I am free to be free? When we look at Bhattacharyya's text more closely, it is clear that the solution he struck upon is not only to distinguish between two forms of willing in Yoga (toward enjoyment or toward emancipation), but also to distinguish between two senses of freedom. In spiritual willing, he is claiming, I am *reversing* my orientation to the world; that is what allows me to detach from the passions and aversions that had previously structured my mode of activity. As we learned from Dasgupta's account, this reorientation of one's disposition is itself a kind of conversion: one "turns back" from the pursuit of enjoyment, having come to the realization that all such enjoyment is really suffering. Advancing this line of interpretation further, Bhattacharyya's point is that we exercise freedom in initiating this self-change. We are free to make this choice.

This is the first sense of "freedom" Bhattacharyya wants to spotlight in his reconstruction. Spiritual willing is free willing in the sense that it springs from one's choice to reverse the natural course of one's striving for enjoyment. But there is another sense of "freedom" at work here, which is the freedom one strives to attain. Freedom in this second sense refers to the *final end* of liberation, *kaivalya* or *mokṣa*, which our commentators have variously translated as "complete isolation," "absolute freedom," or "final liberation." In drawing this distinction, Bhattacharyya argues that Patañjali's Yoga is a genuine system of freedom insofar as it affirms that we are free to redirect the movement of our will (freedom in the first sense), and thereby to strive for absolute liberation (freedom in the second sense). As he explains, "willing in Yoga philosophy is essentially free activity for free being,"<sup>26</sup> meaning that we are free to strive for the goal of our emancipation. There is no dilemma, then, since in Yoga it is consistent to say (i) that absolute freedom is our goal and (ii) that we are free to approximate this goal.

For evidence that Patañjali subscribes to this view, Bhattacharyya points to the second sentence of the *Yoga Sūtras*: "Yoga is the *nirodhaḥ* of the turnings of the mind" (1.2). Here *nirodhaḥ* means something like "cessation," "calming," or "controlling." As Bhattacharyya understands

this passage, even though *nirodhaḥ* counteracts the default activity of the mind (in its various “turnings” or *vrttis*), it is not an absence or privation of willing so much as a force to reverse the flow of willing. In this respect, *nirodhaḥ* is an active force of free will, even though it manifests itself as a power to *forestall* the movements of the mind that keep us chained in spiritual ignorance. *Nirodhaḥ* therefore finds expression as self-restraint: it is a “conscious power of the mind,” he explains, the power “not to move from *vrtti* to *vrtti*.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed, only a force greater than the pull toward enjoyment could effect such control; otherwise, lacking such power, we would be (to borrow a phrase from Hume) mere “slaves of passion.”

### 5.7 The Sacred and the Mysterious

In defending this reconstruction, Bhattacharyya appears to be at odds not only with Dasgupta and Radhakrishnan, but also with the entire commentarial tradition devoted to the *Yoga Sūtras*. By recasting Patañjali’s philosophy as a system of freedom, Bhattacharyya presents the centrality of willing as the source of both our spiritual ignorance and our spiritual liberation. And yet, in interpreting the idea of willing in this way, his reading appears to risk downplaying any positive role for devotion in the yogi’s quest for release. Why? Because if the yogi possesses all the requisite capacities for attaining isolation, it is no longer clear why Patañjali’s doctrine would need a “God” at all. On this view, anything resembling religious consciousness looks odd, if not altogether out of place.

The shape of this problem is a familiar one. Are we capable of attaining liberation through the efforts of our own will, or do we need help from above? As we have seen, Patañjali introduces the idea of “devotion to *Īśvara*” as one path among many for attaining emancipation. For those with a religious bent of mind, he seems to be saying that focusing on the Lord can be an effective means for detaching oneself from the field of *prakṛti*. However, many classical interpreters of the *Yoga Sūtras* reconstruct Patañjali’s doctrine in a way that makes God’s role necessary for emancipation. As Dasgupta had summarized this view, the claim is that *Īśvara* acts as a creative agency that removes the final barriers standing in the way of a yogi’s self-realization, thereby granting liberation through grace. Bhattacharyya departs from this long-standing convention, arguing that the mechanism of grace is at odds with the yogi’s freedom to will his own freedom. He maintains instead that just as yoga is “beyond” morality, as Radhakrishnan had argued, it is “beyond” religion too.

Bhattacharyya’s point is that devotion is born from an attitude of dependency on God, and one’s consciousness of such dependency is what makes up the category of the sacred. The “sacred” refers to that which is

infinitely greater than one's individual will or mind, along with anything one can desire or think. God is the ultimate object of religious consciousness in this sense because "God" refers to that infinite power before whom one stands in awe. Interestingly, Bhattacharyya remarks that this feeling of reverence is possible before a higher law that appears to us as a command; and he cites as an example Kant's categorical imperative, which Kant says elicits from us a special emotion of "respect." Yet Bhattacharyya goes on to say that in contrast to Kant, Yoga appears to preclude even this feeling for a sacred imperative, inasmuch as the yogi strives for freedom from limitations of any kind, including the limitations of moral necessitation. With its "will to transcend the sacred," the practice of yoga even wills to "supersede religion."<sup>28</sup>

Bhattacharyya's point is that the yogi's striving is aimed at transcending any feeling of subordination that would characterize religious consciousness. This is the sense in which yoga, as the "free willing of freedom," counts as a "super-religious spiritual activity."<sup>29</sup> The ideal of unconditional independence presents us with a goal of realizing our essence, as beings who never were entangled in material reality. To approximate that goal through self-discipline amounts to becoming aware of our personhood; indeed, that is how Bhattacharyya reads the idea of "abiding in one's own essence" from *sūtra* 1.3. At most, he thinks that devotion can serve as a step in the process of attaining this special self-recognition, but the results of the recognition still outstrip the intellectual and emotive aspects of religious experience. To become aware of one's own personhood is to abide in the elevated awareness of one's spiritual nature, "above" the entire realm of *prakṛti* itself.

And yet Bhattacharyya does not draw what might seem to be the most consistent conclusion here: that the concept of devotion to *Īśvara* is dispensable in Patañjali's system. Taking an unexpected turn, he argues that in the activity of striving for absolute freedom, the yogini must, to make her striving meaningful, affirm an *upper limit* to that goal. Where there is a degree of freedom, Bhattacharyya argues, there must be a greater degree, and by this same logic we can conclude that there must be a greatest degree. Bhattacharyya thereby recognizes a parallel to one of the traditional proofs of God's omniscience touched upon in Chapter 4: since we possess a finite amount of knowledge, there must be greater and greater amounts by degrees, until we arrive at the idea of infinite knowledge as such, which we (as finite beings) cannot claim to possess. Bhattacharyya employs this form of argument on the grounds that because we possess a finite amount of freedom, there must be greater and greater amounts by degrees, until we arrive at the idea of *infinite freedom as such*, which we cannot claim to possess either. In both cases, we must ascribe these attributes to the Lord, *Īśvara*.

Invoking Kant yet again, but this time to add a constructive link to his account, Bhattacharyya argues that this idea of God enjoys the status of a “postulate.” This is because the idea of God emerges as a presupposition of our striving for freedom from limitations of any kind. To make this striving meaningful, we must assume that our limited freedom admits of an increase by degrees, the logical terminus being the idea of infinite freedom. We are committed to this idea insofar as we work to reverse the direction of our will and seek to uproot the spiritual ignorance that has kept us in bondage. In effecting our self-transformative choice in yoga, we are reorienting ourselves to the ideal of freedom, which is the ideal of *Īśvara*, the pre-eminent Person who never was afflicted by illusion. Thus, Bhattacharyya’s claim is that there is a super-religious form of devotion, one higher than the common variety, according to which a commitment to realizing one’s independence just is a commitment to the complete form (or ideal) of such independence.

Now Bhattacharyya is aware that to call *Īśvara* a “postulate” in the Kantian sense of the word carries further implications.<sup>30</sup> It entails that our striving for absolute freedom is meaningful only if we affirm the *existence* of *Īśvara* as a real being and not as a mere ideal. The philosophy of willing that Bhattacharyya finds at the core of Patañjali’s system does not reduce to the chasing of abstract representations in one’s own mind. Rather, the aim of yoga is to outstrip the structure of categories that keep us chained to a mind-centric experience of the world. That is the guiding promise of the practice: to transcend the ego and its mediating influence on how we perceive everything through the lens of passion and aversion, pleasure and pain, desire and repulsion. To the extent that we are committed to the reality of freedom, we must also be committed to the reality of a being who possesses this power in its highest degree, namely, *Īśvara*, the perfectly free *puruṣa*. That further commitment is what Bhattacharyya means when he speaks of upholding God as a *postulate*.

By introducing the idea of God as a perfectly free *puruṣa*, however, have we not returned to the standpoint of religious consciousness that Bhattacharyya says is eclipsed in the practice of yoga? His answer is clear, although it requires some unpacking to explain. No, Bhattacharyya argues, we have not returned to the standpoint of religious consciousness by affirming *Īśvara* as a postulate. The reason why is that we have overcome the distinctive character of this standpoint, the awareness of the sacred and one’s subordinate position under it. God as a postulate does not appear to us as a hallowed law from above, nor does it elicit that feeling of humility described by Kant.<sup>31</sup> The postulate is not imposed upon us, but rather flows from our striving for freedom itself. As an affirmation of belief in a being who was, is, and always will be free from all limitations, the standpoint of super-religious consciousness that Bhattacharyya associates

with Patañjali's system sublimates the sacred into a new category, what he calls the "mysterious." This is, he argues, devotion in its higher form.

Bhattacharyya, I should note, is not trying to be cryptic with his language here. He is calling attention to the fact that *Īśvara* falls outside the domain of human knowledge. We can know objects only through the structure of categories provided by the twenty-five *tattvas* that Patañjali adopts from Sāṃkhya ontology, either through *puruṣa* or through one of the twenty-four evolutions of *prakṛti*. Without denying that *Īśvara* is, as Patañjali says, a *puruṣa*, Bhattacharyya argues that its pre-eminent status exceeds the terms of description that we normally apply to finite "persons" in the material domain. As a being who never was afflicted by ignorance or illusion, *Īśvara* merits the title of Lord, unsurpassed in its perfection of knowledge and independence. Yet as soon as we try to cognize these perfections, Bhattacharyya explains, we find ourselves at a loss: the best we can do, relative to our standpoint as imperfectly realized souls, is to say that *Īśvara* possesses infinite knowledge and infinite independence.

*Īśvara* is a mystery, then, because we cannot grasp the infinite, but since we are required to posit the infinite in our striving for absolute freedom, we must nonetheless uphold the reality of *Īśvara* as an item of *faith*. This is what Bhattacharyya means by "super-religious" devotion. On the one hand, this form of devotion transcends the standpoint of ego willing that mediates all ends through one's sense of "I"; for higher devotion surrenders this mode of willing altogether. On the other hand, it does not surrender the standpoint of ego willing out of a feeling for the sacred, and in that respect it does not count as religious devotion at all. Instead, the surrender of ego willing that lies at the root of striving for independence inevitably brings one face to face with the *mystery* of freedom as that which surpasses anything we can know. The freely generated activity of spiritual willing transforms itself into a higher form of faith, which Bhattacharyya speaks of as faith in the "mystery of freedom" itself.<sup>32</sup>

In retrospect, this speaks indirectly to the charge of nihilism that previous writers had levelled against Yoga.<sup>33</sup> On Bhattacharyya's account, Patanjali's system does not amount to metaphysical nihilism (or the erasure of distinctions between things) because it is premised on the fundamental reality of finite persons (*puruṣas*) and their distinction from the infinite person (*Īśvara*). Second, Patanjali's system does not amount to moral nihilism (or the erasure of distinctions between actions) because it is premised on the basic freedom of finite persons to uproot their ignorance and work toward liberation. Lastly, Patanjali's Yoga does not amount to practical nihilism, because the end of liberation consists not in self-negation, but in self-realization, where the latter involves "abiding in one's essence." On this last point, we can detect a point of agreement

between Bhattacharyya and Vivekananda, as Vivekananda wants to claim that the notion of uniting with God characteristic of Vedānta and Bhakti is not in tension with the end of soul liberation. This is because, as we saw in Chapter 4, Vivekananda frames the idea of such union in qualitative terms: in acquiring self-sufficiency through the practice of yoga, one becomes more *like* God.

### 5.8 A “Recipe for the Human Soul”

Such is the argument of the *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, which Bhattacharyya admits is a “constructive effort” of interpretation.<sup>34</sup> All ancient systems of thought suffer from an inherent incompleteness, he explains, either because they were recorded as mere prompts for oral instruction (as with the *sūtra* tradition of the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikās* and the *Yoga Sūtras*), because they were clothed in symbolic garb (as with the poetic tradition of the *Gītā* or *Śakuntalā*), or because their original versions survive only in fragmented form (as is the case with the vast body of classical Indian literature to which these texts belong). In any event, Bhattacharyya believes that it is the interpreter’s responsibility to fill in missing details and piece together missing links, all with the aim of illuminating the many layers of meaning that these texts contain. For this reason, he believes that interpretation as the passive recording of claims is not possible; rather, interpretation requires something more, what he calls “construction.” By way of concluding this chapter, I wish to examine this idea more closely and show how it bears upon this study as a whole.

