

REVIEW

*Daya Krishna and Twentieth-Century
Indian Philosophy* by Daniel Raveh

*Ben Gaskin**

“I understand a text better,” DK says, “when I ask myself what this person [the author] is trying to do. I make that text my own...I get into this work, into his thought process...and carry it in a direction where it was not taken.”¹

We might here open with a quote from Daya Krishna himself, that is DK as Raveh refers to him and as we shall also here. The text in question, that which we are trying to understand, is Daniel Raveh’s *Daya Krishna and Twentieth-Century Indian Philosophy*, published in 2020. The difficulty with this particular text—or rather, with taking DK’s advice seriously in our efforts—is that our task is here twofold.

The first layer is simple, we want to understand what Raveh has done. The second, meanwhile, requires us also to keep in mind that DK himself is an active participant in this ongoing conversation. This becomes further complicated when we enter the room that Raveh has set up to find a whole cast of characters, some perhaps familiar, others unknown. The layers, therefore, are Raveh, DK, and a whole cast of the most prominent figures in twentieth-century

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Indian philosophy with whom DK was himself in dialogue throughout his life, which conversation forms the central thread of Raveh's text.

The structure of this book reflects the multiplicity of interests which absorbed DK during his life, both philosophical and political. This can be seen already in the layout that Raveh has selected. Chapter one is titled 'Toward a New Picture of Indian Philosophy' and broadly summarises DK's involvement in Indian philosophy, particularly his efforts to integrate and stimulate the further development of this field. Chapter two, 'Thinking Creatively about the Creative Act,' approaches most plainly the condition of a conversation. Raveh interposes his own commentary with excerpts from DK's own article. The resulting chapter is a true dialogue between the two writers. The third chapter, 'Freedoms', concerns DK's notion of freedom—that it is, as evident from the plural, not a singular term nor can be understood as such. And the fourth and final chapter, 'Concepts and Actions,' deals mainly with the way in which DK's writing and involvement extended beyond the strictly academic to include social and political concerns.

While we might proceed plainly to deal with each chapter in turn, this would hardly reflect the approach endorsed by DK himself as outlined in the above excerpt. Instead of simply repeating what Raveh is saying in his text, therefore, we will rather seek ourselves to enter into this ongoing conversation, one which has continued all the while within Raveh despite DK's passing away in 2007. We will, in doing so, make the same disclaimer as that which Raveh makes concerning his interpretation of DK. This disclaimer reflects a basic principle of DK's philosophy, namely that he ardently opposed pretensions to univocality. This might seem to emerge as much from DK's political notions of the proper place of philosophy, and more broadly of thought in society, as it does also from his sensitive treatment and centering of the philosophy of language. Thus, his careful policy is here at once descriptive and prescriptive, that we neither can nor ought to seek to define exclusively. If this seems to contradict the role of a reviewer, then so be it.

Indeed, here we have touched most directly upon what seems the central thread running through both DK's corpus and Raveh's text. This can be understood by returning to the metaphor with which we began, that of a conversation. Raveh's efforts amount, in effect, to an invitation to a party at which DK was present and spoke throughout the night on a vast variety of topics. Yet we can note that, despite the numerous topics touched upon, across all of these DK demonstrates a consistent personality. It is perhaps here that we might most properly begin: Raveh's text is an introduction to the formidable personality of his friend Daya Krishna.

We can understand our own encounter with DK as proceeding in terms like those discussed in chapter three concerning art and creativity, namely that we are invited into a world in which things are not bound by the necessity of existence. The world in which we find ourselves is instead co-constituted by Raveh and DK, and in this it offers something new.

As DK himself put it: 'Art is an invitation from one person to another to enter into a world where necessity is minimised and freedom is maximised.'²² Here we may not immediately understand philosophy as an artistic endeavour, yet DK insists on the similarity of the creative act across modalities. The effect of the enterprise, whether artistic or philosophical, is likewise similar. As Raveh says of DK, 'These visits to other realms, freer realms, are significant, he believes, if and only if they transform and enrich the world one returns to.'²³

We see here that our encounter with DK in the world of thought which he has woven for us is intended to be meaningful in the sense Heidegger spoke of: 'If the answer could be given, the answer would consist in a transformation of thinking, not in a propositional statement about a matter at stake.'²⁴ This effect, clearly interwoven throughout the entirety of DK's corpus, emerges as his essential aim.

