

## Article

# Hinduism, Belief and the Colonial Invention of Religion: A before and after Comparison

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**Abstract:** As known from the academic literature on Hinduism, the foreign, Persian word, “Hindu” (meaning “Indian”), was used by the British to name everything indigenously South Asian, which was not Islam, as a religion. If we adopt explication as our research methodology, which consists in the application of the criterion of logical validity to organize various propositions of perspectives we encounter in research in terms of a disagreement, we discover: (a) what the British identified as “Hinduism” was not characterizable by a shared set of beliefs or shared outlook, but a disagreement or debate about basic topics of philosophy with a discourse on tenets of moral philosophy anchoring the debate; and (b), the Western tradition’s historical commitment to language as the vehicle of thought not only leads to the conflation of propositions with beliefs, but to interpreting (explaining by way of belief) on the basis of the Eurocentric tradition rooted exclusively in ancient Greek philosophy. Interpretation on the basis of the Western tradition leads to the Western tradition vindicating itself as the non-traditional, non-religious, rational platform—the secular—for explaining everything—the residua are what get called religions on a global scale. Given that Western colonialism is the pivotal event, before which South Asians just had philosophy, and after which they had religion (the explanatory residua of Eurocentric interpretation), we can ask about Hindu religious belief. This only pertains to the period after colonialism, when Hindus adopted a Westcentric frame for understanding their tradition as religious because of colonization. Prior to this, the tradition the British identified as “Hindu” had a wide variety of philosophical approaches to justification, which often criticized propositional attitudes, like belief, as irrational.

**Keywords:** colonialism; ethics; South Asia; interpretation; explication; logic; belief; the West; Yoga; dharma



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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is common to claim that there are such things as religions, that religions are comprised of religious beliefs, and that such beliefs are different from other kinds of beliefs, like those based on science. Given that *Hinduism* is a religious identity like any other religious identity, and religions are commonly held to cluster around defining beliefs, we would expect that there is something like a definitive Hindu response to questions such as:

- *What reasons do people report to accept belief in spiritual entities in Hinduism?*
- *How do people defend belief in devas or deities in Hinduism?*
- *Do Hindu religious beliefs chime well with contemporary science?*
- *Is there a moral imperative to view nature as ensouled or animistic?*

The problem with answering these questions is that the very idea of religion (and spirituality) is foreign to the pre-colonial South Asian tradition, and propositional attitudes, such as belief (the attitude that a thought, also called a proposition, *p*, is true), were typically the subject of intense philosophical criticism. Religious belief is hence doubly foreign to ancient South Asia.

I will argue that not only is Hinduism as a religion a creation of Western colonialism, so too is religious belief. This is because religion in general is a creation of Western

colonialism. I use the term “West” to identify an intellectual tradition with roots in ancient Greek thought, to distinguish it from the west as a geographical area, which includes Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) traditions. As the West expands, it uses the term “religion” for traditions it cannot explain by its (the West’s) beliefs. Hinduism gains its identity as a religion like other noteworthy examples, but it is unique in being (precolonially) a debate and disagreement on basic topics of philosophy, with a discourse on the tenets of moral philosophy rooting the debate. In other words, the creation of “Hinduism” as a religion was a colonial rebranding of open-ended philosophical dissent and investigation (which could criticize Western colonialism) into a religion, characterized primarily by religious beliefs.

This creation of religion is brought about by the prioritization of belief in explanation—*interpretation*—in the Western tradition, and this prioritization is the mechanism and product of colonialism. Both elements are foreign to indigenous South Asian traditions. Ancient South Asian traditions did not have religious identities. Rather these traditions took positions on various topics in philosophy, and the dominant debate was about DHARMA: THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. Hence, the dominant concern of this tradition was moral philosophy, as moral philosophy concerns THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. South Asians were interested in many basic questions of philosophy, including metaphysics and ontology, and epistemology, not to mention many others, such as logic and aesthetics. However, the fault lines of the schools and the debates were most foundationally delineated around questions of dharma.

Moreover, belief was itself a topic of criticism in the South Asian tradition, as were propositional attitudes on the whole. This contrasts sharply with the priority given to belief in the Western tradition. The importance of this argument is not that it conforms to what we (Hindus or non-Hindus) believe. Rather, it is what we can arrive at by adopting a logic-based approach to understanding both the South Asian and the Western traditions—call this approach *explication*. The focus of explication is (thoughts) propositions and their deductive entailments. It is an approach to explanation that puts aside beliefs and other propositional attitudes and relies closely on logical validity (the standard of good deductive arguments) to generate explanations of various conclusions.

At this point, we might imagine the desire to defend beliefs: surely beliefs can play a role in logic—perhaps there is a logic of beliefs. However, research in logic since at least Boole, Frege and Russel, has moved away from connecting psychology (which properly studies attitudes towards propositions, such as belief) with logic, which studies propositions and their inferential connections. J.S. Mill was the last major philosopher to defend the connection between logic and psychology in his *Logic* (1882). There he defended Psychologism, the idea that basic logical laws are psychological laws.

The problem with this view is that psychology is descriptive of *how* we think, and logic concerns how we *ought* to think. The lesson from this is while surely there is a psychology of belief, and an anthropological ethnography of belief or a sociology of belief, the idea of a logic of belief is highly problematic (for a classic exploration and refutation of psychologism, see [Husserl 2001](#)). Hence, when we learn logic these days we focus on propositions, not propositional attitudes. Perhaps the hardest concept for students of logic to learn is that good inference has nothing to do with beliefs. There may be ways to justify beliefs, but that takes us to a discussion outside of logic (cf. [Oliveira and Silva 2022](#)). Acknowledging this distinction between psychology and logic is important for it highlights (as we shall see) the ways in which Hindu philosophers were prescient about these distinctions now made in western academic philosophy. To this extent, recent western tradition bends towards Hindu philosophical thinking.

As T.N. Madan notes, the geographic region of the “Sindu” in Northern South Asia becomes “Hindu” for the Persians, and “Indos” for the Greek ([Madan 2003](#), p. xii). Our word “India” comes from the Greek. At some point under British colonial rule, “Hindu” became used to classify Indians ([Lorenzen 1999](#)). Hinduism is Indianism. Originally, the term was employed by the British to distinguish an indigenous Indian religion from Islam

(Gottschalk 2012). In other words, South Asians did not think of themselves as Hindu prior to British colonialism, and any “indigenous” religious identity in South Asia is an invention of and device of Western colonialism. This observation can be generalized: all we need to do is measure the historical colonial expansion of the West to observe that this coincides with the minting of religious identity in newly colonized regions. South Asia, as one of the newer arenas of Western expansion, is a great source of data about this colonial phenomenon. What is peculiar about Hinduism is that the original referent of “Hinduism” fixed by its colonial baptism (for an account of how such naming occasions fix reference, see Kripke 1980) is not defined by a common view, but a receptivity to philosophical debate and disagreement (for an exploration of this full range, see Ranganathan 2018b). Given that the idea of Hinduism is so open ended, anything that is indigenously South Asian can be Hindu and does not require some common founder, origin or text. This contributes to peculiar logical properties of the category of Hinduism if we treat it as a category of religion. It is merely a collection of disparate positions and knowing that some position is Hindu tells one nothing about its content. One only knows about its origins. Anything indigenously South Asian can be Hindu given the baptism of the term.

Given the act of colonialism and the pressure for colonized South Asians to be depicted by these power structures, religious beliefs about being Hindu and associated with Hinduism were fabricated. At this time, a host of other religious identities were created within the South Asian colonial context of people having to represent themselves according to colonial expectations. In contrast to Hinduism, these religious identities (such as Buddhism, or Jainism) traced their origins to definitive founders or texts. Precolonially, these were all dissenting positions on dharma.

There are important racial dimensions to the label of Hinduism. As noted by Michael James in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on “Race”, racial categories differ from ethnic categories in important ways. First while ethnic categories are often a matter of voluntary affiliation, racial categories are imposed from the outside. HINDUISM as a category of religious identity was imposed from the outside by a hostile power: the colonizer. Secondly, James notes that race and ethnicity differ with respect to the “level of agency that individuals exercise in choosing their identity” (James 2016). As racial categories are imposed from the outside, racialized people cannot easily opt out. In the case of “Hinduism”, as the term describes a South Asian geography, it is hard to opt out if one is ancestrally South Asian. Perhaps one might think that one could opt out of being Hindu by rejecting some core tenet of Hinduism. Yet, as what the British named “Hinduism” was a free and open debate on various topics of philosophy, it is not clear what opting out would look like: for any position a Hindu wanted to take would be a contribution to the debate within Hinduism, not an exception. Here, we could imagine the interpreter simply telling the Hindu to renounce Hinduism by becoming an atheist and denying the existence of *devas*. But the denial of the existence of *devas* and atheism was an orthodox position in what the British called Hinduism (which we shall review).

Naomi Zack in her *Philosophy of Race: An Introduction* (Zack 2018) also notes that there is a strong connection between racial categories and geographic categories. This connection helps us understand proto racial ideas in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but also track the idea of race that defines people in terms of their geography. This culminates most fully in what Zack calls Hegel’s “geographic racism” according to which African geography accounts for the epistemic deficiencies of Africans (Zack 2018, p. 17). Similarly, the identification of Hinduism as a geographic category to identify a religion serves to define South Asians as disinterested in moral and political philosophy, and concerned instead with a shared religion and spirituality. This is a remarkably convenient story for Western colonialism that thereby can depict itself as filling the moral and political void left by Hindu’s geographic (racial) noninterest in moral and political philosophy. (Indeed, J.S. Mill does just this, as we shall see, while appropriating Hindu moral and political philosophy).

What is lost in the minting of “Hinduism” that turns a geographic identity into a religion is a regard for Hindus (South Asians) as individuals free to engage in moral philosophy and to choose controversial options for themselves. Using what I call “explication”, to understand Hinduism allows us to avoid geographic racism and reclaim the space for Hindus to be individuals and to not be intellectually and practically determined by a geographic identity.

In the second section, I explore the distinction between *interpretation* (explanation by way of belief) and its opposite, *explication* (explanation by way of logical validity). This is a modern retelling of an ancient distinction between anti-yoga and Yoga, as explicated in the *Yoga Sūtra* (circa 200 CE). With this distinction, we can either explicate South Asian moral (dharma) philosophy, or we can interpret South Asia as a tradition of religions—but not at once. This allows us to see that there is nothing characteristic about religious positions in terms of explicated content and that the distinction between the religious and the secular is racial, and depends rather on interpretation from a Western vantage. Whereas Yoga, or explication, is how we ought to live to fortify our autonomy, interpretation is a departure from logic and a violation of personal autonomy. In South Asia, interpretation was typically viewed as an error theory (cf. [Ranganathan 2021](#)), or an account of what goes wrong, and understanding South Asia by way of interpretation (to promulgate the idea of Hinduism) is an imposition. Explicated, we find that the South Asian tradition’s exploration of moral theory exceeds what is typical in the West, provides resources for appreciating the wrong and harm of colonialism, and constitutes the foundation for what is often regarded as radically inclusive, progressive, secular (non-religious) philosophy today. Interpreted, Yoga seems like mystical Theism.