To begin with, Bhattacharyya is clear that construction alone will not suffice. As interpreters, he explains, we must do the business of filling in missing details and piecing together missing links in a spirit of charity, striving to optimize a text’s integrity and intention. Often Bhattacharyya prefers to speak of “sympathy” rather than of charity – for to interpret a text according to the principle of sympathy requires more than just presenting it in a favourable light. To be a sympathetic interpreter, as Bhattacharyya sees it, is to relate to a system of philosophy as what he called a “form of life”: a set of ideas that speak to an entire way of understanding the world and our place within it. The task of sympathy is then to enter into a system as one would enter into another culture; it is to become *immersed* in new ways of speaking, acting, and thinking. On Bhattacharyya’s account, sympathetic construction is how we can become attuned to the vitality of past ideas which may otherwise be lost (or come to seem lifeless) in the passage of time.<sup>35</sup>

Along these lines, Bhattacharyya goes on to claim that there must be a division of labour between what he calls the “historical” interpreter and the “philosophical” interpreter, neither of whom is superior to the other:

The historian here cannot begin his work at all unless he can live in sympathy into the details of an apparently outworn creed and recognize the truth in the first imperfect adumbrations of it. The attitude of the mere narrator has, in the case of the historian of philosophy, to be exchanged as far as possible for that of the sympathetic interpreter. There is the danger, no doubt, of too easily reading one's philosophic creed into the history, but the opposite danger is more serious still. It is the danger of taking the philosophic type studied as a historic curiosity rather than a recipe for the human soul, and of seeking to explain the curiosity by natural causes instead of seriously examining its merits as philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

For Bhattacharyya, to approach a text as a "recipe for the human soul" rather than a mere "historic curiosity" is what it means to approach a text as a living form. Interpretive sympathy is what allows us to feel the orientation to life that any system of philosophy aspires to offer, such that we can grasp, relative to the system itself, what we can know, what we ought to do, and what we may hope.<sup>37</sup> For Bhattacharyya, to approach past systems as mere curiosities – or as products of merely "natural causes," as he puts it – forecloses the spirit of sympathy that makes such interpretation possible.

Bhattacharyya thinks that viewing past systems of thought in a historical vacuum is equally problematic:

A true philosophic system is not to be looked upon as a soulless jointing of hypotheses; it is a living fabric which, with all its endeavour to be objective, must have a well-marked individuality. Hence it is not to be regarded as the special property of academic philosophy-mongers, to be hacked up by them into technical views, but is to be regarded as a form of life and is to be treated as a theme of literature of infinite interest to humanity.<sup>38</sup>

Bhattacharyya's point is that if the life of a past system is accessible only to those who see the *internal unity* of its claims, then a method of reducing a system to its isolated parts runs the risk of obscuring its meaning. No isolated part will reveal a worldview of "infinite interest to humanity," because no isolated part speaks to our orientation to life itself. For Bhattacharyya, that orientation only comes through the connection of parts that makes a system of philosophy an interconnected whole: that is where the living form of a system resides. The task of construction becomes all the more pressing, therefore, when we encounter a system missing any of its parts: that is when we must find our way into a past system and, as sympathetic readers, fill in the missing links. As Bhattacharyya urges,

what we are trying to discover – whether it is Patañjali we are studying or any other past thinker – is the very “recipe of the human soul” the system aspires to offer.

## Notes

- 1 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 2 [1827] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 336.
- 2 For discussion, see Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield, *Minds without Fear: Philosophy in the Indian Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 3 Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), vii.
- 4 Cited in Surama Dasgupta, *An Ever-Expanding Quest of Life and Knowledge* (Bombay: Longman, 1971), 69.
- 5 Surendranath Dasgupta, *A Study of Patañjali* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1920); *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1924). Hereafter references will be to the latter edition.
- 6 This contrast is drawn helpfully by Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79: “While in the Sāṃkhya system liberation is the retraction of the self from matter, the situation with Patañjali yoga is more complex. Here certainly liberation is the realisation of the isolation of self, but this is achieved in an embodied state, through the body’s perfection achieved by austerity. The body is controlled through asceticism.”
- 7 For a lucid account of this topic, see Mikel Burley, *Classical Samkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007).
- 8 Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, 100.
- 9 Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, 115–116.
- 10 Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, 121. For a more recent version of this interpretation, see Shyam Ranganathan, “Patañjali’s Yoga: Universal Ethics as the Formal Cause of Autonomy,” in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Ethics*, ed. Shyam Ranganathan (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 177–202. There are also strong echoes here of Fichte’s perfectionist ideal of striving for self-sufficiency, which Dasgupta himself hints at. For a discussion of Fichte, see my *Fichte’s Moral Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- 11 Dasgupta, *Yoga as Philosophy and Religion*, 139–140.
- 12 Dasgupta, “A Hindu View of Religion” [originally delivered in 1938], in *Philosophical Essays*, 374–388 (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1941).
- 13 Dasgupta, “A Hindu View of Religion,” 384–385.
- 14 For an excellent discussion of *ahimsā* and its link to the concept of liberation in both orthodox and non-orthodox Yoga philosophies, see Phillips, *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth*, chap. 3.
- 15 Dasgupta, “A Hindu View of Religion,” 388.
- 16 Cited in K. Satchidananda Murty and Ashok Vohra, eds., *Radhakrishnan: His Life and Ideas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 8.



- 17 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 [1823] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.
- 18 Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 1:25.
- 19 James E. Leuba, "The Yoga System of Mental Concentration and Religious Mysticism." *Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 8 (1919): 197–206, at 200 and 204.
- 20 Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2:335.
- 21 Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2:335–336.
- 22 Gopinath Bhattacharyya, Preface to Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1956), ix.
- 23 Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, in *Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Gopinath Bhattacharyya (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1956), 224.
- 24 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 225.
- 25 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 225.
- 26 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 225.
- 27 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 280.
- 28 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 288.
- 29 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 305.
- 30 See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft [Critique of Practical Reason, 1788]*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See in particular section VI from Book Two, "Über die Postulate der reinen praktischen Vernunft überhaupt."
- 31 I examine this topic at greater length in *Kant's Justification of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 32 See Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Yoga Philosophy*, 227:
 

Surrender of willing is the contemplation of the mystery of absolute freedom or God ... . The mystery of its own spontaneous emergence, of the absolute freedom through which free will itself emerges, the freedom to create freedom, which is just the mystery of God as conceived in Yoga.
- Given that *Īśvara* cannot be an object of knowledge, it remains "the mystery of absolute freedom bound up with the will-surrendering faith" (319).
- 33 Thanks to Sarah Ratzlaff for discussion of this topic.
- 34 Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Sankhya Philosophy*, in *Studies in Philosophy*, 1:7.
- 35 For an illuminating account of Bhattacharyya's philosophy of interpretation, see Jonardon Ganeri, "Freedom in Thinking: The Immersive Cosmopolitanism of Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya." See also the very thoughtful analysis provided by Bhushan and Garfield, *Minds without Fear*.
- 36 Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Vedantism*, in *Studies in Philosophy*, 1:1–2.
- 37 These are the three questions that Kant says unify the theoretical and practical interests of reason. See his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft [Critique of Pure Reason, 1781/1787]*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 38 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Vedantism*, 6.

# Conclusion

## Yoga, the “True Proteus”

Reflecting on the path covered in the foregoing chapters, I find myself contemplating a passage written by August Schlegel in 1826:

The word *yoga* is a true Proteus: its intellectual metamorphoses compel us to use cunning and force to tie it down and make it present itself to us and reveal its secrets. I have searched everywhere and left nothing untried. I even hit upon the idea of going back to its derivation and substituting *conjugium* [conjunction], along with an adjective where it has a mystical sense. But this seemed to me very disconcerting and disturbing. I would be very grateful for suggestions of better expressions. I am not at all concerned about defending my translation, but rather bringing it nearer to perfection.<sup>1</sup>

The Proteus of Greek mythology was said to know all things, past, present, and future, but to be reluctant to divulge his knowledge to others. Endowed with the power to change his appearance at will, Proteus was reputed to reveal his secrets only to those who could hold him down fast.

August Schlegel no doubt struck upon a fitting metaphor to describe the shape-shifting quality of the word *yoga*, the meaning of which continued to elude the grasp of scholars over the years. Following the clue of its etymology (from the Sanskrit *yuj*), the simple link between *yoga* and “union” soon gave way to a proliferation of renderings: *applicatio*, *destinatio*, *devotio*, *aequabilitas*, *exercitatio*, *maiestas*, *mysterium*, *Vertiefung*, *abstrakte Andacht*, *In sichgekehrtheit*, and *Innigkeit*. One need only glance at their English translations to see the lack of unity here: application, destination, devotion, equanimity, exercise, majesty, mystery, contemplation, abstract devotion, turned-into-oneself, and inwardness. Like the mythical Proteus, *yoga* was resisting being pinned down.

Yet this variety of terms was only the surface of a deeper set of shifts pertaining to the doctrines of Yoga themselves. Much in the way that

the image of India functioned as a kind of magic mirror for European scholars – reflecting whatever the spectator wished to see – the concept of Yoga often changed depending on who was interpreting it. Without access to all of the Sanskrit material we have today, scholars were forced to hazard hypotheses in the absence of evidence. Such was the case, as we have seen time and again, with the system of Yoga propounded by Patañjali in the *Yoga Sūtras*, which until the middle of the nineteenth century was accessible only second hand in the form of Colebrooke’s lectures. During this early stage of research, it was only natural to read Patañjali through the lens of the *Bhagavad Gītā* or other texts that belong more squarely within the schools of Haṭha, Vedānta, and Bhakti. It took many years before the old assumption that Yoga means “union with God” was called into question.

As long as this assumption was in circulation, worries about Indian nihilism were inevitable. As we saw in Chapter 2 and again in Chapter 3, the charge of nihilism against Yoga was multipronged, involving both an attack on the underlying metaphysics of texts like the *Gītā* as well as their recommended practices for attaining liberation (the “yogas” of action, knowledge, meditation, and devotion). Hegel was clearer about the problem, but his line of criticism was anticipated by Friedrich Schlegel: namely, that the Indian yogis of old were merely putting into practice ideas that had come to dominate European philosophy after Kant, making the yogis better pantheists than any modern philosopher. Schlegel and Hegel claimed that the doctrine of Yoga animating the *Gītā* posits self-annihilation as our highest end, because it reduces all things to Brahman, the abstract “Being of all beings.” All the various practices of yoga, they maintained, involve emptying the mind to the point that it becomes devoid of all content, like Brahman itself.

In this book I have foregrounded the work of Humboldt and Schelling because they each worked to absolve Indian philosophy of the charge of nihilism. Moreover, they did so in the context of clarifying what they took to be the true meaning of Yoga as a doctrine and yoga as the practical application of that doctrine. For Humboldt, nothing about the theory of divine immanence founded in the *Gītā* entails the denial of individuality, morality, or freedom, at least not when we distinguish between a simple form of “identity” pantheism and a more nuanced form of “dependence” pantheism. As we have seen, Schelling added a further (and much needed) qualification to this thesis, arguing that the way “all things depend on Brahman” is not necessary but is absolutely free. This is the key to his new formulation of pantheism in the *Freedom Essay*, in rejoinder to Schlegel, and it resurfaced decades later in Schelling’s discussion of the *Gītā*, according to which all things abide in God’s “creative glory.”

As the nineteenth century was coming to a close, it might have seemed that the works of scholars like Rājendralāla Mitra and Max Müller had finally paid off, and that Yoga, the “true Proteus,” had finally divulged its secrets. Due to their efforts, it became clear that classical Yoga doctrine admits of two distinct varieties: a religious version, which defines the essence of yoga as union with God, and a non-religious version, which defines the essence of yoga as soul liberation. Many other distinctions then seemed to acquire sharper focus. As Müller argued, following Mitra, the system of *rāja yoga* attributed to Patañjali is more about disunion than union: it concerns separating the essential Self (*puruṣa*) from its entanglement with nature (*prakṛti*), not elevating the soul to the awareness of its divine identity. With the benefit of original texts, scholars could then free the Yoga of Patañjali from its association with Indian theism and pantheism, and for a time it seemed as if order had prevailed.

In truth, it was more the case that puzzling issues had been neatly tucked away. The most puzzling issue of all was why Patañjali felt the need to include a religious element in his doctrine of Yoga. Why, that is, does he offer “devotion to *Īśvara*” as a possible path to higher meditation? What does he mean by *Īśvara*? And is this concept integral to the system expressed in the *Yoga Sūtras*? Having freed Patañjali’s doctrine from the religious contexts of Vedānta and Bhakti, late nineteenth-century scholars worked to redeem what was distinctive about his system as a method for attaining isolation, independence, and freedom. However, the pendulum soon moved in the direction of a non-religious interpretation, so much so that many writers began to claim that Patañjali added *Īśvara* to his system merely as a way of attracting religiously inclined followers. As a result, it was believed that the core of Patañjali’s ideas was not at all different from the non-religious school of Sāṃkhya.

When we turn to the works of Vivekananda and the Bengali philosophers of the early twentieth century (with a focus on Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya), a new principle of interpretation comes to light. Although they had their disagreements, they shared in common a desire to present Patañjali’s Yoga as a unified system within the larger family of Indian schools. The result, on the one hand, was a more sophisticated analysis of the *Yoga Sūtras* and their component parts, with an effort to understand how these parts express an interlinking theory of metaphysics and ethics. On the other hand, these thinkers wanted to grasp the unity of Patañjali’s Yoga, and they were not content to reduce his system to its elemental principles. Vivekananda, as we have seen, wanted to present the unity of Yoga that combined, in an overarching synthesis, the specific paths of action (*karma yoga*), meditation (*dhyana yoga*), knowledge (*jñāna yoga*), and devotion (*bhakti yoga*). Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and

Bhattacharyya, each in their own way, followed this approach in their more academically oriented work.

In comparing their scholarship to that of the Germans, it is striking to find a common theme behind the work of Schelling and Vivekananda. Schelling was working without any awareness of a doctrinal distinction between Patañjali's Yoga and the traditions of Vedānta and Bhakti, but he nonetheless attempted to defend the doctrine of divine immanence on the grounds that everything exists as a free expression of God – the same conclusion Vivekananda made in claiming that everything manifests itself as divine “play.” In this way, Schelling and Vivekananda were both upholding a unique form of dependence pantheism, according to which all things depend freely on God, such that nothing is fixed by necessity. As we saw in Chapter 4, this idea of divine play is central to Vivekananda's claim that the yogas of knowledge and devotion are equivalent, given that the terminus of knowledge (the view that for God nothing is necessary) parallels the terminus of devotion (the view that for God everything is playful). Schelling, I think, would have accepted this reading.

