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Abstract

In this paper, I look to answer an issue I have found in my personal studies. I have frequently found that my personal interest, Indian philosophy, finds very little legitimacy in the academic field of philosophy. In this paper, I will compare the work of ancient Indians with contemporaneous Greeks to demonstrate that it is, in fact, philosophy. Then, I will address the common charge that Indian thought is too religious to be philosophy. After proving that Indian texts have every reason to be considered philosophy, I will investigate why Indian thinkers are excluded from the canon; I will examine the role of the Kantian school of philosophy in building a racist narrative of philosophy as a European activity. Finally, I will consider the ramifications of perpetuating this very Eurocentric image of philosophy before challenging the institutions of philosophy to address the issue.
“The first [rational] thinkers … emerged in the ancient Greek world in the 6th century BC.”

**Introduction**

Who were the first philosophers? Virtually every introductory-level philosophy class gives this distinction to the ancient Greeks. Typically, this is one of the first pieces of information that every student of philosophy learns. The Greeks of antiquity, we are taught, were the inventors of rational thought. They made Greece the original, singular locus of philosophy from which all contemporary philosophical traditions eventually grew. This is the perennial truth that nearly every contemporary Western narrative of philosophy affirms. This well-accepted and widely-promulgated account of philosophy as Greek achievement is not, however, the only version of the story.

According to my own observations, Indian philosophy is very rarely discussed in the West. Its greatest thinkers, developments, and history are all unfamiliar to most of the philosophers that I have known; it is subaltern in the context of academic philosophy. Indeed, in discussions with professional philosophers educated at various institutions across the nation, all but two or three (out of dozens) have admitted a total unfamiliarity with ancient Indian thought. By their own accounts, Indian texts and thinkers were not topics that they had ever seriously been asked to study or consider. The lack of serious consideration given to classical Indian texts, though many certainly appear to be philosophical, perhaps explains why these works are largely omitted from discussions of ancient philosophy. In the face of this systematic neglect of Indian philosophy, I was left wondering: does ancient Indian thought really even count as philosophy?

To add to my confusion, I have been repeatedly encouraged to consider graduate programs

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1 Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*, 13
outside of the field of philosophy in order study classical Indian philosophy. Departments of history, religious studies, and East Asian studies have all been suggested as more suitable environments for someone wishing to study ancient Indian thought. This made clear to me that, although there was a common rhetoric that posited the existence of Asian philosophies, the paucity of Asian thought in the field of philosophy was intentional. I began to take interest in the tenuous relationship between Western academic philosophy and studies of Indian thought, as Indian philosophy in the contemporary West seems to simultaneously hold the status of

*philosophy* and *not philosophy*. Indian thought is allowed the label of 'philosophy,' but its study is evidently not the work of philosophers. I will show that the exclusion of Indians from the philosophical canon, then, has less to do with the content of Indian philosophies themselves than with the institutions that determine what philosophies are worth studying.

Of course, before attempting to answer the question as to whether ancient Indians did philosophy, I should first clarify what I mean by “philosophy.” The exact definition of philosophy is something that continues to be debated by scholars; there are arguably as many definitions of philosophy as there are philosophers. In light of this, I chose a definition of philosophy for this paper that would be fairly agreeable to most professional philosophers. I also picked a definition that would encompass most or all of the current Western philosophical canon. What I mean by philosophy, then, is a coherent system of rational and reflective investigations that use analysis and argumentation to pose and attempt to answer questions in fields such as ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. Philosophy, as a rule, aims to understand things as they really are. Philosophy is the pursuit of objective truths.

By this definition, philosophy has had a far richer and more diverse history than a typical
philosophy class might reveal. Although there is certainly an argument to be made that this sort of philosophy is found to have independent origins in many places throughout history, few regions produced as many significant and diverse traditions as the Indian subcontinent. It's difficult to say which school of Indian thought was the first truly “philosophical” tradition, but methodical and systematic approaches to topics of philosophical concern were certainly present in the subcontinent by the beginning of India's classical period (about 200 BCE). There is evidence of a “protophilosophy” in India that can be traced back to the composition of the Upanishads, but Indologist Johannes Bronkhorst asserts that “the available evidence suggests that no tradition of rational inquiry (in the sense here intended, manifested by critical debate and attempts to create coherent views of reality) existed in India before [the 300s BCE].”\(^2\) For simplicity's sake, I will leave the philosophical value of earlier Indian texts like the Upanishads as the subject for another essay and will limit the scope of this paper primarily to Indian philosophies of the 4th century BCE through the early classical period (about 650 CE) so that I may compare and contrast them with roughly contemporaneous schools of Greek thought. Of course, even though I will discuss only a few examples of classical Indian philosophy, they are far from representative of all ancient schools of Indian thought. The schools of Indian philosophy are simply far too many in number and too diverse in kind to be individually addressed, so I will focus primarily on specific instances that will prove the existence of philosophy in India more generally.