In the third section, the two methods of interpretation and explication are directed toward the Western tradition itself. Interpreted, we can recreate the usual conclusions about the natural religiosity of BIPOC traditions and the natural secularism of the Western tradition. Explicated, we see that the Western tradition is a tradition of interpretation as a function of a basic model of thought captured in the founding idea of *logos*: the Linguistic Model of Thought. Colonialism, explicated, operates on the same model, or rather, the mechanism of colonialism is interpretation. Religion is the byproduct of the colonial expansion of the West that consists in transmitting Western interpretations of colonized people to colonized people via the process of colonization. Then, colonized people understand themselves not according to precolonial philosophical theories and methods, but colonially as a doxastic deviation (called “religion”, or “spirituality”) from the West, which is treated as a universal standard. In so far as there are options (one can explicate or interpret) the choice is not merely political. Explication is logical, anti-colonial, and in keeping with Ockham’s Razor (it is parsimonious)—the idea that we should not multiply entities beyond their necessity. Interpretation is a failure in these three respects. Hence, explication makes better sense of all traditions, including the South Asian.

In the fourth section I consider objections to this analysis. Here too the objections are themselves interpretive dissatisfactions with the argument and the response is explicatory. Chief among such complaints is that the Hindu tradition and Hindu practice present many examples of religious beliefs about spiritual entities. The response notes that how this tradition appears to us today will depend upon which methodology of interpretation or explication we adopt. In the fifth section, I conclude.

## 2. Interpretation vs. Explication

In this section I will further discuss two contrasting methodologies and follow the impact of their application. The first is acclaimed in the Continental and Analytic literature with deep roots in the Western tradition: *interpretation*. The second is an important part of philosophical methodology but not discussed with any prominence (of the sort accorded to interpretation) in the Western tradition: *explication*.

To make the distinction clear, consider an example of two approaches to processing data in recent politics, which exemplify the differences between interpretation and explication.

tion. The example is of the 2020 US presidential election. Donald Trump claims he won that election. The US Electoral College (consisting of duly appointed electors from each state), and voting citizens, determined that Joe Biden won. What is the difference?

Let us consider a significant subset (though not all) of Trump supporters who believe what Trump says. *They believe that Trump was the rightful winner of the 2020 US presidential election*—as Trump said. But more than merely believing this, they used this belief to explain what happened. In other words, they are interpreters, interpreting the election on the basis of the belief that Trump is the rightful winner. Call these interpreters Trumpies. In the states that Trump won, as the outcome is in accordance with Trumpy beliefs, they see nothing to object to here. But what of states where Biden won the popular vote? In these cases, Trumpies find grounds for objecting to the outcome. Why? On their view, Trump actually won, and so the finding to the contrary by state officials is proof of electoral corruption. As reported in the January 6 Hearings before the US Congress, ordinary vote counting procedures in Georgia (a state that Biden won) were interpreted by Trumpies as proof of corruption ([January 6th Committee 2022](#)). In contrast, in states that Trump won, there were no Trumpy complaints about these normal procedures.

On the other side, we have people who endorse an *explicatory* method, which consists in making *explicit* the considerations that logically entail a conclusion about who should be president of the United States. In this case, each ballot cast via procedurally legal avenues, whether by mail, or at polling stations, in the election for president of the US, represents the voter's perspective, and expresses a theory about who should occupy various offices, including who should be president. Explicatory poll workers process the ballots to record these theoretical conclusions so that they may be tallied. In most US states, the simple preponderance of votes in favor of Trump or Biden determines who the state's Electoral College votes go to. In the US Congress on 6 January 2021 (despite a violent insurrection led by Trumpies that day), these electoral college votes were also explicated, and a conclusion about who won the election was deduced from the tally.

The two methods of interpretation and explication are different in a number of ways. The most important difference is that for the interpreter (including the Trumpy) there is no way to assess the evidence *independently* of their beliefs about what the totality of the evidence supports. Here, for the Trumpy, the evidence of whether a vote is legitimate or whether it is corrupt hinges on whether it is in keeping with Trumpy beliefs. Trumpies value votes in favor of Trump, and disvalue votes in favor of Biden. In the case of the explicatory poll worker, each ballot that expresses a theory about who should win various races is assessed *independently* of the truth of who should be president, which is determined by a final tally of the votes. The explicatory poll worker hence values the votes for the losing candidate as much as for the winning candidate—and as they begin counting them on election day, they do not know who is the winning candidate. Each ballot contributes to the final decision of who should be the president. For the explicatory poll worker, there is no way to determine the truth of who should be the president (or who should win various races) independently of tallying the varying and mutually exclusive conclusions about which candidates should occupy offices in each ballot.

A very important difference between the interpreter Trumpy and the explicatory poll worker is that the Trumpy as an *interpreter does not tolerate a disagreement* about who should be president whereas the poll worker as an *explicator values the actual disagreement* about who should be president as necessary to determine the question of who should be president. Indeed, the interpreter displays many of the features of narcissistic personality disorder ([Caligor et al. 2015](#)). The interpreter determines everything according to their beliefs, and hence what this rules out is an appreciation of dissent, which consists also of what they do not believe. They are happy to have discussions about the election, just so long as we keep out the prospect that Biden won. The explicator gives up on assessing each datum (each ballot) in light of the question of whether it represents the final outcome. For them, a vote for Trump in Georgia didn't represent the final vote tally, but it was part of the collection of

propositions that entailed the outcome. Interpreting is about taking the small view of one's outlook. Explication leads to the big picture, beyond one's outlook.

Another important difference is that for the Trumpy interpreter, the election is at best a rubber stamp of a foregone conclusion (what they believe), and at worse an exercise in corruption. For the explicatory poll worker, the election is a data gathering exercise that elucidates important questions that are themselves controversial—questions about who should occupy offices on the ballot. Finally, this shows us that the Trumpy interpreter is not responding to the data; they are responding to their psychology. The explicatory poll worker is responsibly ordering the data into an explicit presentation that will allow for the deduction of a final conclusion. Interpretation is a passive, emotional relationship to the possibilities. Explication is a dispassionate logical activity that requires sorting and ordering data about a controversy and deducing conclusions from the ordered data set.

Interpretation is an explanation by way of belief. Belief is one of many propositional attitudes. To believe the proposition  $p$  is to adopt an attitude of endorsing  $p$ , or taking  $p$  to be true. Interpretation is widely acclaimed in the twentieth-century Analytic and Continental literature. Authors as diverse as W.V.O. Quine (1960, p. 59), early Donald Davidson (1986, p. 316; 2001, p. 101), Martin Heidegger (2010) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990, 1996) stress the importance of interpretation—often employing the term itself (Davidson) or an analogue such as “hermeneutics” (Gadamer) or “Auslegung” (Heidegger) that is readily paraphrased or translated as ‘interpretation.’ It continues in the widely influential idea that reflection is about arriving at an equilibrium of considered judgments (Rawls 1971, p. 18).

Specifically, to interpret some phenomenon  $P$  is for the interpreting subject  $S$  to:

- Use  $S$ 's beliefs  $b$  in the explanation of  $P$ .

So in this case, the Trumpy uses their beliefs about Trump being the winner of the election to explain the phenomenon  $P$ , which is the election and its votes. In philosophy, if we interpret, we explain the topic in terms of what we believe. If we believe for instance that the range of ethical theories is foreclosed by the important options in the Western tradition, we decide Indian philosophers talked about ethics when they articulate beliefs of Western moral philosophers, and we deny that they did moral philosophy when they don't. Alternatively, if one tries to assess the distinction between interpretation and explication in terms of what one takes to be true, one is interpreting and the distinction will make little sense.

Explication is the application of logical validity to the task of deriving explanations. Logical validity is the property of good deductive arguments such that if the premises of the argument are true, the conclusion has to be true. A logically valid argument can be comprised entirely of false premises that one does not believe, and an argument comprised entirely of true propositions or propositions one believes can be invalid. To explicate is to employ logical validity to derive from a perspective  $P$  a theory that entails its controversial claims about  $t$ . The concept  $T$  is what theories of  $t$  are disagreeing about. The importance of explication is that it renders *explicit* propositions that do logical work that are otherwise implicit in a perspective.

To explicate a perspective  $P$ —augustly called a “philosophy”—about topic  $t$ , is to:

- Discern the reasons of  $P$  that constitute  $P$ , which entail  $P$ 's use of “ $t$ ”, and to arrive at a systematization of  $P$ 's reasons that entails the uses of “ $t$ ”. The systematization of  $P$ 's reasons that entails  $P$ 's  $t$ -claims is  $P$ 's theory of  $t$ . The reasons of  $P$  may be what  $P$  explicitly says, or what is entailed by  $P$ .

This is a formulation of explication geared specifically to philosophical theory. But it also applies to the poll worker. When the poll worker does their job, they treat each ballot as representing a perspective  $P$  that expresses a theory about who should win the races identified on the ballot, and they derive this theory from markings ( $t$ ) present in the ballot that indicate these theoretical conclusions. In the case of Indian philosophy, for instance, if we explicate it, we treat each perspective  $P$  as entailing a theory about a term  $t$  used

variously across perspectives—say, “dharma”. So if we explicate Indian philosophy we try to identify a perspective’s theory of dharma.

Then there is the second step:

- Compare theories of *t*: what they converge on while they disagree is the concept *T*.

This second step here corresponds to the tally of such theories about who should win the various races. Unless we can get to this point, we don’t really understand what the election was about, and who won. In philosophy, getting to this point is essential to appreciate what the theories of *T* are actually about. In the case of Indian philosophy, by getting to this step, we understand what the concept of DHARMA is about; and that is just what competing theories of dharma disagree about: THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. Once we thus understand the concept of DHARMA, we then know what was at stake in philosophical cases for a theory of dharma and we are able to more fully understand each theory of dharma as a contribution to that debate. But this also helps us sort out the controversy about dharma, for we then appreciate what the disagreement is about.

