

LIMIT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The Origins of Desire As Discussed by Patañjali and Isaac Luria

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Introduction

The scope of this paper is intentionally narrow. Its task is to examine two texts from two different traditions in regard to one aspect of human religious concern. That aspect is broadly conceptualized, in a variety of belief systems, as *desire*. The understanding of what desire is and of its part in human suffering as discussed in Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras* and in Rabbi Isaac Luria's *Ten Luminous Emanations* is this particular paper's focus.

This paper does not purport to constitute a comprehensive study of either Yoga or the Kabbalah. Nor is it an effort at an in-depth analysis of either man's general philosophical or religious position. Rather, it is intended as an exploration of the phenomenon of *desire* in light of the insights presented in the two texts mentioned above.

Both texts, each understood to be of normative importance within its own tradition, have been widely commented on in their respective contexts. Naturally, this brief study will make use of commentaries considered by the yogic and kabbalist traditions to be of primary importance. In the case of Patañjali, Vyasa's commentary will provide us with elucidation. In the case of Luria, we will consult with Rabbi Yehuda L. Ashlag.¹

Both Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras* and Luria's *Ten Luminous Emanations* concern themselves with the common human experience that things in this world, or life, are not as they ought to be. Furthermore, both texts diagnose this human problem as a misunderstanding (on our part) regarding the relationship between that which is consciousness,² on the one hand, and that which is the non-conscious, on the other. Both texts also prescribe solutions to this state of affairs which are directed toward resolving a confusion that exists in our own human understanding of the relationship between our individual human awareness', the phenomenal world, and a consciousness which is in some way foundational to the cosmos.

The focus of this paper is on the dynamic of tension that characterizes the human experience. This state of tension, called desire, is generated by a simultaneous attraction to two mutually exclusive states of being: that state in which individual experience is dissolved into a unity of all that exists, and that state in which discreet entities (one of which is the human self) are experienced as ultimate. The manifestation of this impossible attraction appears in human experience in the form of an incessant, and maddening, alternation in our own physical and mental behaviors.

Each author situates his description of this dramatic tension on a different stage within the playing-out of the story of existence. Patañjali casts his description in terms of the psychology of individual human beings. Luria casts his description, on the other hand, in terms of the origins of the entire universe. Whether psychological or cosmological, however, each description is an example of mythologized ontology: an analysis of being that is presented via the symbolic medium of language and constrained by the structures that are particular to the narrative format (first such-and-such is, then this-and-that happens).³ In this light, a comparison of their respective descriptions yields a single assertion regarding the primary ontological structure that is expressed and experienced as human suffering.

Prior to Manifestation

Patañjali's text asserts a fundamental ontological distinction between the foundational principle of consciousness (*purusa*) and that which is non-conscious, namely matter (*prakriti*). Likewise, Luria states that the fundamental ontological nature of Divine Consciousness (Light) separates it from the generated universe, which "gradually descended by evolution" from that Light into a state of *relative* darkness.⁴ In the *Yoga Sutras* (2.5-9) the matter is stated like this:

(5) Ignorance (*avidya*) is the (mis)taking of the non-eternal, the impure, the painful, and that which is not the self as being the eternal, the pure, the pleasing, and the self. (6) Egoism is that apparent identity of consciousness with the powers of the instrument [by means of which there is perception]. (7) Attachment arises/results from pleasure. (8) Aversion arises/results from pain. (9) Attachment to life, even in the wise [just as is the case for the rest of us], is self-perpetuating.⁵

In this passage, Patañjali defines five categories of suffering/affliction (*klesa*): ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and attachment to life. Ignorance (*avidya*) is located by Patañjali as the source of the four subsequent afflictions⁶ and is characterized as the result of conflating the identities of things that are in reality, the text asserts, separate from one another. This failure to properly recognize the distinctions that define substantive differences facilitates other varieties of boundary-blurring as well, including the instantiation of the ego or the "I" sense.

Luria, on the other hand, describes the problem in terms that seem to be in direct opposition to Patañjali's analysis:

"All substances come from One Origin, and all powers, potential and actual, are related to the One—the Creator... What caused the soul to be severed from its Origin?...when the Soul assumes a new form and bears the name of "soul" it possesses some particular quality which estranges it from the

Origin. Because of this peculiar quality the soul is considered as a separate part of God. Were it not for this differentiation the soul would remain identical with God Himself..."⁷

The 'problem,' as Luria would have it, is not the collapse of discrimination, but the emergence of it. From the kabbalist's perspective, discrimination is constitutive of the created universe. The thing that distinguishes Creator and created, "the will, or desire, to receive,"⁸ constitutes matter itself.⁹

From this we can see that, despite Luria's insistence on the primordial unity (and identity) of the Divine Consciousness with the created objects within its field of awareness, he nonetheless asserts a categorical difference between his God and the universe—as they stand in relation to one another at *this* (post-creation) point in time. It is a distinction which recalls the distinction between the primordial consciousness (*purusa*) and the primordial non-conscious (*prakṛti*) asserted by Patañjali.