\(^2\) Bronkhorst, *Why Is There Philosophy in India?*, 22
Indian Thought as Compared to Greek Philosophy

Quite apart from being the uniquely Greek pursuit that most Ancient philosophy courses teach it to be, philosophy of both familiar and alien kinds was to be found in Classical India. Despite using terminology and imagery that is unfamiliar to Western sensibilities, Indian philosophers tackle many of the same topics as their Greek counterparts. Although distinctly Indian in both style and approach, many ancient Indian texts, like the *Mahābhārata* or the *Dīgha-Nikāya*, are written in a style of argumentative dialogue that is reminiscent of Plato's *Republic* or *Timaeus*. One of the ideological ways in which classical Indian philosophy most closely resembles that of contemporaneous Greek thought is in the area of ethics. The Buddhist traditions, in particular, are especially fit for comparisons to the works of Plato. Now, at first glance, the ethical system of values presented by Plato might seem unrelated to the ethical systems of the various schools of Buddhism, which all have enlightenment as their aim. Upon closer examination, though, the two systems have significant aspects in common.

**Buddhism**

Buddhist tradition is largely centered around a quest for *nirvāṇa*, enlightenment that results in freedom from suffering (*dukkha*). The first step to attaining *nirvāṇa* is through ethical behavior. People must adopt the habits of good behavior as a way to counteract the poisons (*kleśa*) of greed, hatred, and delusion that keep a person in the cycle of suffering and rebirth (*samsāra*). For Buddhists, an ethical life is an absolute prerequisite for liberation, and a truly ethical life cannot be attained through good deeds alone. An ethical life can only be attained through philosophy. According to Buddhist tradition, by doing philosophy through rational

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3 Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*, 79
inquiry, one can come to know the truth about the world. For most Buddhists, this entails coming to the realization that there is no unified and unchanging self. Buddhists, however, cannot simply reach *nirvāṇa* by being told that there is no self. They must do philosophy and come to understand this revelation themselves. Doing philosophy results in an awareness of what behavior is good; it is the Buddhist ideal to not prioritize oneself over others and to minimize suffering. Doing philosophy also allows one to come to understand why certain behaviors are good; because there is no distinct entity of self, “there is no reason to prefer our own welfare over that of others.” Ethical behavior is the natural result of the knowledge that results from doing philosophy and an understanding of the true nature of things.

**Eudaimonia: the Greek *Nirvāṇa***

Although Buddhism is rooted in a metaphysical view of the self that is fundamentally different from what Plato and his students in Greece were doing – Platonists recognized the existence of a self and discrete external objects while early Buddhists did not – the Buddha and Plato have similar prescriptions for an ethical life. Aspirations for an ideal state of being motivate the writings on ethics of both Greek and Indian philosophers. While the Buddhists aspired to reach *nirvāṇa*, numerous Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle included, had the notion of *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness or well-being, as the ultimate good. The Greeks reasoned that the highest good for humankind must be specific to humans. Being *eudaimon* was the result of virtue (*aretê*, also translated as excellence). Achieving *eudaimonia*, then, was attributed to excellence in the uniquely human activity of reason. Philosophy, being the ultimate exercise in rationality, was identified as crucial to becoming *eudaimon*. For Aristotle, “using

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4 Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*, 79
5 Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*, 80
reason well over the course of a full life is what happiness consists in. Doing anything well requires virtue or excellence, and therefore living well consists in activities caused by the rational soul in accordance with virtue or excellence.” Eudaimonia is achieved through continuous action, the unending exercise of reason.

Though Aristotle also thought material circumstances like noble birth or physical attractiveness could aid or impede the achievement of eudaimonia, his prescription for bliss is much the same as that of the Buddha. Although Aristotle thought that the very act of doing philosophy was a continuous and necessary activity for the end of eudaimonia, Buddhists treated philosophy as the means to the end of knowledge. When the metaphysics of self, however, are removed and the remaining ethical theories compared, what remains is two systems that assert that the ideal human state of happiness can only be achieved through the use of reason. In both systems, goodness is a combination of right deeds and theoretical knowledge.

Indian Religion as Philosophy

It would appear that Indian and Greek philosophies are (at least sometimes) similarly motivated. However, Indian philosophy, as both scholars and my own personal experience can confirm, is often disregarded as being “too religious” to be studied in departments of philosophy. The latent assumption in this statement is that there must be an absolute division between philosophy and religion and that the study of religion must be a thing wholly apart from studies of philosophy. Is this a reasonable position to hold? In brief, my answer is no. When A.H. Armstrong describes religious philosophies as problematic “because their reason throughout

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6 Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics."
7 Including Peter K.J. Park, Robert Bernasconi, Richard King, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, among others.
depends consciously on divine faith and grace,” he rests his entire assessment on a very particular and narrow definition of religion. The problem with this approach, as Mark Siderits describes it, is that it is grounded in an idea of religion as it is commonly understood in the contemporary West, but which is markedly different from religion as it existed in ancient India. Because Westerners are frequently exposed primarily to the faith-based and monotheistic Abrahamic religions, faith (and the dogmatism that may accompany it) is often presumed to be a central element of religion in general.”

“To think of religion this way,” says Siderits, “is to see it as a set of beliefs that one accepts out of a conviction that is not based on rational argumentation. Religion is then seen as falling on the 'heart' side of the head/heart, or reason/faith, divide.”

In reality, though, many classical Indian religions bear little resemblance to the faith-based forms of religion found so commonly in the West. “The concerns of [all] religion[s] are, in a word, soteriological,” states Siderits, but many classical Indian religions take a radically different approach to soteriology from the Abrahamic religions. To declare that matters of philosophy and religion must be distinct “is to suppose that soteriological concerns can only be addressed through a form of emotional commitment.” This view, however, was not held by ancient Indians, who instead thought that “it made perfectly good sense to use our rational faculties in the pursuit of salvation, … [of liberation] from an unsatisfactory way of being.”

