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East — West. The Theory of *Guna* in A.W.Schlegel's Translation of the Bhagavadgita Notes on Translation

Abstract: Schlegel's translation of Bhagavadgita documents a landmark attempt of assimilating and popularizing an important Indian text within the European mind. Presented in this article analysis of the translation suggests that Schlegel's utilitarian goals overshadowed his efforts to accurately present some of Bhagavadgita's key terms. Furthermore, by reason of an assumption in regards to the existence of factual equivalents of these terms in the Western culture, the ambition of layering the system of *guna* onto the Western mind resulted in an unclear representation of the underlying content found in the original Bhagavadgita; proper interpretation of the terms in accordance with their cultural heritage became impossible. In conclusion, contrary to Schlegel's technique, modern inclinations and guidelines for sustaining philosophical terms in harmony with their original pronunciations are more likely to decrease the risk of stumbling upon copious doorways for interpretation and heading for resignation. Such approach may also help diminish the presence of excessive europocentrism in future processes of understanding the Indian mind and philosophy.

Key words: intercultural translation, Bhagavadgita, *guna*, *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*, Schlegel.

Throughout the Western culture, oriental mind has remained a topic of considerable interest for over two hundred years. Along with moral transformations, during the time of the 20th century, new angles on anthropology, psychology, and social sciences eased the process of integrating elements of Eastern and European cultures, as they became more visible and practicable. Among others, a significant portion of popularity belonged to the idea of ahimsa or a concept of personal retreat and introspection. Also, vegetarianism, melodic sutras, and compassionate

asans became equally stimulating to the public, despite them being perceived on a shallow intellectual level astray from the complex and diversified Indian ways of thinking. Nevertheless, in a historical context, the study of Indiology, to some extent, remained under the influence of European points of view. This makes the comprehension of Eastern ideology nearly impossible, as the European views tend to focus either on the antithetical aspects of Western and Eastern mind-sets¹, as seen in the works of Hegel or A. Garwoński², or a tendency to seek harmony and coincidence, as seen in the works of Deussen³. Such tendencies are criticized in the post-war Indiology by the majority of scholars such as S. Schayer, H. Nakamura.

An attempt to understand the East through Western ways of thinking, as exemplified in many translations of religious Sanskrit texts into European languages, remains a problem worthy of examination. A.W. Schlegel's translation of Bhagavadgita into Latin in 1823 is representative of such predicament; the translation of terms from the Indian system of *gunas* exemplifies, in the case of *sattva*, a process of inaccurate imposition of Western philosophical content into the Indian philosophical system and an effort of excessively verbatim translation of two terms: *rajas* and *tamas*. In such case, an analysis of the mentioned translations may provide explanations of how accurate and viable cultural translation may be under given circumstances. Also, further analysis of the texts may provide more information on how the translation of Indian texts may influence the general understanding of non-occidental ways of thinking.

Schlegel's translation was the second attempt to translate the Sanskrit original into a European language. Ch. Wilkins' translation in 1785⁴, which was the first of such documents, served as an aid to Schlegel's project. As a pioneer in the study of the Sanskrit and Indio-European linguistics, Schlegel paid considerate attention to structural adequacy within his translations, focusing on issues such as: grammatical accident, syntax, word formation, and rhythmic aspects of a language. The author decided to use Latin for the purpose of his translation, in view of the language as a great resource of ideas for literary expression⁵. In the end, Schlegel's work was published in the midst of a strong fascination with the Indian ways of thinking which, in turn, served an important purpose for romantics who sought guidance to their lives on a more spiritual plain. Furthermore, the printed edition of Schlegel's work caused a stir in the minds of many intellectuals at the time; for

¹ E.g. irrational — rational; synthesis — analysis, intuition — logic, maximalism — moderation.

² A. Gawroński: "Między Wschodem a Zachodem". *Przegląd Współczesny* 1924, No 26, pp. 321—336.

³ S. Schayer gives a critical judgement in: "O filozofowaniu hindusów". In: Idem: *O filozofowaniu hindusów*. Ed. M. Mejer. Warszawa 1988, pp. 131—153.

⁴ See: *Bhagavad-gita id est thespeion melos sive Krishnae et Arjunae colloquium de rebus divinis*. Trans. A.G. Schlegel. Bonnae 1823, p. XXI.

