

Wang not only harmoniously amalgamates such aspects in his interpretation of the philosophical contents of the Inner Chapters, but also regards their structure as reflecting the unification of the disparate. According to Wang, the Inner Chapters are special within the book of *Zhuangzi* since each of them is “structured systematically to create a self-contained whole” (pp. 161–162). But, simultaneously, the “seven chapters are not separate entities—they form one integrated whole, the unique and unified expression of Zhuangzi’s heart” (p. 167). Wang says allegorically, “They are like Cook Ding’s ox: a complete, integrated animal, yet neither complete nor integrated” (p. 167). Reflecting his overall philosophical understanding of Zhuangzi, Wang concludes: “Once you realize this, division and integration, completion and destruction are all one—division is also integration, completion is also destruction” (p. 167).

Wang’s journey through the Inner Chapters is completed by a chapter summarizing his “synthetic” reading of the text. The book also includes two appendices. The first is a glossary explaining the key terminology of the Inner Chapters, which, according to Wang, as “concepts and categories” constitute a “philosophical system” (p. 179). The second appendix is an essay on “The Recluse Phenomenon.” This essay, which for me is the most inspiring part of the whole book, distinguishes three forms of reclusion, namely an escapist one, where the recluse flees society; then an inner-worldly one, where the recluse retreats to the fringes of society, but remains within its boundaries; and then a third form of reclusion, where one takes on social roles and positions, and thereby integrates oneself fully into society, but goes into an “inner emigration” (p. 202), which, in Wang’s (and Kohn’s) language, goes along with society while not getting mentally or spiritually involved in it (p. 205).

Note

- 1 – Brook Ziporyn, trans. with introd. and notes, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), p. xvii.

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David Gordon White’s *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* claims to be a biographical account of the life of the *Yoga Sūtra*. But it is instead an account of what people across times and continents have thought about the *Yoga Sūtra*. For the *Lives of Great Religious Books* series that White is contributing to with this volume, there is no difference: your life and what people thought about you amount to the same thing. For those of us who believe in the possibility of error—that people’s opinions about you can be mistaken—there is a strong line to be drawn between one’s life and

secondary opinion. In the case of texts, if secondary opinion can be mistaken, we should certainly want to draw a distinction between the text and what people thought about it. Historians of philosophy (philosophers with an interest in engaging with historical figures and texts) take this approach. If you are interested in what other people think about the *Yoga Sūtra*, then this is your book. Moreover, if you are naive enough to believe that the account of the *Yoga Sūtra* that you received from your guru in the wider yoga community is the end result of a faithful, historical process leading back to the historical Patañjali himself, you are in trouble. Call this the *historical thesis*. I shall also call it “Q” for the sake of a Modus Tollens later on. White claims that he no longer holds Q (p. xv). As someone who believes in the possibility of error of secondary opinion, I find it incredible that White ever believed Q.

The book is geared toward showing Q false. White would rather that we view the *Yoga Sūtra* as a “come back classic”—that though historically neglected, it has now been translated into over forty languages the world over (p. xvi). To this end, White is “devoted to tracing the fractured history of these modern appropriations and contestations, which have carried the *Yoga Sūtra*’s legacy across the oceans and over the snowy peaks of the Himalayan Shangri-la” (p. 17). Indeed, the chapters in the first half of the book do provide such an account: starting out first with the reception of the *Yoga Sūtra* within the history of Indian philosophy (chapter 2), followed by the Western discovery of the *Yoga Sūtra* (chapter 3), the surprising interest Hegel showed in the text and the unsurprising inclination of Hegel to claim himself an expert on the topic (chapter 4), the creative reordering and representation of the *Yoga Sūtra* by the Indian Indologist Rajendralal Mitra (chapter 5), the uptake of the *Yoga Sūtra* by the Theosophical Society (chapter 6), the role of Swami Vivekananda in the “mainstreaming” of the *Yoga Sūtra* (chapter 7), and finally the *Yoga Sūtra* in the Muslim world (chapter 8).

