



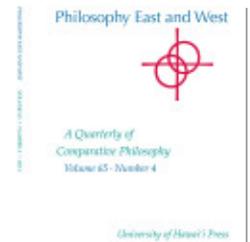
PROJECT MUSE®

Cultural Psychology from Within

Sthaneshwar Timalisina

Philosophy East and West, Volume 65, Number 4, October 2015, pp.
1281-1285 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2015.0098](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2015.0098)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pew/summary/v065/65.4.timalisina.html>

FEATURE REVIEW

Cultural Psychology from Within



Sthaneshwar Timalcina

San Diego State University
timalsin@mail.sdsu.edu

Spirituality and Indian Psychology: Lessons from the Bhagavad-Gita. By Dharm P. S. Bhawuk. International and Cultural Psychology series. London and New York: Springer, 2011. Pp. xxvi + 235. \$159.97, ISBN 978-1-441-98109-7.

Waiting for food, I was enjoying the events seen from the corner of a restaurant in Bengaluru. My attention focused on a child giving a high-five to his father when his team bagged a wicket. Though the family was speaking in their native language, the body language of the four-year-old child was entirely Western. His way of expressing surprise, happiness, or frustration, his hand gestures to explain the events, and his eye movements, all had been Westernized. Speaking in colonial terms, the child was civilized and even had a language to express his emotions and feelings.

Against the backdrop of the perennialist hypothesis that emotions are universal, the constructive approach maintains that emotions are culture-sensitive, and with this approach it becomes possible to make a case that culture plays a significant role in shaping human experience. It becomes possible to argue against this backdrop that psychology, both personal and social, needs to engage indigenous approaches, as these ground the way cultures express their experiences. Minimal work has been done in engaging Indian and other non-Western perspectives that could create a multi-pronged approach to address issues in the humanities or the social sciences. Just as Dharm Bhawuk notes in the first paragraph of *Spirituality and Indian Psychology: Lessons from the Bhagavad-Gita (SIP)*, the consequence is that the psychology of 1 percent of humanity has been applied to the rest of the world. One of the central claims of *SIP* is that the Western emic has been presented as etic, and under the guise of science the experiences and theories of the West have been imprinted upon the cultural body of the non-West. The author believes that something genuinely universal can be discovered, but the approach needs to be corrected to create a global platform that embodies indigenous theories, gender theories, or any other perspective, for that matter. This is not a voice for giving the emic a privilege, nor is this the culmination of the postmodern dilemma of the demise of the truth. On the contrary, this is a call for the correction of the path that has a cultural prejudice in both its roots and its fruits.

Examples abound. Freudian psychoanalysis is considered a universal theory, for instance. The confessional approach adopted in modern psychotherapy secularizes

and universalizes the underlying Christian assumption of confession and redemption. The problems are not just in psychology, though. Religion, politics, literary theories, aesthetics, or any other mode of human experience examined in the gaze of scientific investigation has emerged in the platform that is theoretically either problematic or incomplete. As a consequence, today's social theories have barely solved any human problems. On the contrary, they have caused problems and institutionalized war and genocide. In the Foucauldian paradigm, this poverty of perspectives can be interpreted in terms of the productive capacity of power, and along these lines the imposition of the Western emic, by means of the productive capacity of power, has produced and dominated the discourse on knowledge, sexuality, and subjectivity. This has paralyzed the non-Western processes of thinking, consequently altering human experiences altogether. A poignant example is the case study of the writings of Sudhir Kakar. His writings uniquely portray the ways the Western emics are imprinted in the psyche of the modern intelligentsia, a residual side-effect of the colonial project. According to the reading of Kakar by Alan Roland:

Indians thus emerge in Kakar's analysis as having an underdeveloped ego, that is, in not having the independent, self-reliant, self-directing ego of Western individualism; lacking in rational, logical secondary process thinking, another hallmark value of individualism; as having vague emotional boundaries between self and other with much less of the self-other demarcation that is also characteristic of individualism; and as having a weak conscience or superego because of looking to others for following highly contextual ethical norms rather than having the categorical imperative of Western male individualism (Kakar 1978, 105–8; 135–137). (—Quoted from Roland 1996, p. 14)