Moving into the early decades of the twentieth century, what we found animating the work of the Bengali academics was a method of working toward a view of Patañjali's Yoga as a system of philosophy and orientation to life. Their conviction was that it is only from the standpoint of such a synthesis that one can grasp the connection between philosophy and life, for it is then that all the parts of a doctrine (its claims, principles, and ideas) come together as a whole. The philosophy of Patañjali's Yoga, like any genuine system, aspires to offer a fundamental perspective – in action, knowledge, or devotion – that will illuminate the highest reality (the duality of soul and nature) as well as the highest good (the disjoining of the two). As we have seen, Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya share the view that any philosophy worthy of the name must speak to these two poles of inquiry – the real and the good – and offer insight into their unity. It will not suffice, in their judgment, to embark upon the business of interpreting a system without working toward a view of the whole to which the system aspires. As Bhattacharyya made clear, working toward such a view is how we can feel the life pulse of a philosophy as a recipe for the human soul.

This is why Bhattacharyya was such an advocate of sympathetic interpretation, as I have tried to show. Sympathetic interpretation does not repudiate the work of analysis, nor does it grant the method of analysis a sovereign role in the art of exposition. As far as Bhattacharyya is concerned, the decomposition of a system into its component parts has value only in the service of a higher end, namely, the recomposition of those parts into their complex totality. Because we often find ourselves in the unfortunate situation of working only with the fragments of a system,

as is the case with any ancient text, his point is that we must as interpreters bear the responsibility of filling in those missing links if we wish to catch sight of a text's integrity and intention. We must approach a system not only in the spirit of charity, then, trying our best to place its ideas in a favourable light, but also in a spirit of sympathy, trying to see ourselves and the world through the eyes of the system itself.

Vivekananda and the Bengali philosophers were among a larger number of Indian writers during the early twentieth century who approached classical Yoga philosophy in such a spirit. To varying degrees, they were disposed to find links between Patañjali's seemingly contradictory claims, as well as to build bridges between his system and other Indian schools of thought. They were also inclined to extend those bridges to the world of Western philosophy, and to open up new conversations between ancient India and modern Europe on topics of God, religion, faith, rationality, the self, freedom, and morality. In reading the works of Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, and Bhattacharyya, one is struck by their efforts to defend the value of India's intellectual traditions without disparaging Western schools along the way – an attitude we catch only fleeting glimpses of on the European side, in, say, the works of Humboldt or Schelling. It is not by accident, in my view, that the willingness of these Indian intellectuals to engage with Western traditions gave them a rare vantage point for understanding the history of philosophy in a cross-cultural context. It was from this vantage point, after all, that Patañjali's Yoga could finally appear as a unified system.

From a historical perspective, moreover, it is no accident that the problem of nihilism dominated discussions of Yoga philosophy and yoga practice throughout the nineteenth century. The terms "Yoga" and "yoga" had been associated early on with the pantheistic ideas of the *Gītā*, such that the debate for many decades concerned only whether the pantheism of Yoga was nihilistic or not. On the account I have provided in this book, however, it is significant that all of the Bengali philosophers who engaged with the system of Patañjali devoted much attention to the role of ethics, choice, and freedom in the *Yoga Sūtras*. As we have seen, the charge of moral nihilism that haunted the legacy of Indian thought outlived worries about pantheism, for even a dualistic system like Patañjali's faces the potential problem of making isolation of the self a kind of negation of the self. Nor did it help matters that Patañjali's account of duties to self and others had been ignored in the first European expositions of his system.

For these reasons I have proposed that Dasgupta's *A Study of Patañjali* was a landmark text in the field of Yoga scholarship, given the emphasis he placed on non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) as a first principle of Yoga ethics. Dasgupta also helped initiate a tradition of reading Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* as a unified doctrine, one that explains the root of suffering, the goal of

liberation, and the means for obtaining this liberation. For Dasgupta, a proper grasp of Patañjali's system shows why the charge of nihilism is out of place, no matter how we construe the object of annihilation. There is no ground to attribute metaphysical nihilism to Yoga, since Patañjali posits a fundamental dualism of principles, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, which commits him to a form of realism about finite individuals. Nor is there ground to attribute moral or practical nihilism to Yoga, since Patañjali posits "freedom" as the highest end of yogic practice, and on Dasgupta's reading all the basic precepts of Yoga (the *yamas* and *niyamas*) derive from this fundamental aspiration.

Thanks to Dasgupta's work, the door was open to taking the metaphysical and ethical principles of Patañjali's Yoga seriously, and in Chapter 5 we saw how Bhattacharyya's *Studies in Yoga Philosophy* brought this tradition of interpretation to new levels of sophistication. Building upon Dasgupta, Bhattacharyya maintained that Patañjali's system is unique for making the faculty of will both (1) the root of suffering (as our sustained misidentification of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*) and (2) the cause of liberation (as our transformative choice to "disjoin" the two). Thus, Bhattacharyya concluded that Patañjali's Yoga is a genuine system of freedom, in that it makes a volitional reorientation (and not a mere perfection of knowledge) a necessary condition for overcoming ignorance and attaining emancipation. We saw further how Bhattacharyya offered some suggestive remarks about how "God" serves as a Kantian postulate in Patañjali's system, insofar as it makes the reality of absolute freedom an item of faith or belief.

By the time we reach Bhattacharyya's account, one might feel that the Proteus of Yoga has finally been subdued. Extending the work of his predecessors, Bhattacharyya was able to offer a reading of Patañjali as a practitioner and philosopher, one whose central concept is the will and whose central principle for explaining both the real and the good is freedom. On Bhattacharyya's reconstruction, Patañjali's Yoga tells us how things came to be (by the association of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*), why we suffer (by our willing of that association), and how we can escape this problem (by choosing to separate the two). All the flashing images of Proteus that we have encountered in the foregoing chapters – yoga as action, as meditation, as knowledge, as devotion – come together in this account. Yet I think it would be more accurate to say that Bhattacharyya's aim was not to force Yoga into submission, but to let it speak in such a way that all of its shifting appearances can be true, relative to their place in the system. This at least is how he could approach Yoga, not as a dead system left to the archives of intellectual history, but as a form of life of "infinite interest to humanity."<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

- 1 August Schlegel, "Ueber die Bhagavad-Gita. Mit Bezug auf die Beurtheilung der Schlegelschen Ausgabe im Pariser Asiatischen Journal. Aus einem Briefe von Herrn Staatsminister von Humboldt." *Indische Bibliothek* 2 (1827): 218–258. For an English translation of this passage, see Helmut Gipper, "Understanding as a Process of Linguistic Approximation: The Discussion between August Wilhelm von Schlegel, S.A. Langlois, Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel on the Translation of the Bhagavadgita and the Concept of 'Yoga,'" in *Studies in the History of Western Linguistics*, ed. Theodora Bynon and F.R. Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 119.
- 2 Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Vedantism*, 6.



# Appendix: Images of India

## Voltaire and Herder

*I have in my hands the translation of one of the oldest manuscripts in the world.*  
Voltaire<sup>1</sup>

### Voltaire and the Vedas

By 1760, flocks of visitors were making pilgrimage to Ferney, just outside of Geneva, where they sought the company of François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire. In the autumn of that year, one Comte de Maudave arrived at Ferney on the recommendation of Jean la Rond d’Alembert, Voltaire’s friend and fellow polymath. Maudave was not the most distinguished of Voltaire’s guests, but he did come with a rare gift. Little is known of their encounter other than what Voltaire later reported in letters: that Maudave, in his capacity as governor of Karikal, had managed to earn the trust of a local Brahmin who worked for the Indian Company and was fluent in French. It was through this Brahmin that Maudave was able to secure what many European scholars had dreamed of possessing for over a century: an authentic commentary on the Vedas.

One can imagine Voltaire’s delight as the French officer revealed this text before his eyes, and the world would soon hear the tone of triumph in Voltaire’s words as he shared its contents to readers. For years Voltaire had speculated that a pure form of monotheism, and an equally pure form of morality, predated the Abrahamic traditions from which Christianity grew. With the text brought by Maudave, titled *Ezour Vedam*, he now possessed the proof. Prior to this, Voltaire’s attitude to India was one of mild reverence. In the first edition of his *Essai sur l’histoire universelle* (1754), for instance, he placed China at the beginning of his historical chronology, and the section on the “Indies” made only passing reference to Indian religion. “These Brahmins,” he wrote, “have in their hands one of the oldest

books in the world, written by their first sages, in which only one supreme being is recognized.”<sup>2</sup> In the 1757 edition Voltaire asked whether it is conceivable, “amidst so many extravagant opinions and bizarre ideas,” that the people of ancient India “recognized, like us, an infinitely perfect Being.” These ideas, he answered, “are contained in the Vedam [i.e., the Vedas], which is the book of the ancient Brahmins.”<sup>3</sup>

At this time, knowledge of the Vedas in Europe was entirely second hand. Reports of their existence had been making their way from India since the early sixteenth century, when Christian missionaries made contact with Brahmins in South Asia. In writing his “universal history,” Voltaire’s understanding of the world of India was mediated largely by travelogues and missionary reports. From these texts he could piece together the outlines of a religion committed to the existence of a single divinity. Lacking an original text, of course, he could go no further than hypothesize – that is, until the *Ezour Vedam* came into his possession.<sup>4</sup> In a letter dated February 24, 1761, we find Voltaire sharing his excitement over this discovery with the marquis d’Argence:

If you are curious about news of philosophy, I will tell you that an officer, commander of a small fort on the Coromandel coast, brought me the gospel of the ancient Brahmins from India; this is, I believe, the most curious and oldest book we have.<sup>5</sup>

Later that year he wrote a similar report to Jacob Vernes, saying that the *Ezour Vedam* is “assuredly very authentic.” It is “all the more ancient,” he stressed, “as it fights the beginnings of idolatry.”<sup>6</sup> The implications of this discovery were not lost on Voltaire; if anything, the *Ezour Vedam* confirmed his suspicion that the idolatry, superstition, and “fabulous mythology” of Indian religion were corruptions of an original, pure source.<sup>7</sup> By what right, then, could anyone claim that Hebrew monotheism was prototypical? While this question was never far from the surface of Voltaire’s engagement with India, his target was closer to home. By what right could the clergy of France claim authority for the Catholic church if its theological tenets were preceded by an older foundation? Having pushed back the chronology of universal history to India, Voltaire could declare that India has “the oldest form of religion,” one based on the idea of a “Supreme Being” (*l’Être suprême*), and one that was free of “superstition and fanaticism.”<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, the discovery of a commentary on the Vedas led Voltaire to write new sections for his *Essai*, the most striking of which was titled “The Brahmins, the Vedas, and the Ezour Vedam.” His language was nothing less than glowing. The first Brahmins were “peaceful

rulers,” their people “mild and discerning,” and their faith “simple and rational”:

It is so natural to believe in one God, to worship him, and to feel in the bottom of one’s heart that he must be just. ... It takes time to establish arbitrary laws, but a brief moment is all one needs to teach a number of people assembled to believe that there is a God, and to listen to the voice of their own hearts.<sup>9</sup>

Voltaire’s contemporaries would not have had any difficulty reading between the lines of such remarks. The religion of ancient India offered not only an example of a primordial monotheism, one that predated the writings of the Hebrew patriarchs: for Voltaire, the Vedas offered a foil for everything that was wrong with the clergy. Where the religion of the Brahmins was rational, the Catholic church was opposed to reason, and where the Brahmins taught a simple faith of the heart, the church issued multiple laws, rules, clauses, and subclauses, all of which betrayed the “natural” belief Voltaire found alive in all persons, the belief in “one God.”

My task here is to review this eighteenth-century debate about the chronology of human history, with the aim of providing a context for understanding the controversies that would later surround the reception of Indian philosophy. I will begin by exploring why Voltaire affirmed the antiquity of the Vedas in an effort to combat the Catholic church and its claims to authority in matters of religion. Then, in the remaining sections, I will turn to the work of Herder, whose relationship with India is often in tension with his conception of the Hebraic tradition. Contrary to his reputation as the “German father of Indomania,” Herder’s attitude toward India is more complex, and more ambivalent, than what scholars have supposed. As we shall see, Herder’s late appreciation of ancient Indian religion did not alter his long-standing philosophy of history, which left room for the kind of anti-Hindu attitudes that would guide thinkers in the nineteenth century.

### Voltaire’s Deism

The passages I have already quoted might give the impression that it was Voltaire’s discovery of a Vedic commentary alone that prompted him to see that monotheism and morality are not exclusive possessions of Christians or their Hebrew forebears. But the more we examine Voltaire’s writings, the more we see that his enthusiasm for India was mediated in part by a long-standing interest in what came to be termed *deism*, otherwise known as “natural religion,” according to which the basic tenets of religious faith are accessible through one’s use of reason alone. This interest was sparked

during Voltaire's years of exile in England from 1726 to 1728, when he had occasion to study some of the most influential deistic thinkers of the era. While they did not constitute a unified front against Christian orthodoxy, the English deists inspired Voltaire to reflect upon his own religious views, and he soon settled upon two deistic commitments himself.