Despite the incredible variety that we perceive to exist in the world, both men claim that everything is a manifestation of, and reducible to, two fundamental substrata: one called *purusa* by Patañjali, Light by Luria, the other called *prakṛti* by Patañjali, emanated being by Luria. Additionally, Luria asserts:

"...the will to receive...is inherent in every created thing and naught but this will to receive was revealed in the Creation."¹⁰

Unlike Patañjali's dualism, Luria's universe does, ultimately, originate and resolve itself in an absolute unity. But despite the theological differences between these two visions of ultimate reality and of the human relation to that reality, the description offered by each text (of what characterizes the experience of beings who find themselves somewhere in between original emergence and final resolution) presents significant analytical resemblance to that presented in the other.

Patañjali's Primary Cause of Manifestation

Beginning with a fundamental and irreducible dyad of consciousness and the non-conscious,¹¹ Patañjali's universe apparently originates in an (unfortunate?) conjoining of the elements of the dyad with one another. The result of this is a restriction (*nirodha*) of the scope of consciousness. From this binding or restriction flows the cosmos.

Patañjali's Primary Result and Reaction

Having somehow placed themselves—two things which cannot be united (categorically)—together into one category, consciousness and the non-conscious form a kind of conglomerated entity, like vinegar and oil in well-agitated salad dressing. At least, that is how it appears to consciousness. So, consciousness makes a fundamental error in assessing the nature of its own identity. It is this error that Vyasa defines as the restriction (*nirodha*) of

consciousness, picking up on Patañjali's use of this concept in his description of how one works one's way back to the original state of the unmanifest in which consciousness accurately understands itself to be utterly one with itself and utterly separate from the non-conscious.¹²

This state of perceived conjoinment is uncomfortable for consciousness. It senses that something is not right and there arises, in reaction to this discomfort, the urge to sever the (perceived) unity that has come to be.

Patañjali's Secondary Cause of Manifestation and Its Results

However, instead of enacting the discrimination which would rectify the situation, what seems to "break off" is a conglomerated portion of the conglomeration, a microcosmic portion of the cosmic conjoinment. That is to say, discrimination does occur, but it is the wrong discrimination. Rather than achieving the separation of consciousness from the non-conscious that would result in a return to the unmanifested state in which *purusa* and *prakrti* are utterly separate from one another, what does result is the separation of many small bundles of the *purusa-prakrti* mix from the rest of the cosmic stuff. This breaking-off occurs in much the same way that the splitting of a holographic image occurs: When the image is divided in two, the result is two complete, half-sized images. The constitutive components of the larger image are not separated from one another.

According to Patañjali's schema, at the moment when the distinction between consciousness and the non-conscious is blurred within the field of awareness, consciousness incorporates the qualities inherent in the non-conscious into its own self description. It is from this confusion that the mistaken notion of discreet identities—including the notion of an "I" that is distinct from pure consciousness (*purusa*)—results. We can see the sense of this readily when we consider for a moment that divisibility is a quality possessed by entities that have extension in space and/or time—and neither realm is one in which consciousness has its being.¹³ The apparent division of consciousness into discreet localized identities can only occur as the result of *purusa*, in its proximity to *prakrti*, having assumed the characteristics of *prakrti* onto itself.

Patañjali's "I" and Its Desires

The ego, at this point in Patañjali's cosmogonic description, seeks to literally create bonds of attachment in the hope of alleviating its experience of partial being. This experience of partial being is pain and the effort to unite with that which is perceived to be extra-egoical appears to be an effort to assuage that pain by creating/reinstating a state of wholeness...like the wholeness of a quilt that is the result of drawing many separate entities together and securing them to one another. Of course, as in the case of the quilt, separate

bits and pieces of manifest existence that are brought together do *not* achieve union with one another. They are merely joined, attached at the edges.