⁵ See: *ibidem*, pp. XXII—XXIII.

example, grasped by the beauty of the translation, von Humboldt postulated integrating yoga into everyday life, and F. Schlegel, together with A. Schopenhauer, and his student P. Deussen remained the most prominent propagators of the Indian mind. They considered it to be reviving and cathartic in the realms of the modern world. Naturally, an ability of the European to accurately comprehend such text cannot be compared to the complexity of comprehending it by the Indian. Therefore, Schlegel was pressured to create a masterpiece fairly easy to interpret; a text convincing to the reader through self-explanatory content. Only then could such document serve as a means of popularization, as it had become soon after the first edition. Nevertheless, Schlegel clearly neglected simple and direct transcription of certain terms found in the Sanskrit. He wrote:

Video nonnullos, cum in notiones philosophis Indicis peculiare incidunt, a sensu nostro adeo remotas, ut vix ullum vocabulum nobis usitatum iis plane respondeat, ipsum vocabulum Sanscritum in interpretationem suam inferre solere. Atqui, ex mea quidem sententia, hoc non est e peregrino sermone in nostrum convertere, sed nihil aliud quam verba Sanscrita litteris Latinis scribere. Ergo conatus sum omnia Latina facere, et notionum quoque philosophicarum veram vim et indolem exprimere, quatenus id sine longis verborum ambagibus fieri posset⁶.

In the long run, Schlegel, the writer, became a teacher of philosophical knowledge, who served as a bridge connecting distant cultures⁷. Yet, his facility to maintain such status so was limited to the level of his own competence and reason.

Because the theory of *gunas* is essential to many trends and fields in philosophy, anthropology, and cultural trends within India as a nation, explaining and transposing the *guna* is a problematic and hazardous process.

Ontological studies related to the theory of Sankhya, Yoga, and all Vedic counterparts define *gunas* as basic units of matter, or rather modal properties of matter⁸. Such units are always present in correlation with each other; and this very correlation is the condition for any life form. Units that make up matter contain explanations to all biological, physical, and psychological phenomena; they outline human character, tendencies, behavior, and goals. Therefore, as pointed out by Eliade, *gunas* are both subjective and objective, for they give basis for the existence of external world and also the existence of internal self and

⁶ Ibidem, p. XXIV.

⁷ Schlegel's contemporaries, as Hegel and Humboldt were also concerned with the problem of translating philosophical terms, see: M. Sato: *Das Problem des interkulturellen Verstaendnisses bei der Uebersetzung philosophish- religioeser Texte*. On: <http://www.kclc.or.jp/humboldt/msatog.htm>

⁸ The term modes is used by Dasgupta: *History of Indian Philosophy*. On: <http://www.full-books.com/A-History-of-Indian-Philosophy-Vol-17.html>, p. 243. Eliade uses "modi of being" in: *Patañdzali i Joga*. Trans. I. Kania. Warszawa 2004, p. 29.

the dynamics of psychological processes associated with that self. Furthermore, *gunas* continue to represent the elements of all matter. Such belief has a deep impact on the Indian mind, for it permits the acceptance of unity of life under any manifestations of life⁹. The conviction about universal unity of life is observable in medicine, cuisine, erotica, and psychology. Indian axiology is too based on the modal properties of matter. Furthermore, the properties are built into the soteriology of yoga as starting points, basic elements of human experience, transgression of which leads towards the ultimate liberation (*moksa*)¹⁰. When put together, the entities are classified into three classes – *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas* – in accordance to their individual properties. For the purposes of his translation, Schlegel decided to complete his work by incorporating terms that were to some extent known to the general public; he made use of their connotations with specific groups of ideas and terms to those found in the Indian context. Schlegel uses his technique consistently throughout the text, in contrast to his other translations in which poetic elements were far more important than the philosophical facets. Christian Lassen, who was responsible for the second edition of the text, did not impose any amendments in this area¹¹.

The equivalent of *sattva* is found in the expression *essentia*. However, a rich philosophical basis responsible for the formation of term *essentia* and a series of contexts related to the term caused the connection between *essentia* and *sattva* significantly more difficult to understand. A faulty sense of integrity between the two expressions becomes evident, possibly resulting from lack of sufficient comparative analysis and too much self-confidence in the author's intuitive approach. Attempts to interpret *sattva* through various interpretations of the term *essentia* do not lead to proper understanding of *sattva*. For example, a simple interpretation of the *sattva-essentia* as a principle of being, the nature of things¹², and a form that represents the basic elements of identity ("essentia significat quod est"¹³) may easily be associated with the concept of *gunas* rather than the *sattva* itself. The Indian term, being a modus of matter does not constitute the *per se* actual characteristics of being, such characteristics are a result of a correlation between the previously mentioned three qualities of *gunas*. The amount of differing contexts and links to philosophical ideas makes it virtually impos-

⁹ H. Nakamura elaborates on that particular question in: "Indie". In: Idem: *Systemy myślenia ludów Wschodu*. Trans. M. Kanert, W. Szkudlarczyk-Brkić. Kraków 2005, pp. 21–175. Not mentioning the *guna* is caused by methodological framework of his paper.