In the second half, White returns to South Asia, focusing on the seriousness with which the *Yoga Sūtra* was received by medieval Indian thinkers (chapter 9), the topic of Īśvara (the Lord) as it is dealt with variously by translations and interpretations (chapter 10), the place of the *Yoga Sūtra* in early twentieth-century scholarship (chapter 11), and the (lack of) evidence in support of the claim that Krishnamacarya is last in an ancient tradition of *Yoga Sūtra* transmission stretching back to Patañjali himself (chapter 12).

The final chapter (13) outlines recent commentarial spats on the *Yoga Sūtra*. It touches upon scholarly observations that the language of the *Yoga Sūtra* is more Buddhist than “Hindu.” The assumption here seems to be that something could not be both Buddhist and Hindu (so much for karma). Finally, this chapter deals with contemporary commentarial controversies on the *Yoga Sūtra* between Indologists. Far from faulting scholars for multiplying interpretations of the *Yoga Sūtra* based on assumptions, White identifies “critical scholars” as being preoccupied “nearly exclusively with the classical commentators and their readings of the work’s aphorisms” (p. 5) and the project of criticism as generative of models of interpretations that are themselves the subject of criticism (p. 235). As an example of such criticism, he approvingly cites one scholar (Edwin Bryant) who claims that when we speak “of the

philosophy of Patanjali, what we really mean (or should mean) is the understanding of Patanjali according to Vyasa" (p. 11; cf. p. 226). This is what it is to be a "critical scholar" in his account. He contrasts folks who defer to the authority of a commentator to the lay reader who appreciates the *Yoga Sūtra* in terms of popular Hindu literature and poetry, such as the *Mahābhārata* or the *purāṇas*. This is uncritical in his account (p. 5).

To my way of seeing, when we are critical we read texts for ourselves, and we think for ourselves. This allows us an option to be critical of the authorities. When we study the history of the reception of the *Yoga Sūtra*, we study what other people thought or believed about the *Yoga Sūtra*. To call such secondary opinion right by definition is to give up on criticism.

White's position leads us to the scholar's version of the Euthyphro Dilemma: an authority such as Vyāsa is right if he loves the right account of the *Yoga Sūtra* (Socrates' preference), or, whatever an authority such as Vyāsa says about the *Yoga Sūtra* is the right account of the *Yoga Sūtra* (Euthyphro's preference). In the original dilemma, the authorities were the Gods, tradition, and custom, and the question was "what is the holy." Socrates' preference involves taking responsibility for figuring out what is holy, and this provides a foundation for vindicating some Gods, traditions, and customs, over others. If we take Euthyphro's option, we write a blank check to our stated Gods and treat their preferences as definitive of what is holy—which is contrary to being critical—and, as Socrates notes, the Gods do not agree. Socrates' position is widely considered the better of the two options. White's position is Euthyphroian: knowing about the *Yoga Sūtra*—being "critical"—involves deferring to the authorities. And the authorities do not agree.

In White's account of criticism, there is no way to assess whether a "critical scholar's" account is mistaken, for being critical means reading a text in terms of its commentary. One would hope this is not true. But yet, when White compares competing "critical scholarly" approaches to the *Yoga Sūtra*, with their mutually exclusive readings, he says that if we proceed from the premises to the conclusion, they are "entirely plausible" (p. 234).

On the question of why the *Yoga Sūtra* has so many commentaries, White provides the following explanation about Indian philosophy. In his account, had Indian philosophers employed the mathematics of theoretical physics, which has a fixed, context-invariant and "transparent" extension regardless of what language it is written in, we could understand Indian philosophy clearly. But Indian philosophers instead opted to use natural language. As such, "this language-based format has made ancient Indian philosophy terribly fragile, protean, and difficult to grasp." In White's account "this is what made commentaries so vitally necessary" (p. 26). Logical Positivists who held a position very much like this had to pack it up. There were numerous problems with their approach (for more see Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"). There is one of the few options in philosophy that is treated as dead by all concerned. But worse, White does not seem to appreciate that if what he says is true of Indian philosophy (because it uses natural languages, we need commentaries) then that is true of all tracts such as his own.