In Vyasa's commentary on *sutra* 2:18, the reactionary urge that arises from the erroneous conflation of primal elements is described as being awake (*buddhi*), which is normally understood to signify that phase of awareness in which the individual mind is capable of establishing categorical discriminations between that which is consciousness (*purusa*) and that which is the non-conscious (*prakriti*). This state of being awake or mentally present, is frequently used throughout Sanskrit literature to connote a person who is capable of distinguishing between what is real and true about the self and what is not. But that connotation of wisdom and achievement seems to be precisely not what Vyasa is trying to communicate: "It is being awake (*buddhi*) itself that is bound," he says.¹⁴

We might re-translate Vyasa's statement as: "Having-awoken (*buddhi*) itself is (the ontological activity of) boundary-making." Stated in this manner, having-awoken (*buddhi*) is the value-neutral activity of making discriminations, which can be seen operating at different evolutionary stages of both suffering and liberation. The moment that concerns us here is the discrimination (*buddhi*) that occurs immediately following that first creative moment in which the erroneous conflation of consciousness (*purusa*) and the non-conscious (*prakriti*) occurs.

In addition, rather than providing any lasting sense of completion, some of these bonds are apparently felt to be binding, and there arises the experience of negative desire (aversion) which in turn inspires increased activity. Vyasa's commentary explains that "the painful causes the aversion-afflictions (*klesas*) and become the field for the growth of actions (*karmasaya*)."¹⁵

From this point, what follows is a continuation of the back-and-forth movement between erroneous synthesis and erroneous discrimination. Our passage mentions the karmic results of "pleasure" and "pain" without giving an explanation of the meaning of these words. It is left to the reader to understand the origins of these experiences and their relationship either to egoism or to *avidya* (or to both). This vital information is left out, I want to suggest, precisely because the previous verses do provide us with the information needed to draw the appropriate inferences.

The perspective of the text is that desire arises from pain which itself arises from confusion, the erroneous lumping together of things which cannot be united. In addition to this, the text implies another source of pain and desire: the confusion of erroneously discriminating between things which cannot be separated. The ego, that broken-off conglomerated piece of the larger conglomeration, senses its broken-off non-whole state and seeks to enact some type of synthesis by uniting itself with other broken-off pieces of the greater conglomerated entity.

The upshot of this all is that our experience of desire is the problem in us that needs to be rectified. And this problem, desire, has come to be because of

a collapse of discrimination. Thus we see the sense in Patañjali's statement that "removal of bondage is the disappearance of conjunction...the means of removal is discriminative knowledge."¹⁶

Egoism, then, is the outcome of an erroneous division which itself is the result of an erroneous union. It is almost as if the experience (on a cosmic scale) of putting two things together that don't belong together gives rise to a compelling urge to take things apart again. Without *accounting for* the initial collapse of distinction that gives rise to the conflation/confusion, Patañjali seems to *describe* a kind of chain reaction that begins with one of the primary constitutive functions of the human mind, synthesis, and bounces reactively into that other cognitive operation, discrimination...and then back again.¹⁷

When we take a look at the kabbalist's cosmogony we see there, as well, the notion that the universe itself *is* the binding or restriction of consciousness. This occurs, to use his language, as the result of the divine Will-To-Impart. Luria describes the beginning of creation as the creation of discrimination:

"The restriction of Light occurred...and following this first restraint, the function of limiting became operative in all the worlds... In whatever place it reveals its action, it blocks the Light from that particular space, concealing It so that It stops at that boundary...every boundary or limit...results from the power of the first restriction."¹⁸

— Unlike the view of Patañjali, which takes as a given the ultimacy of the principle of difference (embodied in the primordial pair), Luria feels that it is necessary to somehow account for difference in such a way that the realm of the Divine Consciousness is not implicated by the limits implied in a dualism of creator-created. Despite their varying degrees of dis/comfort with the logical problems of asserting an unqualified consciousness that coexists with that which is non-conscious, both thinkers concur that discrimination, separation, limit, boundary, and absence or lack are all related closely (both causally and conceptually) as slightly different (human) interpretations of a single phenomena: our perception/experience of multiplicity.

We are all familiar with the experience of attempting to find orientation in the midst of an experience of existence in which multiplicity and fragmentation seems to define the reality of our world—physically, emotionally, and even psychologically. According to both Patañjali and Luria (and rightly so, I think), this is a fundamentally negative experience because our own sense of self is necessarily implicated as limited in such a fragmented world (the "I" is merely one of the many fragments). It is this experience of limit that is articulated as desire, the urge toward sufficiency.

