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# “A Petrification of One’s Own Humanity”? Nonattachment and Ethics in Yoga Traditions\*

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In this yogi-ridden age, it is too readily assumed that ‘non-attachment’ is not only better than a full acceptance of earthly life, but that the ordinary man only rejects it because it is too difficult: in other words, that the average human being is a failed saint. It is doubtful whether this is true. Many people genuinely do not wish to be saints, and it is probable that some who achieve or aspire to sainthood have never felt much temptation to be human beings. (George Orwell)<sup>1</sup>

Nonattachment has been a prominent theme in many religious traditions, especially (though certainly not exclusively) in those rooted in the Indian subcontinent,<sup>2</sup> among which are the various traditions of yoga. The term “yoga” is widely known today, having become entangled with a vast industry. Not only can yoga classes be found in gyms, sports clubs, colleges, community centers and village halls throughout the western world—and elsewhere—but there are also many companies specializing in yoga equipment, clothing, books, magazines, DVDs, CDs, holidays, and other paraphernalia. Yoga is commercial, corporate. So does it retain any association with nonattachment?

In Orwell’s essay on Gandhi, first published in 1949, he writes of “this yogi-ridden age,” contrasting its ethic of nonattachment with “a full acceptance of earthly life”. Since 1949 the uses of the terms “yoga” and “yogi”—and hence the concepts that these terms express—have been radically transformed. Yoga is now widely perceived as *contributing to* “a full acceptance of earthly life” rather than opposing it. Far from being an ascetic discipline promoting withdrawal from the world and intimate human relationships, yoga is now

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\* Some of the ideas in this paper were presented to an audience of yoga teachers and practitioners at the Devon Yoga Festival, at Seale-Hayne, August 11, 2012. I am grateful to members of that audience for their lively questions and comments.

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi,” in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 4, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 523–31, at 527–28.

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies of this theme, with some discussion of Hindu and Buddhist sources, include Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and James Kellenberger, *Dying to Self and Detachment* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

regarded as “a preventive, personal self-care activity at the social and interpersonal levels.”<sup>3</sup> It “fosters social interaction and team building,”<sup>4</sup> enabling us to better cope with the pressures of a modern technologically sophisticated society by “tak[ing] a step back and discover[ing] a renewal of energy within that encourages healthy and balanced living.”<sup>5</sup> No longer is yoga an esoteric pursuit, undertaken in secluded places by a small number of dedicated disciples under the strict guidance of a spiritual preceptor; instead, “Yoga is inclusive because it can be adapted to benefit all participants.”<sup>6</sup>

Yoga has certainly proven to be adaptable. Though taking multiple forms throughout its long and convoluted history, never before has there been the abundance of yoga styles that are advertised in popular media today. The area of therapeutic yoga has been especially fecund, a brief glance at the health and fitness section in many book catalogues revealing titles such as *Yoga and Breast Cancer*, *Yoga Fights Flab*, *Yoga for Pain Relief*, *Yoga for a Healthy Menstrual Cycle*, and *Yoga for Depression*. The world is, in a certain respect, far more “yogi-ridden” now than when Orwell wrote his essay; yet the contrast that he sets up between his own “humanistic” and Gandhi’s purportedly “other-worldly” ideal hardly applies to modern-day approaches to yoga. There remains, though, an interesting contrast to be made, or perhaps a cluster of contrasts.

This article will explore the concept of nonattachment as it occurs in yoga traditions, raising the question of how, in view of the central place that this ethico-religious stricture has had, modern yoga practitioners can, and do, relate to those traditions. Having taught “Yoga philosophy” on yoga teacher training courses, I know which texts tend to be prioritized. These are, typically, the *Yogasūtra*, *Bhagavadgītā*, *Haṭhapradīpikā*,<sup>7</sup> and to a lesser extent some of the major Upaniṣads. Each of these texts has fascinating things to say about nonattachment and related topics. What all of them say often jars awkwardly against values held dear by people in modern societies that are broadly liberal and democratic, including many who practice yoga. Thus what we find in contemporary yoga is an intriguing tension between a traditional ethics of nonattachment and a humanistic affirmation of life and the

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<sup>3</sup> Tina Maschi and Derek Brown, “Professional Self-Care and Prevention of Secondary Trauma,” in *Helping Bereaved Children: A Handbook for Practitioners*, ed. Nancy Boyd Webb (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 345–73, at 364.

<sup>4</sup> Yael Calhoun, Matthew R. Calhoun, and Nicole M. Hamory, *Yoga for Kids to Teens: Themes, Relaxation Techniques, Games and an Introduction to SOLA Stikk Yoga* (Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Nanette Tummers, *Teaching Yoga for Life: Preparing Children and Teens for Healthy, Balanced Living* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2009), xxix.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Or *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, depending on which edition one consults. The abbreviation *HP* will be used in references.

world—an affirmation that endeavors to enhance rather than relinquish one’s close emotional bonds with friends and family. In short, there is a clash between the ascetic and humanistic ideals that Orwell identified, but it is a clash occurring *within* a cultural milieu, and within the lives of participants in that milieu, rather than between different sets of individuals rooted in divergent cultural traditions.

To bring out more vividly the bifurcation of values that is at issue, my starting point will be Orwell’s essay and the contrast he adduces. While Orwell portrays the conflict as one between his own “human” values and Gandhi’s “inhuman” asceticism, I shall propose that it can better be viewed as a conflict between two rival conceptions of what is most particular to human life. Then will come my discussion of three of the aforementioned traditional texts: the *Yogasūtra*, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Haṭhapradīpikā*. In each case my exposition will highlight specific ways in which the text articulates the principle of nonattachment and how this articulation diverges from popular contemporary representations of yoga’s goals. These discussions are followed by a presentation of three modes of response to the traditional sources on the part of modern-day yoga practitioners—modes that tend to defuse the tension between the ethic of stringent nonattachment in those sources and the contemporary expectation of a life-affirming discourse. My conclusion relates the consideration of these contemporary responses back to Orwell’s critique of Gandhian asceticism, observing that the clash of values that Orwell vividly depicts is one that is internal to the development of modern yoga in relation to its traditional precursors, and that yoga as it has emerged in contemporary societies is far from the world-denying orientation to life that Orwell found so unpalatable.

## I

In January 1949 the *Partisan Review* published the last essay that George Orwell completed, “Reflections on Gandhi.” With Gandhi having been assassinated in Delhi the previous year, the essay contemplates and evaluates Gandhi’s life and the ethical values that he espoused and embodied. While Orwell’s admiration for Gandhi’s courage and willfulness is evident, the essay’s most striking feature is the contrast that Orwell pinpoints between what he regards as humanistic or simply *human* values and the ascetic and religious ideals that he sees manifested in the life of Gandhi. Orwell draws particular attention to the principle of nonattachment, which, as construed by Gandhi, requires abstention from close personal relationships on the grounds that they, by their very nature, involve forms of partiality and

loyalty that threaten to compromise an impartial commitment to spiritual and ethical standards.

Typifying the attitude that he finds inimical to common human values, Orwell cites Gandhi's privileging of an adherence to strict vegetarianism over the wellbeing of his own immediate family. Orwell discerns in Gandhi's autobiography three occasions on which Gandhi "was willing to let his wife or a child die rather than administer the animal food prescribed by the doctor."<sup>8</sup> Though acknowledging that in none of these instances did anyone actually die as a consequence of abstaining from non-vegetarian food, and also that Gandhi "always gave the patient the choice of staying alive at the price of committing a sin," Orwell is struck by Gandhi's readiness to put the lives of his wife and children at risk for the sake of a moral principle—to insist that a limit must be placed on "what we will do in order to remain alive, and [that] the limit is well on this side of chicken broth."<sup>9</sup> "This attitude", continues Orwell,

is perhaps a noble one, but, in the sense which—I think—most people would give to the word, it is inhuman. The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one *is* sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals.<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi would undoubtedly want to contest the characterization of his actions and principles as "inhuman." Indeed, he would be apt to invoke the notion of human nature in defense of his conception of virtuous conduct. It is, he maintains, essential to human beings—for it "is what differentiates man from the beast"—that we are capable of finding enjoyment in renunciation.<sup>11</sup> "Renunciation here", Gandhi remarks, "does not mean abandoning the world and retiring into the forest. / The spirit of renunciation should rule all the activities of life."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," 527.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. The incident to which Orwell is alluding is one in which a doctor had prescribed "eggs and chicken broth" for Gandhi's ten-year-old son Manilal, who was sick with typhoid combined with pneumonia. See M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: Or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (London: Penguin, 2001 [1927/1929]), 231.