The first of these commitments is that belief in a single God can be established by attending to the arrangement of the material universe, which in the early eighteenth century was often likened to a giant clock. In the same way that, after spending time reflecting on the inner mechanism and arrangement of parts in a clock, one can infer the existence of a clockmaker, so too, Voltaire argued, one can infer the existence of a single Creator behind the created universe, and no belief in miracles or revelations is required to feel the force of this inference. Many English writers argued further that natural religion grounds an equally natural morality, which came to inform Voltaire's second deistic commitment. In *Christianity as Old as Creation*, for example, we find Matthew Tindal making this connection:

By *Natural Religion*, I understand the Belief of the Existence of a God, and the Sense and Practice of those Duties which result from the Knowledge we, by our Reason, have of him and his Perfections, and of ourselves, and our own Imperfections; and of the relation we stand in to him and our Fellow-Creatures, so that the *Religion of Nature* takes in every thing that is founded on the Reason and Nature of things.<sup>10</sup>

Voltaire's heavily underlined copy of Tindal's book shows that he was impressed by such claims.<sup>11</sup> Not only does monotheism grow in the light of reason, but morality too has its source in "the nature of things"; in this respect morality is open to everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Voltaire joined Tindal and others in arguing that reflection is sufficient to establish a rational foundation for ethics and religion: "By natural religion," he writes, "I mean the moral principles common to humanity," all of which spring from a "law" known throughout the universe: "Do what you want people to do to you."<sup>12</sup> The person Voltaire would later define as the "true theist" is someone who says before God, "I adore and serve you"; this is the same person, he adds, who says "I love you" to the rest of humanity, including the "Turk, the Chinese, the Indian, and the Russian."<sup>13</sup>

On these grounds Voltaire staked his belief in God, and he could not understand why anyone would be content with the image of a created universe without a Creator. Nor could he see any reason for mediating faith through the structures of institutionalized religion, Christian or otherwise. For Voltaire, those structures at best confirm what reason can access on its own, making traditional religion unnecessary; or worse – and this was

his real cause for concern – they serve to keep people blind to the powers of reason, making traditional religion a threat. At the same time, the more Voltaire turned to the religion of ancient India as a foil for the present age, the more he had to separate the teachings of the Brahmins from their subsequent “corruptions.” There was no shortage of denigrating reports of Indian religion transmitted to Europe through the work of missionaries during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Indian polytheism being a recurring topic of criticism. But even before he came into possession of the *Ezour Vedam*, Voltaire had to be selective in choosing which teachings to foreground, guided by his own deistic views.<sup>14</sup>

If Voltaire’s eulogizing of India played a strategic role, it was never more transparent than in his tributes to the ancient Brahmins. “Isn’t it plausible,” he asks, “that the Brahmins were the first legislators of the earth, the first philosophers, the first theologians.”<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere he even speaks of the Brahmins’ morality as a system of “ten commandments”:

They are divided into three kinds: sins of the body, those of the word, those of the will. To strike, to kill one’s neighbour, to rob him, to rape women, these are the sins of the body; to conceal, to lie, to insult, these are the sins of the word; those of the will consist in wishing for evil, in looking at the good of others with envy, in not being touched by the miseries of others. These ten commandments make us forgive all their ridiculous rites.<sup>16</sup>

Turning an eye to the present, Voltaire adds: “We obviously see that morality is the same among all civilized nations, while the most consecrated customs among a people may appear to others as extravagant or hateful.”<sup>17</sup> To be sure, Voltaire did not go so far as to say that the ten commandments issued by the Hebrew God (as recorded in Exodus 20:2–6) bear any trace of Indian influence. But he had no need to make a claim of influence here: for the purposes of challenging the biblical chronology central to Christian orthodoxy, it was enough that he could cite a moral code older than anything found in the Books of Moses.

On Voltaire’s account, the emerging portrait of the ancient Brahmins made their moral code appear simple, reasonable, and universal – another foil for what he took to be the arbitrary laws of the Catholic clergy. The Indian ethical commandments were more evidence, for Voltaire, that traditional religion separates us through beliefs, doctrines, and rituals, and that true morality brings people together because it reflects what is common to our nature: “We cannot repeat too often that all dogmas are different, and that morality is the same among all human beings who make use of their reason.”<sup>18</sup> This is what inspired Voltaire’s growing appreciation of ancient India. The Brahmins confirmed his conviction that our common means of

accessing the truths of religion and morality is reason, not revelation. Of course, before 1760, all Voltaire could do was guess at the contents of this ancient religion based on second-hand reports. But with the *Ezour Vedam*, he now possessed (or so he believed) a “commentary” on the Vedas, the next best thing to the Vedas themselves.

### The Forgery

Since the day Voltaire announced the existence of this commentary, over two and a half centuries ago, the *Ezour Vedam* has been called many things: a “coarse forgery” (Müller), a “pious fraud” (Schlegel), a “notorious hoax” (Schwab), and a “poor compilation of Hindu and Christian doctrines mixed up together in the most childish way” (Figueira).<sup>19</sup> Still, it makes sense that someone seeking evidence of monotheism predating the Abrahamic traditions would have greeted the text with enthusiasm. And what may have inspired Voltaire’s particular attachment to this text was its attack on Indian polytheism, along with its claim that true faith is based on the unity of a supreme God.

What complicates matters is that it takes little effort to see the *Ezour Vedam* for what it is: a document written by a Jesuit missionary, either with the aim of converting Indians to Christianity or with the aim of educating new recruits to engage Brahmins in debate. How could Voltaire, the most famous man of letters in the French Enlightenment, fall prey to the illusion of the text’s authenticity? Whatever the cause, the irony has not escaped the attention of scholars. A text written by a Jesuit missionary was eventually turned into a forgery – under whose direction we do not know – and then, by a strange turn of events, made its way to the great *philosophe* François-Marie Arouet, in whose hands the *Ezour Vedam* became a weapon against the very institution behind its first author, the Catholic church.<sup>20</sup>

Even with the *Ezour Vedam*, however, Voltaire had to be selective in deciding which themes to foreground for his readers. The text consists of a dialogue between two characters, Biach and Chumantou. Biach, a religious leader, repents for having spread the teachings of polytheism, a “poisonous doctrine,” and decries the “soulless century” of India as a time of “universal corruption.” Turning to Chumantou, he makes a plea for help: “Be a leader for me, a father; save my soul; free me from error!”<sup>21</sup> Chumantou is willing to offer guidance, for he knows the true Vedas, which uphold a monotheistic God. Yet the tone he takes toward Biach is mostly reprimanding, and he shows no willingness to sympathize with Biach’s plight. Voltaire approved of Chumantou’s hard line against idolatry and his intolerance to superstition, and he cites these scenes of the dialogue as a way of placing the Vedas in a favourable light. On more than

one occasion Voltaire even calls attention to a section of the text where Chumantou recounts how God named the first man Adimo and the first woman Prokriti (evidently taken from the Sanskrit *prakṛti*, “materiality” or “nature”).<sup>22</sup>

If Voltaire ever had occasion to speculate that the Hebrews borrowed from the ancient Brahmins, it was never more tempting than in this counterfeited cosmogony. These first human beings bear an uncanny resemblance to Adam and Eve, and Voltaire enjoyed having his readers decide which pair came first in the course of human history. Yet Voltaire does not mention Chumantou’s diatribe on sin and the need for penance. He does not mention the punishment polytheists and idol worshippers can expect from God and the forgiveness they can hope to receive from Him if they abandon their errant ways. Nor do we hear of any element which makes the Brahmin priest sound like a Christian missionary hoping to save the Hindus (and there are many such elements in the book). All of these omissions from Voltaire’s presentation are revealing, if only because they show the extent to which Voltaire had to meet this Vedic commentary halfway. He put the attack on polytheism front and centre, as well as parts of Chumantou’s account of creation, leaving out the non-deistic themes that sustain much of the dialogue.

The fact that such themes did not shake Voltaire’s faith in the text’s authenticity goes to show how ignorant European writers were about the Vedas themselves. If Voltaire ever fell prey to moments of skepticism, they were never made public, nor were they put to the test by further study. He did take the opportunity to compare the contents of the *Ezour Vedam* with the latest works of British travellers from India, yet he detected enough similarity in their reports to trust the supposed Vedic commentary he possessed.<sup>23</sup> Voltaire himself had criticized previous scholars for writing universal history in the image of their own time, and he took pains to define his own philosophy of history as truly universal in scope.<sup>24</sup> The complaint would soon emerge, however, that Voltaire had done little to improve upon the methods of his predecessors, and that his “universal history” was more of a platform to stage his mixture of deism, classicism, and modern science.<sup>25</sup> For those who found this method lacking, Voltaire’s work was not the place to begin a study of human history. A *new* philosophy of history would have to be established, some believed, one that would make a genuine encounter with past cultures possible.

### Herder and the Hebrews

At last, my dear Hartknoch, I can answer you, because one of my books is finished – and a very lovely one too. It is called *Another Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* [*Auch eine Philosophie der*

*Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*]. ... Fortunately it has little in common with Voltaire ... , aside from the title. It is really my philosophy of history.<sup>26</sup>

So wrote Herder on August 10, 1773, during his time as head pastor in Bückeberg. At the age of twenty-nine, Herder had already distinguished himself through a number of writings, but this letter to Hartknoch shows the sense of anticipation he felt toward his first major work on history, which was published the following year in 1774.

Aside from the allusion to Voltaire's *Philosophie de l'histoire*, Herder's choice of title is revealing for a number of reasons. First, it signalled that his book belonged to a genre popularized by the French, one that aspired to cover the entire scope of human history across the world. It also signalled that the reader could expect something new (where "another" implies "an alternative"). Lastly, by calling attention to humanity's "education" or "formation" (*Bildung*), Herder was letting his audience know the stakes of the project. If we are able to approach history in the right way, and understand what path human beings had to traverse through the ages, then we can catch a glimpse of the path before us, that of a redemptive future. For this project to succeed, however, we need to avoid the mistakes made by previous writers – above all, in Herder's eyes, those made by Voltaire.<sup>27</sup>

Many writers come under attack in *Another Philosophy of History*, including Diderot, Hume, Helvétius, Montesquieu, Newton, and Winckelmann,<sup>28</sup> but there is no question that one of Herder's main adversaries was Voltaire. It becomes clear that Herder does not follow Voltaire in locating the centre of the "Orient" among the Brahmins of ancient India. *Another Philosophy of History* mentions "India" on just two occasions, both times in passing and without raising the question of India's chronological priority. This is surprising, all the more so given that Herder is credited for being the "German grandfather of Indomania,"<sup>29</sup> a view first defended by Paul Theodor Hoffmann over a century ago and adopted by most scholars since (including Willson, Taylor, Faust, and Herling).<sup>30</sup> During the years leading up to 1774, "Orient" in Herder referred to the "land of God" founded by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and "Hebraic" and "oriental" are synonymous terms in Herder's earlier writings.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to say that Herder was falling back on a biblical account of the origin of humanity. He was reaffirming it in subtle and increasingly clever ways. At the time, debates over universal history were in full swing, and Voltaire's work had triggered a predictable backlash from both members of the Church and scholars who wished to defend views of human history in line with the Abrahamic traditions. Herder was aware of a growing wave of scholarship from England that pointed to a South Asian origin of our cultural history, and the fact that this scholarship confirmed



the hypotheses of Voltaire must have been occasion for alarm. Yet Herder resisted making India the centre of his Orient, and this resistance continued to inform his thinking much longer than scholars have recognized.

Nowhere is this more evident than in his monumental yet unfinished *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, 1784–1791).<sup>32</sup> On first glance, it might seem that Herder's view of the Orient underwent a shift in this work, as the title of section 3 suggests: "The Course of Civilization and History Provides Historical Evidence that the Human Species Originated in Asia." Herder would even go on to characterize the "cosmologies of India" as the "voice of the primeval Asiatic world," asking: "What then if we were to follow this voice and ... endeavour to trace it to the original source?"

This is indeed a treacherous path, as if one were to pursue a rainbow or Echo's voice; for as little as a child is able to give an account of its birth, though present at it, as little may we hope that the human species may provide us with historically rigorous reports of its creation, of the earliest teachings, of the invention of language, and of its first habituation.<sup>33</sup>

Herder agrees that it would be an "estimable advantage to possess knowledge of the most ancient tradition of the old Hindu people."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, in this same passage he discourages hope of ever accessing these treasures:

We probably have long to wait for the original Sanskrit language as well as for the true Vedas of the Indians, and even then we can expect little of their most ancient tradition, as they themselves deem the first part of the Vedas to be lost.<sup>35</sup>

As Suzanne L. Marchand has shown, Herder found a way to reassert the primacy of the Abrahamic traditions while conceding the new chronology of human history advocated by Voltaire and others.<sup>36</sup> The solution he struck upon was to grant the *temporal* primacy of ancient India, as the birthplace of civilization, but then to affirm the *cultural* primacy of the Mosaic tradition, on the basis of surviving written artefacts. It was this distinction that allowed Herder to reframe the problem of universal history that Voltaire had set in motion. The search for the "origin of humankind" and the "beginning of history" was no longer a matter of chronology alone: what we needed, he argued, was an origin based on "*written sources*":

Thus, even in terms of history, there remains nothing for us upon the broad extent of the earth but the written tradition which we commonly

call the Mosaic. Laying aside all prejudice, and thus also without the slightest convictions as to its origin, we know that it is more than three thousand years old, and that it is indeed the oldest book possessed by our young species of humankind.<sup>37</sup>

This was effectively Herder's counterargument to Voltaire: all he had to do was appeal to the fact that, while nobody in Europe had yet laid eyes upon the oldest of Brahmanic works, the Books of Moses had been preserved and they were available to all. With such texts already on hand, why would anyone then wish to hazard the journey further East, where the trail of surviving texts recedes into a land of hearsay, fantasy, and fable?<sup>38</sup> Why, Herder asked, would anyone want to recollect the Indian *birthplace* of humanity when we have much better access to its Hebrew *childhood*?

### Herder's *Scattered Leaves*

As it happens, this line of argument soon turned against Herder. Just as he was completing the *Ideas*, in which he lamented our lack of access to Sanskrit originals, two significant – and authentic – books appeared in translation for the first time, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Śakuntalā*, both of which gave European scholars a new window to look into India's cultural past.<sup>39</sup> Voracious reader that he was, Herder approached these texts with genuine excitement, and for a period of time they seem to change his view of India for the better.