Contrary to the Abrahamic religions, which require the acceptance of and obedience to certain doctrines on the basis of faith, many sects of classical Indian religion believe that systematic

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8 Armstrong, An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy. 159.
9 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 5
10 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 5
11 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 6
12 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 6
13 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 6
rational inquiry and self-reflection are the only ways to attain enlightenment and liberation. While a Christian must accept the teachings of Christ as divine and therefore above criticism and reproach, “Buddhists are not expected to accept … claims just because the Buddha taught them.” Indeed, as I mentioned previously, the Buddha's teachings were intended to be a guide to help others reach enlightenment. Even in early Buddhist teachings, reaching nirvāṇa has always required more than simple adherence to doctrines; it can only be attained through reason and critical engagement. To attain liberation, one must not merely know; he must understand.

The Indian form of religion sans faith, then, does not present the problems over which Armstrong expressed concern.

Buddhism was not the only nontheistic religion in classical India. In fact, several classical Indian religious traditions were nontheistic in the sense that they did not appeal to a god to justify their doctrines. For example, the modern Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan wrote that

the Samkhya [school] is silent about the existence of God, though certain about its theoretical indemonstrability. … [The Mimamsa sage] Jaimini refers to God only to deny his providence and moral government of the world, … [and the] early Buddhist systems are known to be indifferent to God.¹⁵

Even among the numerous classical Indian religions that do assert the existence of gods, they [the gods] play no role whatever in the quest for [liberation]. Perhaps worship and sacrifice to the right gods might win one various mundane benefits, … [b]ut the gods cannot bestow [enlightenment] on us. [Liberation] is something that one can only attain for oneself; enlightened beings can only help others by giving them pointers along the way.¹⁶

The gods found in ancient Indian religions are, in many ways, akin to those of the ancient

¹⁴ Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 7.
¹⁵ Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, 27.
¹⁶ Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 8.
Greek gods, though both powerful and long-lived, are neither omnipotent nor immortal. Their influence on human life is limited to power over the external factors in an individual's life, and just as Zeus couldn't bestow *eudaimonia* on the Greek people, neither could Brahmā grant someone enlightenment. Indian religions, with relatively few exceptions, placed great importance on the value of human rationality and its use in attaining liberation. Many Indian religions are, quite apart from the systems of religion-as-faith that are dominant in the modern West, indeed simply systems of philosophy with soteriological aims.

Do the soteriological ends of ancient Indian philosophies provide justification for their exclusion from discussions on philosophy and for their relegation to studies of religion? Here, again, my answer is no. As I demonstrated above, both ancient Greek and Indian philosophers discussed the ideal state of humans: a state of happiness that could only be achieved through the use of reason. What separates the two traditions is that while *eudaimonia* was related only to one's present life, *nirvāṇa* (and the related Hindu *moksha*) were intended to break the cycle of rebirth. This belief in a cycle of rebirth, though, certainly did not impede the development of classical Indian philosophy. Even so, the reference to religious figures and use of allegories in philosophical debate in many Indian (particularly Hindu) philosophies has led some to dismiss Indian philosophy as being more *mythos*, taken to be fantastical and unsubstantiated, than *logos*, taken to be perfectly reasoned and rational. As *mythos*, Indian philosophy must be irrational and unworthy of study as philosophy.

**Greek Philosophy as Mythos**

However, the insistence that philosophy must be *logos* separated from *mythos* is a criterion that is applied inconsistently. Plato, generally accepted in the West as being one of the
first great philosophers, did not accept that philosophy could be divided into *logos* and *mythos*, even though he lived well after this separation had first been proposed. In Robert Fowler's essay "*Mythos and Logos,*" he discusses the various ways in which the Sophists attempted to separate *mythos* from *logos* in their work and how Plato, who was open about his distaste for the work of the Sophists, rejected their efforts to completely separate *mythos* from *logos* as being both fruitless and in vain. Fowler states that, in Plato's work, "there are two kinds of *logoi*, one of which is *mythos* … the point is not just an innocuous one that all discourse is *logos*, including *mythos*, but more fundamentally that *mythos* has a very complicated relationship with *logos* in the philosopher's pursuit of truth."\(^{17}\) Since *logos* and *mythos* always inhere in the same entities on Earth, Fowler continues:

> trying to isolate *logos* from *mythos* [on Earth] produces an infinite regress as we try to distinguish *logos* from *mythos* using a faculty which is itself a mix of *logos* and *mythos* in unknown proportions. … Notoriously, in the *Timaios* the whole of the Republic is called a *mythos*; indeed, it is designated an imaginative construct such as was unlikely ever to come into existence. … Conversely, the story of Atlantis is presented emphatically as a true *logos*. … It is … called a *logos*, but the idea of probability comes up repeatedly, which must undercut this to some extent: it is (probably!) more *logos* than *mythos*, but that is all we can truthfully say.\(^{18}\)

Indeed, much of Plato's work takes as fact what, to modern readers, is unproven and therefore the stuff of *mythos*. Plato's *Timaeus*, for instance, is riddled with talk of gods, heavenly forces, and other mythological topics, but it is still considered to be a philosophical text. Instead of omitting the entirety of Plato's work on the basis of his *mythos*, modern philosophers typically set these portions of his work aside. If Plato is given such allowances, why aren't Indian thinkers?

