

The third way: Indian psychology's solution to the limitations of hedonism

Matthew Whoolery¹ and Hadley Grant²

Corresponding Author: Matthew Whoolery, Email: matthew@whoolery.com

Abstract: Western psychology dominates the research, theory, and published works in modern psychology. Therefore, its theoretical limitations become limitations for the field as a whole. Hedonism is one of these restricting parameters which disallows certain research, theoretical, and therapeutic considerations. Here it is suggested that there are many more theories outside the realm of Western psychology that can be employed to approach psychology and the understanding of people. To create truly meaningful progress in research and psychology, researchers must be aware of other approaches and perspectives. Indian Psychology, with the three gunas, allows for a broader understanding of human beings. Understanding the sattvic guna allows and encourages research, theory and therapeutic systems that explore the importance of love, compassion, and self-transcendence.

Key Words: Indian psychology, gunas, hedonism, altruism, sattva

Psychology has long been dominated by the West. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) point out that this dominance by Western nations means that “96% of psychological samples come from countries with only 12% of the world’s population” (p. 61). This dominance in published research and theoretical psychology means that modern psychology is dominated by a very particular set of ideas, values, and research findings (Nisbett, 2003). To remedy this problem, we need to do more than just increase the amount of research conducted by non-Westerners. We need to seek out ideas from the psychologies of other areas in the world.

In this paper, we address the predominance of the Western value of hedonism and how it limits our understanding of human beings (Gantt, 2000; Reber, 2000). Indian Psychology is one of the most systematically developed non-Western psychologies and its view of the three gunas offers an alternative to the commonly embraced hedonistic limitation and allows for a broader understanding of mental health and human motivation.

The Limit of Hedonism

Hedonism, the seeking of pleasure and avoiding pain, is one of the most dominant ideas in modern

psychology (Whoolery & Wiggins, 2002). For example, Rule (1997) argues that hedonism “offers the best—and perhaps only—hope for meaningful progress in social science” (p. 79). Even behavior that appears to benefit others is interpreted as hedonistically motivated in most psychological theories, including dominant theorists like Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers (Beyers & Peterson, 2000). This hedonistic assumption can be separated into naïve and sophisticated hedonism. Misra (2014) argues that Western Psychology draws on both forms of hedonism. Naïve hedonism involves the simpler calculation of seeking immediate pleasure or avoiding immediate suffering for the individual. The more sophisticated form of hedonism, referred to by Misra (2014) as eudaimonic, involves the striving for perfection, self-enhancement, and fulfillment of one’s potential. In the end, both are forms of hedonism because the ultimate end is the benefit of the individual self.

Hedonism can be viewed as limiting because it is exclusive, not allowing for any other motivation. Behavior that may be seen by most as loving, sacrificing, or even heroic must be re-interpreted as hedonistically motivated. Even rationality itself is interpreted as based on hedonic calculation (Gantt,

¹Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University-Idaho

²Undergraduate Student, Brigham Young University-Idaho

2000). These ideas mean that love, self-sacrifice, and compassion are at best irrational if not entirely impossible. This may be why Western psychology teaches courses in sexuality and romantic love (assumed to be biologically and hedonistically motivated), but not courses in compassion or familial love. It may be surprising for most people because close, loving (non-hedonistic) relationships and belonging form an important basis for life. Indeed, in the only longitudinal study of its kind, the Harvard study found that close, loving relationships were the most important predictor of good physical and mental health (Vaillant, 2012).

The limiting nature of ideas like hedonism often show themselves in how our unquestioning commitment to the idea leads us to manipulate theories and ideas that are based in non-hedonistic systems. For example, much of modern psychology and therapy has embraced mindfulness as a method of self-improvement. These ideas surrounding mindfulness originate in a non-hedonistic system of thought from Indian and Buddhist roots. The original goals of mindfulness focus on letting go of the individual self, not enhancing it (Gunaratana, 2011). Indeed, the whole philosophy at the root of mindfulness meditation is loving-kindness toward others and a recognition that all we have comes from the kindness of others—not our own effort (Tegchok, 2006).

The Three Gunas

Indian psychology, while accounting for both naïve and sophisticated forms of hedonism, also has a third way that allows us to think and analyze outside the hedonistic box. Originating in the Sankya school of thought, there are three gunas that characterize human experience (Easwaran, 1985). These gunas are variously referred to as qualities, attributes, ways of being, or even types of faith (Aurobindo, 1992; Easwaran, 1985). The three gunas are: *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva* (also spelled *sattwa*). The Bhagavad Gita, originally written somewhere in the range of 400 BCE to 200 CE, lays out the basic qualities of each way of being, focusing on how they influence how human beings act, how they understand the world, even the kinds of foods they eat. The gunas are all present in a person at all times, though they vary in which predominates. “Their interplay is the dynamics of

personality” (Easwaran, 1985, p. 46).