This change appears in the fourth volume of Herder's *Zerstreute Blätter*, or *Scattered Leaves*, a collection of essays, translations, and fragments that Herder published in 1792.<sup>40</sup> One of the main topics of discussion is the play *Śakuntalā* by the classical Indian dramatist Kālidāsa, translated into English by Sir William Jones as *Sacotalā: Or, The Fatal Ring* (1789) but traditionally known as *The Recognition of Śakuntalā* (*Abhijñāna-śakuntalā*). Georg Forster produced a German translation in 1791, which Herder and Goethe read that same year.<sup>41</sup> *Śakuntalā*, the central character of the play, whom Kālidāsa describes as “virtue in human form,”<sup>42</sup> moved German readers with her devotion and gracefulness. Herder was likewise impressed by the moral qualities of *Śakuntalā* and the play as a whole, but what made the 1792 volume of *Scattered Leaves* a ground-clearing text was the way Herder supported his commentary on the play with insights drawn from another Indian classic, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which had only just become available to European readers.<sup>43</sup>

We do not know when Herder came into possession of the *Gītā*, but he did include a small selection of translations (the first to appear in German<sup>44</sup>) just prior to his discussion of *Śakuntalā*. And it is revealing to see what selections he chose, for among all of the *Gītā*'s complexities,

both literary and conceptual, Herder spotlights portions that convey the idea of God as an *active* and *indwelling* principle of things (saying little about the two main speakers of the dialogue: Lord Kṛṣṇa and the Pandava prince Arjuna). He also explains the Indian doctrine of creation, preservation, and destruction, which he interprets as three expressions of a single “power” (*Kraft*).<sup>45</sup> Thus, the result is a picture of Indian philosophy very much committed to *pantheism*, the idea that “One is all, and All is one,”<sup>46</sup> but with a *vitalistic* twist, since all things are presented as dynamic forces expressing the “Being of beings.”<sup>47</sup> In short, Herder drew upon the two aspects of the *Gītā* he saw as representative of his own newly formulated system of metaphysics inspired by *Spinoza*.<sup>48</sup>

What similarities, then, did Herder find between Spinoza, who defended a controversial view of the God-nature relationship, and the *Gītā*? The answer takes us back a few years – to 1787 – when Herder wanted to reconcile Spinoza’s philosophy with his conception of nature as a system of forces.<sup>49</sup> As I argued in Chapter 1, the result was a fusion of theories that some have labelled “vitalistic pantheism,” the view that God exists in all things, not as a static substance but as a dynamic force. Herder was without question intrigued by the parallels he detected between this revised version of pantheism and the *Gītā*, so much so that he used nearly identical language in 1792 to describe the *Gītā*’s highest concept, that of Brahman. At one point he even defined Brahman as the indwelling divinity or “the Being of beings in everything,” of which “no thing is a part,” but instead “all things are in it.”<sup>50</sup>

Many of these reflections came to inform Herder’s treatment of *Śakuntalā*. The play revolves around Śakuntalā, daughter of the sage Vishwamitra, and Dushyanta, the king of Hastinapura. A chance encounter brings the two together in a forest, and upon meeting they fall in love. As a token of their love, Dushyanta gives Śakuntalā one of his rings, and the two young lovers plan to reunite back at the king’s palace. But misfortune befalls them twice: first, evil forces conspire to cloud Dushyanta’s mind, and all his memories of Śakuntalā become erased during his separate journey home; then Śakuntalā loses the one token of her connection to the king, the “fatal ring.” Upon her promised arrival to the palace, Dushyanta turns Śakuntalā away, having forgotten her, and she is then swept off to a divine grove. After a period of time, the ring is found and brought back to the king. The sight of it lifts the veil from his mind; he *remembers* Śakuntalā, now gone, and is torn by grief over his actions.<sup>51</sup> Yet the drama ends on a happy note: Dushyanta and Śakuntalā are reunited, their love restored to its original state.

Aside from his praise of *Śakuntalā* as expressing “sacred images” that serve as “recollections of divinity,”<sup>52</sup> Herder says little about the larger allegorical dimensions of Kālidāsa’s drama. Nor does he show signs of

having revisited his earlier chronology of human history after *Scattered Leaves* was published. Instead, his next major work ends with a call for the spread of universal humanism under the direction of Christian faith, echoing his earlier work in the 1770s.<sup>53</sup> This is surprising in light of what we have examined here, for if Herder's encounter with Sanskrit originals had in fact changed his assessment of India as a wellspring for European culture, one might expect him to have revised his philosophy of history accordingly. Yet in the texts he left behind, there is no sign that Herder ever broke with a view of human history that gives pride of place to the Abrahamic traditions.

### Concluding Remarks

During most of the 1770s, Herder did not want to view India as the childhood of humanity, and in the 1780s, appealing to our lack of access to Sanskrit texts, he was willing to call India the site of humanity's birthplace, with the caveat that we have no reason to hope for knowledge of its origin. *Śakuntalā* and the *Gītā* seem to have changed his mind, and one cannot deny that Herder's *tone* toward India altered dramatically in the 1790s. But even then, his enthusiasm for Indian thought stemmed largely from the fact that he perceived its metaphysics as a precursor to his own brand of pantheism, in a manner not unlike Voltaire, who saw Brahmanic religion as a precursor to his own brand of deism. The difference is that Voltaire committed himself to writing world history from a starting point in India, whereas Herder, up to the end of his life, maintained deep allegiances to a biblical chronology.

To be sure, Herder exposed a flaw in the methodology of the *philosophes*, who were happy to judge the past by the standards of the present. And his call for a new philosophy of history seems to have been both sincere and significant: sincere in that he showed every indication of wanting to encounter past times and other cultures on their own terms; and significant in that he displayed an attitude, missing at the time, of open-mindedness to non-European ways of thinking and living. Nevertheless, one is left with the impression that Herder's late "love" of India, for all its vibrancy, was of little substance. And that, I think, is one of the ways in which Herder's philosophy of history left room for Hegel's subsequent rejection of Indian thought – a point of influence brought home by the fact that Hegel openly borrowed Herder's notion of "pre-history." For these reasons one cannot help but conclude that Herder's new approach to human history, while an improvement on Voltaire's in theory, was a failure in practice. At the very least, Herder's reluctance to take Indian history seriously outlived the praise he bestowed on *Śakuntalā* and the *Gītā*.

As we revisit these encounters today, it should not be surprising to discover that what many European writers were most concerned with were theological issues. Critics of Indian religion found popular mythology, and thought they were encountering a crude polytheism, the belief in many gods. Voltaire got his hands on reports of the Vedas and thought he was encountering a pure deism, the belief in a single author of nature. Herder, having touched the *Gītā* in translation, thought he was encountering something more radical still: the view that divinity dwells within nature, a vitalistic pantheism. Given what we have learned, there is no question that Herder's image of India was the most influential, as the association he made between pantheism and Indian systems of thought came to dominate much scholarship into the nineteenth century. With the association of pantheism, as we have seen, the spectre of nihilism was not far off.

## Notes

- 1 Voltaire, *Additions l'essai sur l'Histoire générale* (Amsterdam: published by the author, 1764), 18. Translations are my own.
- 2 Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle*, vol. 1 (Basel: Walther, 1754), 22.
- 3 Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle*, vol. 3 (Paris: Cramer, 1757), 202.
- 4 For important studies of Voltaire's engagement with India, see Daniel S. Hawley, "L'Inde de Voltaire," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 120 (1975): 139–178; Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002); Jyoti Mohan, "La civilisation la plus antique: Voltaire's Images of India," *Journal of World History*, 16, no. 2 (2005): 173–185.
- 5 Voltaire, letter to the marquis d'Argence, February 24, 1761, in *Lettres*, vol. 52 of *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–1885), Letter #4474. Hereafter cited by letter number.
- 6 Voltaire, Letter #4096.
- 7 Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire universelle*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Cramer, 1761), 46.
- 8 Voltaire, *Supplement*, 13.
- 9 Voltaire, *Supplement*, 13–14.
- 10 Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation, or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London: W. Bickerton, 1730), 11.
- 11 This is explored in detail by Norman L. Torrey, *Voltaire and the English Deists* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930).
- 12 Voltaire, *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*, vol. 15 of *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland (Paris: Garnier, 1877–1885), 111, 112–113.
- 13 Voltaire, *Supplement*, 253.
- 14 For a good overview of the European reception of the Vedas, see Will Sweetman, "The Absent Vedas," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 139, no. 4 (2019): 781–803.
- 15 Voltaire, *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (Geneva: published by the author, 1774), 65.

- 16 Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire*, 124. Voltaire supplies no reference for these so-called Indian commandments, and I have been unable to find their source.
- 17 Voltaire, *La philosophie de l'histoire*, 124.
- 18 Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Geneva: published by the author, 1770), 60, s.v. "morale."
- 19 Max Müller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature so Far as It Illustrates the Primitive Religion of the Brahmans* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1859), 5; August Schlegel, "Ueber die in der Sanskrit [...]," *Indische Bibliothek* 2 (1827): 50; Raymond Schwab, *Vie d'Anquetil-Duperron* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1934), 97; Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmans*, 13. For a detailed exploration of this text, see Ludo Rocher, ed., *Ezourvedam: A French Veda of the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 1984).
- 20 Well before the *Ezour Vedam* caused its scandal among Europe's literati, Jesuit missionaries had already been busy in meeting their non-Christian colonies halfway: they were "accommodating" their customs, languages, and life ways, with the aim of revealing a flaw in their world that only the Christian path, they claimed, could overcome. The work of Roberto de Nobili was famous for illustrating a strong form of such accommodation. De Nobili, a seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary, lived in India for forty years. Among his various writings, he composed the *Dialogue on Eternal Life* (ca. 1610) in Tamil, translated into English by Anand Amaladass and Francis X. Clooney in *Preaching Wisdom to the Wise: Three Treatises by Roberto de Nobili, S.J., Missionary and Scholar in 17th Century India*, Jesuit Primary Sources in English Translation 19 (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000), 233–324. The dialogue involves two characters, a master (*guru*) and a disciple (*shishya*). De Nobili has the guru say:

What the Lord revealed to people with less maturity in knowledge can be called the "old Veda," while what he granted to those with full maturity in knowledge can be called "new Veda." But both were revealed by one and the same Lord, and there is no contradiction between them. Both are true. The difference between them is like the difference between the stages of childhood and old age, nothing more. This is why we said that the Lord taught the commandments in a manner which was appropriate to a world which for some time was like a child. Then, after he became human, the Almighty graciously taught the path of the highest righteousness to those who were longing for righteousness and who, like elders, were in possession of full maturity in knowledge.

(260)

By associating the Vedas with divine revelation for humanity in its childhood and the Christian Bible as divine revelation for humanity in its adulthood, de Nobili was applying a form of supersessionism (the view that Christianity replaced Hebrew religion) to an Indian context. For further discussion of de Nobili and Jesuit strategies of accommodation, see Jeffrey Muller, "The Jesuit Strategy of Accommodation," in *Jesuit Image Theory*, ed. Karl Enenkel (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 461–492; Andrés I. Prieto, "The Perils of Accommodation: Jesuit

- Missionary Strategies in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 4, no. 3 (2016): 395–414; and Francis X. Clooney, “Roberto de Nobili’s *Dialogue on Eternal Life* and an Early Jesuit Evaluation of Religion in South India,” in *Western Jesuit Scholars in India: Tracing Their Paths, Reassessing Their Goals* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 82–96.
- 21 These are my translations from *L’Ezour-Védam, ou L’ancien commentaire du Védam. Tome 1. contenant l’exposition des opinions religieuses et philosophiques des Indiens, traduit du samscretan par un Brame, revu et publié avec des observations préliminaires, des notes et des éclaircissements*, ed. Guillaume Sainte-Croix (Avignon: Yverdun, 1778), 179.
- 22 *Ezour Vedam*, 195.
- 23 See John Zephaniah Holwell, *Interesting Historical Events Relative to the Province of Bengal* (London: Becket & de Hondt, 1767), and Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (London: Becket & de Hondt, 1768). Both Holwell and Dow served in the British East India Company; for an informed discussion of their work, see Jessica Patterson, “Forging Indian Religion: East India Company Servants and the Construction of ‘Gentoo’/‘Hindoo’ Scripture in the 1760s,” *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 44, no. 1 (2021): 77–100. Herder too was familiar with these texts, as we learn in a letter he wrote to Heyne in early August 1772: “My previous question about the Indian religion from the Sanskrit language is, I find, answered in Holwell’s Part 2, which boasts of and praises India for having presented the oldest book”; in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe: Gesamtausgabe, 1763–1803*, ed. Karl-Heinz Hahn, vol. 3, 196. Holwell had claimed that ancient Indian religion was monotheistic, and argued, more strongly than Voltaire, that the Vedas are the oldest texts of any religious tradition.
- 24 Voltaire often made this criticism against Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet’s *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (Paris: Sébastien Mabre, 1681).
- 25 This view has been defended by Hawley, Halbfass, and Mohan. In general, it reflects what Peter Gay aptly calls Voltaire’s role as a “subversive anthropologist”; see Gay, *The Party of Humanity: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 84.
- 26 Johann Gottfried Herder, letter to Johann Friedrich Hartknoch, August 10, 1773, in *Briefe*, 3:35.
- 27 For helpful treatments of Herder’s historicism, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John Zammito, “Philosophy of History: The German Tradition from Herder to Marx,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century: 1790–1870*, eds. Allen W. Wood and Songsuk Susan Hahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 817–865; Kristin Gjesdal, *Herder’s Hermeneutics: History, Poetry, Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Michael Forster, *Herder’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Karl Ameriks, “History, Progress, and Autonomy: Kant, Herder, and After,” in *Kant and the Possibility of Progress: From Modern Hopes to Postmodern*

- Anxieties*, eds. Paul T. Wilford and Samuel A. Stoner, 137–152 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).
- 28 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 272–358.
- 29 Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 186.
- 30 See Amos Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1964); Ronald Taylor, “Herder, India, and the Ideals of European Culture,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 3, no. 1 (1967): 15–26; Ulrich Faust, *Mythologien und Religionen des Ostens bei Johann Gottfried Herder* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1977); Herling, *The German Gita*. The direction of Hoffman’s 1919 study was hinted at by Rudolf Heym, *Herder nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken dargestellt* (Berlin: R. Gaertner, 1885), 457. See also Paul Theodor Hoffman, “Der indische und der deutsche Geist von Herder bis zur Romantik” (PhD dissertation, University of Tübingen, 1919).
- 31 See, for example, Johann Gottfried Herder, “Von den deutsch-orientalischen Dichtern,” in *Ueber die neuere deutsche Litteratur*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Hartknoch, 1767), 207–229.
- 32 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* [*Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, 1784–1791], in *Johann Gottfried Herder on World History: An Anthology*, eds. Michael Palma et al. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015).
- 33 Herder, *Ideas*, 208.
- 34 Herder, *Ideas*, 209.
- 35 Herder, *Ideas*, 242. The chapter titled “India” remains surprisingly close to Voltaire’s presentation; see Herder, *Ideas*, 242.
- 36 See Suzanne L. Marchand, “Herder and the Problem of Near Eastern Chronology in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Journal of Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 47, no. 2 (2014): 157–175.
- 37 Herder, *Ideas*, 212.
- 38 Herder also identifies the Ganges as one of the four rivers mentioned in Genesis 2:10–14, making South Asia the geographical site of the Garden of Eden; see Herder, *Ideas*, 221.
- 39 Herder never mentions the *Ezour Vedam* in any of his published work. Pierre Sonnerat was one of the first European writers to question the text’s authenticity in his *Voyage aux Indes orientales*, a book Herder cited in *Ideas* and elsewhere; see Pierre Sonnerat, *Voyage aux Indes orientales et à la Chine, fait depuis 1774 jusqu’à 1781* (Paris: chez l’auteur, 1782). Herder’s doubts about the authenticity of *Ezour Vedam* surface in a letter he wrote on December 22, 1786; referring to the German edition, translated in 1779 by Johann Ith, he remarked that it is “no true original” (*kein wahres Original*). Nonetheless, Herder was likely inclined to be agnostic, as others were at the time, which would explain his choice to keep silent about the *Ezour Vedam* in his published work.