¹⁰ Vide: L. Cyboran: "Joga klasyczna. Filozofia i praktyka". *Studia Filozoficzne* 1976, No 10–11, pp. 84–101. Also: S. Kumar: "The Nature of Human Existence". In: *India in Warsaw*. Eds. D. Stasiak, A. Trynkowska. Warszawa 2006, pp. 174–184.

¹¹ *Bhagavadgita id est thespesion melos sive Krishnae et Arjunae colloquium de rebus divinis*. Trans. A.G. a Schlegel. Bonnae 1846.

¹² TLL, sub voce: "essentia", p. 862: "Veteres, qui haec nomina non habebant pro essentia et substantia naturam vocabant".

¹³ TLL, ibidem, p. 864.

sible to determine the author's intentions; accordingly, an accurate perception of the term is unlikely.

The term *essentia* as “*actio vel status essendi*” or “*res subsistens vel existens*” or “*genus vel qualitas essendi*”¹⁴ is more easily associated with the theory of all *gunas*. In the context of *sattva*, it overshadows the actual meaning of the term and overlooks *sattvas* qualities of dynamic matter; brightness, beneficence, and the power to redeem¹⁵. Furthermore, *essentia* may lead to false assumptions about *sattva* as intangible substance, that conditions being.

Translation of *sattva-essentia* may only be understood as a translation of the Sanskrit stem *sat-* which, among other things, defines being (and reality) and has an equivalent derivative of *esse*, with an abstract formant *-entia*. However, such observation is not evident due to abundant interpretations concerning the term. Eliade writes about *sattva* as “the modal property of brightness and intelligence”¹⁶. Słuszkiewicz describes it as “goodness, an element of decency”¹⁷. Schlegel focuses on one other aspect, the harmony of actual existence in the midst of the inertia of *tamas* and the movement of *rajas*. Whereas, the actual definition is a synthesis derived from the dialogue contained within the above interpretations.

Eliade describes *rajas* as “the modal quality of energy and all psychological processes”¹⁸, Słuszkiewicz explains it as “dust, fog, and passion”¹⁹, Dasgupta simply sees it as “energy-stuff”²⁰. On the other hand, Schlegel denoted the meaning of the term through *impetus*, which remained consistent with a commonly accepted interpretation. *Rajas* is a dominant factor responsible for elements that constitute activity, change, and motion. Objectively put, it is responsible for all motion, even the passing of time²¹. From an anthropological / psychological standpoint, *rajas* is the cause of emotions, it “gives birth to desire and longing, fetters the incarnate with craving for act”²², “impells for action”²³.

The meaning of Latin term *impetus* resembles the meaning behind *rajas* in two ways; it depicts both the abrupt and soft motion²⁴ of elements and their role as the stimuli for feelings (in a figurative sense in classical Latin)²⁵. In result, *impetus*

¹⁴ TLL, ibidem, p. 863.

¹⁵ *Bhagawadgita, czyli Pieśń Pana* XIV, 6; 14; 18. Trans. J. Sachse. Wrocław 1988.

¹⁶ M. Eliade: *Joga. Nieśmiertelność i wolność*. Trans. B. Baranowski. Warszawa 1997, p. 35.

¹⁷ E. Słuszkiewicz: *Pradzieje i legendy Indii*. Warszawa 1980, p. 382.

¹⁸ M. Eliade: *Joga...*, p. 35.

¹⁹ E. Słuszkiewicz: *Pradzieje...*, p. 382.

²⁰ Dasgupta: *History...*, p. 244.

²¹ L. Cyboran: *Filozofia jogi*. Warszawa 1973, p. 60.

²² *Bhagawadgita, czyli Pieśń Pana*, XIV, 7.

²³ Ibidem, XIV, 9.

²⁴ TLL, sub voce: “*impetus*”, pp. 606—607.

²⁵ TLL, ibidem, p. 608.

reflects the two most important planes necessary for understanding the Indian concept. Generally, Sanskrit texts do not contain connotations of *rajas* characterized by aggression (“de actione hostili, in re militari”²⁶).

