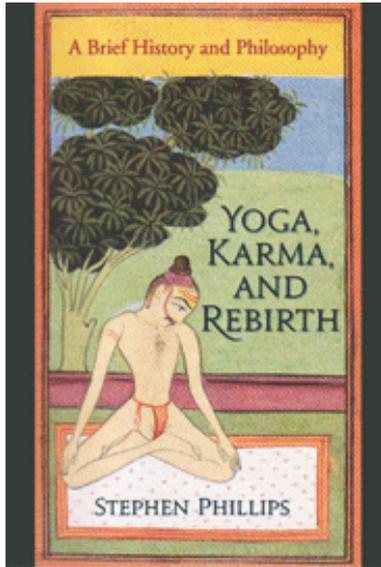


## BOOK EXERPT



Stephen Phillips

*Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth:  
A Brief History and Philosophy*

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Chapter 2: Yoga and Metaphysics  
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For serious yoga practitioners curious to know the ancient origins of the art, Stephen Phillips, a professional philosopher and sanskritist with a long-standing personal practice, lays out the philosophies of action, knowledge, and devotion as well as the processes of meditation, reasoning, and self-analysis that formed the basis of yoga in ancient and classical India and continue to shape it today.

In discussing yoga's fundamental commitments, Phillips explores traditional teachings of hatha yoga, karma yoga, *bhakti* yoga, and tantra, and shows how such core concepts as self-monitoring consciousness, karma, nonharmfulness (*ahimsa*), reincarnation, and the powers of consciousness relate to modern practice. He outlines values implicit in *bhakti* yoga and the tantric yoga of beauty and art and explains the occult psychologies of *koshas*, *skandhas*, and *chakras*. His book incorporates original translations from the early Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Yoga Sutra* (the entire text), the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, and seminal tantric writings of the tenth-century Kashmiri Shaivite, Abhinava Gupta. A glossary defining more than three hundred technical terms and an extensive bibliography offer further help to nonscholars. A remarkable exploration of yoga's conceptual legacy, *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth* crystallizes ideas about self and reality that unite the many incarnations of yoga.

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Yoga teaches the causal independence of consciousness, its kingship or self-rule, as well as its ability to govern thought, emotion, and the body, indeed all of its various instruments and "sheaths." We shall call this Yoga's self-determination thesis. It stands at the center of Yoga metaphysics. That is to say, central to Yoga is the proposition that we can change ourselves, that our bodies are shaped by karma, by what we do, by exercises and training and self-discipline. Self-determination extends to our emotional

and mental bodies as well as our physical “sheath.” Consciousness is transcendent to and can make, or shape, its embodiments. Yoga metaphysics — whether dualist or something else — has the responsibility to make the power of consciousness plain.



There are several competing materialist views, and numerous considerations motivate the one or the other. Arguments for one theory and against another occupy the professional journals. On all views, however, explanatory priority rests with the physical in that consciousness is physically caused. “Materialism” is the word I use to capture this common commitment. On all the theories, conscious states are either identical to physical processes or bubble-like effects of physical causes that themselves have no causal power. In other words, consciousness is not only inseparable from the physical body, it is identical to or entirely dependent on physical states. All volition, everything we choose to do, as well as all thought and emotion and indeed self-consciousness, have sufficient determinants in the brain or another bodily part.

Materialists are, generally speaking, naturalists. Consciousness, etc., may be a bit peculiar as events or properties go, but all subjective as well as objective occurrences belong to a closed physical network, i.e., to the natural world. Consciousness emerges in the evolution of life according to physical, chemical, and biological laws. Yoga’s self-determination thesis is, therefore, false, along with much of our common belief about ourselves as knowers and agents.

Yoga denies a supposition common to all materialism, namely, that either an identity or a one-directional causal relationship, from body to mind, is the truth about consciousness. That is to say, Yoga denies that consciousness is either identical to or the result of physical entities and processes. This is the materialist view boiled down to its essence — albeit a disjunctive essence, two mouthfuls — a *rasa* that is hard to stomach by Yoga, since Yoga is committed to the irreducible reality of consciousness and its power over itself and its instruments. Although there are disputes among Vedantins, Buddhists, Jainas, and other advocates of yoga practices ancient and modern, on all Yoga views at least some consciousness is transcendent to the body and indeed to the mind.

According to the new materialists, in contrast, correlations between brain states and processes and conscious states and processes may be extrapolated to deny all such transcendence. Some correlations, such as the severing of the spinal cord and loss of consciousness, are commonly cited in favor of a general connection. However, a dramatic example of a necessary condition is no argument for sufficiency. As mentioned, the soft problem of consciousness is resolvable by identification of necessary conditions for conscious states in the brain and bodily processes. Yoga has no quarrel with identification of necessary conditions. Our quarrel is with the supposition that things physical could be sufficient for consciousness. You need an unsevered spinal cord to live and breathe and think and feel, but you also need something beyond the bodily instrument.