<sup>10</sup> Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," 527.

<sup>11</sup> M. Gandhi, "Yajna, Welfare, and Service: From a Letter to Narandas Gandhi, October 28, 1930," in *Hearing the Call across Traditions: Readings on Faith and Service*, ed. Adam Davis (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2009), 238–40, at 239.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Informing this conception of renunciation amid ongoing worldly activity is Gandhi's understanding of the doctrine of *karmayoga* advocated in the *Bhagavadgītā*: the ideal of performing one's personal duty while simultaneously foregoing attachment to the fruits of one's actions—while relinquishing, that is, the desire for any personal gain.<sup>13</sup> So too is this notion of selfless action bound up with the aspiration to serve “humanity without any reservation whatever”<sup>14</sup>—though it is hard to derive the injunction to serve humanity directly from the *Gītā*.

To contrast the ethical ideals of Orwell and Gandhi as “human” and “inhuman” respectively is not to present a neutral description but rather to endorse Orwell's construal of human nature over Gandhi's. Notwithstanding Orwell's invocation of what he takes to be a common understanding of the “inhuman” to characterize Gandhi's values, for millions of Indians, and for many others around the world, Gandhi epitomized what a human being can be. For Orwell, it is precisely Gandhi's dedication to serving humanity as a whole that exacerbates the inhumanity of his ethics. As Orwell sees it, to serve an abstract “humanity” is to neglect one's special responsibilities to particular individuals over others; it is to seek an equal emotional distance from everyone, thereby constraining the love afforded to any given individual by the love one can afford to all, and this, in effect, is to withhold one's love *tout court*. Regardless of how likely one is to achieve this emotional neutralization, it is the very aspiration to do so—its elevation as an ethical paradigm—that Orwell designates “inhuman.” Gandhi, by contrast, perceives the cultivation of such nonattachment as promoting what is truly and distinctively human.

A graphic example of what Orwell found so “inhuman” in Gandhi's approach to personal relationships—albeit not one that Orwell himself cites—is a letter of condolence written by Gandhi to a friend whose family had been killed by the notorious Bihar earthquake of 1934. Having begun by noting that a mutual acquaintance has informed him of the deaths of “all your nearest and dearest,” Gandhi then writes:

How can I console you? Where thousands are dead, consolation can hardly mean anything. This is a moment when we must tell ourselves that everyone is a relative. Then no one will feel bereaved. If we can cultivate this attitude of mind, death itself is

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<sup>13</sup> Gandhi fully acknowledged that, for him, “the Gita became an infallible guide of conduct” (*An Autobiography*, 244). For exposition and analysis, see J. T. F. Jordens, “Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgita*,” in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 88–109.

<sup>14</sup> Gandhi, “Yajna, Welfare, and Service,” 240.

abolished. For that which lives cannot die. Birth and death are an illusion. Know this to be the truth and, overcoming grief, stick to your duty.<sup>15</sup>

These words again echo those of Krishna in the *Bhagavadgītā*. “Death is assured to all those born,” declares Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, “and birth assured to all the dead; you should not mourn what is merely inevitable consequence.”<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, birth and death are illusory in the sense that they occur only to bodies and not to the “imperishable one” that resides within.<sup>17</sup> Ceasing to identify with the bodily self and identifying instead with the imperishable, one realizes the impossibility of death, for the imperishable “can neither kill nor *be* killed” (*BhG* 2.19).

In an essay on Gandhi’s response to the Bihar earthquake, Makarand Paranjape comments that, from a standpoint other than that of the *Gītā*, “Gandhi’s condolence seems utterly to lack human pity or sympathy; most people having suffered such bereavement would seek comfort or solace, not the ‘abolishing’ of death and the injunction to do one’s duty.”<sup>18</sup> There can be little doubt that this would be Orwell’s verdict. Urging us not to prematurely condemn Gandhi as callous, Paranjape highlights Gandhi’s efforts to drum up charitable support for the earthquake survivors. Even so, it is the proclivity to reach for metaphysical conceptions of birth and death, implying that one’s family’s demise need not be (and ought not to be) a source of genuine grief, that would dismay Orwell, confirming his view that Gandhi’s spiritual perspective involves, as Peter Winch has put it, “a sort of rejection of life,” the outcome of which “may be a petrification of one’s own humanity.”<sup>19</sup>

There is much more that could be said about Orwell’s critical analysis of Gandhi’s ethics. Here, however, my purpose in referring to that analysis has been principally to introduce the theme of a clash between alternative conceptions of human values. By turning now to some traditional yoga texts, I will explore further the theme of nonattachment that runs through them and the tensions that it generates with contemporary approaches to yoga.

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<sup>15</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 57 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1974), 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Bhagavadgītā* 2.27 (hereafter cited as *BhG*), in *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*, trans. Gavin Flood and Charles Martin (New York: Norton, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> “The one cannot ever perish in a body it inhabits ... and so no being should be mourned” (*BhG* 2.30).

<sup>18</sup> Makarand R. Paranjape, “‘Natural Supernaturalism?’ The Tagore–Gandhi Debate on the Bihar Earthquake,” *Journal of Hindu Studies* 4 (2011): 176–204, at 187.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Winch, “Ethical Relativism,” in his *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 181–93, at 187.

## II

Among the textual sources of yoga, that which figures most prominently on the reading lists of yoga teachers and practitioners is the *Yogasūtra* popularly attributed to the philosopher-sage Patañjali. Estimated by scholars to have been compiled around the second or third century CE,<sup>20</sup> though almost certainly drawing upon earlier sources, the *Yogasūtra* expounds a relatively coherent set of soteriological practices with a strong meditative orientation. Of several salient terms in the *Yogasūtra* that are closely connected with nonattachment, foremost among them is *vairāgya*—“the controlled consciousness of one who is without craving for sense objects, whether these are actually perceived, or described [in scripture].”<sup>21</sup> Being the overcoming of *rāga*—which itself is typically translated as “attachment,” “desire,” or “passion”<sup>22</sup>—*vairāgya* is commonly rendered as “nonattachment,” “renunciation,” or “dispassion.”<sup>23</sup> It constitutes one of the two main poles of the discipline geared towards the cessation of mental disturbances, the other pole being sustained practice or “repetition” (*abhyāsa*).<sup>24</sup> The purported aim of this discipline is the refinement of nonattachment not only to perceptible objects, but also to the underlying factors or qualities (*guṇas*) whose coactivity and intermingling is constitutive of the field of perceptual experience. This nonattachment and “absence of thirsting” (*vairiṣṇya*) after any kind of worldly experience is said to be associated with, or coincident with, the “vision of self” (*puruṣakhyāti*) that precipitates spiritual release (*YS* 1.16).

The portion of the *Yogasūtra* that is best known among today’s yoga teachers and practitioners is that which begins midway through the second chapter and spills over into the third.<sup>25</sup> This portion adumbrates a regimen which, comprising eight components or “limbs,” is known as “eight-limbed” (*aṣṭāṅga*) yoga—its constitutive techniques facilitating a gradual

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<sup>20</sup> Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Folkstone: Dawson, 1979), 3; idem, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice* (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 1998), 284; Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 42.

<sup>21</sup> *Yogasūtra* 1.15 (hereafter cited as *YS*), in *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary*, trans. Edwin F. Bryant (New York: North Point Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899), 872.

