

would have responded using both principles of Aikido movement and principles guided by the Wisdom of Love. I would have stepped off line, and redirected his attack with the sweetest possible apology and maybe a life-affirming hug.

## 12

# Epistemic Viciousness in the Martial Arts

GILLIAN RUSSELL

**W**hen I was eleven, my form teacher, Mr. Howard, showed some of my class how to punch. We were waiting for everyone else to finish changing after gym, and he took a stance that I would now call *sbizentai yoi* and snapped his right fist forward into a head-level straight punch, pulling his left back to his side at the same time. Then he punched with his left, pulling back on his right. We all lined up in our ties and sensible shoes (this was England) and copied him—left, right, left, right. Afterwards he told us that if we practiced in the air really hard for three years, then we would be able to use our fists to kill a bull with one blow.

I worshipped Mr. Howard (though I would sooner have died than told him that) and so, as a skinny, eleven-year-old girl, I came to believe that if I practiced enough, I would be able to kill a bull with one blow by the time I was fourteen. I'm going to talk about epistemic viciousness in the martial arts, and this story is an illustration of just that. *Epistemic* means having to do with beliefs and their justification. *Viciousness* normally suggests deliberate cruelty and violence; but I use it here with its more old-fashioned meaning: *possessing of vices*. (The opposite being a *virtue*.) Vices (such as avarice, alcoholism and nail-biting) are ordinary things, and most of us struggle with a few, but *epistemic* vices are defects with respect to the formation of beliefs. My eleven-year-old self possessed the epistemic vice of *gullibility*, which led me to form the false belief about killing bulls.

Other epistemic vices—such as closed-mindedness—can also lead to us *not* forming true beliefs when we ought to. Consider the internet-surfing Karate-sensei who stumbles upon an article claim-

ing that chocolate milk is better than water or sports drinks for promoting recovery after exercise, and describing an experiment using stationary bikes performed at the University of Indiana, purporting to support this claim. Surfing Sensei is a skeptical guy; he is aware that the fitness industry is fuelled by fads and lies and he long ago developed a vocal blusteriness in response to fitness advice: it's all nonsense designed to make money. He often bangs on about this to his students: all this stuff about protein-shakes and proper form and recovery and what-not is stupid. If you want to get better at running, you've got to run more, and if you get thirsty when you're cycling on a stationary bike, drink water; nothing will make you better at cycling—except more cycling. So Surfer Sensei doesn't even consider the results of the experiment at the University of Indiana. The corruption of the fitness industry has driven him towards the vice of closed-mindedness; he has a tendency to ignore certain kinds of evidence which could lead an epistemically virtuous agent to form a new belief.

Karateka, and practitioners of the Japanese *gendai budo* (modern martial ways) in general, like to extol the virtues of character that training in a martial art promotes. Yet whatever the moral virtues of the well-trained budoka, the culture of training in many martial arts actually *promotes* epistemic vice, including both closed-mindedness and gullibility, but also unwarranted epistemic deference to seniors and historical sources, lack of curiosity about important related disciplines, and lack of intellectual independence. This makes them unreliable when it comes to forming beliefs.

### Beliefs in the Martial Arts

What kinds of beliefs am I talking about here? I'm mostly interested in the *martial* parts of the martial arts—the teachings that pertain to fighting and self-defense, as opposed to those that pertain to competing in a sporting tournament, or how one ought to live one's life. Some of these beliefs are about particular techniques, such as (and I make no claim here about whether these examples are true):

- **that your opponent's roundhouse kicks are more dangerous whilst you are closing on him or her, than they are once you've closed**

- **that when fish-hooking the mouth, it is important to avoid being bitten**

And some beliefs will be about the interaction between certain techniques and the strategic situation more generally:

- **that slapping the ground with your arm when falling is more risky when you are on uneven ground than it is when you are on nicely sprung tatami**
- **that kicks to the head are easier and less of an invitation to a tackle when your opponent is situated downhill (or downstairs) from you**

And then there will also be beliefs about related topics, such as training, physical fitness, anatomy, fight-psychology and history:

- **that at the beginning of a fight you'll burn through all your blood sugar and can expect to feel exhausted**
- **that Anko Itosu was never in a fight, but Miyamoto Musashi and Choki Motobu liked to get in six before breakfast**

Learning a martial art is not *merely* a matter of acquiring beliefs, of course. We learn skills, gain balance and strength, develop muscle memory and proprioceptive abilities, and learn reactions and instincts for timing that can even be tricky to put into words. But, for some reason, people are particularly likely to acquire *crazy* beliefs in the martial arts. We've all heard the stories about martial artists who believe they can use their *chi* to kill someone without touching them, and read YouTube comments from kids who think that ninja nerve-strikes are banned in the UFC on the grounds that they are "too deadly." (A glance at the UFC rules will debunk that one.) Harry Cook's multipart articles on the concept of *ki* in *Classical Fighting Arts* are a chronicle of budo gullibility, and include the horrifying story of a seventeen-year-old boy who attempted to stop a train by taking up a kung fu stance in its path.