*By definition* the mind’s receptivity of sensory input and its ability to respond through

bodily movement depend on physical processes properly functioning. In other words, we know *a priori* that bodily events, such as visual perception or lifting a limb, depend on the normal functioning of bodily processes. So why should this bit of analytic insight mean that every conscious state correlates with something going on in the brain? Introspectively, yogins report self-consciousness during periods when their brains show minimal activity.

The materialist answer is typically that in such cases science has a project. We may not know yet but we shall. Science's trajectory is progress. This of course is a convenient attitude towards inconvenient phenomena, such as, to cite another large example, our apparent freedom to move about. The materialist may be taken to presume that any consciousness touted by Yoga would have a physical correlate and exclusively physical causes. After all, what is the alternative? The entirety of this chapter constitutes a response to this challenge and attitude, but here is the gist.

First, Yoga in entering philosophy's mind-body debate inherits rich dualist resources, counterarguments about consciousness that so far have not been answered by materialists. We shall survey a few of these, and further references will be given.

Second, Yoga metaphysics itself, if it need be dualist, need not be Cartesian, need not endorse a dualism of non-interactive substances. Yoga dualism may or may not find that consciousness is a substance in the sense of a locus or substratum of peculiarly psychological properties, but, whatever the precise ontology, Yoga at a minimum will be interactionist, as will be explained, avoiding the mysteries of Cartesian dualism and its non-interactionist progeny.

Yoga need not oppose science, not even brain science, although it must be opposed to causal closure. Brain science reveals necessary conditions, never in themselves sufficient. In classical India, the Nyaya school is famous for making the point. Nyaya, "Logic," is a premier dualist philosophy classically allied with Yoga in our broad sense. Nyaya philosophers point out that a genuine perception of a thorn, in the stock example, through the organ of touch requires physical contact between the thorn and a bodily part, a left toe, for instance. But you do not need the toe to remember the thorn. This is one indication of the transcendence of consciousness.

The Nyaya philosopher definitely would agree with the modern materialist that having a brain is a condition of human consciousness. Cut off a head and the person dies. The particular stream of cognition forming Devadatta's mental life ends with the death of Devadatta, according to Nyaya. This school does not, unlike mainstream Yoga (Vedanta, Buddhism, and so on), recognize an occult or "pranic" body. But Nyaya does recognize that Devadatta the person is a composite of a self and a body and indeed a life. The body is not sufficient for consciousness, since, Nyaya philosophers argue, we see that material things, excepting the living body, are not conscious.

...Let us move on with the remark that it is not worth disputing the basic anti-Cartesian argument that we are aware of the world that is explained by physics and chemistry and we act and are acted upon by things physical. Cartesian dualism is untenable. But Yoga dualism is different, building from the insights of ... Nyaya.

Four types of causal relationship are recognized by the philosophers of classical Nyaya. Nyaya views causal capacities as dispositions, *samskara*, which are latent properties, lawful tendencies for something to change under certain circumstances, as captured by conditional statements. For example, water has the disposition to freeze at a certain temperature. The liquid in a glass possesses the property, though its having it is not immediately evident. Similarly, we do not continuously remember our breakfast this morning but can if prompted. Simplifying a bit, we may say that Nyaya finds dispositions of four broad types.

1. Physico-physical dispositions, for example, elasticity, for example, of a rubber band. (A rubber band is a physical thing both before and after being stretched.)
2. Physico-psychological dispositions, for example, perceptual capacity, for example, to perceive a pot in the stock example. (The sense organs triggered by connection with a physical object of the right type have the ability to generate, for example, the psychological event of awareness of the pot.)
3. Psycho-psychological dispositions, for example, inferential capacity, for example, from sight of smoke on the mountain to the occurrent knowledge that there is fire over there. (The self carries the disposition to infer fire from detection of smoke, a disposition acquired by “wide experience” of the connection between smoke and fire.)
4. Psycho-physical dispositions, for example, to effort and action, for example, from wanting the mango on the table to the effort and action to pick it up. (The self is the locus of a, let us say, desiderous disposition — *cikirsha* in Sanskrit, “desire to do” — to such effort and action on the body’s part.)

With its self-determination thesis, Yoga is committed to the importance of developing dispositions of types three and four, as will become clear.

The bottom-line is that Nyaya’s dualism — which is one option for Yoga, so “Yoga dualism,” let us say — does not make it impossible to understand mental-physical interaction. There are many obvious correlations, and doubtless many less obvious that remain to be discovered in science or yogic research. Yoga dualism is a thesis that centrally concerns consciousness and self-determination. Consciousness transcends matter and is self-determining or can be. It can reshape its physical sheath, perfect it, bring it into a new harmony with the breath, feeling, and thought. This we find through yoga practice to be the nature of yogic self-monitoring consciousness, to repeat, that it alters what it monitors, the body, the emotions, thoughts and intentions, whatever it identifies with and nourishes. That is, consciousness changes its embodiments for the better, for health and integration, for what we might call the (Tantric theme of) spiritualization of the faculties. In special experiences, consciousness finds it has, or can have, a body of different stuff or energy than the physical (a pranic body, a karmic body, a subtle or astral body, *sukshma-sharira*). Always capable of connecting with matter, it can withdraw into itself, and, except for the dispositional property to reconnect, be undisturbed by material happenings. This power (called *samyama* in the *Yoga-sutra*) is a foundational fact shaping Yoga metaphysics.