<sup>23</sup> Bryant, *ibid.*, 47; Christopher Chapple and Yogi Anand Viraj, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: An Analysis of the Sanskrit with Accompanying English Translation* (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1990), 37–38; Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali*, 34–35; Daniel Raveh, *Exploring the Yogasūtra: Philosophy and Translation* (London: Continuum, 2012), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Raveh, *Exploring the Yogasūtra*, 27. The pairing of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya* is also given in the *Bhagavadgītā*: “the mind is hard to control and unsteady, but by repeated practice [*abhyāsa*] ... and by cultivating indifference to passion [*vairāgya*], it can be held in check” (*BhG* 6.35, in *The Bhagavad Gīta: A New Translation*, trans. W. J. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)). This verse from the *BhG* is quoted in Vijñānabhikṣu’s commentary on *YS* 1.12; see Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Feuerstein proposes that the portion I am here referring to comprises *YS* 2.28–3.8 inclusive (*The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali*, 78–99).

withdrawal of the practitioner’s attention from worldly life and activities. As presented in the text, the system begins with two sets of five vows pertaining to ethical conduct and dispositions, and then concisely outlines several aspects of meditative practice, including bodily posture (*āsana*), the regulation and retention of breath (*prāṇāyāma*), and progressive degrees of focused concentration. The first five ethical precepts or restraints (*yamas*) together make up the “major vow,” which applies “universally, regardless of caste, region, time, or circumstances” (YS 2.31).<sup>26</sup> It consists of “non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), chastity (*brahmacarya*), and non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*)” (2.30). The five secondary restraints or observances (*niyamas*) comprise “purity (*śauca*), contentment (*santoṣa*), austerity (*tapas*), [scriptural] study (*svādhyāya*), and devotion to the Lord (*īśvarapraṇidhāna*)” (2.32). While all these major and secondary requirements combine to regulate the practitioner’s daily activity, orienting behavior away from a secular and towards a soteriological way of life, those which are most pertinent to the theme of nonattachment are chastity, non-possessiveness, and austerity. As traditionally conceived, the strict observance of these restraints would involve cutting oneself off from family relationships and material comforts and taking up the role of a dedicated spiritual adept.<sup>27</sup>

Orwell, as we have seen, regards Gandhi’s ascetic ideal as “inhuman.” Even more emphatically, towards the end of his essay, he describes “Gandhi’s basic aims” as “anti-human and reactionary.”<sup>28</sup> Similar terms occasionally appear in descriptions of Patañjali’s yoga. For instance, in his wide-ranging study of yoga traditions, Mircea Eliade remarks that all of the various methods prescribed in the *Yogasūtra* for liberating “man from his human condition ... have one characteristic in common—they are antisocial, or, indeed, antihuman.” Contrasting the life of the “worldly man” with that of the yogin, Eliade continues:

The worldly man lives in society, marries, establishes a family; Yoga prescribes absolute solitude and chastity. The worldly man is “possessed” by his own life; the yogin refuses to “let himself live”; to continual movement, he opposes his static posture, the immobility of *āsana*; to agitated, unrhythmical, changing respiration, he opposes *prāṇāyāma*, and even dreams of holding his breath indefinitely; to the chaotic flux of psychomental life, he replies by “fixing thought on a single point,” the first step to that final withdrawal from

<sup>26</sup> This and other unattributed translations are mine.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya, *Yoga Philosophy of Patañjali*, trans. P. N. Mukerji, 2nd edn (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 38, 100, 144–45; Karel Werner, *Yoga and Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), 134–35.

<sup>28</sup> Orwell, “Reflections on Gandhi,” 531.

the phenomenal world which he will obtain through *pratyāhāra*. All of the yogic techniques invite to one and the same gesture—to do exactly the opposite of what human nature forces one to do. From solitude and chastity to *saṃyama*, there is no solution of continuity. The orientation always remains the same—to react against the “normal,” “secular,” and finally “human” inclination.<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, this image of a radical turning away from world, society, and family—of rebellion against one’s own human nature—is hardly likely to appeal to contemporary practitioners who are urged by popular expositions of yoga to “practice for the pleasure of it”<sup>30</sup> and to treat yoga as “a physical, emotional, and social activity” that generates “laughter and smiles.”<sup>31</sup> Most of those who attend popular yoga classes these days will attest to the fact that, as it is practiced in those classes, it can indeed produce physical, social and emotional enjoyment. There is no need to deny this, or to label modern fitness-oriented yoga as “inauthentic” or “not really yoga,” in order to highlight the contrast between how yoga has come to be perceived and how it is understood in its early Indian sources; it is this contrast that interests me, and the ways in which modern-day practitioners of yoga respond to that contrast. One way of responding is to dispute the accuracy of the sort of characterization offered by Eliade—to argue that it is simply mistaken to portray yoga as life-denying and “antihuman.” Examples of this and other responses will be discussed further on, after having examined two additional texts, beginning with the *Bhagavadgītā* (or *Gītā*).

Estimated to date from between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE,<sup>32</sup> the *Gītā*, though widely accepted among Hindus as a relatively self-contained spiritual classic, forms part of the sixth book (known as the *Bhīṣmaparvan*) of the *Mahābhārata* epic.<sup>33</sup> While its authorship is traditionally ascribed to a sage-poet named Vyāsa, this name may be “a

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<sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1954]), 95–96. Cf. Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, 79: “the whole orientation of the yoga system is fundamentally concerned with asceticism as the reversal of the body’s flow and so the reversal of time.” See also the descriptions of “the overwhelming otherness of yoga” in Yohanan Grinshpon, *Silence Unheard: Deathly Otherness in Pātañjala-Yoga* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 13 *et passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Sandra Anderson and Rolf Sovik, *Yoga: Mastering the Basics* (Honesdale, PA: Himalayan Institute, 2000), 16. Cf. Minda Goodman Kraines and Barbara Rose Sherman, *Yoga: For the Joy of It!* (Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Tummers, *Teaching Yoga for Life*, 39; Calhoun, Calhoun, and Hamory, *Yoga for Kids to Teens*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Flood and Martin, *The Bhagavad Gita*, xii.

<sup>33</sup> Arvind Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā* (London: Duckworth, 1986), ix.

generic title for a post-Vedic compiler or arranger of sacred texts and applied to a number of eminent sages.”<sup>34</sup>

The text of the *Gītā* comprises a dialogue between the warrior-prince and military hero Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna, who is an embodiment or “descent” (*avatāra*) of the god Vishnu in human form. In the dramatic setting of the dialogue—the battlefield of Kurukshetra upon which the two rival armies are ranged against one another—Arjuna instructs Krishna to steer the chariot into the center of the field so that both sides may be surveyed (*BhG* 1.21–24). Immediately, Arjuna is struck by the sight of men whom he recognizes among the opposing Kaurava troops: cousins, uncles, former teachers, friends (1.26–27). “[O]verwhelmed by supreme compassion” (1.27),<sup>35</sup> he loses the will to fight; not only would victory be stained with the mark of sin (1.36), but it could only be pyrrhic, given the devastation of the clan structure that it would entail: with numerous warriors slaughtered, women would be liable to seek partners from other social classes (1.40–41), and the “intermingling” of classes “leads to nowhere but hell (*naraka*) for both the clan and those who destroy it” (1.42).<sup>36</sup>

Thus we see that Arjuna’s “compassion” (*kṛpayā*) is itself intermingled—with the fear of becoming a sinner and with deep anxiety about what fratricidal war will mean for the future of the community. Yet at its heart is an attachment to kith and kin, an attachment to which many readers, both ancient and modern, may be thoroughly sympathetic. When entering into battle meant only the taking on of an amorphous and relatively anonymous enemy, Arjuna showed no signs of doubt; it is his seeing the faces of his brethren and former acquaintances that brings home to him the reality of his situation. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas might put it, it is the encounter with the face of the other—the “epiphany of the face”<sup>37</sup>—that throws Arjuna off balance, for it is this encounter that radically interrupts and “unsettles the natural and political positions we have taken up in the world.”<sup>38</sup> So, too, is it this dimension

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<sup>34</sup> Ron Geaves, “Vyāsa,” in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, ed. Denise Cush, Catherine Robinson, and Michael York (London: Routledge, 2010), 975–76, at 975. Cf. Robert N. Minor, *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1982), xxxiii–xxxiv.

<sup>35</sup> Trans. Swāmī Gambhīrānanda, *Bhagavadgītā with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> My trans. Elsewhere, unacknowledged translations are mine.

<sup>37</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1987), 55. Cf. Merold Westphal, “Commanded Love and Divine Transcendence in Levinas and Kierkegaard,” in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Fordham, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000), 200–23, at 206.

<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 13–33, at 23. Cf. Alphonso Lingis, “The Sensuality and the Sensitivity,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 219–30, at 227: “In his face, by facing, the other takes a stand; otherness itself appeals to us and contests us.” A disanalogy between Levinas’s

of Arjuna’s predicament—his disruptive responsiveness to the embodied presence of familiar faces—that Krishna specifically picks up on and against which he launches an unremitting verbal assault, which constitutes much of the remainder of the *Gītā*.