But it's not just lunatics and kids who pick up odd beliefs. Just last week I was on the way home from a Judo class with a friend—a senior judoka and university student—who insisted that although there was nothing wrong with lifting weights, strength

was unimportant in judo, and it wouldn't help one to become a better Judo player. The appropriate reply is, of course, unprintable. My friend has seen plenty of examples of the value of strength in Judo, has done hours of strength-conditioning in a Judo dojo where they've installed a weights room upstairs, and despite copious experiential data in support of the contrary hypothesis (the kind of data that can read off three-minute *newaza* (groundwork) sessions with someone fifty pounds heavier than yourself) he still somehow believed it when he was told that strength isn't at all important in Judo.

Judo is an art in which there is relatively little room for pretence; in *randori* (free practice) either you manage to throw your opponent, or you don't. In *newaza* either you escape from your opponent's hold or you don't. So if a belief in the unimportance of strength manages to survive the training that Judo offers, it isn't surprising that it thrives in arts, such as Aikido, where there is usually less competitive *randori*, and more *yakusoku kumite* (pre-arranged sparring). One particularly bizarre story from my own experience involves a young male karateka whose natural physical makeup and Judo training had made him unusually strong. Really, *unusually* strong—this is the only time I have heard of a Karate club having to buy thicker *makiwara* because a *beginner* was routinely snapping them by accident. But after a few years away, the man began training with a local branch of the Ki Society, who denigrated the importance of his strength. He eventually returned to us stripped of much of his muscle-mass, convinced that there was a kind of disreputable immorality associated with physical strength, and that the main way he could improve his martial ability was to let his muscles atrophy and develop his *ki*.

His teachers were, I think, fantasists, but I want to know why are there so many fantasists in the martial arts, as compared to other activities. You won't find many sprinters or removal-men who will tell you that strength doesn't matter to their chosen tasks; nor will you find power-lifters who think they can move the bar without touching it or high-ranking engineers who specialize in *ki*-distribution.

### On Going to the Dojo Like You're Going to Church

A piece of the puzzle is that a lot of people treat their martial art as sacred. Not just special, and important and worthwhile—like,

say, a vocation—but like a religion. Their sensei is basically the agent of the Founders on Earth, infallible on all matters martial, and the writings of the founder are treated as the word of god. Members feel guilty if they don't go, and risk being regarded as morally deficient if they leave. Minor infractions of the social and dress codes are also moralized (having red toe-nails in the dojo is like going to church in a mini-skirt and halter-top—you can do it, but it's no way to get into the choir) and the students of other martial arts are talked about as if they're practicing the wrong religion.

In religion, people seek something that will satisfy their desire for the special, mysterious, and meaningful in their lives, which is exactly what some of us hope to find in the martial arts. But though this means that the sanctification of the dojo isn't particularly surprising, it also provides a clue as to how some of the wackier beliefs find fertile ground there: people who are hungry for something special—and that's all of us to some degree—are more likely to be suckers, because strong desires make people vulnerable. If you're very hungry, you might search all your life and die disappointed, or you might eventually give in and satisfy the desire by lowering your epistemic standards, so that you come to believe—falsely—that you've found something that exotic already.