Bhawuk's work needs to be read against this backdrop. Speaking with regard to India, he has had his collective experiences inscribed with colonial pens, and books like *SIP* need to be welcomed without further ado. And there are some pioneers in this project, a testimony to the works of Jadunath Sinha or Anand Paranjpe, which Bhawuk has frequently cited. The challenge today for scholars is to not let this academic issue be hijacked and derailed in the guise of nationalist discourse. This book is thus a wake-up call for Indologists to go beyond philology, and for comparative scholarship to look beyond the Western emic. Without lingering in the postcolonial debacle, *SIP* attempts to make a constructive contribution by providing a new approach that seeks to contribute toward a global understanding with multiple competing perspectives. Bhawuk repeatedly cites the Upaniṣads to justify his approach, saying that contradictory factors can reside together and that there are always meta-categories to emerge in the commingling of the perspectives that cannot be reduced to one another. The underlying narrative is that a "multiparadigmatic approach will limit mistakes about universals" (p. 62).

It is not possible to address all the issues raised in *SIP*. The ones that I find particularly engaging are the theories of the self, desire, and action. While deconstructing some of the contemporary Western theories of the self, Bhawuk exploits the *Bhagavad-gītā* (*BG*) to propose a different model of the self that is interdependent and, while being embodied, is also transcendent. In this way, a clear distinction between the

phenomenal and metaphysical selves is laid out, and the embodied and active selves are recognized, with the first being the desiring self and the second being the societal self. This new approach to the self facilitates addressing concepts such as that of action without attachment or *niṣkāmakarma*. Engagement with society, accordingly, becomes just a process of recognizing the very self, the utmost goal of Hindu philosophy. Along the same lines, Bhawuk's new reading of the *BG* provides a foundation for addressing desire, which, in his understanding, is identified as an anchor to maintain cognition, emotion, and behavior. The author has come to this conclusion without engaging any materials from the Trika and Pratyabhijñā philosophical systems, where desire/volition plays a central role in giving rise to cognition and action. This is to say that the thesis Bhawuk has developed can be tested in other philosophical systems originating from India. The book is programmatic, for it lays the foundation for addressing emotions by examining the classical Indian texts. This development of the theory of self, desire, and action in the process of expanding some of the classical texts illustrates Bhawuk's claim that classical theories embedded in philosophical and religious texts can be polished like gems and offered for a global discourse. This also confirms his claim that there is a need for writing new expositions (*bhāṣya*) for the classical texts.

The philosophy of action ties closely with the theory of self, as is evident in *SIP*. Simply put, human activities are *for* something, and not all agents practice what the *BG* identifies as action without any self-interest. Following the dominant worldview, we work to achieve success. Calling upon the *BG* at this juncture is meaningful, since the success-driven-ness in today's work philosophy has displaced peace and happiness while enthroning laissez-faire capitalism. The contradiction between the success-oriented approach and the harmony- and peace-driven approach is not marginal, as these polar opposites identify both an abyss and a zenith of human action philosophy found epitomized in the philosophies of both Ayn Rand and the *BG*. These conceptual differences, however, are not mere intellectual problems, for one does not need to be a philosopher to have some guiding principles to act and be active.

Bhawuk's attempt to justify the concept of acting without desires, *niṣkāmakarma*, as a means of providing a new understanding of the self also answers some of the questions Kaufman (2005) has raised. What is praiseworthy in Bhawuk's approach is that he provides answers by not displacing the socio-historical context or the cultural-philosophical context, and unlike Chadha and Trakakis (2007), who respond to Kaufman by reading Immanuel Kant, Bhawuk attempts to respond to some of the objections to the theory of acting without attachment by giving a new reading of the *BG* and providing a new theory for the self in action. Additionally, the theory of action without attachment also speaks for a philosophy of action as a teleology in itself, with action not being instrumental for achieving some other goal. Like dancing, hiking, or non-commercialized play, action in this paradigm is an end in itself. What makes self-inaction theoretically possible, along these lines, is a new reading of the theory of self that goes beyond the transcendent self and incorporates the embodied and the societal selves together. Accordingly, although outwardly manifest by

reaching toward goals, actions are nevertheless instrumental in self-recognition and therefore do not need any extrinsic goal. This is not the picture of the metaphysical in conflict with the dynamic and societal self but one where multiple self-experiences complement each other. Needless to say, the *BG* repeatedly stresses that action is embedded with the self. Evidently, the self addressed along these lines cannot be the transcendent but is that which is dynamic and immediately felt in embodied experiences and social engagements.