In identifying the negativity of human experience as this state of desire, Patañjali and Luria locate the source of our suffering as inherent in the distinction and limit which constitute the situation of individual human beings *qua* individuals. Doing this enables both to recommend, quite logically, that

the alleviation of suffering requires that the seat of a person's identity be shifted—from that which is limited and fragmentary to that in which the existence of limit and of fragmentation is impossible. For both Patañjali and Luria this latter has to consist of something radically different than what characterizes the manifest universe, for “only the vessel is subject to the manifold diversities and states of expansion.”¹⁹

Luria's Primary Cause of Manifestation

The cosmogony described by Luria and his commentator, Ashlag, begins (not temporally, but causally) with the Divine Consciousness' “Will-To-Impart”. This Will necessitates the existence of a vessel (that is to say, an entity which is defined by its emptiness) that can be the recipient of the infinite abundance which characterizes Divine Consciousness. Thus the divine Will-To-Impart paradoxically executes a withdrawal of Divine Consciousness into Itself, called contraction (*tsimtsum*) by Kabbalah.

Luria's Primary Result and Reaction

This withdrawal or contraction is the creative act, the bringing into existence of both Being and Non-being. It is the genesis of difference and of the perception of that difference, discrimination:

“The only new factor which was revealed in the Creation [was] labeled by the sages “existence from non-existence” (*yaish m'ayn*)... Light and all that is comprised in It...is emanated as ‘existence from existence.’”²⁰

That from which the Divine Consciousness withdraws is longing itself, a vacuum of dense darkness. This creation of Non-being, the state of lack and of desire, is necessary in order for there to be that to which the Divine can impart It's abundance. Just as the divine desire is spoken of as the Will-To-Impart, the desire felt by the created beings is understood as the Will-To-Receive.

The emergence of Being and Non-being is all of a piece. They are phases of existence which arise simultaneously. For Luria, it makes little sense to discuss the existence of Being in a context in which Non-being does not exist. Prior to the divine contraction that *is* creation, there is neither Being nor Non-Being. The “new factor” revealed in the creation is the potential-for-Being. It is this potential—this simultaneous knowledge of emptiness and of what fulfillment could be—which is the essential nature of the creation and of all the creatures in it.

This reading of Luria's work is reinforced by Ashlag's discussion of darkness. Darkness, he tells us, is ontologically rooted in the Will-To-Receive. It, like any kind of emptiness or vacuum or nothingness, is non-existent prior to the divine creative urge. “Darkness was newly revealed with the creation of the universe.” In addition, while desire is characterized as darkness by Ashlag,

he also points out that this is only the case when the Will-To-Receive is viewed relative to the Will-To-Impart. In other words, that which comprises our substance, and which characterizes the direction of our consciousness, is also Light, though "a little darker than the Heavenly Light."²¹

For Ashlag "darkness" is characterized by the same kind of ambiguity that we saw in regard to Vyasa's "being-awake" (*buddhi*). Both are, in some respect, constituted of the light of consciousness. Yet both are "a little darker" than the Absolute Consciousness that exists as the ground of the universe. Both commentators thus describe the human situation as: being awake enough to know that we are not awake. We are imbued with enough consciousness to kindle the fire of desire for more.

While none of this can be said to be problematic from the perspective of the Absolute Consciousness, Luria and Patañjali are primarily concerned with what it is like for us to experience being that-which-consciousness-is-not: dark, limited, empty, lacking, separated out, etc. Our identification with/as lack itself appears then, for both Patañjali and Luria, to be that of which our suffering is composed, and that from which our experience of desire directly arises.

It is clear, also, that Patañjali's view of this identification is that it originates in a mistake—or in a chain of mistakes that compound one-another's effects on consciousness. On the other hand, Luria attributes this state of affairs, at least in the initial stages of cosmic evolution, to a intentional 'act' of Divine Consciousness.²²

Luria's Secondary Cause of Manifestation and Its Results

The response to this act of contraction (strikingly similar to Patañjali's account of the emergence of egoism which occurs as a reaction to the experience of Non-being that results from the constraint of consciousness), is a kind of coagulation—a further contraction—in the substance of that which experiences itself as the Will-To-Receive. In the face of the experience of its own incompleteness—the experience of having been separated from the Divine Light—that being which is constituted of the Will-To-Receive is gripped by an urge toward self-completion. Ironically, this desire—which we could think of as the active phase of Non-being—frustrates its own purpose.

The dense vacuum that is created matter, in a confused effort to ameliorate its emptiness (the absence of the Divine Light), executes a further contraction. Withdrawing into itself, the created absence-of-Being (which was created to *be* lacking, and thus in desire, and thus receptive) makes an effort to pull itself together, as though pulling itself together might result in some sort of experience of self unity. But the very opposite results. For the coagulation of Non-being into a solid object, as it were, with definite boundaries is the very thing which makes the darkness of Non-being even more impervious to being penetrated by the Light!²³