> It seems dismissals of Indian philosophies as being too religious or mythical are based on

\(^{17}\) Fowler, "Mythos and Logos," 63  
\(^{18}\) Fowler, "Mythos and Logos," 64
assumptions about the 'mystical' culture of India. John Locke, for example, revealed his total unfamiliarity with Indian philosophies when he wrote:

Had the poor Indian philosopher (who imagined that the earth wanted something to bear it up) but thought of this word 'substance' he needed not to have been at the trouble to find an elephant to support it, and a tortoise to support his elephant; the word substance would have done it effectively.\(^\text{19}\)

Here, Locke assumes that Indian philosophies take as truth the Hindu myth that Earth is supported on the back of an elephant, which in turn is standing on the back of a turtle. “It would be impossible, [though],” declares B.K. Matilal, “to find a text in classical Indian philosophy where the elephant-tortoise device is put forward as a philosophic explanation of the support of the earth.”\(^\text{20}\) In fact, the Hindu *Vaisheshika Sutra* coined a term for substance (*dravya*) no less than two centuries before the Common Era, and it had nothing to do with either elephants or tortoises. If we adopted Locke's method of treating another culture's myths as its philosophy, says Richard King, “we could reject the Greek philosophical tradition on the basis of the Greek belief that the world is held aloft by the shoulder of Atlas.”\(^\text{21}\) Though ancient Indian philosophies certainly had elements of *mythos* in them, to reject them as philosophy while accepting the work of ancient Greeks like Plato shows an unfamiliarity with the material that is being dismissed as well as a tacit acceptance of the double standard that consistently works against the philosophies of nonwhites. This sets a pattern that devalues non-Western philosophies because they come from remote and unfamiliar lands.

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\(^\text{19}\) Locke qtd. in Matilal in *King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 29

\(^\text{20}\) Matilal in *King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 29

\(^\text{21}\) *King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, *King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 29
The Historical Basis for the Dismissal of Indian Philosophy

If philosophy has not always been purely logos, even in the West, then the mythos/logos distinction must be historically grounded. The notion of a strict mythos/logos dichotomy developed alongside the reason/tradition (or philosophy/religion) split of the European Enlightenment. The attempts to separate mythos from logos, reason from tradition, and religion from philosophy were treated as natural and necessary preconditions for mankind's rational development. This perspective is, however, far from a universal one. Rather than articulating any sort of a priori truth about the nature of either, the uniquely European division of philosophy and religion into two separate disciplines can be traced to certain contingent political and social causes in Enlightenment-era Europe.22 “The authority of 'Theology' in European universities was undermined by intellectuals [in the modern era] who were unhappy … with the ecclesiastical authority within society.”23 The clash between religious institutions and academics led to the creation of this dichotomy between the “detached and deliberate” field of philosophy and religion, the “subjective commitments that are not open to rational investigation and scrutiny.”24 “The principle of rationality,” as King states, “has often been upheld in the west as a culturally independent and neutral faculty capable of promoting freedom of thought and thereby firmly distinguished from a dogmatic adherence to (religious) tradition.”25 Religion, tradition, and mythos had come to be associated in the West with blind dogmatism. The European discipline of philosophy, which prided itself on its use of reason to discover universal truths, developed an attitude that eschewed all religious traditions on this (historically contingent) basis. From then

22 King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought, 36
23 King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought, 4
24 Siderits, Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction, 6.
25 King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought, 13
on, attempts “[t]o exclude the so-called 'spiritual' aspects of Indian thought from the category of 'philosophy' … project the Enlightenment dichotomy between philosophy and religion onto materials where such a polarity does not exist.”

**Dismissal Not on the Basis of Religion: Indian Materialism**

Presenting the ancient Greeks as concerned only with rationality while painting ancient Indians as mystics is not only misguided, it is outright wrong. Even if we suppose that the distinctions between religion/philosophy and tradition/reason are, in fact, necessary preconditions for the practice of philosophy proper, such anti-traditional and irreligious schools of thought also existed in classical India. The best example of anti-traditional philosophy in classical India is the school of Cārvāka, also known as the Lokayata (from loka, meaning earth/world), a school of Indian materialism whose seminal work, the now-lost Brhaspatya Sutras, may date back as far as 600 BCE. The Cārvākas “deny God, ridicule the priests, revile the Vedas and seek salvation in pleasure.”

The Medieval Indian doxographer Madhava Acharya quoted Bṛhaspati, the semi-mythical writer of the Brhaspatya Sutras, as saying:

> There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world. … [These concepts] were made … as the livelihood of those destitute of knowledge and manliness. If a beast slain in [sacrifice] will itself go to heaven, why then does the sacrificer forthwith not offer his own father? … When the body becomes ashes, how can it ever return again? … Hence it is only as a means of livelihood that brahmins [priests] have established here [all] these ceremonies. … The three authors of the Vedas were buffoons [and] knaves.