After berating Arjuna for his “weakness,” “impotence,” and “faintheartedness” (*BhG* 2.2–3), Krishna invokes a more metaphysical mode of argumentation to counteract Arjuna’s aversion to killing. It is, he declares, mere bodies that fall upon the battlefield. That which is “embodied” (*śarīraḥ*, 2.18; *dehin*, 2.13, 22, 30) is eternal (*nitya*, 2.18 ff.); it is neither born nor does it die (2.20), and it is with this imperishable source that we should identify ourselves and others (2.12). In this light, given that there is really no one who dies, “Thou shouldst not mourn”<sup>39</sup> (2.27, 30; cf. 2.25, 26, 28). The feeling of sorrow, grief, discomfort at the thought of death, whether one’s own or another’s—even when the death of the other is at one’s own hands—becomes forbidden, a sign of ignorance and spiritual immaturity; the “learned” (*pañḍitāḥ*) do not suffer from such emotional afflictions (2.11).<sup>40</sup> This is, as Zaehner observes, “a dangerous doctrine,”<sup>41</sup> one which leaves it hard to draw any sharp distinction between the sociopathic murderer and the God-realized saint: “Charles Manson taught his ‘children’ to kill without having to endure the qualms of conscience that lesser mortals feel. This is precisely the message which the incarnate God, Krishna, passes on to his beloved disciple, Arjuna, in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.”<sup>42</sup>

To avoid this morally disastrous conclusion—that God’s incarnation on earth should be enjoining Arjuna and by implication the rest of us to feel no remorse at slaughtering one another—many modern readers follow Gandhi in seeking an allegorical meaning within the text. Gandhi, whose interpretation was largely prefigured by Theosophical expositions of the *Gītā*<sup>43</sup> famously construes the battlefield of Kurukshetra as representing the human

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contention and Arjuna’s situation, however, is that Arjuna is responding specifically to faces that he recognizes whereas Levinas stresses the ethical irresistibility of the face of the *stranger*; see, e.g., Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991 [1961]), 13, 39, 75–78, 213–15, 244, *et passim*; Bettina Bergo, *Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 99; Jonathan Boulter, *Beckett: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2008), 102–4.

<sup>39</sup> Trans. Franklin Edgerton, *The Bhagavad Gītā*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Kaṭha-upaniṣad* 2.18–22, in Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 237–38.

<sup>41</sup> R. C. Zaehner, *Our Savage God* (London: Collins, 1974), 98.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>43</sup> See Jordens, “Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgīta*,” 88; Ronald W. Neufeldt, “A Lesson in Allegory: Theosophical Interpretations of the *Bhagavadgīta*,” in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgīta*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 11–33; Steven J. Rosen, “Kurukshetra in Context: An Analysis of Violence in the *Bhagavad Gīta*,” in *Holy War: Violence and the Bhagavad Gīta*, ed. Steven J. Rosen (Hampton, VA: Deepak, 2002), 9–34, at 11–12; Eric J. Sharpe, *The Universal Gītā: Western Images of the Bhagavadgītā: A Bicentenary Survey* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 109–10, 116.

individual: the war is an internal conflict “between the forces of Good (Pandavas) and the forces of Evil (Kauravas)”;<sup>44</sup> “The real Kurukshetra is the human heart, which is also a *dharmakshetra* (the field of righteousness) if we look upon it as the abode of God and invite Him to take hold of it.”<sup>45</sup> While this psychological or “demythologized”<sup>46</sup> reading may facilitate a softening of what can otherwise sound like an unpalatably pugnacious message, it does not avoid what many modern readers will regard as a comparably unsavory emphasis on the cultivation of emotional detachment. Indeed, for Gandhi, renunciation of attachment to the fruits of one’s actions is the “matchless remedy” propounded by the *Gītā*, “the central sun round which devotion, knowledge and the rest revolve like planets.”<sup>47</sup> And for Gandhi, a life of renunciation and the pursuit of self-realization had to be a self-controlled life, and that in turn entailed celibacy.<sup>48</sup> So, too, did he see renunciation as harboring the seeds of truth and nonviolence: “When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa* [violence].”<sup>49</sup>

Searching in the *Gītā* itself for references to the kind of renouncing attitude that Gandhi advocates reveals occasional lists of virtues that the practitioner of yoga is expected to develop. Among these virtues, “nonviolence” (*ahimsā*) does occur (*BhG* 10.5; 13.7; 16.2; 17.14); so too do “chastity” (*brahmacarya*, 17.14), “austerity” (*tapas*: 10.5; 16.1; 17.14–16), and “absence of attachment to, or affection for, sons, wife, home, and the like; and constant even-mindedness with respect to both desirable and undesirable events” (13.9). Thus, even in those passages where Arjuna is not being encouraged to enter into battle against his relatives, he is nevertheless being urged to relinquish the love and fellow-feeling that an ethics of the sort celebrated by Orwell would regard as essential to genuinely human life. Gandhi, while rejecting a literalistic bellicose reading of the *Gītā*, commends its emphasis on pacifying the

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<sup>44</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 15 (Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1965), 288. Cf. idem, *The Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi*, ed. John Strohmeier (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000), 27. See also Jordens, “Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgita*,” 89, 98.

<sup>45</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Discourses on the Gita*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1960), 8. Cf. idem, *Gandhi Interprets the Bhagavadgita* (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, n.d.), 16: “It is the human body that is described as Kurukshetra, as *dharmakshetra*. It does become that when used in the service of God” (quoted in Jacqueline Hirst, “Upholding the World: Dharma in the *Bhagavadgītā*,” in *The Fruits of Our Desiring: An Enquiry into the Ethics of the Bhagavadgītā for Our Times*, ed. Julius Lipner (Calgary: Bayeux, 1997), 48–66, at 56–57).

<sup>46</sup> For exposition of the notions of “psychologization” and “demythologization” (in the context of Buddhist studies), see David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45–59. An important source of such concepts is the theological work of Rudolf Bultmann; see, e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958); Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

<sup>47</sup> Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi*, 18. Cf. Jordens “Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgita*,” 103.

<sup>48</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Harper Collins, 1997 [1951]), 95–97.

<sup>49</sup> Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi*, 22.

emotions and relieving oneself of the contaminating influence of ties to family and friends. In this respect, the *Gītā*, whether read in the light of Gandhi's antiviolence or not, contrasts with the more family-friendly and sociable aspirations of most modern yoga enthusiasts. Much the same is the case with traditional sources of *haṭhayoga*, the best known of which I will turn to now.

The term "hatha yoga" has become pervasive in yoga-related parlance. It is popularly used to denote "the branch of yoga which concentrates on physical health and mental well-being," utilizing bodily postures and breathing techniques to promote "balance and flexibility."<sup>50</sup> At some venues, the style of yoga taught in "hatha" classes is distinguished as being more "gentle" than other forms of postural yoga.<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere, "hatha yoga" is taken to be "a generic term that encompasses all styles of physical yoga practice."<sup>52</sup> The term *haṭha* is routinely defined as "a Sanskrit combination of the word *ha* (sun) and *tha* (moon), which is itself a union of opposites."<sup>53</sup> This folk etymology is not a recent invention, but can be traced back to relatively early sources such as the fifteenth-century *Yogaśikha-upaniṣad*.<sup>54</sup> The "opposites" which are being brought into union are traditionally understood to be the upward-flowing and downward-flowing vital breaths (*prāṇa* and *apāna* respectively) or the heating "feminine" energy (*rajas*) and the cooling "masculine" energy (*bindu*), the latter being identified with seminal fluid or the subtle essence thereof.<sup>55</sup> Imagery of the union of masculine and feminine elements is among the factors that situate *haṭhayoga* within a broader Tantric milieu, such imagery being pervasive within both Hindu and Buddhist Tantra.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "Hatha Yoga," *The Free Dictionary*, medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Hatha+Yoga (accessed September 30, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., *San Antonio Yoga Hub*, [www.sanantonioyogahub.com/hathagentle-yoga.html](http://www.sanantonioyogahub.com/hathagentle-yoga.html) (accessed October 21, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Bill Counter, "Hatha Yoga FAQs," *Yoga in Sacramento*, [www.absolutelyashtanga.com/descriptions.html](http://www.absolutelyashtanga.com/descriptions.html) (accessed September 30, 2012). Cf. *Derek the Dog: The Exeter Yoga Centre*, [www.derekthedog.co.uk/page9/yoga.html](http://www.derekthedog.co.uk/page9/yoga.html) (accessed September 30, 2012): "Hatha yoga is a generic term that encompasses a wide range of yoga traditions that share an emphasis on physical practices such as postures (asanas,) breathing exercises (pranayama) and cleansing techniques."

<sup>53</sup> Martin Kirk and Brooke Boon, *Hatha Yoga Illustrated: For Greater Strength, Flexibility, and Focus* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2006), 2. See also Rajeswari Raman, *Hatha Yoga for All*, 2nd edn (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 18, and Shandor Remete, *Shadow Yoga, Chaya Yoga: The Principles of Hatha Yoga* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 105, among many others.

<sup>54</sup> Swami Digambarji, Mahajot Sahay, and Swami Maheshananda (eds), *Yoga Kośa: Yoga Terms Explained with Reference to Context*, 2nd edn (Lonavla: Kaivalyadhama, 1991), 322.