One gets the impression from White that there is no philosophy of the *Yoga Sūtra*: just commentaries all the way down. Along the way, in reviewing the various historical interpretations of the *Yoga Sūtra*, White criticizes those who read the *Yoga Sūtra* in the order it comes down to us as “slavishly following the order of the sutras as they are found in the original text” and praises Rajendralal Mitra’s Kantian representation of the *Yoga Sūtra*. This involves replacing Patañjali’s philosophically important concept of *person* (*puruṣa*) with the Platonically laden mental concept of the self as the *soul*—a representation that conflicts not only with the *Yoga Sūtra*’s criticism of personal identification with mind (YS I.2–4), a representation that not only conflicts with the *Yoga Sūtra*’s criticism of personal identification with mind (YS I.2–4), but is a representation that White wishes was the way Patañjali had presented the material to make it “far more accessible” (chapter 5, pp. 94–95). My concern is that the order of the text, and the concepts employed in it, are the objective features of a text that a good reading should explain. If I change the order of the *Yoga Sūtra*, and change the concepts from those characteristic of Yoga to that which is definitive of Plato, I now have the *Plato Sūtra* in front of me. I have not rendered the *Yoga Sūtra* more accessible: I just changed the topic. But none of this will seem out of the ordinary if, in the case of the *Yoga Sūtra*, it is merely commentaries all the way down, with no objectively meaningful text for us to read.

From what I can tell, White has one main argument and one smaller derivative argument:

1. If P (Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* is a classic of Indian Philosophy) then Q (it comes down to us in an unbroken succession of teacher, student, and copier).
2. Not Q,
3. Therefore: Not P.

Call this the historical argument. Instead of “P” White would rather have the following idea:

P_{comeback} (Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* is a *comeback* classic).

All the attention poured on the secondary literature on the *Yoga Sūtra* bolsters Not Q. The strength of this Modus Tollens relies upon Not Q. I take it that Q is false. White agrees, too. But for the same reason I do not buy (1). As a conditional, it is either true in the hollow way that conditionals can be true (with a false antecedent and false consequent) or it is outright false (with P being true and Q being false). If the meaning of a text is objective, and not determined by opinion, then the perennial importance of a text is not about its social reception but its enduring philosophical importance given its objective meaning. If P, then Not Q is a more plausible conditional. We do not need P_{comeback} . If the meaning of texts is subjective, then anything goes: indeed, one might even believe truthfully as a matter of one’s perspective that Q is true of the *Yoga Sūtra*—which White denies.

Does White have an opinion on the objectivity of the meaning of the *Yoga Sūtra*? Does he reject that the meaning of the *Yoga Sūtra* is objective? He says something revealing. In his account, given Not Q, the “recovery” that followed the text’s re-discovery was a tortured process . . . as its many modern interpreters projected their fantasies, preconceptions, hopes, dreams, and personal agendas onto Patanjali’s work in unprecedented ways. As a result, the *Yoga Sūtra* has been something of a battered orphan for the better part of the last two centuries, often abused by well-meaning or not-so-well-meaning experts and dilettantes. . . . (p. 16)

If the meaning of a philosophical text is objective, we don’t need its parent to protect it. We merely need to read it as philosophers read texts: for the philosophy. No text is properly described as an orphan on this account. If the meaning is subjective, then any one account is as good as another. Everyone is the parent of a text, and no text is an orphan. Either way, no parent of a text has a place of privilege in accounting for the meaning of the text. Yet, White draws attention to the absence of the *Yoga Sūtra*’s parent as the issue.

A derivative argument that White tries to establish is that the *Yoga Sūtra* is an “Indian scriptural and philosophical tradition that is truly cosmopolitan, embedded in every part of the world, even if only recently rediscovered in the land of its birth” (p. 17). The evidence for this just is the historical material that White examines through the book. If this is the argument, then it is only plausible if the *Yoga Sūtra* being “recently rediscovered” in India means something like a thousand years ago, by the likes of Nāthamuni (p. 163). *Recent* is vague, but a *thousand years ago* is not that recent—even for us philosophers who read old stuff all the time.