Our experience with the process of explication will depend upon the logical sufficiency of the positions we are explicating. If they are together illogical (invalid), an explication will reveal ad hoc reasoning that is (for example) a result of psychological processes as opposed to logical processes. In the voting case, such errors would correspond to problems with the ballot.

While explanation by way of belief (interpretation) is popular in the Western tradition, it is methodologically incompatible with explication, which is the backbone of philosophical research; these are mutually exclusive methodologies. The reason they are mutually exclusive is that explanation by way of what one believes (what one takes to be true) is a criterion that does not respect logical validity; an explanation by way of what one takes to be true may constitute an invalid argument. For instance, the argument,

PR1. Biden was POTUS in 2021.

PR2. Modi was PM of India in 2021.

(Therefore) This paper is on Hinduism and belief.

is comprised of true propositions and would constitute an explanation in terms of what we take to be true in so far as we believe these propositions. Yet the argument is invalid. In contrast, Modus Ponens—

PR1. If P then Q,

PR2. P

(Therefore) Q

is always valid, even if we substitute propositions we disbelieve or are false for P and Q. There are thereby an unlimited number of valid arguments that depart from what one takes to be true (or are true). In general, however, reason concerns inferential support (whether deduction, induction or even abduction) and the truth of the data, reasons and candidate conclusions of various forms of reasoning is secondary to this essential trait. Yet, belief makes truth the primary concern. This highlights the divergence of belief, which is a propositional attitude, from propositions, which has been noticed in the literature where belief is occasionally discussed as an example of an ‘intentional context’ (Quine 1956; Kaplan 1968; Kripke 1988). The trouble with intentional contexts is that they do not allow a direct inferential interaction with the propositions they contain. Rather, any possible inference has to be mediated by the attitude or psychology of the person overseeing such an intentional context.

To illustrate the problem, consider the proposition *it is raining outside*. If it is true that *it is raining outside*, then we can derive via logical validity that *water is falling from the sky*. But if it is true that *x believes that it is raining outside*, we cannot draw from this that *water is falling from the sky*. The addition of the attitude changes the topic, from the proposition, to the psychology of the person holding the attitude. And then, whatever inferences can be drawn from the intentional context will depend upon the psychology of the relevant person. This addition of the attitude constitutes an impediment to drawing inferences, which goes unchecked largely because the articulation of beliefs does not necessarily involve

articulating the attitude. If *we believe that it is raining outside* (that is, if we take it to be true), we usually just say: *it is raining outside*. This is captured by the insight derived from Alfred Tarski's work (cf. Tarski 1944, Tarski [1935] 1983) that saying "*p* is true" is pragmatically equivalent to the first order assertion, *p*. (Deflationists about truth claim that this is all there is to say about truth. For more, see Armour-Garb et al. 2022, Edition).

The problems with interpretation hide in part because of an audible indistinction between the articulation of thoughts and beliefs. This allows us to confuse the two as though they are interchangeable, and this allows us to treat all explanation by way of thought as an explanation by way of belief.

This will become *extremely* important later when we consider the Western tradition's predilection to interpret. As the West relies on a Linguistic Model of Thought, which equates what we can think with what we say with language, it models thought as audibly indistinguishable from beliefs. But explanation by way of thought (explication) and explanation by way of belief (interpretation) are distinct, and the problems of interpretation are real.

While we began this section with a political example to distinguish interpretation and explication, our interest in this paper is to track the political outcomes of these contrasting methodologies in the study of human intellectual history. Whether we adopt interpretation or explication we can talk about philosophy, for instance, as a conversation.

But the character of this conversation, as we see it, will depend upon which method we adopt. If we interpret, we will find dissent upsetting. We will rather focus on agreement, hide and deny disagreement. If we explicate, we value disagreement as the means of understanding the conversation. But we cannot understand the issue at stake in the contrast between interpretation and explication if we do not allow for disagreement. What pursuing this disagreement shows is that what is at stake is between understanding as something exhausted by your beliefs (interpretation), or understanding as something that has to take into account logically dissenting positions (explication). Interpreters will of course want no part of this discussion, and will sooner we not engage in it. However, explication, aside from being rationally superior, wins the debate for a simple reason: there is no way to appreciate the disagreement between interpretation and explication without explicating. Understanding this disagreement is an example of explication. Just like the 2020 US Presidential election, when we allow for the full pursuit of a disagreement, we find that not all options are equal, and some are the clear winners.

### 2.1. Interpretation and Race

Let us now turn to the application of interpretation to the Indian tradition and BIPOC thought. If we were to interpret the Indian tradition, and BIPOC philosophy, from a conventional Westcentric starting point, we would explain the uses of "dharma" in terms of what we believe in our Westcentric context. And hence, every use of "dharma" would be equated to what we are inclined to endorse in those contexts. Owing to the doxastic divergence between us and the ancient South Asians, we would have to conclude that "DHARMA is a concept difficult to define because it disowns or transcends distinctions that seem essential to us" (Lingat 1973, p. 3), that it is used in a "bewildering variety of ways" (Larson 1972, p. 146) and that "It stands for nature, intrinsic [ontological] quality, civil and moral law, justice, virtue, merit, duty and morality" to name a few (Rangaswami Aiyangar 1952, p. 63). In the Indian Constitution, it is also the term that has been conscripted to stand for religion in its self-description as a secular state: *dharmanirapekṣa rājya*—"it is a state with no dharma" (Government of India 1950). Interpretive accounts of "dharma" are not the exception in the Westernized literature, but the rule. Such interpretive approaches correlate with a skepticism about the existence of any traditional moral philosophy in the South Asian tradition, and the affirmation of the tradition as predominantly religious (for a survey of such claims, see Ranganathan 2017c, pp. 52–55).

This generalizes to the treatment of BIPOC traditions by Westernized contexts where BIPOC positions are invariably talked about as religious. This has everything to do with



methodology. To get belief in the category of religion off the ground, one can either: (a) postulate a criterion one takes to be true of religion, and then explain religions in terms of that criterion (which would be an interpretation);<sup>2</sup> (b) simply accept that what are labeled as religions are religions and then use this belief to account for what the category is about (which would also be an interpretation) (for a still useful discussion about both strategies, see [Harrison 2006](#)); or (c), interpret on the basis of the Western tradition, which treats the Western tradition as the non-religious and hence secular, and then anything that has extra-Western doxastic roots as religion. This latter strategy is dispositive as it helps reconstruct the unlikely coincidence that anything that is a clear example of a religion has an extra-Western origin: such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism. Western interpretation would also explain how indigenous European traditions (like Norse mythology, the worldview of the Sami, or ancient Celtic practices) are also religious (as they fall outside of the Western tradition), and yet ancient Greek mythology (in Homer) is converted into literature and studied in classics. It is also dispositive as it would explain how whether something is a religion or is religious has nothing to do with the content of the religious matter but everything to do with racial origins. It would also explain how this glaring racial disparity on what gets counted as religion is not usually acknowledged: Western interpretation based on beliefs produced by this tradition would make it seem as though this divergence is just the way things are.

Consider for instance the position that you should not worry about your individuality (or questions such as whether God exists), but rather pay careful attention to your choices, for they have consequences. Some lead to beneficial results for all concerned, and others to suffering. In so far as beings can suffer, we ought to choose carefully so as to minimize suffering. If you believe this because you read [Bentham \(1781\)](#), your views would be called ethical. But if you adopted this because you read the writings of Buddhists ([Goodman 2009](#)) your views would be religious.

Or, consider the position that reality begins with the evolution of matter from a primal indistinct state of nature: a root state of nature. Through this evolution of matter, primitive undifferentiated states evolve into increasing states of complexity, and display emergent properties, such as the mind and computational capacities (intellect). People might believe themselves to be making choices and committing actions, but in reality everything that happens is a play of natural processes, and the sense of agency is itself an epiphenomenon produced by the causal interaction of natural processes. If you came to believe this by accepting reasons from European scholarly work, you would be called a rationalist–materialist. This is ‘secular.’ If you came to adopt this because you adopt Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s second-century *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, you would be a Hindu, as Sāṅkhya is a paradigm philosophical school within Hinduism. This is ‘religious’.

Consider the claim that the Vedas are a corpus of normative claims, that promise good outcomes, and the various citations of *devas* in this text are purely grammatical and literary devices to shore up rhetorical support for those claims—one doesn’t need to buy their existence to understand the purpose of the text. If you believe this on the basis of a contemporary Western literary criticism, that would be secular. If you adopted this deflationary approach to *devas* and the Vedas because you adopted the Orthodox Brahminical school, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā (cf. [Bilimoria 1989](#)), you would be an Orthodox Hindu.

Similarly, when Plato muses about life after death, reincarnation (*Phaedo*) and a divine creator (*Timaeus*), these are just the speculations of a philosopher. When the Cārvākā deny that anything but matter exists, the only good is pleasure, and our liberation from suffering is death ([Chattopadhyaya and Gangopadhyaya 1990](#)), that is also Hindu as it falls within the wide catchall of indigenous South Asian positions with no common founder. Given interpretation on the basis of the Western tradition, racialized philosophers, no matter what they argue on the basis of their racialized traditions, are categorized as religious. Similarly, if it is purely Western, it is treated as nonreligious and hence secular.

## 2.2. Explication and Hindu Moral Philosophy as Decolonial Moral Philosophy

If we explicate, we would treat each perspective that employs “dharma” as entailing via logical validity a theory of dharma that entails its various “dharma” claims. The concept DHARMA would simply be what the competing theories of dharma disagree about—what we can also derive logically as their joint entailment. If we did this, we would discover that what theories of dharma are disagreeing about is THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. The right has to do with choice, procedure and action and the exercise of agency. The good concerns states (possible or real) that are worthy of approval. If we explicate theories of ethics or morality in the Western tradition, and theories of the *Tao* in the Chinese tradition, we would find the same disagreement playing out. Disagreements about dharma are, explicated, disagreements of moral theory. As set out in the recent *Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Ethics* (Ranganathan 2017b), we find, explicated, four basic ethical theories—a list that adds to the familiar three theories in the Western tradition. At no point would we come to acknowledge religions, as every perspective that could be so explicated would be understood in terms of its contribution to philosophical disagreement.