The Cārvākas, from what can be gathered of extant commentaries, believed that sense-perception

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26 King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 29
27 Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 27
28 This is not the Hindu deity of the same name, but a man from the Vedic Period (1750-300 BCE) about whom relatively little is known.
29 Acharya, Madhava. "Cārvākas," 233-234
was the only independent means of knowledge. They rejected revelation and even inferential reasoning (anumāṇa) as valid ways of acquiring knowledge,

Clearly [reflecting] anxieties about the ways in which logical inferences could be applied to justify belief in the existence of ... gods, demons, and heavenly realms. ... This of course, created problems for the Materialists since they used arguments to substantiate their own position and refute the views of others. [Some Materialists] distinguished between inferences about the past and inferences concerned the future [or supernatural forces] ... since [only inferences about the past] could be directly verified by sense-perceptions.³⁰

Though many ancient and Medieval Indian commentaries on Cārvāka thought seem to equate classical Indian materialism with an unsophisticated form of hedonism, these are, at best, of questionable reliability. Of the surviving works regarding materialism, most come either from proponents of opposing philosophical schools or from authors writing about Cārvāka after its apparent disappearance in the 12th century. Classical Indian students of Cārvāka developed distinctions between 'crude' and 'developed' materialism, with the latter positing a hierarchy of pleasures, placing intellectual pursuits above purely physical ones. Although a central tenet of materialism was a disbelief in absolute moral right and wrong, many of the materialists still sought to form systems of ethics. As with the Buddhists, the common goal of Cārvāka ethics was to avoid activity that would cause harm to others. “Clearly then,” stresses King, “the Cārvāka position was not a form of unsophisticated or unreflective hedonism and in this regard can be compared to the Greek Epicureans.”³¹

Philosophy of both theistic and atheistic kinds flourished in ancient India. If one were to attempt to explain the absence of Hindu (or even Buddhist and Jain) philosophies from the

³⁰ King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought, 20
³¹ King, Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought,
curricula of philosophy courses across the West on the basis of religion, as is often done, what explanation could there be for the neglect of even the anti-traditional and atheistic schools of Indian thought? It seems that, for many contemporary philosophers, understandings of what deserves to be called philosophy and who can be called philosophers come, ironically, from the tradition of the discipline. The assumption that there must be a distinction between *mythos* and *logos* or faith and reason in philosophy is, as I have previously discussed, a uniquely Western feature rooted in historical contingencies. This artificial dichotomy has become tradition in Western academic philosophy and is now commonly accepted (too often without critical evaluation) as a necessary and universal requirement for the practice of philosophy.

**Omission as a Result of Ignorance**

Just as the notion of a necessary religion/philosophy dichotomy was born of history and propagated as an *a priori* truth through academic institutions, so too was the omission of nonwhite philosophers, even those whose work meets the Western criteria for 'philosophy,' from the Western canon. I have encountered many contemporary philosophers that know little to nothing about non-Western philosophies but, even still, are quick to dismiss them as unphilosophical. None that I have encountered have considered how they might have such knowledge regarding material that they themselves have not studied. 'If the Indians had *actually* been doing philosophy since ancient times,' the thinking of many of these professional philosophers seems to go, 'I would have encountered it/learned about it during my studies of philosophy.' Even after having this problem pointed out, I've seen relatively few Western philosophers that are particularly interested in assessing the validity of this mode of thinking, and, as a result, continue to insist that nothing worth studying as philosophy existed in the
ancient world outside of Greece. This mentality is evidenced by the abundance of histories of philosophy that do not ever question how we know that the Greeks were the first philosophers. This is the exact type of uncritical thinking that philosophers claim to avoid by divorcing themselves from religion and tradition. Indeed, this parochialism endemic in Western philosophy perpetuates the racist notion of philosophy as an exclusively European activity that has stood, largely unchanged, as the dominant narrative in the field for roughly two hundred years.

In the same way that the mythos/logos distinction was not always a central component of Western philosophy, neither was Eurocentric parochialism. Prior to the late eighteenth century, philosophy was generally believed to have originated independently in several locations. Although historians of philosophy debated exactly which cultures developed proper philosophy in ancient times, the most commonly cited loci for its development were Egypt, Greece, China, and India. Part of the debate surrounding the birthplace(s) of philosophy revolved around the particular definition of philosophy and its relation to religion.
Historiography of Philosophy

In the mid-to-late 1700s, however, two major shifts occurred within the field of the history of philosophy: a narrative style of history that was based on the evaluation of the material presented was adopted, and theories of race began to be incorporated into the evaluations of the philosophies discussed. Although the reasons for these developments are certainly numerous, the work of Immanuel Kant played a crucial role in the 18th century changes to the field of the history of philosophy. The predominant approach to histories of philosophy prior to Kant tended to organize philosophical movements chronologically, give biographies and historical context about major philosophers, and present their philosophies without evaluation. One such example was Jacob Brucker's early eighteenth century history of philosophy, Historia critica philosophiae, which was originally a large five volume work (a sixth was later added) that covered theoretical works from Africa, Asian, and Europe. Brucker, like many before him, wrote in a “‘lives and opinions' mode.”