- 40 Johann Gottfried Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4 vols. (Gotha: Carl Wilhelm Ettinger, 1792).
- 41 William Jones, trans., *Sacontalá; Or, The Fatal Ring* (London: Edwards, 1789).
- 42 Jones, *Sacontalá*, 100.
- 43 Sir Charles Wilkins, a fellow member with Jones of the Royal Asiatic Society, translated the *Bhagavad-Gītā* from Sanskrit into Latin before finalizing his English version under the title *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon* (London: C. Nourse, 1785). Herder worked with both the English and German translations.
- 44 These translated excerpts of the *Gītā* appear in part 2 of the essay “Ueber Denkmale der Vorwelt” [“On the Monuments of the Prehistoric World”]; from the 1792 volume of *Scattered Leaves*], in which Herder translated *ślokas* 9.2, 9.4, 7.2, and 10.5 from Wilkins’s English version. Later in the same collection Herder added a collection of partially translated and paraphrased fragments from the *Gītā* in an essay titled “Gedanken einiger Brahmanen” [“Thoughts from Some Brahmins”]. A complete German translation did not appear until 1802, made by Herder’s student Friedrich Majer, whose translation of Wilkins’s edition appeared in the first and second volumes of the *Asiatisches Magazin*, edited by Heinrich Julius Klaproth. Interestingly, Majer added the following in his brief preface: “No attentive reader will miss how these roughly four thousand year old ideas and dreams of wisdom coming from the Far East—consisting of a highly peculiar combination of strange fables and abstract speculation—stand in a wonderful connection, though in completely different times and climates, with what Plato, Spinoza or Jacob Böhme believed” (406–407). For a discussion of the *Gītā*’s transnational migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Gerald James Larson, “The *Bhagavad Gītā* as Cross-Cultural Process: Toward an Analysis of the Social Locations of a Religious Text,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43, no. 4 (1975): 651–569; Catherine A. Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Mishka Sinha, “Corrigibility, Allegory, Universality: A History of the Gita’s Transnational Reception, 1785–1945,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2020): 297–317.
- 45 Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4:77. Note that “power” (*Kraft*) has a technical meaning in Herder’s vitalistic metaphysics; for further discussion, see Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, and Herling, *The German Gita*.
- 46 This phrase (*Eins ist Alles, und alles ist eins*) was commonly used during the 1780s and 1790s.
- 47 Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4:79.
- 48 Herling, *The German Gita*, has given the most extensive treatment of this connection in the literature, to which I am here indebted.
- 49 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *God: Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick H. Burkhardt (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940).
- 50 This is Herder’s gloss on *Gītā* 9.4: “All beings abide in Me / I do not abide in them.” Abstract as this may sound, this distinction made room for Herder to articulate a position that upholds the dependence of all created beings on Brahman, not as their causal ground, but as their metaphysical ground. Thus,

Herder was close on the trail of reading the *Gītā* in terms of what theologians would later call “panentheism.” As the additional prefix “en” indicates, panentheism is a hybrid position, combining the transcendence of God found in theism with the immanence of God found in pantheism. The term “panentheism” (*Panentheismus*) was coined in 1828 by Karl Christian Friedrich Krause, *Vorlesungen über das System der Philosophie* (Göttingen: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1828).

- 51 See *Śakuntalā*, 121: “Was it sleep that impaired my memory? Was it delusion? Was it an error of my judgment? Or was it the destined reward of my bad actions? Whatever it was, I am sensible that, until Śakuntalā return to these arms, I shall be plunged in the abyss of affliction.”
- 52 Herder, *Zerstreute Blätter*, 4:80.
- 53 See, for example, Herder’s *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* [*Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 1791–1797], in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See Letter 24, in particular.

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# Index

*Note:* Endnotes are indicated by the page number followed by ‘n’ and the endnote number e.g., 20n1 refers to endnote 1 on page 20.

- Adluri, Vishwa 34n37  
*ahimsā* (non-violence) 5, 7, 118, 119, 131n14, 137; *see also* Dasgupta, Surendranath; Phillips; yoga, Patañjali
- Alter, Joseph S. 9n1
- Amaladass, Anand 153n20
- ātman* (self) *see puruṣa*
- Ameriks, Karl 154n27
- Anstett, Jean-Jacques 10n10
- App, Urs 155n27
- Arjuna *see Bhagavad Gītā*
- Aurobindo, Sri 111n55
- avidyā* (ignorance, self-deception) 115–17, 123; *see also* Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; freedom, *mokṣa*; *kaivalya*; suffering; Mitra
- Bagchee, Joydeep 34n37
- Baier, Karl 8n1, 9n4, 83n44
- Ballantyne, James Robert 93, 110n16; *see also* yoga, translation of
- Bayle, Pierre 9n2, 14; *see also* nihilism
- Becker-Cantarino, Barbara 32n16
- Behler, Ernst 9n3, 30n1
- Beiser, Frederick 31n2, 154n27, 154n45, 156n45
- Beißner, Friedrich 32n12
- Bernasconi, Robert 53n19, 79n4
- Bernstein, Jay 31n6
- Bhagavad Gītā*: fatalism and 47–9; freedom and 47–51, 62–4, 66, 74–7 (*see also Bhagavad Gītā*, freedom; pantheism, freedom; Humboldt); Hegel’s interpretation of 56, 57, 61–5; Herder and 3, 149–52 (*see also* pantheism, vitalistic); Humboldt’s interpretation of 2, 41–50 (*see also* freedom, morality and; Humboldt; pantheism, identity *vs.* dependence); morality and 43, 47–51, 55, 63, 64, 73, 74, 134 (*see also* ethics, *Bhagavad Gītā*); pantheism and 2, 45–7, 74–7 (*see also* freedom, pantheism; Humboldt; Schelling, Friedrich); Schelling, Friedrich’s interpretation of 72–7; yoga, Patañjali and 42, 93, 95, 96, 98, 107, 117, 129, 134 (*see also* Bhattacharya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; Mitra)
- Bhattacharyya, Gopinath 132n22, 132n23
- Bhattacharyya, Krishna Chandra: interpretative sympathy and 129–31, 136, 137; *Īśvara* and 125–8 (*see also* God); *mokṣa* (liberation) and 124, 126 (*see also* freedom, *mokṣa*; *kaivalya*; suffering); Sāṃkhya *vs.* Patañjali’s Yoga and 123; spiritual willing and 123–5, 127, 128; *Studies in Yoga Philosophy* and 122–9; super-religious devotion and 127, 128; sympathetic construction and 129

- Bhushan, Nalini 131n2  
 Bielby, Claire 32n16  
 blue flower 69, 82n38; *see also* lotus flower; Novalis; symbolism  
 Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne 154n24  
 Bowman, Brady 53n33  
 Brahma 47, 53n27, 60, 92; *see also* Brahman  
 Brahman 4, 6, 7, 45, 49, 53n27, 55, 62–5, 75, 76, 83n50, 87, 95, 99, 100, 103, 108, 111n55, 134, 150, 156n50; *see also* Brahma; God; *Īsvara*  
 Breazeale, Daniel 31n9, 31n10  
 Brown, Robert F. 80n11  
 Bryant, Edwin E. 52n10, 111n49  
 Buchheim, Thomas 81n33  
 Buddhism 4, 26, 38, 97, 116, 119; *see also* Indian philosophy; Jainism  
 Burkhardt, Frederick H. 156n49  
 Burley, Mikel 9n1, 131n7  
 Bynon, Theodora 54n36, 139n1  
 Byrne, Jean 9n1  
  
 Cardew, Alan 80n11  
 Carpenter, David 9n1  
 Chapple, Christopher Key 9n1, 33n21  
 Christian religion 17, 18, 29, 55, 57–8, 60–1, 72, 91; Catholicism 5, 16, 24, 29, 58, 141–5 (*see also* Hegel; Schlegel, Friedrich; Voltaire); missionaries and 141, 144, 145. 153n20 (*see also* de Nobili; Voltaire); Protestantism and 56, 58 (*see also* Hegel; Schlegel, Friedrich); the trinity and 60, 61, 80n18 (*see also* Creuzer; Hegel)  
 Clooney, Francis X. 153n20  
 Colebrooke, Henry Thomas:  
   Humboldt and 42, 43, 49–51;  
   *Sāṃkhya* and 3, 38–41, 66, 79n4, 94; Yoga, Patañjali and 3, 38–41, 44, 49–51, 66, 94, 96, 117, 134  
 Cousin, Victor 98, 110n30  
 Cowan, Robert Bruce 32n15  
 Creuzer, George Friedrich: Günderröde and 19, 21–3; Hegel and 59–61; Indian philosophy and 59, 60; symbolism and 59–61, 72, 80n11 (*see also* mythology; Schelling, Friedrich)  
 Cross, David xviii n2  
 Curley, Edward M. 82n42  
  
 Dasgupta, Surama 131n4  
 Dasgupta, Surendranath: *avidyā* (ignorance) and 115, 116; ethics of yoga and 117–19, 137; *History of Indian Philosophy* 113; *Sāṃkhya vs. Patañjali* and 114–16; *A Study of Patañjali* 5, 113, 137; willing and Patañjali yoga 113, 114, 117–19  
 Datta, Narendranath *see* Vivekananda  
 Daub, Karl 77n2  
 De Nobili, Roberto 153n20  
 deism *see* Voltaire, deism  
 Della Rocca, Michael 31n2  
 De Michelis, Elizabeth 9n1  
 di Giovanni, George 31n2, 33n30  
 Dow, Alexander 154n23  
 Duquette, David 53n19  
  
 early German Romanticism (*Frühromantiker*) 15–18, 22, 23, 28–30, 31n6, 56, 69; *see also* Herder; Hölderlin; mythology; Novalis; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich  
 Easwaran, Eknath 111n51  
 Eckhart, Meister 91, 100; *see also* Müller, Max  
 Eichner, Hans 10n6, 31n7, 32n13  
 Eldridge, Richard 31n6  
 Emery, Gilles 81n18  
 Engels, Friedrich 88, 89  
 Enlightenment: age of 13, 14, 16, 17, 25, 28, 155n36 (*see also* Kant); French 145, 154n25 (*see also* Voltaire)  
 equanimity 4, 43, 73–5, 118, 133; *see also* Dasgupta, Surendranath; Schelling, Friedrich, Indian philosophy; yoga, translation of ethics: *ahimsā* (non-violence) and 5, 7, 118, 119, 131n14, 137 (*see also* Dasgupta, Surendranath); *Bhagavad Gīta* and 43, 47–51, 55, 63, 64, 73, 74, 134 (*see also* *Bhagavad Gīta*, morality; Humboldt); freedom and 48, 51, 55, 63, 64, 66, 68, 70, 117–19, 122, 134, 138 (*see also* *Bhagavad Gīta*; nihilism; pantheism);