At this point it is worth addressing the relationship between various topics in philosophy and the Indic concern for dharma, or moral philosophy. First, unlike what has become the norm in Western philosophy, indigenous South Asian philosophers were systematic philosophers. So, while they did certainly pursue philosophy in areas such as metaphysics or epistemology, they typically did it within a package that had views on dharma, and it was in many cases *identified* simply as a view on dharma (such as we find with Jainism, Buddhism, Vaiśeṣika and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā). Secondly, it is true that indigenous South Asian philosophers used the word “dharma” for various ontological, metaphysical and epistemic matters. Buddhists call constituents of reality and the teachings of the Buddha, “dharma”. Jains call the principle of motion, that liberated individuals traverse, and the teachings of Jainism, “dharma”. The *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* begins in the first *sūtra* with: Now, therefore, we will explain dharma. What follows are *sūtras* about ontology and metaphysics. Rāmānuja, a bhakti philosopher, in discussing cognition of external matters, describes it as the *dharma-bhūta-jñāna*: dharma, thing, knowledge (Rāmānuja *Gītā Bhāṣya* 5.16, Śrī Bhāṣya I.i.1). This is very similar to the *Yoga Sūtra* employment of “dharma” to discuss epistemic matters (YS III.13).

Interpreters opportunistically interpret each such use of “dharma” according to their own beliefs. If we explicate, we will have to identify each perspective’s theory of dharma that (also) entails its ontological, metaphysical, or epistemic uses of “dharma”, and then compare the theories: what we find (via the second step of explication) is that the theories all contribute to a debate about THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD, and hence this is the concept of DHARMA (as per explication). This is a very important implication of explication: it is only once we understand the big picture theoretical disagreement about dharma that we understand what the concept DHARMA is and what is at stake in these various uses of “dharma”. So, in many cases, it is quite impossible to extricate metaphysical and epistemic discussions from moral philosophical discussions if we explicate.

Interpreters, as we saw, identify these matters as ontological or epistemic, as their beliefs dictate, but at the big-picture expense of understanding theoretical disagreements about dharma. Interpreters relying upon the Western tradition are likely to reduce ethics to discussions of the values and norms of human society as we find in Plato, and Aristotle, and which continue in the Western tradition. The Indian conversations about dharma, explicated, take on cosmological significance as they apply not merely to human society, but to philosophical topics in general (for more on this, see Ranganathan 2017c).

Explicated, we find that theories of dharma as theories of moral theory exceed what we are accustomed to in the Western tradition. In the South Asian tradition, we find four basic theories. And while the South Asian tradition has four notable moral theories that are widely discussed, all four are internal to what the British called “Hinduism”. The first three theories of dharma are familiar in the Western tradition. To fill out the details of the

theories, consider the question of how we should respond to climate crisis. Each theory would take us in a different direction.

- **Virtue Ethics:** The Good (character, constitution) conditions or produces the Right (choice, action). (Vaiśeṣika, Madhva's Dvaita Vedānta, Jainism)

The Virtue Ethicist would have to determine what the virtuous agent would do in response to climate crisis and then act accordingly. (The theories identified here as examples of Virtue Ethics provide different accounts of the model virtuous agent.) Depending on what model of virtue a Virtue Ethicist elects, their response to climate crisis will differ.

- **Consequentialism:** The Good (end) justifies the Right (choice, action). (Nyāya, Kāśmīra Śaivism, Cārvākā, Buddhism)

Consequentialists would have to determine what the good was (is it happiness, or perhaps environmental health), and then on the basis of this determination, they would have to choose courses of action that maximize these ends. If the consequentialist chooses happiness as their good, given climate crisis, they will have a variety of options to choose from with respect to how they could maximize happiness, and some of these measures might involve mitigating climate crisis. If there was no way to maximize happiness without mitigating climate crisis, all roads for the consequentialist would lead to dealing with this problem as a means to happiness.

- **Deontology:** The Right (procedure) justifies the Good (actions, called duties, or omissions, called rights). (Bhagavad Gītā's Karma Yoga, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā)

Deontologists have two challenges: first they must identify candidate actions or omissions that are good, and then critical reasons or procedures that select some of these good things to do or avoid as duties or rights. With respect to climate crisis, how Deontologists respond will depend upon the two steps.

Interpreters are likely to define these theoretical options differently, deferring to their beliefs about these options. And many of these beliefs may center around figures who promote hybrid theories, such as teleological theories that combine the first two options. However, explication reveals the ways in which basic ethical theories are themselves different positions one can take on THE RIGHT *or* THE GOOD. While there are too many examples of the above ethical theories to name in the South Asian tradition, and as that explicatory work is beyond the scope of this essay (for a closer overview of these traditions, see [Ranganathan 2017a](#)), the above nonitalicized parenthetical examples are within what is conventionally thought of as Hinduism (for a closer look, see [Ranganathan 2019a](#)). If we define Hinduism in terms of its colonial baptism, it includes the examples in italics. Importantly, disagreements about dharma reveal an historically significant fourth option:

- *Bhakti/Yoga: The Right (devotion to the procedural ideal, Īśvara) conditions or produces the Good.*

An exploration of this basic Hindu theory is in order as it provides the historical source not only for decolonizing our study of philosophy, but it has also been politically influential in anti-oppression political movements. With this we can compare what it would contribute to the challenge of climate crisis.

This theory is classically set out in the second-century *Yoga Sūtra* by Patañjali, though it is also defended in sources such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* as "bhakti yoga", and has earlier antecedents in the *Upaniṣad*-s (1000–500 BCE). "Bhakti" is often translated as 'devotion.' Given the prominence of Theism relative to the Western tradition, this theory is often interpreted as a version of Theism, as it involves devotion to Īśvara, the Lord, Sovereignty. Theism, the view that there is an all good, all powerful, all knowing agent, who is God, and what God wants is what we should do, is a version of Virtue Ethics: God for the theist is the supremely virtuous agent. As a version of Virtue Ethics, Theism starts with the goodness of the moral agent (God) and this leads to right choice (either as God's action, or guidance).

Īśvara, in contrast, is not Good, but the procedural ideal of the Right. Recall, the right has to do with choice, agency, procedure, and hence Īśvara is the ideal of these matters.

According to Yoga/Bhakti, in opposition to Virtue Ethics (and Theism), we begin with the devotion to the Right, and as we figure out what this means for us in practice, we bring about the good, which is the perfection of the devotional practice. So, Bhakti/Yoga is the opposite of Theism in so far as it is the opposite of Virtue Ethics.

Metaethically, the *Yoga Sūtra* begins with a distinction between two approaches to mental content. On the one hand, we can engage in Yoga, which consists in the constraint and ordering of mental content in a manner that respects our autonomy as epistemic agents, or we identify with mental content as our explanation. The distinction between explication and interpretation are modern retellings of this contrast. This distinction is of first metaethical importance, for whether we are able to understand the options of moral theory depends upon which method we choose. When we explicate, we are ordering thoughts into logical explanations that protect our autonomy as we do not have to believe or buy any of the explanations so explicated (YS I.2-3). This is because logical validity does not require that we believe the thoughts that we appreciate as forming a valid argument. When we interpret, we treat the facts as we see them as our explanation, and this is encoded as our beliefs—in this case, the epistemic boundaries between ourselves and what we are aware of collapse as we reside in intentional contexts (YS I.4). In undermining our epistemic autonomy from what we contemplate, and by employing propositional attitudes as the explanation, interpretation changes the subject from our thoughts to our attitudes and psychology. This is further discussed as *avidya*, or ignorance (YS II.3). We can spell this metaethical argument out, in standard form, in a disjunctive syllogism implicit in the opening aphorisms of the *Yoga Sūtra*:

PR 1. Either we should organize mental content to understand the options and preserve our autonomy (Yoga), or we simply identify with the facts as we see it (anti-yoga).

PR 2. As we understand that PR 1 is a disjunction of two mutually exclusive methodologies, and not a fact, in understanding PR 1 it is not the case that we can simply identify with the facts as we see it (anti-yoga).

Therefore, we must organize mental content to understand the options and preserve our autonomy (Yoga).

Notably, this is an argument against using propositional attitudes (including beliefs) as an explanation, and one that gets off the ground by pressing the mutually exclusive disjunction of Yoga and anti-yoga, which is a logical distinction that we are aware of when we contemplate the options. It is an argument that does not appeal to what we believe, but rather what we can disagree about, namely Yoga and anti-yoga.

This metaethics sets up a normative ethics where we inhabit the space of Yoga, so described, as a devotional practice to the ideal of Autonomy and Sovereignty, *Īśvara*. This ideal of Sovereignty is in turn comprised of two general traits: it is not constrained by past choices (it is unconservative), and it is free to determine itself into the future (it is self determining) (YS I.24). The normative theory is hence spelled out in terms of three procedural ideals that we ought to be devoted to as practitioners of Yoga. First, there is devotion to *Īśvara* itself (*Īśvara praṇidhānāna*), and in turn the practice of the two essential procedural traits of *Īśvara*: unconservatism (*tapas*) and self-governance (*svādhyāya*). Essential to the practice of *svādhyāya* is the determination of one's own chosen values or norms (*iṣṭa-devatā*) (YS. II.44).

Persons on this account are things that thrive given their own sovereignty, which includes nonhuman animals, and large-scale bodies like the Earth. Taking these seriously as persons is a matter of moral theory, as is the identification of one's chosen values. The outcome of the process of the practice of Yoga is autonomy (*kaivalya*). However, as it is not a version of Consequentialism, this end does not justify the practice. Rather, devotion to the procedural ideal provides meaning to one's practice and this transforms into a practice of autonomy via a moral cleansing (*dharmameghasamādhi*) that consists of abandoning interpretation or ego-based understanding in every context (YS IV 29-34). Importantly,

our relationship to other people is not founded on shared values, as each one of us as a practitioner has to determine that for ourselves. Rather, it is our shared interest in autonomy. This provides the foundation for political acts of solidarity in the face of violent opposition and for resetting the moral order when it becomes oppressive (for more on Yoga and moral recalibration, see [Ranganathan 2019b](#)).

A steady state of *affliction*, what we often call trauma, is explained in the *Yoga Sūtra* as originating with anti-yoga, namely interpretation. Interpretation is ignorance on a Yoga account as it changes the focus away from propositions, which we can reason about, to the psychology that enwraps it in an intentional context. All interpreters, like the Trumpy, claim to be understanding what they are interpreting (such as the election), but are in fact talking about themselves (their attitudes). This collapse of what one is aware of with the power of awareness gives rise to a false self, called *egotisim* (*asmitā*) (YS II.6). In this state, individuals experience emotional paroxysms because of their inability to reason and problem solve. Like the Trumpy, they are happy when they experience what is in accordance with their beliefs and are upset when they do not. This constitutes being stuck in affliction (YS II.3). This is a state of violence, where the afflicted experience the violence of their affliction and also commit violence aimed at suppressing what is not in keeping with their beliefs. This analysis of trauma explains it as the imposition of a perspective via interpretation on the individual, from which they cannot free themselves. When this imposition of an interpretation comes from outside, especially as it relates to THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD, we call it colonialism (cf. [LaMonica 2021](#); [Butt 2013](#)). In this case, the colonized are expected to conform to the imposed interpretation. We too can be the origins of the interpretation we live under. This gives rise to very real non-ideal political arrangements where the colonial interpretation is enforced with violence.