In his commentary on the Gita, Sri Aurobindo (1992) describes the three gunas: “*Tamas* is the principle and power of inertia; *Rajas* is the principle of kinesis, passion, endeavor, equilibrium and harmony (*ārambha*); *Sattwa* the principle of assimilation, equilibrium and harmony” (p. 57). *Tamas*, the lowest of the three gunas, is characterized by laziness, self-destructiveness, and vanity. The *tamasic* way of being is self-seeking, though in the most basic way. An avoidance of effort is combined with the self-oriented focus on self-benefit. The second guna, *Rajas*, is characterized by energy and desire. This is the way of being that leads us to act based on the desire for personal gain or benefit. The *rajasic* seeks enjoyments and possessions gained through effort. It seeks self-benefit, whether for gain, admiration, or even a belief in eternal blessing. All action is done for a purpose to benefit the self. *Sattva*, the final guna, is characterized by peacefulness, cheerfulness, and unity. The *sattvic* acts, not for the sake of self-benefit, but for the sake of others and for the work itself.

As we can see, the first of the two gunas, *tamas* and *rajas* belong to what Indian psychology considers the lower nature where we focus on doing “according to our desires” (Aurobindo, 1992, p. 522). The *rajasic* nature is higher than the *tamasic*. A society often benefits from people who seek self-benefit, recognition, and wealth. Modern medicine and other technologies are most often driven by the *rajasic*, desire-driven behavior of people motivated to develop knowledge and skills. *Rajasic* energy, then, can provide benefits to both the self and to others. “But in all, whatever law it may seem to admit, it follows really only the law of the lower self and ego, the restless, untired, self-devouring, and all-devouring mind” (Aurobindo, 1995, p. 573). Both of these gunas are forms of hedonism, ways of being that don’t allow for genuine compassion, affection, or love. They align with the basic assumption of hedonism found in Western psychology. However, this is not the end with Indian psychology—there is a third way, the *sattvic*.

The Third Way: Sattva

The *sattvic* guna, characterized by a sense of harmony and interconnection with other human beings and the

divine, is the third possibility that takes us beyond the hedonic limit we find in Western psychology. The sattvic way of being is free from attachment to the outcome of their actions, basing their decisions not on what will benefit or harm the self, but what is right. The rajasic person makes decisions between what to do or not to do, but not rightly. Unlike the sattvic, the rajasic makes decisions on what will benefit and harm the self, not on what is right. For the sattvic, it is important to understand that what might benefit or harm the self might not be what matters when we look at the whole. Therefore, to know what is right, we must look beyond self-interest. "Truth is not merely whatever our own personality is or creates...Beyond that personality there is, first, a universal being as well as a universal becoming of which ours is a little movement" (Aurobindo, 1992, p. 524). All actions must be understood in the larger web of being, of which ours is but a little movement. The web includes the needs of all other beings, including our close relations, our communities, and the world of all beings including in nature. Our needs and considerations are not unimportant, but in the sattvic way of being we see them for what they are, a little part of a much larger whole. One might contrast this self-decentering with the typical self-centering encouraged in most Western psychologies (see Rogers, 1947).

This self-transcendent aspect of the sattvic guna is also expressed by some non-mainstream Western psychologists like Viktor Frankl (1992). He argues that "being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself...What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence" (p. 115). Frankl argues here that the purpose of the self is always directed outward, toward a work and to people outside oneself. Since human beings are not their own purpose, the only way to fulfill one's purpose is to seek the purposes of others.