Kant on Philosophy as Progress

To Kant, however, this was simply unacceptable. In his view, histories of philosophy should, in themselves, be an exercise in philosophy. Whereas history was a discipline concerned with accidentals and contingencies, Kant believed that doing philosophy helped progress the human species. Like many of his day, Kant believed that humans were created with a purpose, and, quite like one might expect from an Enlightenment-era philosopher, he believed that that this purpose was to achieve rationality. This goal, however, applies only to the species as a whole, not to individuals, because

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reason itself does not operate instinctively, but rather needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another. … If nature has only set the term of [a person's] life as short (as has actually happened), then nature perhaps needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment to the next, in order to propel … our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim [of rationality].

Since doing philosophy is the “attempts, practice and instruction” Kant describes as necessary for man to progress towards the ideal of rationality, a history of philosophy is therefore the history of the necessary progress humans towards a goal of rationality that we must eventually reach. A Kantian history of philosophy, therefore, needs to very clearly show this progress of the species towards rationality in order to be a proper history of philosophy and not a mere history of ideas.

Since, according to Kant, the development of rationality has been a gradual one over the course of human history, histories of philosophy must present a narrative that demonstrates how mankind has progressed from the nascent and immature philosophies of the ancients to the advanced and highly-rational philosophies of Kant and his followers. In a sense, the ancient philosophers were like babies. Just as babies have the potential to reason as adults do, the philosophers of the still-young human race had the potential to reason just as the moderns did; just as babies make mistakes that they will learn from as they grow older, the earliest philosophers made mistakes in reason from which later generations of man learned. In this sense, Kantian histories of philosophy must be evaluative. They must show what errors were made in older philosophies and how these errors were addressed and corrected by later philosophers. This application of a priori principles to previous philosophies is both proof of progress and the basis for the narrative of progress, in that it creates a dialogue whereby modern philosophers can

33 Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," 11-12
engage with older texts and prove that advancements towards an ultimate rationality have been made. In order to show this progress, it must present a narrative with both a beginning and an end.\textsuperscript{34}

**Kant and the Dismissal of Nonwhites**

How, then, did Kant contribute to the exclusion and dismissal of Indian schools of thought from the field of philosophy if the goal of Kantian histories of philosophy was principally to show human progress from the infantile philosophies of the ancients to the culmination of philosophy with Kant's “true metaphysics”?\textsuperscript{35} He did so by dismissing the work of non-Europeans on the basis of race. When Kant writes about the origins of the races in his essays “On the Different Human Races” and “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,” he seeks to provide an explanation for the many apparent differences between peoples of different regions. He describes the different racial characteristics as being the result of the first humans settling in different regions around the globe and adapting to the many different climates of the world. He divided humans into four races: the (Native American) Hunnish, the Negro, the (Asian Indian) Hindu, and the White. Each race had distinct physical and mental characteristics that would be common to every member of that race.\textsuperscript{36} After a period of time, these early humans stopped adapting, and the characteristics they had developed began to be reproduced in their offspring. The characteristics that were reproduced predictably and unfailingly through generations are what Kant classifies as racial traits.

Based on the racial characteristics he described, Kant created a hierarchy of the races. At

\textsuperscript{34} Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*, 21.
\textsuperscript{35} Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*, 23
\textsuperscript{36} Any trait that wasn't common to all members of a race was classified by Kant as being varietal.
the top were the white race, who Kant said “contains all incentives and talents in itself; and so one must observe it more carefully. … If a revolution occurred, it was always brought about by the whites.” Kant said “they acquire culture in the highest degree, but only in the arts and not the sciences. They never raise it up to abstract concepts. … The Hindus always remain as they are, they never bring culture further.” Second in the hierarchy was the Hindu race, of which Kant said, “they acquire culture in the highest degree, but only in the arts and not the sciences. They never raise it up to abstract concepts. … The Hindus always remain as they are, they never bring culture further.”

Below the Whites and Hindus were the Negroes, who Kant said could “be educated, but only to the education of servants,” and who, apart from the Americans, “undoubtedly holds the lowest of all … levels that we have designated as racial differences.” At the bottom of the racial hierarchy is the Hunnish race, who, “despite the proximity of example and ample encouragement,” are “incapable of any culture.” Philosophy, which is culture par excellence, could only ever be advanced by the whites. It was this knowledge that allowed Kant to dismiss ancient Indian or Egyptian texts; he thought that people incapable of cultural progress wrote them. Because Kant believed that nonwhite races were incapable of the sorts of abstract thinking required for philosophy, he believed that they were also incapable of progressing the human species. The narrative of progress he prescribed for histories of philosophy meant that schools of thought that didn't contribute to the development of rationality in mankind must be excluded from histories of philosophy on the basis that they were not, in fact, philosophical. This meant that, of the four locations that had once commonly been held as birthplaces of philosophy, only Greece deserved a place in a Kantian history of philosophy.