The *Yoga Sūtra* includes a very influential non-ideal ethical theory—a theory of what to do outside of ideal conditions of practice. These are the famous Eight Limbs of Yoga, which begins with the political commitment to activism. The first and most famous of the limbs is described by Patañjali as a universal obligation, called Yama (YS II. 30-36). It consists in nonviolent, direct action (*ahimsā*) to allow people to participate in social facts (*satya*) that reveals: people not deprived of their requirements (*asteya*), personal boundaries respected (*brahmacharaya*) and the practitioner as a non-hoarder (*aparigrahaya*). Importantly, a concern for the truth comes second after the disruption of harm, effectively shelving interpretation, which is an explanation by way of what one takes to be true. Truth so understood is something we discover, and it is the truth of a world of autonomous individuals. This activism, which has the effect of getting opponents to renounce their hostility (YS II.36), exemplifies a devotion to Sovereignty, the activity of unconservatism while valuing self-governance. But it is also explicitly social. Having engaged in this activism, one can then proceed on to the Niyama (the second limb) where the practitioner commits to the three basic practices of Yoga, while working on being content and pure in this commitment (YS II.32). The third limb is *āsana*, which is literally described as the comfortable steady state of continuous yogic practice (YS II.46-8). In contemporary yoga talk, “*āsana*” is the word for postural exercise. This exercise bears a resemblance to what is discussed in the *Yoga Sūtra* to the extent that postures are ways to practice the three basic procedural commitments of Yoga. This and all further yogic practice happens within the context of the original activism: Yama.

Patañjali’s discussion of Yama sets out a diagnosis of violence and a political strategy for a response. The origin of violence is trauma according to the *Yoga Sūtra*, and the end to that violence is an activism of harm disruption, itself an example of non-harm, which has the effect of getting one’s opponent to renounce their hostility (YS II.30-35). What is not widely appreciated is that M.K. Gandhi derived his political philosophy from the *Yoga Sūtra*, and that Patañjali had already set out in the *Yoga Sūtra* the strategy of nonviolent direct action (cf. [Puri 2015](#), who shows Gandhi extensively crediting Patañjali for his politics in his collected works). Gandhi’s uptake of this was influential on Martin Luther King’s implementation of nonviolent direct action in the American Civil Rights movement ([King](#)

1958). Many contemporary progressive activist movements, whether Black Lives Matter, or Direct Action Everywhere, follow these models. What is often considered progressive politics today, which takes an inclusive approach to personhood, and treats conservatism in general as what is to be abandoned in favor of self-governance and the determination of one's own freedom from the past via the unconservatism of direct action, is Yoga. As reviewed, in many cases there is a direct historical connection to the *Yoga Sūtra* and progressive politics. A hallmark of this progressive approach, already in the *Yoga Sūtra*, is that what relates people are not shared values (as each of us determines what our own values are, at least, ideally), but rather shared interests in being unconservative and self-governing. This interest cuts across natural traits, such as sex, gender, sexual orientation and species.

Returning to the issue of climate crisis, Yoga/Bhakti provides three levels of response. First, the yogi/bhakta would have to engage in the metaethical or metaphilosophical activity of explicating the ethical and scientific options. Such a comparison will help in the determination of the winning option. Normatively this means that the yogi/bhakta is already involved in devotion to the ideal of procedure, *Īśvara* (Sovereignty), and thereby practicing Sovereignty's two essential traits of unconservatively understanding radically different options while making room for their own self-governance to choose their own values. This then leads to the non-ideal political practice (the *Yamas*) of having to mitigate against harms, such as climate crisis, that would interfere with the practice of unconservatism and self-governance. This will be political and require taking stands on issues of public policy and our relationship to persons of other species, including the Earth. The yogi/bhakta would be in a position to identify experts (such as scientists) who are knowledgeable about a topic, such as climate crisis, by virtue of their own explicatory (yogic) research focused on pursuing and organizing the data. Their advice would be important, but they would be acknowledged as experts by way of their own explicatory research, not their virtue.

In contrast to the Virtue Ethicist (of which Theism is an example), the yogi/bhakta does not look to the good agent to provide guidance. Indeed, according to the yogi/bhakta, simply looking to the good agent to provide guidance, without going through these three steps, would be a recipe for interpretation. Guidance is rather self-generated by these levels of yogic practice. When the yogi/bhakta acts morally and politically, they do so on their own accord as sovereign individuals, not as followers.

Explicated we see that not only is the South Asian and "Hindu" tradition a remarkably vibrant tradition of moral philosophy, with a diversity of basic options, but also decolonially influential on a global scale. Correlatively, this is ignored in the literature, which prefers to discuss South Asia as being bereft of any moral philosophy while being predominantly religious.

### 2.3. Methodological Outcomes

In concluding this section, it is noteworthy that whether one finds religion in South Asia, or an extended moral philosophical discussion, depends upon which methodology one adopts. If one interprets with the Western tradition providing the doxastic content, then we treat it as the secular and anything from outside of this tradition appears mysterious, non-logical, beyond the pale of secular explanation, traditional and, in a word, religious. Call this idea of secularism "Secularism<sub>2</sub>". In a Westernized world that assumes Secularism<sub>2</sub>, only the Western tradition is regarded as secular. It is with this approach to BIPOC traditions that the British decided that South Asians had to have a religion they called "Hinduism". If we go back to one of the earliest sources for the use of "secularism", there it was defined as 'free thought' (cf. Holyoake 1896, p. 51). We could reprise this definition of secularism as free and open philosophical exploration. Call this Secularism<sub>1</sub>. Explicated, we find that the South Asian tradition, which the British called "Hinduism", is Secularism<sub>1</sub>.

Secularism<sub>2</sub> gets off the ground by defining itself in terms of not being religious. Secularism<sub>1</sub>, in contrast, is not defined in terms of what it is not. Rather, it is secular because of what it is: logical and philosophical. By using the idea of Secularism<sub>1</sub> to identify what the British called “Hinduism”, we are identifying something that never needed, and never used, the idea of religion to make sense of itself, as it was too busy being philosophical. In other words, for the purposes of colonization, the British decided to rebrand a vibrant tradition of Secular<sub>1</sub> philosophical freedom into a religion, which would then have no part to play in the Secular<sub>2</sub> administration of South Asia. This move cements the subservience of the indigenous philosophical tradition in South Asia to Western rule and conveniently exempts Western rule from non-Western moral criticism. The political purpose of creating “Hinduism” as a religion was to get rid of South Asian moral philosophy.

Yoga in particular as a unique moral theory from South Asia entails the normative importance of individuals engaging in the determination of their own conception of the good (via *svādhyāya*), with the practical experimentation that comes along with *tapas* (or anti-conservatism). John Stuart Mill, officer of the British East India Company, at once recommends this theory as part of his doctrine of a comprehensive Liberalism in *On Liberty*, and simultaneously implies that South Asians are among the racially immature who would do better with an Akbar (the famous Mogul ruler of India) as a dictator (*On Liberty* I.10). In this case, he was hardly advancing a novel theory—and as a colonizer, he was demonstrably appropriating and taking credit for a theory that predated him (by millennia) in the part of the world he had a hand in colonizing. Explicated, we see that disagreeing on (moral/dharma) philosophy, openly, was how South Asians had dealt with each other historically, and it is also a fundamental element of Yoga. At roughly the time that Socrates (as depicted in the *Apology*) was being put to death by the Athenian court for failing to uphold the values of his community (defined by the court), South Asians valued those willing to leave community and strike out on their own as *śramaṇas*—famous ones including Buddha and Mahavira. Explicated, they were the articulators of two respective philosophical theories (a form of Consequentialism and Virtue Ethics, respectively). Interpreted, by way of the West, they are religious leaders of Buddhism and Jainism.

### 3. The West: Imagination vs. History

In the previous section we reviewed a disjunctive syllogism, implicit in the opening lines of the *Yoga Sūtra*, which makes the case for an explicatory methodology, without appeal to beliefs. We have to acknowledge it as a way to appreciate the possibilities of disagreeing about methodology. But if we pursue an explication of the South Asian tradition, what we find is not religion but philosophy, and lots of moral philosophy. If we want to recreate the usual distinctions between secular Western thought and Hindu religious belief, we need to interpret from the Western perspective. This allows us to recreate the racial disparity between positions that are regarded as secular and those that are regarded as religious. We can summarize this also as a disjunctive syllogism.

PR 1. Either we can interpret the South Asian tradition on the basis of the West and recreate the familiar distinction between Hindu religion and its beliefs, and secular (Western) thought, or we can explicate it as a tradition of philosophy, including moral philosophy.

PR 2. Explication will not allow us to recreate the familiar distinction between Hindu religion and its beliefs, and secular (Western) thought; it only reveals philosophical theory and disagreement.

Therefore, we need to interpret the South Asian tradition on the basis of the West to recreate the familiar distinction between Hindu religion and its beliefs, and secular (Western) thought.

In appreciating the argument for Western interpretation, we are not considering an argument to the effect that the Western interpretation of South Asia is the better option.

Indeed, when we look at the question of dharma, interpretation renders it inexplicable, irrational, and multiplies meanings of “dharma” beyond their means. Interpretation violates Ockham’s Razor. When we explicate, we stick close to the expectations of logic, and reduce various theoretical uses of ‘dharma’ to a disagreement about the basic concept of DHARMA, THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. Explication is both reasonable and parsimonious, which is to say, in keeping with Ockham’s Razor. When we explicate, we pursue the disagreement across theories of dharma to locate the singular concept of DHARMA (THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD), which theories of dharma disagree about. This is also reflected in the case of the US election. For the explicatory poll worker there is only one thing to keep track of: the election. Ballots and vote counting procedures are all part of this one thing. For the Trumpy, there is the election that Trump was supposed to have won, and then various conspiratorial entities (like ordinary vote counting procedures, and cases of ballots) out to deny Trump’s victory. In the paranoia of the interpreter, whose beliefs are challenged by a world of diverse perspectives, entities are multiplied beyond necessity to account for how things do not conform to their beliefs. This is not merely a problem for Western interpretation, but for all interpretation that has to contend with explanatory failure.