While White seems to follow Euthyphro on the matter of what counts as normative, he seems to follow Plato in the *Republic* (not Socrates) on another matter: banish literature from serious discourse (in Plato’s case it was Homer; in White’s case it is the *Mahābhārata* and *purāṇas*), and drag out the disengaged wise men (the traditional commentators) to tell us how things are. Plato explored this position in the *Republic* after Socrates was executed for his brand of philosophical piety, which brought him into conflict with Euthyphroian types (described in the *Apology*). If Philosophers could be kings, and we banish literature—the source of common ideas of piety—Socrates would be safe—right? The result of this experiment is a new kind of tyranny, which Plato scarcely conceals in the closing books of the *Republic*. White’s *Republic* is characterized by a liberal attitude to who could count as an authority on the *Yoga Sūtra*. It has to do with scholarly credibility, cashed out in terms of deference to commentaries. At times I wondered if White was attempting to encourage a completely libertarian approach to the *Yoga Sūtra*, where anyone could be an authority on the *Yoga Sūtra*, so long as one’s view was informed by a traditional commentary.

Overall, I found *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* a window into the state of scholarship on the *Yoga Sūtra*, where deference to authority and the idea that authorial intentions matter apparently continue to exercise influence. White depicts the “critical” scholars as part of his Euthyphroian enterprise, which renders their research

seem (rightfully) strange. I found that White helped me catch up on the secondary literature on the *Yoga Sūtra*, which is useful. Extracting this benefit was made difficult by the philosophical minefield that White has set for anyone familiar with the history of contemporary philosophy and the *Yoga Sūtra*. The very premise of the *Lives of Great Religious Books* series, which collapses the distinction between the text itself and secondary opinion, is not helpful to critical thinking about a text such as the *Yoga Sūtra*. It consists in rejecting the distinction between opinion and fact, which is central to critical thought. Despite this, White's book was useful in providing a snapshot of the state of research into the *Yoga Sūtra* today.

White begins his last chapter with the question whether *kaivalyam*, "the goal of Yoga practice, means that the practitioner dies to the world." He notes:

For Yohanan Grinshpon, the answer is yes: Yoga requires that the person disintegrate. . . . It is the absolute, unfathomable end, the end of ends. For Chris Chapple and Ian Whicher, the answer is no: Yoga entails enlightened engagement with the world; while Shyam Ranganathan goes so far as to say that the *Yoga Sūtra* is a work of moral philosophy, guiding men to become morally perfect in the world. (p. 225)

This is almost my view. In my account, the topic of the *Yoga Sūtra* is not men, but people, and what it is to be a person is to have an interest in one's own independence (*kaivalya*) via a control of the objects of one's environment (erroneously identified as mental privacy prior to the practice of yoga). Ideally this involves total control and responsibility for one's environment. Animals have an interest in this kind of independence: they are people. As the central topics of the *Yoga Sūtra* are self-governance and self-mastery as a means to independence—a central concern of moral philosophy in any tradition, as exemplified in the works of philosophers such as Plato or Kant—the *Yoga Sūtra* is a classic work on ethics. Figuring this out involves reading the *Yoga Sūtra* on its own terms (that is, not through the lens of a commentary) while studying the history of moral philosophy. My method in *Yoga Sūtra* research is critical and typical for what counts as research in philosophy, but not what counts as critical scholarship on White's account.

Positively, White puts aside "critical scholarship" at the very end of his book and notes the important role Yoga is playing in critical discourse about democracy in India (p. 236). He depicts this as *Yoga Sūtra 2.0*. If the content of the *Yoga Sūtra* is to be cashed out by what White calls "critical scholarship," then this is capricious—it involves no deference to commentarial authority but a direct interest in yoga. If I am correct about the ethical substance of the *Yoga Sūtra*, this is a faithful engagement with Yoga. This would not be the first time that this has happened. According to recent research, the *Yoga Sūtra* was formative in M. K. Gandhi's doctrine of *satyagraha* (cf. *YS* II.33–35) and influenced his account of moral virtues. As Bindu Puri notes in her *Tagore-Gandhi Debate on Matters of Truth and Untruth* (Springer, 2015) (p. 36) there are over two hundred references to the *Yoga Sūtra* and "Bhagwan Patañjali" in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. This is a topic that White leaves out of his global survey of the reception and impact of the *Yoga Sūtra*. Gandhi apparently did not read Patañjali through a commentary.