<sup>55</sup> Mikel Burley, *Haṭha-Yoga: Its Context, Theory and Practice* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000), 3–4; Georg Feuerstein, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 60.

<sup>56</sup> Dina Bangdel and John C. Huntington, "Secret Instructions for Transformation: The Subtle Body of Kundalini Yoga," in *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, ed. John C. Huntington and Dina Bangdel (Columbus, OH: Columbus Museum of Art, 2003), 230–31, at 231; Elisabeth Anne Benard, *Chinnamastā: The Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 104. But, for the claim that *haṭhayoga* rejects "the exclusivity, complexity and esotericism of tantra," see James Mallinson, "Siddhi and

Modern yoga manuals tend to retain the emphasis on a “union of opposites” while leaving aside or modifying some of the traditional connotations of this theme. So, too, do such manuals downplay more literal translations of *haṭhayoga* than that which folk etymology supplies. Literal renderings include “discipline of force,”<sup>57</sup> “forceful yoga,”<sup>58</sup> and “yoga of violent exertion.”<sup>59</sup> If one consults early textual sources, the emphasis on forceful techniques designed to “immobilize” the various physiological and psychological processes of the human organism is much in evidence. As David Gordon White describes the method of traditional *haṭhayoga*:

One first immobilizes the body through the postures; next, one immobilizes the breaths through diaphragmatic retention; one then immobilizes the seed through the “seals”; and finally one immobilizes the mind through concentration on the subtle inner reverberation of the phonemes.<sup>60</sup>

Reminiscent of Eliade’s characterization of Patañjali’s yoga as a reaction against natural human inclinations, White adds that the “immobilization” aimed at in *haṭhayoga* leads to a reversal and transformation of the “order of nature on a microcosmic level.”<sup>61</sup>

Of all the early *haṭha* sources, the best known and most likely to appear on reading lists of yoga teacher training courses is the *Haṭha(yoga)pradīpikā*, which is generally agreed to date from the mid-fifteenth century CE,<sup>62</sup> to be compiled by Svātmārāma, and to borrow substantially from earlier works,<sup>63</sup> including some traditionally ascribed to the legendary figure named, in Sanskrit, Gorakṣanātha or, in Hindi, Gorakhnāth.<sup>64</sup> Like the *Yogasūtra*, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* appears to be composed primarily for the lone practitioner living outside mainstream society, its opening chapter stating that one who performs *haṭhayoga* should reside in a small isolated hermitage and be occupied exclusively with the methods imparted by his guru (*HP* 1.12–14). These methods are held to have been inaugurated by the “Primal

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*Mahāsiddhi* in Early *Haṭhayoga*,” in *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained through Meditation and Concentration*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen (Leiden: Brill), 327–44, at 340–41.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Connolly, “Haṭha Yoga,” in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 288–89, at 288.

<sup>58</sup> Feuerstein, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*, 131. Cf. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, 1287.

<sup>59</sup> David Gordon White, *Sinister Yogis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>60</sup> David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1996), 274.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 220, 274.

<sup>62</sup> Christian Bouy, *Les Nātha-Yogin et les Upaniṣads* (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1994), 81–85.

<sup>63</sup> For a comprehensive list, see the appendix at the end of James Mallinson’s “*Haṭhayoga*’s Philosophy: A Fortuitous Union of Non-Dualities,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (forthcoming).

<sup>64</sup> Feuerstein, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*, 118–19, 136; White, *The Alchemical Body*, 140.

Lord” (Śrī Ādinātha, Lord Śiva) “as a stairway, so to speak, for ascending to the heights of *rājayoga*” (1.1).<sup>65</sup>

Following relatively recent popular usage, especially as propounded by Swami Vivekananda, *rājayoga* is often assumed to refer to the meditative techniques outlined in the *Yogasūtra*;<sup>66</sup> it is, however, misleading to impose this sense of the term upon its occurrences in the *Haṭhapradīpikā*. A list of synonyms of *rājayoga* offered in the latter text indicates that *rājayoga* denotes not some superior, more refined set of techniques to be adopted after having mastered the inferior methods of *haṭhayoga*, but rather the highest achievement of *haṭhayoga* itself (*HP* 4.3–4):<sup>67</sup> a state of mind which, as White advises, seems to be one of immobilization. It is in the descriptions of this state that *haṭhayoga*’s traditional emphasis on transcending worldly life and experience comes across most forcefully. As in the yoga of Patañjali, the goal is for all mental content to dissolve and a state of unwavering, objectless consciousness to obtain. The mind is to be tamed like an elephant (4.91) or killed like a hunted deer (4.99). That which is “the snare for capturing the inner deer and is also the hunter who kills [it]” is *nāda*, the “(inner) sound” (4.94).

The hearing of, and absorption of consciousness in, this mysterious sound is held to be facilitated by such practices as contemplating the space between the eyebrows (4.80), closing one’s ears with one’s hands (4.82), and prolonged suspension of breathing (4.15, 112). The sound is identified with “energy” or “power” (*śakti*, 4.102) and visually depicted as a coiled snake (*kuṇḍalī*, *kuṇḍalinī*), which is stimulated to straighten and ascend through the central conduit (*nāḍī*) of the practitioner’s body by means of the unstinting practice of bodily postures (*āsanas*), breath-restraint (*prāṇasamāyāma*), and the application of discrete muscular contractions designed to “seal” or “bind” the channels through which vital energy could otherwise escape.<sup>68</sup> The culmination of these practices is the cessation of the inner sound, the foregoing of all mental activity, and the rigidifying of the body so that it becomes like a log (4.106); thus, the yogin who has “surpassed all the stages [of practice] ... appears as if dead”

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<sup>65</sup> My trans. For the Sanskrit text, see *Haṭhapradīpikā of Svātmārāma*, ed. Swami Digambarji and Raghunatha Shastri Kokaje, 2nd edn (Lonavla: Kaivalyadhama, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> See, esp., Swāmi Vivekānanda, *Rāja Yoga: Or Conquering the Internal Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896). For discussion, see Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2004), 149–80. De Michelis observes (*ibid.*, 178) that the identification of *rājayoga* with the system expounded in the *Yogasūtra* seems to have been first made by H. P. Blavatsky, cofounder of the Theosophical Society; see H. P. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings: 1879–1880*, Vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, n.d. [c. 1966]), 463.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *HP* 1.67, where *rājayoga* is described as the “fruit” (*phala*) of *haṭha*.

<sup>68</sup> See *HP* 3.120 in the Digambarji and Kokaje edition; 3.124 in some other editions, e.g. *The Haṭhayogapradīpikā of Svātmārāma with the Commentary “Jyotsnā” of Brahmānanda and English Translation*, trans. Srinivasa Iyengar, revised by Radha Burnier and A. A. Ramanathan (Adyar: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1972).

(4.107). This event of spiritual fulfillment is depicted as dying to the world in a very striking sense—liberation through petrification.

### III

Unsurprisingly, when the concept of nonattachment emerges into expositions of contemporary forms of postural, meditative and therapeutic yoga, certain of the features foregrounded above remain relatively occluded. Such expositions are unlikely, for example, to echo Eliade's and White's characterization of yoga as systematically immobilizing body, breath, and mind, or as resisting and reversing the natural flow of life; neither are they likely to dwell on the physical and social isolation traditionally stipulated for the yogin. They may commend Gandhi's psychologized interpretation of the *Gītā*'s narrative context, thereby avoiding the discomfort of condoning remorseless intrafamilial slaughter in the name of duty; they are less likely to endorse the eschewing of emotional ties to all fellow human beings, an injunction that remains consistent across both literalist and allegorical readings of the *Gītā*. What I will propose here is that, when confronted by ostensibly ethically troubling features of traditional yoga orthopraxy, there are various responses available to the contemporary practitioner, and these responses are divisible into the following three types.

Firstly, there is the option of simply *ignoring the traditional sources*. Many forms of modern yoga, both postural and meditative, are amenable to being largely separated from their traditional forerunners, and there is no significant difficulty involved in maintaining this separation. As a number of recent investigations have shown, the styles of postural yoga on offer throughout much of the world these days, including modern India, owe as much to the disciplines of gymnastics, dance, and wrestling exercises as they do to traditional systems of yoga.<sup>69</sup> Especially influential has been the innovative synthesis of yoga postures and gymnastics developed by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya during his time as resident physical education-cum-yoga instructor at the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore, South India, during the 1930s and '40s.<sup>70</sup> Though Krishnamacharya himself, and his foremost students (notably K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar, Indra Devi, and Krishnamacharya's own son, T. K. V. Desikachar), all sought to maintain an ideological connection between their approach to yoga and the long tradition of (Brahmanical) Hindu spiritual philosophy that stretches back to antiquity, it nevertheless transpired not only that the postural dimension of their respective

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<sup>69</sup> Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); N. E. Sjöman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1996).