Immanuel Kant himself never wrote a history of philosophy, but two of his students,

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37 Kant, Immanuel Kant, Gesammelte Schriften Akademie-Ausgabe Bde. 1-23, 25:1187
38 Kant, Immanuel Kant, Gesammelte Schriften Akademie-Ausgabe Bde. 1-23, 25:1187
39 Kant, Immanuel Kant, Gesammelte Schriften Akademie-Ausgabe Bde. 1-23, 25:1187
40 Kant, "On the Use of Teleological Principles of Philosophy," 186.
Johann Buhle and Wilhelm Gottlieb Tenneman, wrote Kantian histories of philosophy. While Buhle entertained the thought that Indians may have been doing a “mixed up” version of the “doctrines of the most celebrated Greek philosophical schools [that] were disseminated in India … after Alexander's conquest,” he still largely glosses over non-European traditions. Tenneman skirted the issue of non-Western philosophy entirely and merely claimed that philosophy originated with the Greeks.41 Echoing Kant, Tenneman said that “[h]istory of philosophy is exposition of the successive development of philosophy,” and used this rationale to justify his exclusion of non-Europeans from his history of philosophy.42 This narrative style of histories of philosophy quickly became the norm in Germany. A contemporary of Kant and his students, the French philosopher Joseph-Marie de Gérando observed that “no example of a revolution [was] as swift as that which was affected in Germany by the doctrines of Kant.”43 By the mid-nineteenth century, the Kantian-style narrative approach to histories of philosophy had become fairly standard in Western traditions of philosophy, and Greece had become well-accepted as the birthplace of philosophy.

Secularization and Racism

It was also during this period that scholars began retroactively secularizing the philosophies of the ancient Greeks in order to make them more closely fit the narrative of the progress of philosophy that was being developed by Kantians. Modern philosophers used the distinctions Aristotle drew between theoria, phronesis, and techne, to mark the moment in which philosophy became a matter of pure theory (as opposed to the practical knowledge that was so

41 Park, Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy, 84.
42 Park, Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy, 27.
43 Park, Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy, 45.
well-developed in the East) and to locate the birthplace of philosophy in Europe. Increasingly, philosophy was becoming “characterised by a detachment from practical concerns … [which allowed the thinker] to view the world from a disinterested and non-participatory [position].”

When Edmund Husserl declared that “only in the Greeks do we have … the essentially new form of a purely 'theoretical' attitude,” he assigns to ancient Greeks the unique ability to “universally … [assess] truth claims and [apply] critical thought to all truth-claims including those of one's own tradition.”

The widespread secularization of philosophy, combined with an academically-sanctioned relegation of nonwhites to the category of the inferior and historically insignificant with its roots in Enlightenment era theory, all but guaranteed that the many diverse philosophical traditions of India would be effectively removed from Western philosophical discourse. After Kant, the Western philosophical canon was pruned to paint a portrait of philosophy, rational thinking, and progress as the sole domain of the whites. The current philosophical canon, which has remained mostly unchanged since the end of the modern period, reflects the philosophical tradition advanced by Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers. This is the tradition that many budding young philosophers in the West are inheriting.

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44 King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 26
45 King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, 26-27
The Perpetuation of a Racist Canon

Even if one accepts that Kant's views on race shaped his (and soon after, the West's, more generally) understanding of philosophy and its history, the conclusion that this Western canon is racist in itself might seem far-fetched. After all, the overtly disparaging language Kant used to discuss the abilities of nonwhites is far from openly accepted in current academic institutions. However, because histories of philosophy still tend to want to present narratives of progress culminating in our contemporary Western views, philosophy continues to trace its own evolution according to a fairly narrow and uniquely European definition of philosophy. Unsurprisingly, tracing the development of Western thought according to Western benchmarks leaves little room for non-Western thought. In an increasingly 'global' age, however, it has become more and more difficult to convincingly attribute the persistence of an overwhelmingly white philosophical canon to innocent parochialism. By seeking to demonstrate progress in a simple linear narrative of Western-defined progress, many contemporary histories of philosophy implicitly condone the racist parochialism that is so common in the field.

Even so, the past several decades have witnessed an increasing institutional awareness of the need for 'diversity' in the field of philosophy, as evidenced by the abundance of minority-focused conferences and summer programs that now plaster the walls of my own school's department office. An acute awareness of the lily white face of philosophy has prompted more and more Western philosophers to begin addressing a potential issue – the absolute dearth of non-Western thought in their books, syllabi, and lectures. By prefacing their otherwise completely Eurocentric works with short explanations for the noninclusion of non-Western philosophies, contemporary Western philosophers have found a way to 'acknowledge' non-
Western thought without having to actually engage with the materials. The charges of racism and ethnocentrism in the field of philosophy stem from what Robert Bernasconi refers to as the “apparent tension between the alleged universality of reason and the fact that its upholders are so intent on localising its historical instantiation.” When met with accusations of Eurocentric parochialism, academic philosophers never even seemed to consider a total reevaluation of the canon. Instead, we see many Western philosophers embracing their own parochialism, qualifying all of their work as being 'Western philosophy.' As a result, non-Western philosophies could be overlooked on the basis of being outside the scope of such projects.

Most Western philosophers today, having been educated in the white European tradition already mentioned, know very little about ancient Indian schools of thought. In fact, many contemporary Western philosophers know so little of non-Western intellectual traditions that they are wholly incapable of either defending or refuting the very basic assertion that philosophy (a supposedly universally human pursuit) existed in India (a subcontinent that produced some of the ancient world's most advanced civilizations). Unable to talk about non-Western philosophies in any meaningful way, contemporary philosophers increasingly seem to respond to charges of racially-motivated parochialism by citing their own ignorance of non-Western traditions and familiarity with Western traditions as a suitable justification for such a narrow and culturally-specific focus. This rationale, however, is problematic. Students of any academic discipline are expected to be at least passingly familiar with the most important movements in that discipline's history, and philosophy is no exception. It is doubtful, for example, that a Western student could receive a degree in philosophy without having ever gone over the works of Aristotle, Descartes,

or Kant. These very same philosophy programs, however, produce large numbers graduates that have never even heard of Nagarjuna or Mahavira. That philosophers are not only allowed, but perhaps even encouraged, by many Western departments of philosophy to be totally ignorant of Eastern traditions is telling of a belief that is endemic to academic philosophy: that Indian philosophies are not significant to the field of philosophy as a whole.