There are laws of self-determination, shown by correlations in the reverse direction from those touted by materialists. These include principles of yoga practice. But Yoga hardly rules out physical dependences, let me repeat to cool the fervor of the materialists. Causal relations run both ways, and mental events are typically the result of a complex collection of factors some of which are physical and some of which are not. We might add that if consciousness and the body were not at all physically determined, there would be no point to yogic exercises. We do yoga to augment the causal factors that lie on the side of consciousness.

Yoga dualism in our sense stressing the power, or potential power, of consciousness is compatible, it is important to note, with several forms of monism. By sketching a dualist version of Yoga metaphysics (in line with Nyaya), I mean to emphasize the transcendence of consciousness and potentialities of dependence reverse to that assumed by materialists. Consciousness can but need not be material. In part it is material in perception of material things and in movements of the physical body. But that it is so in those states is no argument that it cannot exist otherwise than materially.

To sum up our response, then, to the correlations argument of the materialists: Who would not expect (given the truth of Yoga dualism) correlations between brain and mental events? Insofar as the mental events belong to embodied persons, correlations are guaranteed. That there are correlations, however, leaves open the questions of identity and the directionality of the causal relations.

Yoga contends both that consciousness is not identical to the body and that mind-body (or consciousness-body) causality is not one-directional. What we do shapes the body. The physical universe is not causally closed. There are psycho-psychological and psycho-physical dispositions.

The truth of this thesis is rather easy to see. Evidence for it couldn't be closer. For instance, insofar as you and I are moving our eyes as we read (instead of, for example, closing our eyelids), we are right now programming, materially changing, our brains, the physical underpinning of our memories, by reading. Or, if no physical underpinning of memory is required, we are making a psycho-psychological disposition resting in something else, a mind, a subtle body, or a non-material self. But let us suppose that it is the brain which is like a computer, as materialists think. Then each of us is right now chiseling in a property necessary to a later remembering. People who do not do so cannot remember this sentence. Thus we do not have to look at the special feats of yogins to find reverse correlations between mind and brain that refute materialism.

Yoga philosophy admits physical determinations of consciousness but challenges us to take cognizance of our potential. Yoga stresses personal responsibility: we shape our own good selves or personalities and need not be fatalistic or resigned to biological and physical inheritances (yoga as a "make-over" without cosmetics or plastic surgery). There are Yoga perspectives that have us as preparing the way for a larger self to integrate with us, with our ultimate act a surrendering. But on these (*bhakti* and Tantra) views, too, we have to make ourselves ready by mastering all the practices, the asanas, the breath-control, the meditation, and the rest. What we do to get ready remains essential.

A second prop to anti-Yoga prejudice may be dealt with more briefly. It is motivated by scientific explanations revealing physical identities. That is to say, a “reductionist” argument marshals to the materialist cause scientific successes in explaining things macroscopic by formula governing the microscopic. Consider weather, heat, and crystals. We understand these things by understanding their physics and chemistry. All phenomena, it is then hastily supposed, can be explained by theories that refer only to physical events and entities (niceties about the ontology of numbers, words, theories, etc., being beside the point).

The problem, however, is how to carry out this agenda with consciousness, with thought, feeling, and other mental events, including the meditative experiences of yoga. The fact is that no one has a clue. In the case of weather, etc., the microscopic is both necessary and sufficient for the macroscopic. Mean kinetic energy is identical with heat. Given a certain value for the one, the other will be absolutely fixed. Similarly, if something is H<sub>2</sub>O, then it is water. And there is no water that is not H<sub>2</sub>O. With this much, Yoga has of course no quarrel: certain physical things and events can be explained reductively in chemical and physical terms without reference to consciousness. The classical Yoga of Patanjali is realist in this sense, and we should have no qualms about admitting physico-physical capacities and processes going on independently of the mind — at least of our minds (the question of the universality of some sort of Divine or cosmic mind being another matter). However, Yoga teaches that nothing in the brain ever absolutely fixes the mind — *a fortiori* where “the mind” includes extraordinary states of yogic consciousness. In Yoga, we see this, what philosophers call the *explanatory gap*, as the obverse side of the thesis of the self-determining power of consciousness, its control, or potential control, of its range of instruments (thought, emotion, bodily movement, and so on).

To be sure, how the brain works is now better known. We even have chemical remedies for certain “mental” illnesses. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that science presents only correlations between (a) brain or more broadly bodily states or processes and (b) mental phenomena. It does not have a theory about how the latter (b) are required by (a) things physical. In other words, neurology and medicine make plain precise dependences of certain conscious states on certain physical processes. When a loud sound goes off near our ears, we hear it, even if our concentration is elsewhere. But we can block out noise, not attend to it, consciously fail to perceive available data. In other words, Yoga grants that the physical factors can predominate in the determination of a mental event. But often the story is different, and never is a physical one by itself sufficient when it comes to conscious states.

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