<sup>70</sup> Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 176; Sjöman, *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, 50–51.

methodologies far exceeded all others in popularity, but also that this dimension is the one most easily dissociable from any explicit reference to Hindu religiosity.

This detachability from religio-philosophical connotations has facilitated the pervasive spread of secularized styles of fitness-oriented yoga across the world and especially throughout western countries from the 1960s onwards.<sup>71</sup> The vast majority of participants in these styles give little more than lip service to yoga's rich ideological background;<sup>72</sup> there is no obvious need for them to do more than this in order to derive the health and social benefits that they seek. The situation is similar with certain popular forms of meditation. The Transcendental Meditation method devised by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, is promoted as “a simple, natural technique” which dissolves stress, “resulting in better health, more happiness and success.”<sup>73</sup> Although the Maharishi's brand of meditation and his approach to Āyurvedic medicine continue to be designated as components of “Vedic Science,” explicit references to the ancient heritage of Vedic religion and culture are largely absent from the Maharishi Vedic Institute's promotional materials, the emphasis being far more on living life to the full and maintaining “natural health and beauty” than on spiritual discipline and worldly disengagement.<sup>74</sup>

A second option for contemporary yoga practitioners is *selectivity*—discriminating between those parts of the vast legacy of yoga traditions to be appropriated and those to be left aside, thereby creating what Durkheim called “a free, private, optional religion, fashioned according to one's own needs and understanding.”<sup>75</sup> Or, if “religion” is not quite the right term for what goes by the name of “yoga” these days, then we could say that what is being fashioned is simply a mode of semi-ritualized activity, whether secular or religious.

It is, of course, entirely possible to excavate passages from the *Yogasūtra*, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Haṭhapradīpikā* that, when abstracted from their respective surroundings, can be read as being compatible with world- and family-oriented values. The *Haṭhapradīpikā*, for instance, makes frequent claims about the health-promoting benefits of its practices, declaring of this or that posture or breath-retention technique that, among other things, it “bestows health,”

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<sup>71</sup> Kimberley J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 104; Singleton, *Yoga Body*, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Georg Feuerstein, *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga: Theory and Practice* (Boston, NJ: Shambhala, 2003), 239; Thomas Pilarzyk, *Yoga beyond Fitness: Getting More than Exercise from an Ancient Spiritual Practice* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2008), 33–34.

<sup>73</sup> *Transcendental Meditation: Official Website for the UK*, [www.t-m.org.uk](http://www.t-m.org.uk) (accessed October 4, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> *Maharishi Ayurveda*, [www.maharishi.co.uk](http://www.maharishi.co.uk) (accessed October 4, 2012). See also the subtitle of Denise Denniston, *The TM Book: How to Enjoy the Rest of Your Life* (Fairfield, IA: Fairfield Press, 1986).

<sup>75</sup> Émile Durkheim, “Concerning the Definition of Religious Phenomena,” in *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings with Bibliographies*, Vol. 1, ed. W. S. F. Pickering (London: Routledge, 1975 [1899]), 74–99, at 96.

“destroys all diseases,” slows or reverses the aging process, and furnishes the practitioner with a lustrous body, radiant complexion, exquisite fragrance, clear voice, bright eyes, acute mind, the vigor of a sixteen-year-old, and control over seminal ejaculation.<sup>76</sup> The text’s itemizations of “outer signs” of successful practice even occasionally impute to the accomplished yogin a heightened degree of sexual allure (2.54–55; 3.49).<sup>77</sup> Artful citation of such passages could give the impression that the numerous books currently recommending yoga for improving one’s sex life are continuous with the *hathayoga* tradition.<sup>78</sup> This impression is less readily maintained, however, in the face of traditional injunctions to remain chaste (*HP* 3.117), avoid women (1.61), and stay away from people in general (1.15–16).

In the case of the *Yogasūtra*, the terse and often elusive significance of its apothegmatic remarks makes it well suited for selective exploitation. For instance, one of its very few pronouncements on “posture” (*āsana*) states that “posture [should be] steady (*sthira*) and comfortable (*sukha*)” (*YS* 2.46). A study of the classical commentaries on this sūtra indicates that the instruction has traditionally been applied primarily to the type of sitting posture that should be adopted for the purposes of breath-control and meditation practice,<sup>79</sup> yet it remains sufficiently vague to be associated with any of the multifarious postures devised in modern yoga. When removed from the text as a whole, the passages relating to the eight-limbed (*aṣṭāṅga*) yoga can, without too much distortion, be treated as offering a system of practice incorporable into an otherwise secular lifestyle—provided one downplays the requirements to remain chaste and be devoted to the Lord which occur in the first two limbs. The meditative culmination of that system is interpretable as a relaxation of mind and body for the purpose of recovering from the stresses of daily life, as long as one eschews the longer-term goal, which seems—in both Patañjali’s yoga and the *hathayoga* of Svātmnārāma—to be the permanent cessation of respiratory and cognitive activity.

<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., *HP* 1.17, 27, 29, 31, 47, 54; 2.16, 19–20, 47, 78; 3.7, 16, 28, 49–50, 57, 64, 81, 115; 4.53, 71; *et passim*.

<sup>77</sup> The *HP* is not unique in this respect. See, e.g., *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* (13th century CE), cited in Mallinson, “*Siddhi* and *Mahāsiddhi* in Early *Hathayoga*,” 330.

<sup>78</sup> Examples of this proliferating genre include: Ellen Barrett, *Sexy Yoga: 40 Poses for Mindblowing Sex and Greater Intimacy* (Berkeley, CA: Amorata Press, 2004); Jacquie Noelle Greaux, Jennifer Langheld, and Garvey Rich, *Better Sex through Yoga: Easy Routines to Boost Your Sex Drive, Enhance Physical Pleasure, and Spice Up Your Bedroom Life* (New York: Broadway, 2007); Vimla Lalvani, *Yoga for Sex* (New York: Hamlyn, 2001). For further discussion of this theme, see Mikel Burley, “From Fusion to Confusion: A Consideration of Sex and Sexuality in Traditional and Contemporary Yoga,” in *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (London: Routledge, 2008), 184–203.

<sup>79</sup> See, esp., the commentary by Vyāsa and subcommentary by Vācaspatiśra, cited in, e.g., Swāmī Veda Bhāratī, *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali with the Exposition of Vyāsa: A Translation and Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), 568–75.

Of the various teachings presented in the *Bhagavadgītā*, the doctrine of *karmayoga* is especially apt to be extracted from the particular context in which Krishna imparts it to Arjuna. The idea of performing actions without attachment to their results has come to be widely associated with charitable activity—the carrying out of tasks with an altruistic as opposed to a self-serving attitude. Indeed, “selfless service” and “selfless action” are among the expressions that are often used to translate *karmayoga*, both in editions of the *Gītā* and elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> “To simply refuse to participate in life is not the spiritual objective,” writes one recent commentator on the *Gītā*. “The goal is to renounce selfish action, engaging in activity beneficial to the greater good without expectation of personal reward or recognition.”<sup>81</sup> While Arjuna is certainly enjoined to perform his duty without thought of personal gain,<sup>82</sup> the suggestion that this is for the sake of “the greater good” implies that humanity in general, or at least a significant number of people, will receive some identifiable benefit as a consequence. Whether in the *Gītā* itself or in the portions of the *Mahābhārata* narrative that immediately surround it, any such benefit is difficult to discern.<sup>83</sup> But if one talks about renouncing selfish action in abstraction from those textual surroundings, then the *Gītā* can be understood as promoting the assistance of one’s fellow human beings, and perhaps of other creatures as well, through the performance of good works, and also as inviting us to carry out domestic chores such as “washing the dishes or cleaning the toilet” with an attitude of worshipful service.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, one could construe “nonattachment to the fruits of your actions” as indicating that one “can be at this moment alive to the flow”<sup>85</sup> and practice yoga postures “for the joy and satisfaction of the process” rather than becoming fixated on achieving a particular goal.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> See, e.g., Eknath Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Classic of Indian Spirituality*, 2nd edn (Tomales, CA: Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, 2007), 104, 119, 127–28); Harish Johari, *Leela: Game of Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 7, 71; Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1951]), 395.

<sup>81</sup> Prem Prakash, *Universal Yoga: The Bhagavad Gita for Modern Times* (Saint Paul, MN: Yes International, 2009), 74.