The usage of the term *impetus* remains compelling also in the theory of pre-classic mechanics. The first concepts rejecting peripatetic theory of natural motion, as described by Ibn Badga, John Philoponos and John Buridan, were based on the assumption that motion of a body is maintained by means of accumulated energy within that body. This energy had been known as *impetus*. In this case, however, in its most important aspect, *impetus* had described internal properties of motion of a body. Therefore, an actualization of the meaning in post-classical Latin becomes evident in this case. The importance of this lies in the fact that close connection between *impetus* and *rajas* as objective sources for physical movement existed.

Tamas, the third type of *guna* and also on an axiological level an opposition to *sattva*, reflects the lowest level of human spiritual development. The term illustrates darkness, dusk, eclipse, illusion, weight, and lack of knowledge²⁷; consequently, *tamas* prevents salvation or deliverance. It is the basic element of all structured matter, the cause for existence of mass and consistency of objects (e.g. subtle psychological acts dominated by *sattva* are not structured as matter, dominated by *tamas*, would be structured in the Western ideology). *Tamas* is “the modal property of static inertness”²⁸. On its objective side, *tamas* was the foundation of all physical phenomena and structures, even conceptual classifications and ideas. On the subjective part (psychophysiological, axiological, and soteriological), it is like “a shadow over human consciousness”, which blocks access to clear and accurate knowledge. “A person whose consciousness is polluted with an excessive amount of *tamas* becomes heavy, lazy, dull, numb, as his mind is filled with routine, literally, »thickly« expresses matters of spirituality”²⁹. With his decision to translate *tamas* into *caligo*, Schlegel most likely focused on the literal and first meaning of the word: *caligo* that is *obscuritas*, *nox*, *tenebrae*³⁰. As a metaphor, Latin term *caligo* pertains to intellectual burden (“caligo animi vel mentis”), often times illustrated as a fog covering visibility. Terms such as *error* and *ignorantia* can be used as synonym for *caligo* and play an important role in understanding *tamas*. The decision to use such translation, however, left out the physical aspect of the context — the objective function of mass, durability, permanence, and heaviness.

Based on the above examples it is reasonable to conclude, that Schlegel prioritized literal projection of terms taken from Sanskrit. In the first case, an abstract

²⁶ TLL, ibidem, p. 606.

²⁷ Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon, sub voce: “tamas”. On: <http://webapps.uni-koeln.de/tamil/>

²⁸ M. Eliade: *Joga...*, p. 35.

²⁹ L. Cyboran: “O etyce indyjskiej”. In: *Klasyczna joga indyjska*. Ed. L. Cyboran. Warszawa 1986, p. 378.

³⁰ TLL, sub voce: “caligo”, p. 161.

noun was modeled by creating an analogical Latin derivate of the word; however, the process should not be confused with neologism, as the derivate could easily be applied to a wide variety of philosophical contexts and therefore be misinterpreted when applied specifically to Indian meaning. In the remaining cases, Schlegel used direct literal translations of relevant terms; this process, on the other hand, narrowed the capacity of interpretation to Latin milieu. *Sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are all elements of a coherent conception of matter, and their meanings are modified in accordance to a corresponding philosophical setting or background. Such expansive denotation is virtually impossible when applied in the context of unfamiliar ideology. Translation of complex philosophical texts, such as the translation of Bhagavadgita is not confined but contingent upon many factors, primarily due to the fact that it must inevitably relate to the construct of the entire philosophy it was based upon.

The key goal during Schlegel's time, the popularization of Indian mind, benefited from the simplified terminology to a limited extent. That is mostly because the masterpiece remained accessible and comprehensible to an average recipient; nevertheless, it was not enough from the perspective of a scientist, philosopher, or any serious and interested amateur. Cyboran makes a good observation that "plain substitution of equivalent terms from European philosophy is less confusing to a layman than a historian of philosophy; the first one will either understand or not, while a specialist of philosophy will always understand, but he will understand it either properly or improperly, depending on whether he will take pleasure in the formal presentation of the content"³¹. More modern translations primarily contain terms mentioned in this text through transliteration³², which requires annotation but also opens more space for interpretation. This change has been a direct result of how euro-centrism has had lesser presence in today's texts about Indian culture. This, in fact, is "the only proper humanistic way of dealing with cultures"³³.

³¹ L. Cyboran: *Filozofia jogi...*, pp. 29—30.

³² E.g.: S. Gambhirananda's and dr S. Sankaranarayana's English translations or excellent Polish translation by J. Sachse.

³³ S. Schayer: In: M. Mejor: "O indologii słów kilka". In: *India in Warsaw...*, p. 59.