To the Western mind, this self-transcendence and minimization of the individual may seem unpleasant and even counterproductive or counter-factual. Indian psychology does not minimize the challenge required of us to put away the selfish and become self-

disinterested. In his commentary on the Gita, Sri Aurobindo (1992) states that "this new movement is of the nature of a powerful adventure into the unknown or partly known, a daring development and a new conquest" (p. 520). The Bhagavad Gita itself teaches this through a metaphor, saying that the rajasic self-seeking seems like the best way to have the best life. The abandoning of one's own interest seems, on its face, to be a recipe for loss and unhappiness. However, the Gita teaches in 18:37-38 "That which seems like poison at first, but tastes like nectar in the end—this is the joy of sattva, born of a mind at peace with itself. Pleasure from the senses seems like nectar at the first but it is bitter as poison in the end. This is the kind of happiness that comes from the rajasic" (Easwaran, 1985, p. 260). Letting go of self-interest seems like poison, like we are being asked to abandon all of our desires and wants. However, this bitter-looking asceticism turns to the nectar we experience when we have harmony, peace of mind, and a sense of belonging and oneness. The seeming-nectar of the self-seeking rajas turns to poison when we find ourselves isolated, lonely, and disconnected. Tragically, these are common symptoms that underlay the psychological struggles of many Westerners (Hari, 2019).

What are the characteristics that we would expect of the person who develops and strengthens the sattvic way of being in themselves? Sri Aurobindo describes the sattvic person as having "high purity of the reason and will, an equal soul, a deep peace and calm, a wide sympathy and preparation of oneness, a reflection of the inner soul's divine gladness in the mind, life, and body" (1992, p. 532). The calculating nature we find in the tamasic and rajasic mind is reduced and "all the action of the perfected soul will be even such a constant divine giving of itself and its powers, an outflowing of the knowledge, light, strength, love, joy, helpful Shakti which it possesses in the Divine" (p. 534). The Bhagavad Gita describes the sattvic person as one who is "giving simply because it is right to give, without thought of return" (Easwaran, 1985, p. 248). Notice that all of these attributes describe a person who is out-flowing, giving, cheerful, and at peace. These kinds of characteristics are literally impossible in most of the theories in Western psychology, but are a genuine and desired way to be in the Indian tradition.

This perspective allows for Indian psychologists to study human characteristics like compassion, love, and non-hedonistic altruism. It also allows psychotherapists to evaluate and encourage such virtues.

What Indian Psychology Can Offer the West

As mentioned above, the limitations of a psychology restrained by a limited set of values is not just a question of the accuracy of its data. It also means that the ideas of that psychology limit the possibilities of how we understand human beings. The domination of hedonism in Western psychology can only be overcome by addressing the values that we find in other psychologies. Indian psychology, in this case, can open possibilities in research, theory, and practice that are not available in a psychology limited to the tamasic and rajasic gunas.

How can the sattvic possibility open up new research opportunities? Since hedonism has long been assumed, Western psychologists do not look for, or even allow for, evaluation of altruism and self-sacrifice. Researchers might study how altruistic and compassionate motivations and behaviors develop in childhood. They may study how the sattvic qualities influence a sense of belonging and interconnection with others. Since the sattvic way of being is now allowed as a possibility, researchers might study how those with higher levels of self-forgetfulness, loving-kindness, and unity-consciousness fare in their mental health compared to those with a more tamasic or rajasic way of being.

An acceptance of this third way from Indian psychology opens up new theoretical directions. While there are some genuine exceptions to hedonism-dominant theories (see Adler, 1964; Frankl, 1992), most ignore or reject the sattvic ways of being that are an important way of understanding human beings in Indian psychology. We might find personality theories and theoretical understandings of human beings that allow for, and even encourage, sattvic traits.

Another place in which this third way can influence what we do in Western psychology is in the field of psychotherapy. Western and American

theories of therapy and mental health are dominated by hedonistic values. In fact, in the author's research on current evaluations of mental health, not a single measure of mental health used in a therapeutic context included even one question evaluating a non-hedonistic characteristic. Items focused on decreasing negative personal symptoms and increasing personal positive emotions were instead dominant. If we can incorporate sattvic values, we can look directly at how altruism, kindness, love, and belonging influence our mental well-being. Some Indian psychologists directly address whether their patients are loving and kind to others or not. Varma (2014) directly addresses the sattvic values in a therapeutic context, arguing that the goals of therapy of Indian psychology go beyond ego strength and toward love. "Love has an extraordinary transformative power which can heal all breaches and wounds in our consciousness, and eventually liberate us from fear, guilt, and egoism" (p. 203).

Conclusion

Since Western psychology dominates the research, theory, and published works in modern psychology, its theoretical limitations become limitations for the field as a whole. Hedonism is one of these restricting parameters which disallows certain research, theoretical, and therapeutic considerations. Indian Psychology, with the three gunas, allows for a broader understanding of human beings. The sattvic guna allows for non-hedonistic conceptions of human beings. Understanding the sattvic way of being allows and encourages research, theory and therapeutic systems that explore the importance of love, compassion, and self-transcendence.

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