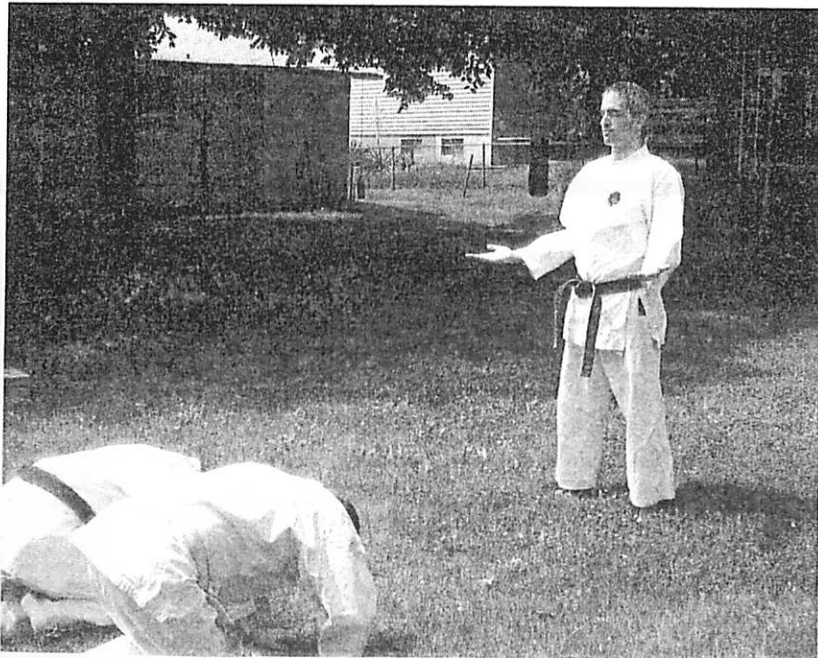
The tendency to treat your martial art as sacred also seems to encourage a style of thinking according to which the art and the teachers aren't merely good, but are the best anything or anyone can possibly be—in any respect one can think of. Some people end up believing, for example, that Karate is not merely a good workout, but *the best possible physical exercise ever*. I came across an example of this in the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* a few years ago. I don't mean to pick on the writer as an exceptionally bad case, just a convenient one who happened to express the ideas in a prominent place. The writer, reviewing a book on Yoga for martial artists, began by writing:

It is difficult for this reader to understand why anyone who is practicing karate would ever need or want to practice yoga to help their karate. *Is something lacking in the study and practice of karate that warrants turning to another form of exercise to accomplish karate's goals?* It is highly doubtful to this reader. . . .

Oh, come on! Karate, practiced in isolation, tends to overdevelop the lateral quadriceps compared to the vastus medialis and adduc-

tors, making the patella of many karateka a bit frog-eyed. All that punching over-develops the chest, anterior deltoids and triceps with respect to the back, posterior deltoids and biceps, contributing to poor posture and a tight chest. Unbalanced leg muscles and sweeps are a nasty combination, and so are insufficient development of the rotator cuff and repeatedly having to receive *ikkryo* (a technique that involves manipulating your opponent's body by manipulating their arm), and if you are practicing Karate seriously, it's better that you should know all this.

Admittedly, I am assuming that getting injured—especially things like knee and shoulder injuries that often linger on for years—is no way to accomplish Karate's goals. But if you'll grant me that, then what we have is a reason to add something to Karate from the outside, by giving new karateka a gentle push in the direction of the power-rack and the pull-up bar. I take my claims here to be unexceptional, though no doubt they'll offend the True Believers. But right or wrong, it won't be possible to dispute these points reasonably by assuming that karateness is next to godliness, and ignoring anything that comes into conflict with that.



*Rei unto Sensei*

### The Problem with Investment

Not everyone treats their martial art like a religion; but another, more inevitable, problem is that those who already have beliefs in the area tend to have a lot invested in those beliefs, and the people whose testimony we are most likely to trust have inevitably invested *years* of effort.

Suppose that Kenji has been studying Shotokan Karate for twenty years. He had a lot of trouble with a particular style of side-kick early on, finding it hard to make his knee do what his teacher's knee did, but one day his elderly teacher took him aside and showed him how using his hip-flexor and obliques in a slightly different way made the kick much easier to perform. Kenji was impressed and since then he has been able to execute a kick which closely resembles that of his teacher. Kenji eventually ended up teaching Karate, and whenever he has a student who struggles with the kick in question, he takes them aside and teaches them his teacher's trick, feeling proud that he is able to pass on this information, and contribute to his students' progress. Very occasionally a new student will ask him what the kick is useful for, and, like his teacher before him, he tells them that it is used in competition, but that its *real* use is in disarming an attacker by kicking the knife from their hands. Kenji subscribes to the following belief: this particular side-kick is an important and effective Karate technique. He has a lot invested in this belief, and it would be painful to give it up: he struggled for years to master the technique, and if it is not a useful technique, all that will have been wasted. He taught the technique to many students; if he comes to believe that it is not an effective technique, he would have to admit that he had misled them, and that would be very embarrassing.

Down the pub one night, a lot of evidence is presented to Kenji that goes against his belief: friend A, a physiotherapist, observes the kick and tells Kenji that the technique will be detrimental to the stability of his and his students' knees. Friend B, a professional cage-fighter, argues that the technique is useless and points out that no-one has ever used it in a full-contact fight, and that's because you can't get any useful force behind it (except against your own ligaments). Friend C, a historian of the martial arts, argues that the kick is not to be found in any of the precursors of the Shotokan Kata. It is, he argues, a late addition to the style that probably crept in by mistake. Finally Friend D, an expert in knife-fighting, tells Kenji that the disarming technique simply wouldn't

work in general, and that he has underestimated the danger of closing on a blade, and the lengths that good knife-fighters instinctively go to to protect their blade-hands. Typically, he says, a fighter would have little trouble blocking the kick with the other arm or a leg, and would then immediately counter with the knife.