<sup>82</sup> See, e.g., *BhG* 2.47–50, where Krishna’s insistence on renouncing attachment to all results implies that these include the results that would materially benefit oneself.

<sup>83</sup> The phrase “for the maintenance of the world alone” (*lokasamgraham evā ’pi*) in *BhG* 3.20 is sometimes assumed to carry ethical significance. See, e.g., S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, 2nd edn (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), 139 and especially Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā Rahasya*, trans. B. S. Sukthankar, Vol. 1 (Poona: Tilak Bros, 1935), 456. But the phrase can more naturally be taken to mean simply that one should act in accordance with the cosmic order, without this implying that anyone in particular, or humanity as a whole, is benefited.

<sup>84</sup> Robert Butera, *The Pure Heart of Yoga: Ten Essential Steps for Personal Transformation* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2009), 40–41.

<sup>85</sup> Swami Sukhabodhananda, *Personal Excellence through the Bhagavad Gita* (Mumbai: Jaico, 2007), 91.

<sup>86</sup> Anderson and Sovik, *Yoga: Mastering the Basics*, 16.

The third option is *reinterpretation*. It overlaps with what has just been discussed, for it involves focusing attention selectively on particular features of traditional teachings and giving less attention to others, but with the aim of devising a more comprehensively revisionary interpretation of the tradition itself. Reinterpreting textual sources is something that scholars routinely do, so it should not come as any surprise that there have been multiple reinterpretations of yoga texts which diverge from how those texts have traditionally been understood. Some of these reinterpretations are especially appealing to the predilections of many contemporary yoga practitioners, and it is two recent examples of this tendency that I will highlight here. These two examples are both reinterpretations of Patañjali's classical yoga, and each of them portrays the goal of that form of yoga as, first and foremost, the purification of the practitioner's ethical relationship with others, and with the world in general, as opposed to an absolute withdrawal into one's own inner consciousness and away from external relationships.

The first example comprises a number of publications by Ian Whicher, who offers "a reconsideration of classical yoga"<sup>87</sup> according to which yoga facilitates "a responsiveness to life that no longer enslaves the yogin morally or epistemologically." Rather than refraining from action, the yogin's mode of activity "becomes purified of afflicted impulses"; and hence "we need not conclude that liberative knowledge and virtuous activity are incompatible with one another, nor need we see detachment as an abandonment of the world and the human relational sphere."<sup>88</sup> This interpretation of Whicher's relies heavily on his own reconstrual of the terse definition of yoga's goal offered at *Yogasūtra* 1.2: *yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ*. In place of standard translations, which render this sūtra as, for example, "Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of consciousness,"<sup>89</sup> "Yoga is the restraint of fluctuations of the mind,"<sup>90</sup> or "Yoga is the control of the modifications of the mind-field,"<sup>91</sup> Whicher embellishes his translation with an interpolation: "Yoga is the cessation of [the misidentification with] the modifications of the mind."<sup>92</sup> As one reviewer of Whicher's book has remarked, the square-

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<sup>87</sup> Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998).

<sup>88</sup> Ian Whicher, "Classical Sāṃkhya, Yoga and the Issue of Final Purification," *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 53 (1999): 779–98, at 794–95.

<sup>89</sup> Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali*, 26.

<sup>90</sup> Chapple and Viraj, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 33.

<sup>91</sup> Pandit Usharbudh Arya, *Yoga-sūtras of Patañjali with the Exposition of Vyāsa: A Translation and Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Honesdale, PA: Himalayan Institute, 1986), 93.

<sup>92</sup> Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*, 1, 152; idem, "Cessation and Integration in Classical Yoga," *Asian Philosophy* 5 (1995): 47–58, at 47.

bracketed insertion “dramatically changes the definition of Yoga” in a way for which “there is no textual evidence ... in any traditional Sanskrit commentary or text.”<sup>93</sup>

Responding to this criticism, Whicher contends that he is going “beyond a mere literal understanding/translation” and that it is plausible to regard Patañjali’s own definition of yoga as elliptical, the crucial term *sārūpya* (“[mis-]identification with”) having been left out of the original sūtra for the sake of concision.<sup>94</sup> Contrasting what he sees as the “epistemological emphasis” of Patañjali’s use of the term “cessation” (*nirodha*) with the reviewer’s “metaphysical/ontological emphasis,” Whicher insists that the cessation in question is merely that of the practitioner’s false understanding of his or her own identity.<sup>95</sup> While agreeing that yoga’s goal is “aloneness” (*kaivalya*), Whicher maintains that this “implies a power of ‘seeing’ in which the dualisms rooted in our egocentric patterns of attachment, aversion, fear, and so forth, have been transformed into unselfish ways of being with others.”<sup>96</sup>

What Whicher offers his readers is a vision of yoga’s goal as an ethically purified “state of embodied liberation—one that incorporates a clarity of awareness with the integrity of being and action.”<sup>97</sup> As an account of what yoga’s goal has become in the collective imagination of many contemporary practitioners, this vision is persuasive. As a description of what the goal meant for the author of the *Yogasūtra* and for the commentarial tradition that followed him, however, it is on very shaky ground.<sup>98</sup>

More recently, Shyam Ranganathan has gone even further than Whicher in the direction of emphasizing the *Yogasūtra*’s specifically moral significance. While acknowledging that, “if we were to read Patañjali as he is often translated, we would have to conclude that he is interested in a dispassionate, abstract spiritual exercise, geared simply towards the personal goal of liberation,” Ranganathan contends that we should *not* read Patañjali in this way; instead, we should attend to the “moral vocabulary” that he uses at “systematic junctions.”<sup>99</sup> The most crucial place where this moral vocabulary is found, at least in Ranganathan’s translation of the text, is chapter 4, sūtra 29. There the phrase *dharma-megha-samādhi* occurs, denoting a state that precipitates the achievement of final liberation. Translators

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<sup>93</sup> Gerald James Larson, “On *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*: A Review,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3 (1999): 183–86, at 185.

<sup>94</sup> Ian Whicher, “On *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*: A Response to Larson’s Review,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3 (1999): 187–97, at 190 and 192.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 191, 195.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>97</sup> Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> For further critical discussion of Whicher on this matter, see Mikel Burley, “‘Aloneness’ and the Problem of Realism in Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga,” *Asian Philosophy* 14 (2004): 223–38, at 231–32; *idem*, *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (London: Routledge, 2007), 138–41.

<sup>99</sup> Shyam Ranganathan, *Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtra* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2008), 26.

generally concur that *megha* is best rendered as “cloud,” and that *samādhi* is a state of deep meditative absorption. *Dharma*, however, is a polysemic term which, due to its multiple possible meanings, is often left untranslated.<sup>100</sup> One translator, for instance, places “cloud of dharma” in parentheses and then adds the note: “The meaning of dharma includes virtue, justice, law, duty, morality, religion, religious merit, and steadfast decree.”<sup>101</sup>

Since the term *dharmamegha* does not occur in earlier Brahmanical sources, but appears in certain Buddhist texts both from the Pali Canon and from the Mahāyāna tradition, some commentators have speculated that Patañjali borrowed it from Buddhism.<sup>102</sup> Whatever the origin of the expression, it is surprising, given its enigmatic quality, that Ranganathan should be so confident that *dharmameghasamādhi* ought to be rendered as “Rain Cloud of Morality Liberating State of Absorption.”<sup>103</sup> While “morality” is *one* legitimate translation of *dharma*, it is hardly the only one; and hence it is difficult to see how this one sūtra can substantiate Ranganathan’s claim that “The picture that we receive from the *Yoga Sūtra* is ... that morality reveals the nature of the *puruṣa*.”<sup>104</sup> Indeed, after a detailed study of the relation between the Buddhist and the Yoga conceptions of *dharmamegha*, Klaus Klostermaier concludes that the main difference between them is that, while the Buddhist version has an “altruistic” ethical aspect, “The *Yogasūtra* seems to be interested in the benefit of the *dharmamegha samādhi* for the sake of the *yogin* only: his *kleśa* [afflictions] and his *karman* [actions and their consequences] are eradicated, his knowledge is infinitely enlarged, his *kaivalya* is secured, which means the attainment of his ‘being his true self.’”<sup>105</sup> Ranganathan is aware of Klostermaier’s analysis, and complains that “it removes from the [Yoga] texts all moral significance.”<sup>106</sup> But something can be removed from a text only if it is there in the first place, and Klostermaier finds no evidence that *dharma* has a discernibly moral significance in

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g., Chapple and Viraj, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, 120; Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali*, 142). Cf. Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 840.