- puruṣa* (essential Self) and 115–20 (see also Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; freedom, *puruṣa*; Radhakrishnan); yoga, Patañjali and 41, 66, 116–22, 124–6, 137 (see also *niyamas*; *yamas*)
- evil: beyond good and 120–2 (see also Radhakrishnan); pantheism and 27, 28, 68, 70
- Ezekiel, Anna C. 32n16
- Ezour Vedam 141–6; see also *Vedas*; Voltaire
- fatalism 47–9, 76; see also *Bhagavad Gītā*; Jacobi; nihilism; pantheism; Schlegel, Friedrich
- Faust, Ulrich 155n30
- Feuerstein, Georg 9n1, 52n11
- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb 16–18, 25, 26, 69, 119, 131n10
- Figueira, Dorothy M. 32n16, 81n34, 152n4
- Flood, Gavin 131n6
- Forster, George 19, 69, 82n37, 149; see also blue flower; lotus flower; *Sakuntalā*
- Forster, Michael 82n40, 154n27, 157n53
- Foxen Anya 8n1
- Franco, Eli, xviii n3
- Franks, Paul W. 53n33
- freedom: *Bhagavad Gītā* and 37, 47–51, 55, 62–6, 74–7, 117, 134 (see also Humboldt; nihilism; pantheism; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich; Spinoza); Bhattacharya, Krishna and 122–9; Fichte and 16, 17; *mokṣa* (liberation) and 77, 92, 95, 96, 123, 124, 117 (see also *kaivalya*); morality and 48, 51, 55, 63, 64, 66, 68, 70, 117–19, 122, 134, 138 (see also *Bhagavad Gītā*; Bhattacharya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; ethics, yoga; Humboldt); *prakṛti* (material reality) and 47–9, 74, 97, 114, 117, 122, 125, 126, 128, 135, 138; *puruṣa* (essential self) and 8, 49, 99, 115, 119, 123, 127, 128, 135, 138; the will and 114, 123–8 (see also Bhattacharya, Krishna); yoga, Patañjali and 5, 7, 8, 74, 93, 97, 99, 112–15, 117–29, 135, 137, 138 (see also Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; Müller, Max; nihilism; pantheism; Vivekananda)
- French revolution 16; see also early German Romanticism; Fichte; Schlegel, Friedrich
- Ganeri, Jonardon 10n12, 132n345
- Garfield, Jay L. 131n2
- Garnett, Constance 110n27
- Gay, Peter 154n25
- Gentz, Friedrich von 53n20, 62, 66, 67, 81n22, 81n31; see also Humboldt
- Germana, Nicholas A. 80n10, 81n34
- Gipper, Helmut 54n36, 139n1
- Gītā* see *Bhagavad Gītā*
- Gjesdal, Kristen 32n16, 154n27
- God: Christianity and 17, 91, 101; *Īśvara* relation to and difference from 94–6, 99, 103, 104, 106, 125–7; nature and 2, 6, 7, 15, 21, 22, 71; pantheism and 1, 2, 14, 21, 22, 25, 26, 31n2, 60, 76, 77, 87, 91; union with 4, 5, 44, 91, 93–6, 98–103, 105, 106, 129, 134, 135
- Goethe, Wolfgang von 13, 15, 16, 149; see also early German Romanticism; Herder; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich; Spinoza
- Goldberg, Ellen 9n1
- Gottlieb, Gabriel 32n10
- Gregor, Mary 132n30
- guṇas* (material powers) 47, 49, 73; see also *prakṛti*
- Günderrode, Karoline von 3, 19–23, 32n16; see also Creuzer; early German Romanticism; nihilism; Schelling, Friedrich
- Guyer, Paul 132n37
- Hahn, Karl-Heinz 31n5
- Hahn, Songsuk Susan 154n27
- Halbfass, Wilhelm 9n4, 52n7, 154n25
- Haldane, Elizabeth Sanderson 78–79n4
- Handwerk, Gary 32n15

- Hanse, Frank-Peter 32n11  
 Hardenberg, Friedrich von *see*  
 Novalis  
 Hartknoch, Johann Friedrich 146,  
 147, 154n26  
*Haṭhāpradīpikā*, 92; *see also* Pal; yoga  
 as doctrine, *rāja*  
 Hawley, Daniel S. 152n4, 154n25  
 Hegel, G. W. F.: *abstrakte Andacht*  
 (abstract devotion) 65, 72, 133;  
*see also* yoga, translation of;  
*Bhagavad Gītā* and 3, 58, 61–6;  
 Catholicism and 58, 59; Christian  
 Teutonic history and 57–61;  
 Colebrooke and 66, 67, 77n4;  
 Friedrich Schlegel and 58, 59;  
 Humboldt and 56–8, 61–3, 66, 67,  
 73, 77n3; Indian history and 59–61,  
 67, 120, 121, 151; Yoga and 64–6,  
 96, 109, 120, 134  
 Hegel, Karl 77n2  
*Heinrich von Ofterdingen* 82n38;  
*see also* blue flower; Novalis  
 Henderson, Jeffrey 33n36  
 Herder, Johann Gottfried: Abrahamic  
 tradition and 29, 142, 147–9,  
 151; *Auch eine Philosophie*  
*der Geschichte zur Bildung der*  
*Menschheit (Another Philosophy*  
*of History for the Formation*  
*of Humanity)* 146–9; *Gott:*  
*Einige Gespräche (God: Some*  
*Conversations)* 14; *Ideen zur*  
*Philosophie der Geschichte der*  
*Menschheit (Ideas for the Philosophy*  
*of the History of Humanity)* 148–9;  
 Indian philosophy and 3, 30, 69,  
 149–52, 156n50; mythology and  
 17; the Orient and 79n7, 147,  
 148; Spinoza and 13–15, 19, 150;  
 vitalistic pantheism and 15, 22,  
 70, 71, 150; *Zerstreute Blätter*  
*(Scattered Letters)* 149, 150  
 Herling, Bradley L. 9n4, 54n37, 79n4,  
 81n28, 147, 155n30, 156n45  
 Heym, Rudolph 155n30  
 Hinduism 20, 22, 58, 60, 61, 64, 113,  
 120, 121, 145  
 Hodgson, Peter C. 80n17, 81n27  
 Hoffmann, Paul Theodor 147, 155n30;  
*see also* Herder  
 Hölderlin, Friedrich 17, 56; *see also*  
 early German Romanticism  
 Holwell, John Zephaniah 154n23  
 Hübner, Karoline 54n33  
 Hulin, Michel 10n7  
 Humboldt, Wilhelm von: absorption  
 and 50, 51 (*see also* yoga, translation  
 of); *Bhagavad Gītā* and 2, 42–50,  
 55, 117 (*see also* *Bhagavad Gītā*);  
 Colebrooke and 42, 43, 49–5; Hegel  
 and 56–8, 61–3, 66, 67, 73, 77n3;  
 pantheism and 44–7 (*see also* Indian  
 philosophy, nihilism; pantheism,  
 identity *vs.* dependence)  
 Hume, David 125, 147  
 Ignorance *see avidyā*  
 Indian philosophy: Asceticism and 25,  
 26, 40, 51, 65, 94, 131n6 (*see also*  
 Hegel; Schlegel, Friedrich);  
*Bhagavad Gītā* 2, 7, 8, 37, 41–51,  
 55, 56, 58, 61–7, 72, 73, 75–7, 95,  
 96, 98, 107, 117, 129, 134, 137,  
 149–52; *darśanas* of 3, 4, 38, 39  
 (*see also* Colebrooke); God and 28,  
 29, 34n39, 36, 37, 39, 40, 42, 44–9,  
 51, 60–9, 75, 77, 94–6, 99, 103,  
 104, 106, 108, 125–7, 138 (*see also*  
 God, *Īśvara*); *Haṭhāpradīpikā* 92  
 (*see also* Pal); liberation and 4, 5,  
 37, 38–41, 48, 65, 77, 87, 88, 92,  
 95–7, 101, 102, 105, 106, 109,  
 113, 115–17, 119, 122–5, 128,  
 128, 131n6, 134, 135, 138 (*see also*  
 freedom, *mokṣa*; *kaivalya*; suffering);  
 nihilism and 3, 5–7, 26, 27–30,  
 36–7, 41, 44–50, 55, 65, 96–101,  
 109, 121, 128, 129, 134, 137,  
 138, 152 (*see also* *Bhagavad Gītā*;  
 Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta,  
 Surendranath; Hegel; Humboldt;  
 Mitra; Müller, Max; Radhakrishnan;  
 Schlegel, Friedrich); renaissance of  
 112, 131n2; *Sakuntalā* and 19, 21,  
 33n18, 35, 68, 69, 82n38, 129, 149,  
 150, 151, 157n51; *Sāṃkhya* and 4,  
 37–42, 51, 52n8, 66, 77, 88, 93–8,  
 101, 103–5, 113–16, 120, 123, 128,  
 129, 131n6, 135  
*Innigkeit* (inwardness) *see* Schelling,  
 Friedrich; yoga, translation of

- Īśvara* 37, 39, 49, 94, 94–6, 99, 103–7, 125–8, 132n32, 135; *see also* Brahman; God; puruṣa; yoga, Patañjali
- Ith, Johann 155n39
- Jacobi, Friedrich 14, 15, 25, 26, 31n2, 70, 96; *see also* nihilism; pantheism; Schlegel, Friedrich; Spinoza
- Jacobsen, Knut A. 9
- Jain, Andrea R. 8n1
- Jainism 4, 38, 119; *see also* Indian philosophy; Buddhism
- Jamme, Christoph 32n11
- Jena Romanticism *see* early German Romanticism
- Jones, William 19, 33n18, 38, 51n2, 82n39, 149, 156n43; *see also* *Sakuntalā*
- kaivalya* (liberation) 8, 92, 95–8, 117, 119, 123, 124; *see also* Dasgupta, Surendranath; freedom, *mokṣa*; Indian philosophy, liberation; Mitra; Vivekananda
- Kālidāsa *see* *Sakuntalā*
- Kant, Immanuel 16, 17, 64, 73, 126, 127, 132n30, 132n37, 138; *see also* Bhattacharyya, Krishna; enlightenment; Fichte; Herder
- Kapila *see* *Sāṃkhya*
- Kaṭha Upaniṣad* *see* *Upaniṣads*
- Kierkegaard, Søren 88
- Klaproth, Heinrich Julius 156n44
- Kleingeld, Pauline 34n41
- Kluckhohn, Paul 82n38
- Knox, T. M. 80n13
- Kompridis, Nikolas 31n6
- Krause, Karl Christian Friedrich 157n50; *see also* pantheism
- Kreines, James 53n33
- Ṛṣṇa *see* *Bhagavad Gītā*
- Kuberry, Christa 8n1
- Langlois, S. A. 50, 54n36, 54n37, 65, 139n1; *see also* yoga, the translation of
- Larson, Gerald James 156n44
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 13, 14, 16, 31n2; *see also* Jacobi; nihilism; pantheism; Spinoza
- Leuba, James E. 121, 132n19
- Levering, Matthew 81n18
- Liberation *see* freedom, *mokṣa*, *kaivalya*
- Lord, Beth 31n4
- lotus flower 55, 69, 74, 82n38, 83n50; *see also* blue flower; early German Romanticism; Herder; Humboldt; Novalis; *Sakuntalā*; Schelling, Friedrich; symbolism
- Maas, A. 8n1
- Macfie, A. L. 33n37
- Majer, Friedrich 156n44
- Mallinson, James 9
- Marchand, Suzanne L. 33n37, 34n40, 148, 155n36
- Marchignoli, Saverio 10n7
- Mariña, Jacqueline 33n34
- materialism 13, 14, 17, 37, 49; *see also* pantheism; Schlegel, Friedrich; Spinoza
- Maudave, Comte de 140; *see also* Voltaire; *Vedas*
- McGetchin, Douglas T. 10n7, 32n15, 33n37, 79n8
- Medhananda, Swami 111n46
- Melamed, Yitzhak Y. 52n33
- Mensch, Jennifer 31n4
- Menze, Clemens 10n7
- Michel, Karl Marcus 10n11, 81n19, 81n21
- Millán Brusslan, Elizabeth 31n6, 33n34
- Mitra, Rājendralāla: *Īśvara* and 94–6, 99 (*see also* God); *kaivalya* (isolation, liberation) and 97, 98 (*see also* freedom, *mokṣa*; Indian philosophy, liberation); Patañjali yoga and 93–6, 99 (*see also* Müller, Max; Pal; *Yoga Sūtras*, *Sāṃkhya*); *Yoga Aphorisms of Patañjali* and 93
- Mohan, Jyoti 152n4, 154n25
- Mohapatra, Rimina 77n4
- mokṣa*, *see* *kaivalya*, freedom
- Moland, Louis 152n5
- Moldenhauer, Eva 10n11, 81n19, 81n21
- Moore, Thomas 82n39
- Morgenthaler, Walter 32n19
- Müller, Georgina Adelaide 109n2

- Müller, Max: Christianity and 90, 91, 100, 101 (*see also* Eckhart, Meister); *Īśvara* and 99 (*see also* Mitra); nihilism and 96–9 (*see also* nihilism, metaphysical); Schelling and 88, 89; *Upaniṣads* and 88–90, 100 (*see also* yoga as doctrine, Advaita Vedānta); yoga, Patañjali and 98, 99
- Murty, Satchidananda K. 131n16
- mythology: early German Romanticism and 17, 18, 23, 24, 28, 29, 32n11, 56 (*see also*; blue flower; early German Romanticism; Schlegel, Friedrich; Schelling, Friedrich; Hölderlin); Indian philosophy and 19, 59, 68, 71, 72, 76, 82n44, 89, 133 (*see also* Creuzer; lotus flower; Müller, Max; Schelling, Friedrich)
- Nassar, Dalia 32n16
- natural morality 143, 144; *see also* early German Romanticism; Voltaire
- natural religion 16, 17, 142, 143; *see also* deism; early German Romanticism; Tindal; Voltaire
- new mythology *see* mythology, early German Romanticism
- new religion *see* mythology, early German Romanticism
- Ng, Karen 32n16
- nihilism: Indian philosophy and 3, 5–7, 26, 27–30, 36–7, 41, 44–50, 55, 65, 96–101, 109, 121, 128, 129, 134, 137, 138, 152 (*see also* *Bhagavad Gītā*; Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; Hegel; Humboldt; Mitra; Müller, Max; Radhakrishnan; Schlegel, Friedrich); metaphysical 6, 15, 16, 27, 45, 96, 128, 138; moral 6, 7, 15, 28, 41, 45, 48, 50, 55, 64, 66, 70, 96, 121, 134, 137, 138 (*see also* Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; Hegel; freedom; Schlegel, Friedrich; Vivekananda); practical 6, 27, 45, 128, 138; relationship between pantheism and 14, 21, 22, 25, 26, 36, 37, 53n33, 70–1 (*see also* Jacobi; pantheism; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich; Spinoza)
- Nikhilananda, Sawmi 80n15
- nirodhaḥ* (cessation) 124, 125; *see also* Bhattacharyya, Krishna; freedom *niyamas* (self-regarding duties) 41, 51, 66, 92, 117, 118, 138; *see also* ethics, yoga; *yamas*; yoga, Patañjali
- Novalis 17, 23, 34n41, 82n38
- O'Brien-Kop, Karen 8n1
- O'Regan, Cyril 80n18
- Ostarcic, Lara 82n43
- Orient: oriental renaissance 5, 24, 28, 58, 68 (*see also* Herder; Humboldt; Schlegel); orientalism 32n15, 33n37, 59, 81n34, 82n44, 155n29 (*see also* Said; Schlegel, Friedrich); scholarship of the 8n1, 10n7, 79n8
- Pal, Navina Chandra 91–4; *see also* yoga as doctrine, *rāja*; yoga as practice, *haṭha*; yoga, translation of
- Palma, Michael 155n32
- Palmer, F. R. 54n36, 139n1
- pantheism: controversy 2, 14–16, 25, 26, 30n2, 53n33, 87 (*see also* Herder; Jacobi; Lessing; nihilism; Schelling, Friedrich; Spinoza); identity *vs.* dependence 7, 46, 47, 49, 62, 69, 71, 76, 134, 136, 156n50 (*see also* Herder; Humboldt; Schelling, Friedrich); Indian philosophy and 2, 7, 21–3, 26–30, 36, 37, 45–9, 68–70, 75, 76, 87, 96–9, 134, 136, 137, 150–2, 156n50 (*see also* Hegel; Herder; Humboldt; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich); morality and 6, 7, 13, 15, 27, 28, 45, 48, 50, 51, 55, 68, 70, 71, 137 (*see also* nihilism); panentheism 156n50 (*see also* Herder); relationship between nihilism and 14, 21, 22, 25, 26, 36, 37, 53n33, 70–1 (*see also* Jacobi; pantheism; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich; Spinoza); vitalistic 14, 15, 19, 22, 30, 31n4, 70, 71, 150, 152; 156n45 (*see also* Herder)
- Park, Peter K. J. 10n7, 32n15, 79n8
- Parkinson, G. H. R. 53n33
- Patañjali *see* yoga