SIP raises more questions than a single book can handle. Further analysis is required to address such issues as whether the alternative to the 'scientific culture' is a 'spiritual culture.' Or, is the integration of emic perspectives sufficient to rewrite the 'sciences' grounded on 'etic' or universal perspectives? Or, can the 'subjective' play the same role in creating new knowledge as the 'objective' does? There is not one single answer to these questions, and that indeed is the point. Personally, I am shocked at the way the 'objective' has vanished from the humanities, whether in the field of journalism or religious studies, or in any faculty of the social sciences. What is sad, however, is that this erasure of objectivity is hardly even noticed. Understandably, more subjects want their voices to be heard, shattering the cultural monologues. What has been misconceived in this process, however, is the notion that to make a noise is the same as having a voice. I therefore argue on behalf of the system of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*), still insisting that we can foster a mutually agreeable rational paradigm for a logical conversation. And this is not about a power-sharing between subjective and objective, etic and emic, universal and culture-specific. Classical Indian theories of *pramāṇa* are a testimony, if not for finding agreement, then for institutionalizing a culture of dialogue. It is ingenious of classical India to develop this system and engage Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains in the pursuit of mutually agreeable truths. The perennial dictum of a single truth and the postmodern dilemma of no truths both fail to acknowledge the inherent diversity of perspectives that still have transcendent principles that nonetheless bind contradictory perspectives together. Indian philosophical discourse is not about approving all approaches; nor is it about validating a single truth shared by all. On the contrary, it is about a quest for the truth that in itself is dialogical, as it is revealed through discourse.

The dichotomy between science and spirituality, infrequently addressed in *SIP*, poses the same problems. While acknowledging that science is yet another culture, I still maintain that unlike a dogma, science is capable of self-deconstruction. The existing paradigm that underlies the narrative of the scientific West versus the spiritual East—again a perennial myth, thanks to Suzuki, Vivekananda, and Radhakrishnan—may once have given breath to the non-Western cultural identity but is now being used as a tool to bulldoze intrinsic cultural differences. The process of universalizing the perennial truth is epitomized in the life of Ramakrishna, with his experience of the divine through all different religions. Additionally, 'spirituality' itself is a New Age invention that has not only aided in mystifying the East, as Said would say, but has also assisted in commodifying Indian religions. Interestingly, this has facilitated a mingled platform for the godman and the conman. In this flux of market and faith,

scientific truths have found their way into Harry Potter–style autobiographies. And with these developments I lament the demise of objectivity.

Interestingly, Patañjali and Śāṅkara, for instance, did not claim anywhere that what they theorized was their private experience. Whether Nāgārjuna or Śāṅkara, classical philosophers who were also the spiritual leaders of their times, were meticulous in their efforts to rationalize and logically address whatever mystical or spiritual experience they had. The reduction of such approaches to spirituality engenders approval of the same imperial agenda where what the East has is spirituality along with a bunch of subjective narratives.

While *SIP* is not a text on history, there are a number of historical issues in the backdrop of the text. When the model of leadership is addressed, for example, I could not stop wondering what distinctive leadership model could be derived from the classical Indian experience. The twentieth-century spiritual and political leaders addressed in the text have primarily been inspired by the leadership model from Western culture. This, however, does not mean that all the leadership models are alike. The experiments of Gandhi or Bhave, for instance, are exceptionally Indian in the sense that their role resembles the leadership models of the Buddha and Mahāvira and gives soft power a higher status. I believe even Bhawuk would agree that there is a diametric difference in the leadership models of Gandhi, the father of Indian independence and democracy, and Nehru, the godfather of Indian oligarchy.

References

- Chadha, Monima, and Nick Trakakis. 2007. "Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman." *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 4: 533–556.
- Kakar, Sudhir. 1978. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kaufman, Whitley R. P. 2005. "Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil." *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 1: 15–32.
- Roland, Alan. 1996. *Cultural Pluralism and Psychoanalysis: The Asian and North American Experience*. New York: Routledge.