<sup>101</sup> Sri Swami Satchidananda, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: Translation and Commentary* (Yogaville, VA: Integral Yoga, 1990 [1978]), 222. Cf. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 510.

<sup>102</sup> The Pali equivalent is *dharmamegha*; see S. N. Tandon, *A Re-appraisal of Patanjali’s Yoga-Sutras in the Light of the Buddha’s Teaching* (Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1995), 46–47. A Mahāyāna source in which the phrase *dharmameghā bhūmi* occurs is the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (c. 3rd century CE). See Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932), 291; Christopher Key Chapple, “Living Liberation in Sāṃkhya and Yoga,” in *Living Liberation in Hindu Thought*, ed. Andrew O. Fort and Patricia Y. Mumme (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 115–34, at 125–26; Klaus Klostermaier, “*Dharmamegha samādhi*: Comments on *Yogasūtra* IV, 29,” *Philosophy East and West* 36 (1986): 253–62, at 257–60.

<sup>103</sup> Ranganathan, *Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtra*, 299, 300.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. The Sanskrit term *puruṣa*, in the context of Yoga philosophy, is normally understood to denote “the transcendental Self, or pure spirit” (Feuerstein, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga*, 280).

<sup>105</sup> Klostermaier, “*Dharmamegha samādhi*: Comments on *Yogasūtra* IV, 29,” 260.

<sup>106</sup> Ranganathan, *Patañjali’s Yoga Sūtra*, 300 n.

Patañjali's text. Although it may have been advisable for Klostermaier to put his conclusion in more cautious terms,<sup>107</sup> there is nothing in Ranganathan's discussion of *dharmamegha* to warrant a complete rejection of that conclusion.

Like Whicher, Ranganathan uses interpolation to slant Patañjali's definition of yoga in the direction of his own interpretation, offering "Yoga is the control of the (moral) character of thought" as a translation of *yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhah*.<sup>108</sup> There is little justification for inserting the word "moral" here other than the translator's conviction that Patañjali is "concerned with the ethical ... through the length of the entire *Yoga Sūtra*."<sup>109</sup> Ranganathan's is thus a highly idiosyncratic reading among scholars of Yoga, yet for many contemporary yoga practitioners it may have the ring of truth. Yoga is these days commonly promoted as a means, not of detaching from worldly concerns and transcending bodily and interpersonal life, but of developing oneself "physiologically, psychologically, morally, and spiritually," enabling one "to grow healthily and to lead a pure life."<sup>110</sup> By reinterpreting "Patañjali's whole project" as being "geared to moral improvement," Ranganathan perhaps places an even stronger emphasis on morality than most readers of popular yoga manuals would expect.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, by doing so, he poignantly evinces the strategy of responding to the traditional ethic of nonattachment by reinterpreting it as an ethic of practical concern for others.

#### IV

Each of the possible responses outlined above constitutes an option that some contemporary yoga practitioners have taken. For many such individuals, there may be no particular choice to make, as their relatively meager experience of traditional yoga teachings has not brought them into contact with the kinds of ethically challenging material to which attention has been drawn in this article. In these cases, ignoring the tradition is the only path available. It is for those practitioners who do take their study of traditional sources further that questions are apt to arise, and this is likely to apply especially to those who follow their interest far enough to enroll on a yoga teacher training course. In this context, both the providers of the course in question, and the students who sign up for it, will have to make decisions—whether explicitly

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<sup>107</sup> For some insightful critical comments on Klostermaier's article, see Georg Feuerstein, "Response to Klaus Klostermaier, 'Dharmamegha samādhi: Comments on *Yogasūtra* IV.29,'" *Philosophy East and West* 37 (1987): 341–42.

<sup>108</sup> Ranganathan, *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra*, 72.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>110</sup> Geeta S. Iyengar, *Yoga: A Gem for Women*, 2nd edn (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1997), 49.

<sup>111</sup> Ranganathan, *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra*, 21.

and self-consciously or merely tacitly—concerning the extent to which they feel able to align their own values with those expounded in the traditional sources. Those who approach this process with due seriousness may undergo in their own lives a clash of values analogous to that which we see vividly represented in Orwell’s reaction to Gandhi’s purportedly “inhuman” ideal. Of course, a fourth possible response, to be added to the three discussed in the previous section, is that of thoroughly appropriating the ascetic vision of life embodied in a text such as the *Yogasūtra* or *Haṭhapradīpikā*—or the attitude of detachment from close interpersonal relationships that typifies at least some careful readings of the *Bhagavadgītā*—and becoming a sagely renouncer or the equivalent of a dutiful warrior who relinquishes desire as a motive for action. Though, no doubt, a logical possibility, such a response is rare among contemporary yoga practitioners.

In speaking of “responses,” “options,” and “decisions” here, I am not supposing that the negotiation of values to which I have referred is determined purely at the level of the individual. The way in which any given person relates to the traditional material will inevitably be influenced by the socio-cultural context wherein exposure to that material occurs. If, for example, texts such as the *Yogasūtra*, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Haṭhapradīpikā* are introduced to students in forms that have already passed through the reinterpreted and detraditionalizing filter of a contemporary school of fitness-oriented yoga, then one would not expect the same degree of ethical perturbation to be generated as when they are encountered in a raw, less percolated form. The purpose of this article has not been to analyze in detail the range of possible contexts that could have a bearing on these matters, or to offer speculations on exactly what their effects might be on the reception of traditional teachings; rather, it has been to highlight features of the traditional sources that are prone to appear incongruous with widespread ethical assumptions and to point out that *there is a question here* for modern-day participants in yoga.

Nor have I been concerned with issues of authenticity. By registering differences between traditional and modern conceptions of the methods, aims, and values of yoga, the intention has not been to identify any one of those conceptions as “authentic” and to decry others; it has merely been to affirm that *there are indeed differences*. Good work has been and is continuing to be done by historians of religion into the tortuous trajectories along which yoga-related concepts and practices have meandered in order to arrive at the complex

scenarios that we see manifested in today's transcultural milieu.<sup>112</sup> Attending to those historical trajectories discloses ceaseless waves of more or less pronounced innovation—the constant interplay between inheritance and originality—as opposed to a single “eastern” paradigm suddenly appropriated and exploited by a hegemonic “West.”<sup>113</sup> Yoga is by no means unique in this regard: we see similarly convoluted processes of intercultural fertilization and symbiosis in Hindu traditions more broadly as well as in, for example, Buddhism and Tantra.<sup>114</sup> The ways in which the concept of nonattachment has been in some instances ignored, in others selectively inherited, and in still others radically re-envisioned as an ethics of active participation and social engagement constitute a vital part of the ongoing narrative of yoga's exuberant emergence onto the global stage.

When Orwell wrote of “this yogi-ridden age” he could hardly have dreamed of the pervasive status that yoga and yoga-derived activities would acquire across multiple cultural domains. Yet the concept of yoga is undergoing perpetual transformation, and in the popular imagination of the early twenty-first century it hardly retains the sense of saintly aspiration with which Orwell associated it. If presented with Orwell's critique of Gandhian asceticism as (in Winch's poignant phrase) “a petrification of one's own humanity,” many twenty-first century yoga enthusiasts may well be highly sympathetic to it. Their goal, for the most part, is not the renunciation of attachment to everyday life; it is the enhancement thereof and a full participation in it.<sup>115</sup> For some, the goal is “to integrate the spiritual into earthly life,”<sup>116</sup> but this is by no means to forego earthly life for the sake of becoming a saint. While, from a scholarly perspective, attentiveness is needed to the flagrant misdescriptions and spurious representations of traditional sources that proliferate in contemporary yoga discourse, we should not overlook the ebullient mixture—of spiritual and other cultural forms—that is evolving through reinterpetive reception of yoga's ideologically bountiful past.

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<sup>112</sup> Some of this work has been referenced earlier, such as that by De Michelis, Singleton, Sjoman, and David White. Other relevant sources include Joseph S. Alter, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>113</sup> Here I borrow the phrase “interplay between inheritance and originality” from Aletta J. Norval, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16, who is in turn borrowing (inheriting) it from Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>114</sup> See, e.g., Agehananda Bharati, “The Hindu Renaissance and Its Apologetic Patterns,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970): 267–87; David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Prakash, *Universal Yoga*, 27: “With an inner balance, one can fully participate in all the ventures of earthly life without succumbing to confusion.”

<sup>116</sup> See, e.g., Aaron Star's praise for Darren Main's approach in Darren Main, *Yoga and the Path of the Urban Mystic*, 2nd edn (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2007), vi.