## The Story of One Male Asian American Philosopher

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My parents immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s and I was born in Chicago in the mid-seventies. My father's job as a petroleum engineer took us first to Texas and then, when I was five, to Saudi Arabia. I made a few friends at my international school with whom I played football and soccer, jammed guitar in a heavy metal band, and rode my motorbike in the desert. Because the Saudi government mandated that everyone not born in the country had to leave for at least thirty days each year, our family also spent significant amounts of time traveling, mainly to visit relatives and friends in the US, India, and Germany.

When the first Gulf War began in 1991, my family was living by an army base that was being bombed. My brother was already living in the States. The war was too scary for my mom. She packed me up and moved me to California. I found high school academically challenging. As a young child, I had been diagnosed with dyslexia and now found myself struggling with algebra and writing. In high school, about the only thing I was decent at was playing guitar. But even then, most of my band mates thought it was an oxymoron that I was a "rhythm guitarist" because I had no rhythm—I fell out of time all the time.

When it was time to decide where to go to college, I wanted to be far away from the high school I was at in Southern California. I picked Humboldt State University in Arcata, California, seven hundred miles up north. It was one of the most beautiful campuses I'd ever seen, nestled deep in the redwood forests.

I first discovered the term "philosophy" in an encyclopedia around age twelve. Long before I knew what the study of logic and moral philosophy was, I had found myself attracted to what falls under those terms, such as Charles Sanders Peirce's law $(((P \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow P) \rightarrow P)$, which I also found in the same encyclopedia, and Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, which I stumbled across at a bookstore at age fifteen.

My full conversion to the philosophy major came after I took a class in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy, and was introduced to the debates over faith and rationality, Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and Spinoza's *Ethics*. I discovered that I didn't think that evidence settled whether God exists, and also that I am not a Hindu. Later I became interested in the philosophy of law and the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty because of his discussion of two hands touching each other where one cannot say that there is a subject and an object. I also discovered critical thinking.

My parents grew up in Nehru's India where the study of science and math was seen as bedrock and, thus, encouraged me towards a profession that would provide a steady income, preferably as a medical doctor, an engineer, or a lawyer. They were worried that my choice to pursue philosophy would be seen as a failure of sorts and I'd be considered someone who simply wasn't good enough at math and science and had been forced to "settle." They, like many Indians of their generation, associated philosophy with either European existentialism, theology, or Indian Hindutva—a pro-Hindu nationalist movement that neither they nor I accept. My choice to pursue philosophy was seen as a waste of a prized opportunity. I gathered that their circle of friends would have said, "We have come all the way from India to America so that you can have an opportunity to get a good education, and now you want to study philosophy?"

At the end of my sophomore year, a friend at UCLA encouraged me to apply to their philosophy department because of my interest in logic. I applied and gained acceptance, which was doubly good because my parents had recently divorced and my mom needed me back in Southern California. At UCLA, I was introduced to mathematical logic by Tony Martin and Kit Fine, reintroduced to medieval philosophy by Calvin Normore, the philosophy of language by David Kaplan, Kant and the philosophy of mind by Tyler Burge, and Wittgenstein by Andrew Hsu. I found myself attracted to the content as well as the method of doing philosophy. It felt honest: I was being encouraged to search for the truth, to be precise, and to challenge my classmates to do their best to present and defend an argument.

At UCLA, the standards were high and the readings were difficult. I spent all my time walking, reading, and talking. I would do proofs on the back of pizza boxes at the shop I was working at. Nothing seemed more important to me than understanding philosophy. I liked inspecting the deductive status of arguments: validity and soundness. I also liked to think in terms of basic logics, such as first-order predicate logic. It didn't matter what the arguments were about.

I did find it odd that there appeared to be little respect for phenomenology, and when I asked about Indian philosophy, I was told that the department didn't offer courses in that area. It wasn't clear why these things were excluded, but I went with it, because I found my first love in philosophy: modal logic.

I was fascinated by how possible worlds semantics pushed us to think about the most fundamental questions concerning reality: the relation between the possible and the actual. When a friend gave me a copy of Stephen Yablo's "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?" I remember loving the style of argument and the question: How does our ability to conceive things guide us with respect to knowing what is possible?

It was my interest in the work of David Chalmers on conceivability and consciousness that led me to pursue graduate school at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where I worked with Kevin Falvey, Tony Brueckner, and Nathan Salmon. I wrote my dissertation on the epistemology of modality focusing on the work of Stephen Yablo, David Chalmers, and Timothy Williamson. To this day, I continue to work on issues in that field. The majority of my work is exploring how knowledge of essence informs our judgments about what is possible and necessary.