Explication makes rational sense of the South Asian tradition as it sticks close to logic. For this reason, it would make rational sense of any tradition. Interpretation is an abject failure in part because it foists its irrationality (of prioritizing belief over logical validity) on to what it tries to understand, such as the South Asian tradition. And yet, if our goal is to reconstruct ordinary beliefs about the religion Hinduism, and the secular West, we need to interpret from a Western vantage. This further entails that this way of understanding what the British called “Hinduism” is foreign to the indigenous tradition. In other words, using belief as an explanation of Hinduism, and understanding it as a religion, are all Western impositions. This imposition happened in history, beginning with Western colonization. In contrast, explication—Secularism<sub>1</sub>—is the indigenous South Asian option.

### 3.1. *Interpreting (In) the Western Tradition*

If we were to interpret the Western tradition in terms of what participants in this tradition believe, we would reify the doxastic commitments that come with this tradition. Our starting point would be that purely Western thought is secular philosophy, and BIPOC traditions are religious. Indeed, the Western tradition is dominated by the idea of *logos*, wherefrom we derive our word ‘logic’, and so it is presumptively reasonable. We would then use our beliefs about what religions are like, brought to us by the Western tradition, to try to understand all religions. We would assume, as is usually done, that religion is about gods and spiritual matters, which contrasts with scientific investigation—even though, explicated, much of Asian ‘religion’ is atheistic and naturalistic. We find this atheism in Sāṅkhya, but also any position that rejects theism (a version of Virtue Ethics) would strictly speaking be atheistic. Yoga is hence atheistic. Virtue Ethics was a minority position in South Asia. Moreover, we would not have any reason to believe that what the British named Hinduism was just an ancient secular tradition of philosophical investigation. Just the opposite, our own interpretive understanding of the Western tradition that produces the category of Hinduism as a religion would lead us to try to understand Hinduism like other religions.

Finally, if we interpreted the West using beliefs provided to us by this tradition, colonialism would seem like a footnote because it is not something that happens to the Western tradition. Indeed, using interpretation, we could always select from the West the batch of beliefs that paint it most favorably, allowing us to perpetually sanitize our account of the West, asserting claims such as, ‘yes colonialism is wrong, but it’s not an essential part of the Western tradition’ (for a different approach, see [Mills 1997](#); [Pateman 1988](#)). Correlatively, interpretation itself as a method of explanation founded on belief would seem like the default option, without alternative. The intellectual production of this tradition would hence be treated as the gold standard for evaluating other traditions. Hence, participants in this tradition would not think about the need to treat the Western tradition



as based on philosophically contingent ideas, with political implications. The intellectual history of the West is rather treated as the default secular resource of critical inquiry.

### 3.2. Explicating the Western Tradition

To explicate the West is to do what is uncommon. It is to take stock of the various facts of its historical development and look to reasons and theories, internal to the tradition, that would entail those outcomes. When we are successful, we would find that the political conclusions of this tradition are themselves entailments of theories and premises internal to it. Perhaps the most significant historical series of facts of the Western tradition is that it is a global, colonizing tradition. Every continent on the face of the Earth has been colonized by the Western tradition in some form. The second, and subsidiary, fact of this tradition is that it is where we get the idea of ‘religion’ from. A suitable explication of this tradition would hence explain how this category was itself an outcome of more basic theories and premises. In explicating these historical trends, we are *not explaining them* by way of our beliefs, which would be an interpretation. Indeed, the reasons that we uncover that entail the political outcomes of this tradition might be reasons that we reject. Rather, the strength of the explanation is that it relies upon historically available reasons that entail the relevant outcomes. And, if we are interested in being more rigorous, we can treat the explication of the South Asian tradition (a tradition of explication itself) as a control group, against which we can compare the development of the West.

If we explicated the West, we would go back to its earliest assertions and note that the ancient Greeks had one word for speech, language, thought and reason: *logos*. Accordingly, thought is what we say, or the meaning of what we say, as is reason. We could call this the Linguistic Account of Thought (LAT). This model of thought connects ancient Greek thought to the contemporary manifestations of the West in Continental and Analytic philosophy in so far as LAT is assumed by both strands of the West (for an account of the ubiquity of the theory and the problems it causes for translation, see [Ranganathan 2018a](#)). The problem with this model of thought is that it contributes to a blurring of thought and belief by identifying thought with what we say in language. As noted in Section 2, and in light of insights gained from the work of Tarski, another way to say “*p* is true” is to just say, *p*. But then our articulation of the thought *p*, and our *belief that p*, are indistinguishable. But if we cannot distinguish between the two, then an explanation by way of thought is also an explanation by way of belief. Hence the Western tradition grounded in LAT encourages interpretation as the default approach to understanding as, traditionally, it cannot distinguish between thinking and believing.

The linguistic underpinnings of this particular model of thought also conflate thinking with *human* community membership characterized by shared language—hence the tradition ends up being anthropocentric and communitarian. And so we find in Plato and Aristotle this understanding of the human individual in terms of their place in society, ethical questions as equivalent to questions of how to get on in one’s society (both in Plato’s *Republic* and in Aristotle’s *Ethics*), and the problematization of human outsiders who do not share our views—explicitly discussed in Book X of the *Republic*. The conflation of thinking clearly and human community membership is explicit in Plato, who treats the city state as the soul writ large. Interpretation in this tradition is hence a matter of one’s communal traditions. Hence, as it expands via interpretation, it does so by applying its beliefs to alien traditions. However, the problem is that foreigners do not share languages with us, and hence it is difficult to see how they share our beliefs. Interpretively, they seem puzzling. Aristotle’s position on the natural subservience of the slave (Politics 1254b16–21) was a way to reconcile the outsider to one’s own culture, as people became slaves by conquest and were often from non-Greek, racially distinct communities ([Jiménez 2014](#); [Zack 2018](#), p. 7).

By the time the Romans inherit these ideas, they have a solution for dealing with outsiders who apparently do not accept their linguistically encoded communal standards: colonization. Colonization is the intentional application of one’s outlook (one’s beliefs) on the colonized, who must then find a way to live up to these expectations or perish.

Colonization is the political application of interpretation, already a pressure generated by the more basic LAT. This political outcome effectively forces others to be part of one's communal standards. And the Romans also develop a term for normalized traditions that are subservient within the imperial fold but that are not necessarily those of the imperial norm: *religio* (religion), which was distinguished from *superstitio* (for more about this history, see [Beard et al. 1998](#); [Gordon 2008](#)). With this innovation, the Western tradition has a way to come to terms with what cannot be reduced to its tradition, which it theorizes as universal. T. Masuzawa's wonderfully titled work states this clearly: *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* ([Masuzawa 2005](#)). European universalism is preserved in talk of world religions as the Western tradition gets to decide what counts as a religion. This is a process that repeats itself. Yet, originally, it was paradoxical.

On the one hand, labeling a tradition as having *religio* was a way to insulate the Roman Empire from criticism, as the position was cast as a matter of tradition, not moral and political philosophy. Yet, deciding that a tradition had *religio* (as opposed to *superstitio*) was a political prize within the colonial context. Jews were apparently recognized as having *religio*, but ancient Christians were not, and were instead persecuted. In time that changed. Constantine's conversion to Christianity and its institution as the official religion ([Lenski 2014](#)) managed to further appropriate an alien tradition by making it the official position of Western power. With this, various other non-Western, indigenous, but nevertheless European traditions were stamped out and marginalized.

By the time Islam came about many centuries later, it inherited many of these features of the West, including the distinction between philosophy (Western intellectual tradition) and religion. Islamic thinkers continued the conversation with Western philosophy and seemed to also adopt the Western idea of thought as speech.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the idea of there being an 'official religion' had become commonplace in the Western tradition by this time. And hence when the British showed up in South Asia, it was not a stretch to reach back to the Roman idea of religion to classify South Asians as a way to normalize the subservience of the *religified* other, while also nodding to the Western expectation that communities have official religions. "Spirituality" has a history within Christian thought but has increasingly come to label the same topic of religion in English from the twentieth century on, except with the expectation that spirituality is unorganized whereas religion is official ([Oman 2013](#), pp. 26–28; cf. [Solomon 2002](#)).

Alongside of this, we could also explicate a history of Western philosophy that is relatively unconscious of its colonial exploits, because beliefs about being colonized are far from this tradition as its role has been that of the colonizer. But it shows up in very peculiar tensions between a tradition of philosophy that requires explication to proceed, and a tradition that theorizes by way of interpretation—as exemplified by recent Continental and Analytic philosophers. In this tradition, when the topic should really be thought, we have discussion of belief, as though they amount to the same thing. Knowledge itself is theorized as a kind of belief in this tradition (cf. [Gettier 1963](#), and the voluminous literature on this), or a propositional attitude ([Williamson 2002](#), p. 34). And while at least one influential Western thinker, due to their interest in logic, notes how anti-rational intentional contexts are ([Quine 1956](#)), and that indeed we need to use logic to understand aliens (which would be explication), this same thinker feels the need to clarify this activity as interpreting aliens in terms of what one takes to be true ([Quine 1960](#), pp. 58, 59 fn1). And so we find that Quine, one of the few logicians who had the good sense to call out intentional contexts, problematically makes the frequent undergraduate error of confusing logical explanation with truth. This is the power of interpretation: it overrides reasoning. The political upshot of this, however, is that Secularism<sub>2</sub> Western philosophy is also racialized and turned into something that requires using Western doxastic resources, such as belief and interpretation, even though these undermine logic and philosophy.

### 3.3. South Asia, the Pre-Colonial Control Group, and the Colonial Experiment

Our control tradition is the South Asian tradition, which *lacked* LAT. Indeed, the idea that language could be the foundation of what is thinkable was criticized in a widely endorsed (though variously theorized) distinction between two truths: absolute truth or *paramārtha satya* (*p*), and conventional, provisional or worldly truth, *saṃvṛti* or *vyāvahārika satya* (*x* believes that *p*). Linguistic truth is at most conventional truth—it embodies the considered propositional attitudes of a linguistic community. Ultimate truth (which all disagreed about) was something beyond human convention. Owing to this criticism of human convention, South Asians in ancient times did not identify the thinkable with community standards, and they thought far more widely about dharma: it often was cosmological in significance. Correlatively, while there was an ancient tradition in the West of persecuting philosophers (starting with Socrates, then Jesus, Boethius, Hypatia, etc.), in ancient times it is very difficult to find any evidence of this in South Asia. In this respect the contrast is sharp.

