

Comparing the Metaethics of Patañjali's Yoga and Nondual Śaivism

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Metaethics may be characterised as the philosophical and soteriological framework in which a tradition's implicit normative ethical theory and practical ethical precepts are embedded. This paper compares two traditions that contributed to the evolution of modern transnational yoga as it is currently practiced: Patañjali's Yoga, exemplified in his Yogasūtra, based on the dualist Sāṃkhya system and influenced by Buddhism; and nondual Śaivism, which itself emerged from the dualist Śaiva Siddhānta.

Ethical precepts (the yamas and niyamas), as well as devotion 'the Lord', Īśvara, play important roles in Patañjali's Yoga. I argue that Patañjali's Yoga emerged from early theistic Sāṃkhya, resisted Buddhist idealism, and yields a moral realist metaethics that is grounded in the characteristics of the three guṇas. Patañjali's metaethics may be understood as a form of natural law theory, but one quite unlike anything found in the Western traditions.

In nondual Śaivism by contrast, ultimate reality or Paramaśiva, may be said to be amoral –not in a pejorative sense, but in the sense that absolutely everything that happens in the universe is merely the 'play' (krīḍā) of Śiva –there is no sense of a teleological goal towards the realisation of 'the Good'. The ultimate goal for the nondual Śaiva tantrika is the realisation that they are Śiva, exercising complete and total freedom (svātantrya) in whatever way seems fitting. There is no necessary correlation between spiritual advancement and ethical behaviour. The metaethics of nondual Śaivism may be characterised as a form of hermeneutical fictionalism, in which followers may choose pragmatically to follow the 'rules of the game', as though in a play, but without believing in any ultimate moral values.

I argue that the diverse metaethical frameworks that are implicit in different yogic traditions play important and often under-appreciated roles in a range of ethical challenges facing modern transnational yoga.

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