In addition to my dissertation work, I expanded my interests out to the philosophy of economics, moral philosophy, and business ethics. I got my first taste of experimental philosophy when Stephen Stitch et al. published their famous study of how, unlike Westerners, Indians don't share the Gettier Intuition (that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge). I became curious about intuitions and how culture might shape them, but also wondered why no one was talking about Indian philosophy, but only about how Indians react to examples from Western philosophy. Later in my career I devoted years of research working on intuitions in philosophical methodology with people in experimental philosophy and analytic philosophy, such as Edouard Machery and Thomas Grundman.

After my PhD, I was honored to have been hired by San José State University, where I am now a Professor of Philosophy and former Director of the Center for Comparative Philosophy. I now teach a wide range of courses from philosophy of mind to business ethics. I was fortunate early in my career as SJSU supported my travel to Germany, Brazil, and Australia to do work in analytic epistemology on the topics of modality and intuition. During this part of my career, I was passionate about the philosophy of economics also. When I was up for my first sabbatical, I considered getting a second doctorate in the field. However, my mom

was diagnosed with cancer and midway through a summer school I was attending in Budapest, I decided that I had to go back to California. I couldn't choose a second degree over my mom; she had always been there for me. While my plans for the second degree had failed, my passion for the field didn't. I still teach courses in the philosophy of economics and applied topics, such as the prison industrial complex.

My colleagues at SJSU introduced me to comparative philosophy—the late Richard Tieszen, Carlos Sanchez, Bo Mou, and Karin Brown. My introduction to Indian philosophy came via Purushottama Bilimoria, who had just moved to Berkeley in 2009. I met him at a talk by Hubert Dreyfus at SJSU, where I was responding to Dreyfus's critique of John McDowell. We found we had similar interests and he asked if I wanted to work on a paper for a *festschrift* on the work of Jayshankar Lal Shaw. I didn't know Shaw's work at the time and was initially hesitant, but after reading a few articles that Purushottama suggested on classical Indian epistemology I was hooked by the methodology and clear arguments about the self and perception.

When I discovered that Evan Thompson was teaching a seminar on Buddhism at the University of California at Berkeley, I signed up immediately, wanting to learn more about Indian philosophy of mind. The seminar turned out to be well attended by neuroscientists, philosophers, and Buddhist scholars, and I was immediately attracted to the interdisciplinary vibe there (the excitement I felt reminded me of the first time David Kaplan explained to me the problem of quantifying into modal contexts). I realized I wanted to learn not only about Indian philosophy but also about Asian philosophy and phenomenology in general. I reconnected with my desire to engage a broader range of philosophers in different traditions who could be accessed in English, since I didn't know Sanskrit. When I finally took my first sabbatical, I spent time formally training in Indian philosophy with Jayshankar Shaw (by now I knew him well).

As I got deeper into the discipline, I found myself questioning why these thinkers were never part of the traditional philosophy curriculum (a thought that many people have about the traditions they enjoy, which are left out of the canon). Some of the people I was reading wrote in English and had only died recently, such as Bimal Krishna Matilal and Daya Krishna. In advocating for the need to include Indian philosophy into the canon, I do not want to imply that these traditions are better than other traditions. Rather, I cannot defend the idea that there is a principled reason to exclude them: neither their method nor their intellectual excellence seemed any different from what I had studied.

My early attempts to advocate for Indian philosophy were met with resistance. It was implied that since I had no Sanskrit training and there is no such thing as Indian philosophy (only Indian religion), it was inappropriate for me to advocate for its inclusion.

Surprisingly, the most frustrating conversations I've had were with Indians raised in India. The presumption that many make is that the only reason anyone would talk about

such things is because they are defending Hindutva. They can understand wanting to be a classical Indian musician or artist, but Indian philosophy is backwards-tending to them. It seems unfair that such an amazingly rich philosophical tradition has effectively been hijacked by Hindu nationalists and their religious-nationalist agenda.

It has been ten years since I became reacquainted with Indian philosophy, the last seven of which I have spent trying to make work on perception in Indian philosophy relevant to analytic discussions. I am now in my mid-forties and will perhaps never make a massive breakthrough on a topic as heavily researched as perception. However, I remain convinced that we have a lot to gain from a cross-traditional conversation in philosophy. I hope to synthesize an understanding of perception that cuts through these different traditions and get people to talk to one another.

I've come to appreciate that friction is not always bad. Cross-cultural methods improve analytical and experimental methods by providing a kind of *epistemic friction* that takes one outside of one's philosophical echo chamber in an epistemically responsible way.