Of course, once British colonialism occurs, much changes. First, after the colonial period, when South Asia, and Hindus in general, are understood not in terms of their indigenous tradition of Secularism<sub>1</sub>, but in terms of being a religion, we find the development of religious belief, but under conditions of duress. One more recent example that highlights this kind of colonial pressure is the creation or definition of Balinese Hinduism. South Asian influences in and around Bali go back millennia. From the 15th century on, Islamic rulers targeted these areas for control. Upon the colonial independence of Indonesia from the Dutch, and after much of Indonesia had been Islamized, the constitution guaranteed religious freedom, but Islamists in power sought to constrain what could count as a religion. They only recognized three as being genuine religions: Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Other local traditions were recognized as merely possessing beliefs but were denied the status of having a religion. Adhering to monotheism was necessary but insufficient to gain recognition as possessing a religion. Groups without official religious status were targeted for conversion (Ramstedt 2005, p. 9). In response, the Balinese decided to organize a Hindu religious identity, but as one commentator notes, the “Balinese had to reinvent themselves as the Hindus that they were already supposed to be” (Picard 2005, 57). Eventually they did gain some recognition as proponents of a monotheistic Hinduism that met the concerns of the Indonesian ministry of religion (McDaniel 2013). Far from being an anomalous occurrence, this re-presents what happens to Hindus when they have to meet external expectations of having a religion, beginning with the British.

A second variety of Hindu religious belief generation can be found via the adoption of interpretation by South Asian intellectuals who grew up under colonialism, which then seeks to re-present Hinduism in ways that show it to be competitive with standards and aspirations prominent in the colonizing tradition. Characteristic of this exercise is an explicit endorsement of the Western take on South Asia (a prime example is S. Radhakrishnan’s *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, OUP 1940).

A third notable variety of Hindu belief generation is ongoing and part of the project of right-wing Hindu Nationalism. Unlike the Secularism<sub>1</sub> past of pre-colonial Hinduism (namely, South Asia), this ‘conservative’ form of Hinduism denies the room for open-ended philosophical dissent in a Hindu jurisdiction (for more on this development, see Sharma 2007, 2011). Rarely recognized, Hindu Nationalism relies both on the idea of Hinduism, and the idea of India as a nation, which are Western in origin. It is hence not indigenous (contrary to its representations) but (ironically) a continuation of the Western tradition. Nationalism is typically a political identity founded on a linguistic identity that provides an ethnic criterion for nationality. This mode of Westernization based on LAT occurred during British colonization with the creation of a “Hindu” language of “Hindi” written in Devanagari, and a “Muslim” language of “Urdu” written in Arabic script, even though they were the same spoken language: Hindustani (King 1994).

With being Hindu rendered linguistic, a nationalism based on this identity was not far away. Hence, while it claims to be conservative, it is a new development, which consists

in the internalization of Western interpretations of Hinduism as something other than Secularism<sub>1</sub>. This variety of Hindu belief generation is particularly confusing for Western critics of Hindu Nationalism, who perceive it as a threat to secularism—which they only understand in terms of Secularism<sub>2</sub>. Hindu Nationalists, in contrast, tend to view Western academics as themselves neocolonial actors and Secularism<sub>2</sub> as a means of further denying what is indigenous and precolonial to South Asia. But instead of affirming the indigenous Secularism<sub>1</sub> of the Hindu tradition, Hindu Nationalism—and its usual critics—buy the Western idea that being Hindu involves certain shared beliefs that are Hindu (for an account of the formation of these beliefs, see [Chhibber and Verma 2018](#)). Lay Hindus tend to get particularly confused as the right-wing position is often called “Hindutva”—meaning ‘being Hindu’—and academic criticisms of Hindutva (cf. [Dismantling Global Hindutva: Multidisciplinary Perspectives \(Conference\) \(2021\)](#)) appear from afar to be criticisms of being Hindu, which many Hindus find offensive. This quagmire, explicated, is a tragedy of errors that relies upon Western colonialism to define the options for Hindus. Explicated, decolonially, a Hindu state would be Secular<sub>1</sub>.

In all three cases, the generation of Hindu belief involves the internalization of Western beliefs that Hindus then attempt to live up to. In this process, Hindus will likely be unconscious of the process as they will identify the Western interpretation as their own self-understanding of themselves as Hindus.

### 3.4. Explicating Western Interpretation

Explicating the West, and then following the changes that occur as a function of Western interpretation, including the colonization of South Asia, provides a historical, non-anachronistic look at the development of Hindu beliefs. Prior to the colonization of South Asia we can see the expansion of the West as a colonizing tradition with the idea of religion as a way to subordinate BIPOC traditions relative to the West. By the time it reaches South Asia, the West has gone through historical changes, such as identification of ‘official religions’ as a means of maintaining the West’s hegemony as the foundation of Secularism<sub>2</sub>. The colonization of South Asians who then take on Western interpretation continues the project, but this time internalized by South Asians. On a Yoga analysis, we see that this is a *kleśa* (an affliction) brought about by the ignorance of interpretation. But it has real political impact on how Hindus then understand themselves within a Westernized world. Instead of adopting a South Asian, decolonial, explicatory approach (Yoga) to their own tradition and the West, it is ordinary to buy the Western interpretation via the project of generating Hindu religious beliefs. The exception to these trends would be the genuinely orthodox Hindus, with traditions that predate British colonialism, who have moral philosophical practices and identities that do not involve the West. These are traditions that predate the minting of Hindu religious identity, and there are numerous such moral philosophical practices in South Asia.

## 4. Objections

This paper is structured around explication, which allows us to appreciate that: (a) we have a methodological choice in pursuing research (we can choose explication or interpretation, but not both at once), and (b) these choices have different outcomes. The argument for explication does not rest on what the author or anyone believes. Rather, it is an argument that begins by an appeal to reasoning (not belief), and then asks us to account for historical facts in terms of historically available reasons. Interpretation changes the topic from thoughts that we can reason about to the psychology of the interpreter. Any argument that relies upon thoughts the interpreter does not believe will appear deficient. One cannot exhaustively respond to all such complaints as they will vary according to the psychology of the interpreter. But in general we can recognize them because they do not actually engage with the argument. Interpreters will typically complain that explicatory essays proceed by way of too many fast arguments, and appeal to “facts” that are unsubstantiated.

In response, explicators can note that the difficulty that interpreters are having is a function of their expectation that they have to believe the premises of the arguments that are considered, when this is not required to follow the argument. Secondly, an explicatory argument does substantiate various conclusions by way of rendering their premises clear. So, historical facts, such as the invention of religion by the Western tradition, the creation of “Hinduism” the religion by the British, and the multiplication of meanings of ‘dharma’ in the literature, are substantiated by rendering explicit the premises that give rise to these innovations. Ironically, in many cases, these premises are themselves a deviation from reasoning: interpretation.

An objection that might seem nonmethodological relies on the belief that Hindus from ancient times believed in deities and other spiritual entities. Call this the *they really are religious* objection.

The *they really are religious* objection is dependent upon interpretation. To take an analogy, consider physics, which we can either interpret or explicate. If we interpret physics, we understand physicists as having beliefs about gravity and other unseen forces. Gravity is hence presented thus:

- Physicists believe in the existence of gravity, an unseen force operating between large bodies.

This is an *intentional context* like *I believe it is raining outside* and will hence have all the logical problems of intentional contexts. The first problem is that logic does not help us understand such states. These contexts are about the psychology of the physicist, not the proposition (*gravity is an unseen force operating between large bodies*) that is trapped in the gaze of the physicist. This is hence an interpretive account of gravity, based on belief. But one could in contrast explicate physical theory, and then we would find that gravity figures in a theory of physics, which contains premises (about gravity), which are propositions (not propositional attitudes, like belief) that logically entail conclusions about empirical observations, which could then be tested. Explicated, we see rather that gravity is useful for physicists because it is not the subject of belief. That is why one can be quite agnostic in science while engaging in the testing of hypotheses: no part of the enterprise requires that you believe what you are entertaining. The same is true for philosophy—explicated!

Similarly, we always have the option to explicate or interpret *prima facie* religious positions. With *devas*, we could interpret Hindu claims about *devas*, or we could explicate them. If we interpret them, we cast talk about *devas* within propositional attitudes, which logic cannot help us understand. This problematizes propositions about *devas* as anti-rational and not simply part of philosophical discourse. This supports the idea that talk of *devas* is not philosophy but religious. Or, we could explicate Hindu discussions on *devas*, and then we find that Hindus entertained theories, which were either about *devas*, or not, and these propositions played a role in moral (dharma) theories that entailed conclusions about what we ought to normatively expect and accept. Just as in the case of physics, once we explicate, we do not have to have beliefs about the entities we invoke in explanation. Explicated, we see that “*deva*” stood for an external, personal norm or value. The named *deva* was always a norm or value of ethical theory, from the very start in the Vedas.

The earliest source for what the British called Hinduism is the Vedas. They are composed from roughly 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, are comprised of an early part, which consists of the chants (*Mantras*) and the ritual manuals (*Brāhmaṇas*), and a later part comprised of the Forest Books (*Āraṇyaka*), and the Dialogues (*Upaniṣads*), authored in the second part of the Vedic period. In the first part, *devas*, which were in most cases natural forces or observable features of the climate and environment, were invoked as part of a Consequentialist practice, where these forces were regarded as requiring sacrifice, and properly appeased they would deliver the natural outcomes that aspirants desired, such as relief from sickness, death and material failure. Why is this a version of Consequentialism? Explicated, Consequentialism is the theory that the means are justified by way of their supposed ends. Here the sacrifice to the natural forces was thought to be justified by way of the supposed ends. In many cases, this Consequentialism was based on empirical

observations. An example of this is that the natural forces in one's body, such as fire (metabolism), had to be fed to bring about good ends, otherwise bad things would happen. The early Vedic view was deeply naturalistic.

After some time, we find that the people of the Vedic tradition lost confidence in the Consequentialist outlook because of worries about moral luck, a sense that the paradigm was unjust (as it involved inflicting death on sacrificial animals that one wished to avoid oneself) and because the paradigm was resentful as it defined the goods of life in terms of the bads. Specifically, the goods of life had to do with survival, material security and freedom from harassment by others. The bads had to do with sickness and death, a lack of material security, and war. The tradition then switched to an opposite procedural approach to moral choice, that prioritizes the Right over the Good. In this case, reality was reconceived as radically procedural, as a matter of Growth, Expansion and Development (Brahman), and the self (*ātmā*) existed in this substance. Now, the goods of life were reconceived as a function of personal autonomy, and not as a function of pleasing natural forces (for an elaboration of this history, see Ranganathan 2018c). Hence, the various *devas* of the naturalistic paradigm were eliminated (cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9).