- Patterson, Jessica 154n23  
 Phillips, Stephen 9n1, 111n49, 131n14  
 Pinkard, Terry 82n43  
 Plutarch 26, 33n36  
 Pollock, Sheldon 33n37  
 Post-Kantian tradition 1, 24, 89, 120;  
*see also* Bhattacharyya, Krishna;  
 Herder; Fichte; Schelling, Friedrich;  
 Schlegel, Friedrich; Jacobi; Kant;  
 Radhakrishnan  
*prakṛti* (material reality) 8, 38, 39,  
 47–9, 73, 74, 95, 97, 98, 104, 114,  
 117, 122, 125, 126, 135, 138;  
*see also* freedom, *mokṣa*; liberation;  
*puruṣa*; *Sāṃkhya*; yoga, Patañjali  
 prehistory 6, 57, 61, 72, 79n7; *see also*  
 Hegel; Herder  
 Preisendanz, Karin 8n1  
 Proteus 35, 50, 134, 135, 138; *see also*  
 Schlegel, August Wilhelm; yoga,  
 translation of  
*puruṣa* (essential Self) 8, 38–9, 44, 49,  
 75, 95, 97–9, 104–6, 114, 115, 119,  
 123, 127, 128, 135, 138; *see also*  
 freedom, *mokṣa*; liberation; *prakṛti*;  
*Sāṃkhya*; yoga, Patañjali
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli: evil and  
 122; Hegel and 120, 121; Yoga  
 ethics and 121, 122, 124  
 Raisbeck, Joanna 32n16  
 Ranganathan, Shyam 9n1, 111n50,  
 131n10  
 Rathore, Aakash Singh 77n4  
 Ratzlaff, Sarah 111n56, 132n33  
*Rezeptionsgeschichte* (reception  
 history) xiv  
 Richards, Anna 32n16  
 Robinson, Catherine A. 156n44  
 Rocher, Ludeo 153n19  
 Romanticism *see* early German  
 Romanticism  
 Rush, Fred 82n43
- Said, Edward 33n37; *see also*  
 orientalism  
*Sakuntalā*: Bhattacharyya, Krishna  
 on 129; Colebrooke on 38–41;  
 Günderröde on 19, 21 (*see also*  
 Indian philosophy, nihilism); Herder  
 on 149–51; Schelling on 68, 69;  
 Schlegel, Friedrich on 35–7 (*see also*  
 Indian philosophy, nihilism)  
*Sāṃkhya*: Bhattacharyya, Krishna on  
 128, 129; Colebrooke on 4, 37–42,  
 51, 66; Dasgupta, Surendranath on  
 113–16; Müller, Max on 97, 98;  
 Mitra on 93–7; Radhakrishnan on  
 120, 123; Vivekananda on 101,  
 103–5; *Yoga Sūtras* relation to  
 37–41, 52n11, 66, 93–8, 113–16,  
 120, 123, 128, 129  
*Sāṃkhya-Karikas see Sāṃkhya*  
 Samuel, Richard 82n38  
 Sarbaker, Stuart Ray 9n1  
 Sardesai, Damodar 10n7, 32n15, 79n8  
 Sargeant, Winthrop 33n21  
 Schelling, Caroline 24, 70, 71; *see also*  
 Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, August  
 Wilhelm  
 Schelling, F. W. J.: equanimity and 74,  
 75 (*see also* yoga, translation of);  
 Friedrich Schlegel and 24, 67, 68,  
 71, 81n33; Indian philosophy and 4,  
 72–7, 85, 82n44, 134, 136, 137  
 (*see also* freedom, pantheism);  
*Innigkeit* (inwardness) and 72, 73,  
 75, 87, 133 (*see also* yoga,  
 translation of); mythology and  
 71, 72; *see also* mythology, Indian  
 philosophy; pantheism and 4, 69,  
 70, 71, 87, 108; *Philosophische*  
*Untersuchungen über das Wesen*  
*der menschlichen Freiheit (Freedom*  
*Essay)* 68, 70, 71, 75, 76  
 Schlegel, August Wilhelm: Indian  
 philosophy and 45, 46; translation  
 of Indian philosophy and 36, 42, 63,  
 74, 76, 133  
 Schlegel, Dorothea von 18, 23, 70;  
*see also* Schlegel, Friedrich  
 Schlegel, Friedrich: Catholicism and  
 16, 23, 24, 29, 58, 59 (*see also*  
 Hegel, Catholicism); Friedrich  
 Schelling and 24, 67–71, 81n33;  
*Gespräch über die Poesie (Dialogue*  
*on Poetry)* 17, 18 (*see also* early  
 German Romanticism; mythology);  
 Indian philosophy and 2, 3, 18,  
 23–30, 35–7, 41, 44, 48, 49,  
 55, 65, 96, 109, 134 (*see also*  
 Indian philosophy, nihilism); new

- mythology and 17, 18, 24, 28, 29  
 (see also early German Romanticism; mythology); nihilism and 2, 7, 25–8, 37, 48, 50, 55, 65, 109, 121, 134  
 (see also Indian philosophy, nihilism; freedom, pantheism); pantheism and 25, 27, 28, 30, 37, 45, 62, 68, 134 (see also freedom, pantheism); Spinoza and 15, 18, 25, 30, 70, 71 (see also freedom, pantheism); *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians)* 16, 23–30, 36, 45, 58, 69 (see also freedom, pantheism; nihilism, Indian philosophy)
- Schlesier, Gustav 53n20, 81n22
- Schopenhauer, Arthur xvii2
- Schwab, Raymond 153n19
- Scott, Douglas W. 81n35
- Self: annihilation of the 21, 26, 27, 35–7, 48, 55, 65, 70, 75, 98, 134 (see also Günderröde; Jacobi; Schlegel, Friedrich); *Īśvara* and the 37, 96, 99, 103, 104, 106, 107, 125, 127, 135 (see also Dasgupta, Surendranath; God, *Īśvara*; Mitra; suffering); ignorance of essential 104, 106, 107, 115, 117, 128, 138 (see also Bhattacharyya, Krishna; Dasgupta, Surendranath; freedom, *mokṣa*; *kaivalya*)
- Singleton, Mark 9n1
- Sinha, Mishka 156n44
- Sonnerat, Pierre 155n39
- soul: annihilation of the 25–30, 77 (see also Jacobi; self, annihilation; Spinoza); liberation of the 4, 5, 8, 37, 40, 48, 77, 87, 88, 92, 95, 97, 101, 102, 109, 113, 115–17, 122, 129, 135 (see also *avidyā*; freedom, *mokṣa*; Indian philosophy, liberation; *kaivalya*; suffering)
- Spinoza, Baruch: early German Romanticism and 13–15, 18 (see also early German Romanticism; mythology; Schelling, Friedrich; Schlegel, Friedrich); nihilism and 2, 15, 25, 26, 49, 53n33 (see also freedom, pantheism; Jacobi; nihilism); pantheism and 2, 13–15, 25, 70, 71, 76, 87, 150 (see also freedom, pantheism; Herder; Humboldt; pantheism, identity *vs.* dependence; pantheism, vitalistic); pantheism controversy and 13–15, 25, 30 (see also Jacobi; Lessing; nihilism)
- Staiano-Daniels, Lucia 10n7
- Steigerwald, John 31n4
- Stewart, Jon 10n7, 53n19
- Stone, Alison 31n6
- Stoner, Samuel A. 155n27
- Sweetman, Will 152n14
- suffering 28, 29, 74, 98, 115–17, 124, 137, 138; see also *avidyā*; freedom, *mokṣa*; Indian philosophy, liberation; *kaivalya*
- symbolism 17, 31n4, 59–61, 69, 80n11, 80n13; see also Creuzer; Hegel; Hölderlin; Müller, Max; mythology; Schelling, Friedrich
- sympathy see Bhattacharyya, Krishna Chandra
- Taylor, Ronald 155n30
- Tindal, Matthew 143, 152n10; see also natural religion; Voltaire
- Torrey, Norman L. 152n11
- Turgenev, Ivan 110n27
- Tzoref-Ashkenazi, Chen 32n15
- Upaniṣads* 4, 89, 90, 93, 96, 98, 100, 106; see also Müller, Max; Vedānta; Vivekananda
- Vedas* 57, 89; Voltaire and 140–2, 145, 146, 148, 152; see also Ezour *Vedam*
- vibhūti* (power), 40; see also yoga, Patañjali
- Vohra, Ashok 131n16
- Vivekananda, Swami: *bhakti yoga* and 106–8; divine play and 108, 136; God and 106–8, 112, 129; *Īśvara* and 103–7 (see also Mitra; Müller, Max; yoga, Patañjali); *rāja yoga* and 101, 102, 106–8; *Upaniṣads* and 99, 100 (see also yoga as doctrine, Advaita Vedānta; Müller, Max); *Vedānta Philosophy: Lectures on Rāja Yoga and Other Subjects* 101–8; Yoga, Patañjali and 101–8

- Voltaire: Abrahamic tradition and 141, 142 (*see also* Herder); the Brahmins and 142, 144–7; Catholicism and 141, 142, 144; deism and 142–6; *Essai sur l'histoire universelle* 140–2; *Ezour Vedam* and 141, 144–6; *Vedas* and 140–2, 145, 146, 148, 152
- Ware, Owen 32n10, 131n10, 132n31
- Whicher, Ian 9n1
- Whistler, David 81n33
- White, David Gordon 9n1, 9n4, 77n3, 101, 102
- Whitley, Giles 109n2
- Wilford, Paul T. 155n27
- Wilkins, Charles 50, 54n35, 65, 156n43, 156n44; *see also* yoga, translation of
- Williamson, George S. 32n11, 80n10
- Willson, Amos Leslie 82n38, 155n30
- Windelband, Wilhelm 31n4
- Windischmann, Karl 67, 68, 81n32
- Wirth, Jason 82n44
- Wood, Allen 32n10, 132n37, 154n27
- yamas* (other-regarding duties) 41, 51, 66, 117, 118, 138; *see also* ethics, yoga; *niyamas*; yoga, Patañjali
- yoga as doctrine: Advaita (non-dual) Vedānta 100, 110n34, 121 (*see also* Müller; Vivekananda); Bhakti 1, 4, 5, 88, 93–5, 101, 104, 108, 112, 129, 134–6; Patañjali 4, 5, 7, 36–42, 44, 49, 51, 52n8, 66, 87, 88, 92–9, 101–8, 112–28, 134–8 (*see also* ethics, yoga, Patañjali; freedom, yoga, Patañjali; God, yoga, Patañjali; pantheism, Indian philosophy; *prakṛti*; *puruṣa*; *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga Sūtras* relation to); *rāja* (royal yoga) 91–3, 101, 102, 106–8, 135 (*see also* Vivekananda); Vedānta 1, 4, 5, 38, 88–91, 93, 95, 100–2, 104–6 (*see also* Müller, Max; Radhakrishnan; Vivekananda)
- yoga as practice: *bhakti* (yoga of devotion) 4, 5, 75, 87, 88, 93–5, 101, 104, 106–8, 112, 129, 134–6 (*see also* Vivekananda); *dhyana* (yoga of meditation) 1, 135 (*see also* Vivekananda); *haṭha* (yoga of physical health) 4, 91–4, 134 (*see also* Mitra; Pal); *jñāna* (yoga of insight) 44, 75, 87, 106–9 (*see also* Humboldt; Schelling, Friedrich; Vivekananda; yoga as practice, *bhakti*); *karma* 1, 7, 43, 44, 64, 73–5, 98, 135 (*see also* *Bhagavad Gītā*; Humboldt; Mitra; Schelling, Friedrich)
- Yoga Sūtras* 3, 4, 7, 8, 36–42, 50, 51, 66, 92–7, 99, 101–5, 109, 112, 113, 115–19, 122–6, 129, 134, 135, 137; *see also* ethics, yoga, Patañjali; freedom, yoga, Patañjali; God, yoga, Patañjali; pantheism, Indian philosophy; *prakṛti*; *puruṣa*; *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga Sūtras* relation to
- yoga, translation of 3, 4, 7, 36, 50, 51, 54n36, 72–4, 87, 91–3, 133, 139n1
- Zammito, John 154n27
- Zanucchi, Mario 82n38