The world into which we are invited, however, is not static but dynamic. It is a living whole. DK holds firmly that the ideal for philosophical work is not a textbook of answers, but is merely to offer, as Raveh puts it, 'a window through which the reader can look

into the author's creative thinking process.⁵ This ongoing process is not one in which the viewer is merely a passive observer. It requires their active participation in thinking through the thoughts which are first presented only as dead symbols on a page. The text is incomplete absent the active participation of its recipient, and this not as audience but also as interlocutor. Here we may recall the quote from DK featured at the outset, in which he outlines his ideal for this active participation. As he says elsewhere, 'one cannot understand any work unless one ceases to see it as a finished product.'⁶ The ideal for philosophical and artistic endeavours more broadly, therefore, is that one should see each piece as merely reflecting a 'temporary halting place' in the broader dance of thought and creative activity.⁷ This is a dance as old as time. As Raveh describes it, 'DK is interested in the collective, perennial process that they [*i.e.* each individual work] are an instant of.'⁸

DK emphasises this process view of philosophical practice in his treatment of Indian philosophy in particular. For instance, he speaks of the Samvad Project—his effort along with several colleagues to open up a dialogue between two streams within the living process of Indian philosophy—as 'something like the Sangam at Prayag Raj.'⁹ Raveh explains that this refers to 'the famous confluence of Ganga and Yamuna [rivers] near Allahabad.'¹⁰ The two movements brought together here, Ganga and Yamuna, are the classical tradition of Indian philosophy as practiced in Sanskrit and the more modern mode of Indian philosophy as practiced primarily in English. DK's aim in this seems to have been for its practitioners to become more self-conscious of the breadth and depth of Indian philosophy.

Here the historical context is important, in that the intrusion of British colonisation created a bifurcation of the rivers of Indian thought, creating well-funded colonial universities and yet leaving intact, albeit neglected, traditional centres of Indian thought. DK sought to merge these streams and to take a step towards reforming the self-conscious unity of Indian philosophy. The two streams were brought together in a series of dialogues 'between active practitioners of the two philosophical traditions, the Indian and the

Synkrētic

Western, in a dialogical situation where each was forced to existentially face the living tradition of a different way of philosophizing.¹¹

The aim of the Samvad Project can be summarised by a phrase reflecting a thread that runs throughout DK's corpus: 'when people gather together, something new emerges.'¹² This emphasis on multivocality is coupled in DK with a steadfast faith in the possibility of newness. His method was movement in thought wherever possible, particularly in relation to the state of Indian philosophy. In an excerpt with which many younger scholars may empathise, he says that

a picture once built is difficult to dismantle, but the evidence and the argument slowly undermine it, and the younger generation which is not so indissolubly "wedded" to "orthodoxy" as the older one, begins to be more open and responsive to the critique as it finds some substance in it.¹³

Here, in an excerpt from the introduction to his *New Perspectives*, DK takes aim at the prevailing concept of Indian philosophy. One of DK's key targets in this endeavour was the contrast between Western civilisation as 'rational' and Indian civilisation as 'spiritual.' This notion, he emphasised, did not merely take the form of an external stereotype: 'What the British produced was a strange species... [whose] terms of reference are the West.'¹⁴

We may note that here DK's thought entails a distinctively political aspect, which may be seen throughout his corpus. This tendency towards politicised, minority views earned for DK the reputation of a maverick philosopher. Raveh reports that a professor at an esteemed Indian university remarked to him that 'Daya Krishna was a great man . . . but very provocative.'¹⁵ This view can be seen as a natural consequence of DK's self-appointed task, which Raveh elsewhere describes as 'to shoot question-arrows at "the beliefs," many of them "totally unfounded," that constitute the conventional picture of Indian philosophy.'¹⁶ This habit extended to his reading of the canonical texts, which others tended to treat as beyond reproach. G.R. Malkani, for instance, pointedly questioned whether DK was 'competent to find fault with the father of the system'—that is, with Sankara, generally regarded as the founder of

the Vedānta school of Indian philosophy. The significance of DK's approach, Raveh notes, is that he did not see Sankara as a father 'but as a fellow-thinker, an interlocutor, even if more than a thousand years separated them.'¹⁷ As Raveh further remarks:

DK is well aware that this textual approach is hardly accepted by the traditionalist, who prefers that the texts that he holds precious remain 'untouched' by a sharp philosophical scalpel such as DK's.¹⁸

This sense of DK's apparent disrespect was likely only increased by the fact that he seemed to be playing a different game entirely. He did not seek to substitute his own views. We might instead compare his approach to that of Nietzsche, in that he likewise sought to philosophise with a hammer:

This little book is a *grand declaration of war*; and as regards the sounding-out of idols, this time they are not idols of the age but *eternal* idols which are here touched with the hammer as with a tuning fork—there are no more ancient idols in existence . . . Also none more hollow . . . That does not prevent their being the *most believed in*; and they are not, especially in the most eminent case, called idols . . .¹⁹

Where such idols are found empty, where they ring hollow, then DK is not reticent to take the hammer to them. This is not intended merely as a destructive act, but rather that he might thereby clear the ground for new growth. We might imagine this metaphorically by reflecting upon the dynamics of a forest in which ancient trees stand tall above the undergrowth below, blocking the sunlight whereby these saplings might have had a chance to reach their full potential. DK here plays the part of a careful woodsman, inspecting old trees for weakness and rot, then, where necessary, striking to make way for something new.

Of course, this metaphor is itself overly destructive and misrepresents DK's true stance towards India's extant traditions. This is readily apparent in his view that

Philosophical schools do not die of criticism. Rather, they get a new life and rigour as they try to meet the challenge, usually introducing interesting modifications in their position, or different arguments in support of their

Synkrētic

position. The history of philosophy, in all traditions, is the history of counter-argument.²⁰

The idea is not, therefore, that these should be destroyed outright; it is not tradition with which DK was at war. He was opposed only to the univocality of a presumptuous and suffocating authority. This was the target of his ire, not Indian traditions as such but only in this negative aspect. Here DK must not be seen as merely tearing down false idols. The purpose of this enterprise was to give new life to Indian philosophy, that he might thus be an exemplar of one who could seek newness even in the most ancient of traditions. We see in this side of DK a maverick philosopher, no doubt, but one whose mission was to encourage the participation of new voices in a hitherto hidebound discourse. This is why he was not interested in using his talents to institute a new regime. It was always the questions in which he was interested. Answers close a door; they pretend that the process is complete. Questions are an open door and every answer—if taken honestly and without pretension—itself brings into being a whole raft of new questions. The movement of philosophy, for DK, is a never-ending story.

For those operating outside of India, whether in the Western tradition or otherwise, this message must be seen as equally applicable to our own experience. This is particularly pertinent because, as DK recognised, social and technological developments are reshaping the world of thought. While the importance of tradition remains, the present conditions demand an imaginative effort to think through the relation between thought and the ever-changing actuality to which it refers. DK thus speaks of, in Raveh's words, 'the need of philosophy to calibrate itself to the present, lest it become a prehistoric dinosaur.'²¹ We can sense in DK's corpus a sense of urgency, that he truly believes in the importance of philosophy to the world. Yet it is clear that he believes that this significance is not merely a *de facto* state but rather must be achieved by the efforts of its practitioners. If philosophy merely claims for itself this title *a priori*, then it will only drift further and further from true relevance for its never knowing that it needed to move. This is only one aspect

Review: *Daya Krishna and Indian Philosophy*

of the importance of DK's work to the modern world more broadly. While the title's reference to the twentieth century and Indian philosophy may lead some to believe that it is a work limited to both particulars, the nature of DK's mission is plainly of universal relevance today.

Of course, this is not to minimise the essentially Indian focus of DK's work and Raveh's text alike. Throughout the book we are introduced to a whole swathe of characters, most of whom are known only within India. These characters, thanks to Raveh's detailed introductions to aspects of their thought, may provide a jumping-off point for further inquiries into Indian philosophy. This is a text which admirably embodies the principle DK himself set out, that 'when people gather together, something new emerges.'²² This book offers us an introduction to a range of impressive thinkers, both in the classical and modern Indian traditions, with whose works we may go on to pursue a dialogue at our leisure. We can thus read Raveh's work as opening up a conversation between ourselves as readers and DK, as well as a variety of other thinkers, Indian and Western alike. This is not a text, in other words, from which one ought to seek certain answers. It is rather a party whose host introduces us to a variety of guests. The aim is that we may find new friends as well as—with Daya Krishna's insistent encouragement—our own voice.

Notes

- 1 Daya Krishna in Daniel Raveh, *Daya Krishna and Twentieth-Century Indian Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 77.
- 2 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 97.
- 3 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 97.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, transl. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 55.
- 5 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 1.
- 6 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 86.
- 7 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 86.

Synkrētīc

- 8 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 86.
- 9 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 4.
- 10 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 4.
- 11 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 3.
- 12 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 37.
- 13 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 11.
- 14 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 11.
- 15 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 22.
- 16 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 9.
- 17 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 64.
- 18 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 10.
- 19 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, transl. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 3.
- 20 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 57-58.
- 21 Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 7.
- 22 Krishna in Raveh, *Daya Krishna*, 134.