In the much later *Yoga Sūtra*, we find the codification of the two alternative modes of explanation—the external explanation of nature characterized by causality, and the internal explanation of the self, characterized by responsibility. Here, the term '*deva*' is used to denote the values or norms that one owns as a matter of self-determination (YS II.48). What is often not noticed, in relationship to Yoga, is that the very famous tableau of Viṣṇu (see Figure 1) and Lakṣmī (see Figure 2) sitting on the cosmic snake Ādi Śeṣa (Figures 1 and 3) floating over an external wavy ocean, is a graphical depiction of Yoga as a normative ethical practice (in Book II) of the *Yoga Sūtra*, floating over Yoga as a metaethical practice (articulated in Book 1), where it is figuratively described as the subsiding of external waves of influence (see Figure 3).



**Figure 1.** In this image we can see the characteristic depiction of Viṣṇu with his activities that do not constrain him, such as the disk and mace. We also see him holding the conch, the symbol of objectivity (what we can perceive from various vantages and what appears different according to vantage), as well as Lakṣmī, who is also Padma, the Lotus. In being distinct from these activities, Viṣṇu shows himself to be *tapas*: unconservative, self-challenging, activity, which is at once responsible for, but not constrained by, one's own activity. Ādi Śeṣa, the cosmic snake, also Īśvara Praṇidhāna (devotion to Sovereignty), is seen with him. Reprinted with permission from Bajirao 1007 from Wiki and licensed under the attribution and share alike license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>).



**Figure 2.** Here Lakṣmī who is also Padma (the Lotus) is sitting on herself. She is hence governing herself, and inspecting herself (as Lotuses she holds up). She is the yogic practice of *svādhyāya*: self-study, self-determination. She also embodies many other ideals of Yoga, including: *svarūpevasthanam* / “abiding in one’s form” (YS I.3), *svarūpa-pratiṣṭhā* / “standing on one’s form” (YS IV.34), and more literally *sva-svāmī* / “own master” (YS II.22) (picture by author).



**Figure 3.** This is a picture of Ādi Śeṣa (*Īśvara praṇidhāna*) holding and being devoted to Viṣṇu (*tapas*) and Lakṣmī (*svādhyāya*), described as the essential practice of Yoga (YS II.1) floating on top of waves (YS I. I.2-3). Lakṣmī, *svādhyāya*, is also depicted here as forming a bond with her chosen ideal, as per *Yoga Sūtra* II.44 depiction of *svādhyāya* (image by Denis Vostrikov, *Canva*).

Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī—*tapas* and *svādhyāya*—comprise the traits of Sovereignty (YS I.24). Ādi Śeṣa, ever devoted to these two procedural ideals, is Devotion to Sovereignty (*Īśvara Praṇidhāna*). These deities simply are the procedural ideals of the practice of Bhakti/Yoga. Viewed this way, the very many stories of these three, including the *Rāmāyana*, or the *Mahābhārata*, are thought experiments of how things turn out when these values are valued, or compromised. Viṣṇu’s appearance at key junctures in the articulation of the philosophy of Yoga (in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and the epics) is hence also not accidental but part of

the explication of the theory. In many cases, these procedural ideals deliver the moral philosophy lectures themselves.

Śiva (see Figures 4–6), depicted as the ideal experiencing subject, and his consort Śakti (who is depicted as the full range of his emotional experiences, seen in Figure 7), are associated with teleological ethical theories, such as Kāśmīrī Śivism, or Vaiśeṣika.



**Figure 4.** Depicted here is the classic Śiva Liṅga (phallus), where Śiva, the ideal experiencer, is within and emerging from the experience of the yoni (vulva) that is Śakti (picture by pphl, *Canva*).



**Figure 5.** Here Śiva as the ideal experiencer is seated in meditation (picture by Sandeep Singh, *Canva*). He embodies the virtues of the ideal experiencer, unphased by turbulent events. Also, Śiva brings about good outcomes by way of meditative experiencing. For instance, the space around him in meditation is serene. Those who awaken Śiva from meditation are said to be burnt by a flame that originates from his third eye.

Here too, the various stories associated with these two are thought experiments of these ethical values of Consequentialism or Virtue Ethics, in various contexts.

As Hindus were not burdened with the linguistic account of thought, they were free to depict their moral values in art, and literature. Devotional practice that includes such artifacts is a way for devotees to formalize their relationship to these moral ideals and norms, and to rely on them in their own practice of dharma (as per the theory they adopt). Explicated, these values and norms do the moral philosophical explanation of what an appropriate ethical practice should look like. Disagreements, then, between different schools of which of the many values and ideals to venerate, are moral philosophically



significant. Western interpretation recasts propositions about these various values and norms as free-standing propositional attitudes in need of support.



**Figure 6.** Classically, Śiva is depicted as the Lord of Dance, Naṭarāja, who experiences from a state of flux. In this classic depiction he is seen dancing on a demon (picture by Lathish, *Canva*).



**Figure 7.** Here we see three expressions of Śakti, Śiva's consort. On the left we have Pārvatī (picture by Robertobinetti70, *Canva*), who looks very much like Lakṣmī: attractive. Then in the middle we have Durgā (picture by Pabitra Chakraborty, *Canva*), who is attractive but also fierce, displaying various weapons. On the right we have Kālī (picture by anonymous, *Canva*), who is outraged over the evil she destroys.

Of course, many Hindu schools and traditions, especially those that do not formulate their practice in terms of ideals, simply do not talk about *devas*, or provide arguments for eliminating them from moral theory. The Pūrva Mīmāṃsā tradition is one prominent example. The *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, which argues for a form of hard determinism, simply gets rid of talk of *devas*. As Hinduism, precolonially, is not defined by any shared view, and was constituted by the explicatory freedom to pursue controversial positions, no option was barred. It contains at least one school (Nyāya, a form of Consequentialism) that took the trouble to defend the existence of Īśvara via intelligent design arguments (cf. [Dasti 2017](#)). And yet others, such as Rāmānuja (c. 1017–c. 1137 CE), a bhakti philosopher, prefiguring Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by centuries, argued that the empirical evidence was insufficient to prove the existence of ultimate moral postulates (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, I.i.3).

A second objection worth noting is that while, indeed, Western interpretation does create an account of Hinduism in terms of belief, Western commentators are also known to

focus on Hinduism in terms of Hindu practices of religious worship and ritual. Caste, for instance, is often top of the list in an account of Hinduism. Hindus it would seem are defined by a commitment to caste, as found in texts of “Hindu Law” (such as the *dharmaśāstras*—deontological, ritual purity books written within the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā tradition) (cf. Lubin et al. 2010; Davis 2010). Is this not incongruous with the analysis presented here which focuses on beliefs?

The proper response begins with the observation that interpretation is the mechanism of the colonial presentation of Hindus by the West. The colonial impact is to paint Hindus, a geographic identity, with one brush, with respect to various other matters, such as social practice. Given the batch of Western beliefs interpreters take to be salient, some of which may involve law, caste, ritual or worship, we will find these matters dominating the interpretation of South Asia. What is interesting from an explicatory approach is that you will be able to find Western sources for these concerns, including caste as theorized in terms of color, or *varna* in Sanskrit (see Plato’s *Republic*). But which matter is salient in an interpretation will depend in large measure on the Western interpreter. As always, these interpretations tell us more about the interpreter than the interpreted. Explicated, we would find that South Asian moral philosophy had many views on these topics, and there was no common Hindu position on these matters.

A final objection worth considering is that the preceding considerations do not explain how elements of the Western tradition are counted as religious or spiritual. For instance, when Socrates consults his Daemon, who tells him to do philosophy (in the *Apology*), that seems like a spiritual matter. First, it is worth noting that the Daemon here plays a role in Socrates’ moral argument for why he will not stop practicing philosophy, and in this respect, Socrates as a philosopher explicates his own position. But secondly, the preceding considerations show that the apparent religiosity or spirituality of a position, and beliefs associated with the position, depends upon three elements. The first is that it is interpreted; secondly, that it is interpreted on the basis of the Western tradition; and third, that it is interpreted as a doxastic deviation from the Western tradition. We can interpret the Western tradition on the basis of itself and we simply reify its narrative of being the content of secular reasoning. When people participating in the Western tradition interpret some part of the tradition as a deviation, they recast it as religious or spiritual, but it would depend on the interpreter and what they take to be central to the tradition.

## 5. Conclusions

In a Westernized world, brought on by centuries of Western colonialism, the sociological norm is to interpret everything, including non-Western traditions, on the basis of the beliefs of the West. As part of its own difficulty in understanding what does not follow from its tradition, along the way it invents the idea of religion and spirituality. BIPOC traditions such as what the British named “Hinduism” had sophisticated philosophical theorizing about the distinction between believing and thinking, interpretation and explication, external imposition (of which colonization is an example) and personal autonomy, which reveals the precolonial tradition as a rich engagement in Secularism<sub>1</sub>. For Western colonialism to succeed, philosophy and explication—South Asian moral philosophy—has to be erased, as it constitutes a critical arena for the West’s claim to authority. Colonialism succeeds by changing how people think about this tradition from one of active philosophy that explicatorily probes options within a philosophical debate to clusters of religious belief. Hindus and everyone have a choice, however, as outlined in the *Yoga Sūtra*. We can be responsible explicatory thinkers, or interpretive believers. In being responsible thinkers, we can explicate the colonial history of religious belief. If we interpret, we give up reasoning, which is to our detriment.

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## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> Brent Nongbri in his *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (2015) pursues an argument regarding the relationship between religion and colonialism. This paper does as well. However, Nongbri suggests religion is a recent idea because he claims that “religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity” (Nongbri 2015, p. 18). This is an interpretive criterion of religion, which allows him to discount earlier ideas of religion that do not meet this standard. For Nongbri, one of the distinctive features of this Protestant notion of religion is that it is private and personal (Nongbri 2015, p. 24). The explicatory approach to understanding the history of the idea of religion that I pursue shows in contrast that the political function of religion is to publicly marginalize BIPOC traditions that could respond critically to Western colonialism. This is as old as the Roman Empire. To this end, it’s an old idea. The later Protestant idea of religion as a private affair is merely an acceptance of that political marginalization. Interpretive explanations are ironically a-historical, as they buy artifacts, like the Protestant idea of religion, as though they are foundational, when they themselves are in need of explanation.
- <sup>3</sup> The Arabic verb ‘*nataqa*’ means to *speak* or *utter*, ‘*mantiq*’ is the word for logic, and ‘*natiq*’ is often the word used for RATIONAL. (For instance, in Arabic discussions of Plato’s tripartite division of the soul, the rational soul is often referred to as: *al-nafs al-natiqah*). I have this on the good authority of Muhammad Ali Khalidi. He is translator and editor of *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Khalidi 2005).

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