What reveals itself, then, is a prevalent tendency among Western philosophers to categorize non-Western thought as belonging to a category of the Other. Though no longer explicitly ruled by the inflexible racial hierarchy found in the works of Kant, the construction of the Western philosophical canon is still, at its core, much the same as it was 200 years ago. The Greeks are still presented as the sole progenitors of philosophy, and a narrative of philosophy-as-progress is still widely used in contemporary histories of philosophies. Most significantly, though, nonwhite and non-Western philosophies still struggle to find legitimacy in Western philosophy departments. Though there is certainly an abundance of wildly diverse classical Indian philosophical traditions that one could choose to study, they are rarely given much consideration in Western lecture halls. The many complementary and competing Indian philosophical traditions are often condensed in a single unit, 'Indian philosophy,' and grouped with the equally diverse Chinese and Japanese philosophical traditions into a single, monolithic course. Classes on 'Asian philosophy' must, then, fit the entire manifold intellectual history of the planet's largest and most populous continent into the same number of weeks given to a class on, say, modern European philosophy. I would like to restate this for emphasis: in a large number of philosophy departments across the US, it would absolutely be commonplace for a class that covers the entirety of Asian philosophical knowledge to be taught in the same amount of time
allowed to a 300-year window of European philosophy. It is unlikely that there has ever been someone who perfectly presented the many nuances of any single philosophical tradition over the course of a single school term, but to even attempt to give a relatively complete overview of the entirety of Asian philosophy in a single term is perhaps little more than an exercise in futility. Hyper-condensed classes on the whole of Asian philosophy, though, are frequently the only exposure students in Western universities have to non-Western thought. This tendency very clearly demonstrates the proportionally greater value that is placed on European traditions in the field of philosophy.

I suspect that the underlying reason for the ongoing dismissal and undervaluation of Indian thought in Western philosophy is that, although there may be a form of philosophy present in these texts, it is not our philosophy. 'The familiar European philosophical traditions already poses many difficult and interesting questions,' one might say, 'so why should we be expected to learn ancient Indian philosophy, which is unfamiliar and inconsequential to our (secular, modern, and Western) ends?' According to Hamid Dabashi, this sort of thinking is understandable on the one hand, because “as [with] all other people, Europeans are perfectly entitled to their own self-centrism.”47 On the other hand, though, this view assumes that the 'we' doing philosophy have European roots. In a modern global culture, particularly in the United States, it cannot be taken as a given that “we” have roots in Europe, and to trace “our” history of philosophy back only through Europe completely disregards the multicultural roots of the contemporary American student body. Treating the culturally-specific forms and development of European philosophy as the only forms and development of philosophy just serves to disenfranchise non-white, non-

47 Dabashi, Hamid. "Can Non-Europeans Think?"
European students by explicitly leaving their philosophy out of the canon, yet this is exactly the approach academic philosophy often takes. The consequence is that an entire population is effectively rendered invisible in the field.
Conclusion

The omission of non-Western philosophical traditions from discourses is an exercise of power. The fact that so many programs of philosophy find it permissible to only teach Western philosophy is the result of what Dabashi calls “the phantom memories of the time [when] 'the West' had assured confidence and a sense of its own universalism and globality.”48 Far from being expressions of universal truths, though, these demonstrations of institutional might make the entire discipline of philosophy look as though it's desperately clinging on to the last vestiges of its imperial heyday. The exclusion of Indian philosophy from the canon, then, is a holdover from the imperialist era, when the West had a political position that allowed them to claim the universality of its own brand of philosophy. If the field of philosophy must accept that, in a global culture that is no longer easily divided into categories of 'colonizers' and 'colonized,' the standards of universal truth cannot be constructed from a provincial perspective. Academic philosophy must begin to approach its concerns from perspectives outside of its traditional borders, and though there are certainly contemporary philosophers who are willing to acknowledge the existence of Indian philosophy, mere acknowledgment is not enough. I have talked to several nonwhite students that have declared philosophy's apparent preoccupation with European thought as being off-putting. The current canon, it seems, perpetuates itself by facilitating philosophical discussion only among those who are interested in the works and thoughts of Europeans. As it stands, studies of Indian and other non-Western philosophies are at the margins of the field, and this status as a very niche area of philosophical interest has its roots in unabashed ethnocentrism and racism on the part of early modern Europeans. Not enough is

48 Dabashi, Hamid. "Can Non-Europeans Think?"
being done to change this perception of non-Western philosophies as unimportant to the study of philosophy.

To continue practicing philosophy in this Eurocentric tradition even after the value of Indian philosophy is established is to either implicitly endorse the racism that spawned this system or accept the current state of philosophy as a culturally-dismissive discipline in a world rife with cross-cultural exchange. In other words, any person that does not attempt to remedy the problem of cultural exclusivity in philosophy by taking the initiative to become familiar with the material and to profess its relevance and legitimacy in helping to perpetuate this system.
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