That's a lot of evidence and expert testimony to crop up in one night, but Kenji *really* doesn't want to give up his belief that the kick is a good technique. He gets in a horrible argument with his friends at the pub, but on the way home on his own realizes that it's actually easy to maintain his belief in the effectiveness of the kick. First, he should have told A that health is one thing, and martial ability is another; perhaps training in Karate will get you a few injuries over the years, but we're not training for health, but to be able to fight. Then he should have told B that cage-fighting is stupid and immoral (so there), and obviously doesn't involve knives. Friend C is a smart guy and so he should have expressed interest in his historical findings, but pointed out first, that it is not always easy for an outsider to interpret kata, and then he should have said that Karate is a living art and it's natural that when new techniques are discovered, they are added to the curriculum. The Boston Crab wasn't originally a part of Judo, but that doesn't mean that it's not an effective Judo technique. Finally, for Friend D, who claimed that the disarming technique wouldn't work, he plans the response: you just aren't doing it right. Our kick is difficult and takes many years to perfect—no-one said the martial arts were easy. If you train in it long enough, it will work.

None of these answers is really sufficient, and some of them are outright irrelevant, but Kenji isn't trying to convince his friends, but simply maintain his own mental coherence whilst retaining the belief in which he has invested so deeply. It is hard to imagine someone *without Kenji's level of investment*—say his brother Tenji—maintaining the belief in the face of such evidence. Suppose Tenji has taken on the ambitious project of constructing a martial art from scratch and so far he has never so much as spent a minute practicing or teaching any techniques, he just wants to design the most effective martial art possible. Tenji hears about a new throw, and is considering adding it, but then is told by experts that the throw is dangerous for the lower back of the person performing it, wouldn't work in a sport fight, isn't a traditional martial arts technique, but something that was invented yesterday by the guy down the road; and finally that the throw isn't a technique which should

be used martially, because it involves allowing your opponent into your *shikaku* (dead angle) which is too risky. It's absurd to think that Tenji would talk himself out of accepting all these points and add the technique to his new art. Why would he? *He* doesn't have any reason to.

### Trust Me, I'm Your Sensei

The trouble is that when you're just starting out, you don't have much choice. A martial art can't be learned from a book; you have to learn from someone who already knows what they're doing, and so, depending a little on where you live, if you find a single club in a single art which has an experienced teacher and lots of adult senior students who look strong, and can do stuff that you'd like to be able to do, then that club might well be your *only* decent bet for learning about the martial arts.

Deference to one's teacher is both traditional and expected in many training environments; but without a common background of Confucianism to ground such deference, contemporary dojo interpret the idea in many different ways. Some clubs are run like military boot camps (Drop and give me twenty maggot! Yes, sir! Bow to your sensei! Yes, sir!); some like an extended family in which rank is *never* pulled, because it would be beneath the dignity of those who have rank to bother; and some clubs seem like a secret society where you never quite know where you stand or what the rules are (Is sensei not criticizing my footwork any longer because I've got it right now, or is it because he's given up on me? I wonder whether it's okay to ask? Maybe he'd be annoyed and give up on me. . . .)

Regardless of the cultural norms in your dojo, and whatever was expected in traditional China, Okinawa, or Japan, it does seem that respect—respect beyond the normal respect accorded to every human being—is something that is appropriate for anyone who knows a lot about the martial arts and who is sincerely trying to teach you some of what he or she knows. So how do you maintain that respect whilst remaining epistemologically vice-free? If your sensei says something that you think is obviously false (“you can't kick me from there”), it doesn't seem all that respectful to answer “sure I can, look! . . . there!”

Respect for your sensei can require you not to challenge every apparent falsehood you hear from his or her lips. However, there's

a lot of distance between that and believing everything that they say. The epistemically virtuous are cautious in what they *believe*, but that won't normally get in the way of decent behavior. You can show respect by keeping quiet when it's appropriate, and, within your own mind, you can show respect to someone by giving serious weight to the fact that *they* have made a claim. When your five-year-old cousin says "You can't kick me from there, asshole", you might smile and walk by secure in the belief that he's wrong, but when someone you respect as your teacher says it, and it *still* seems obviously false, respect demands that you try to resolve the tension. Depending on the personality of your sensei, you might be able to ask them about it and get a serious answer—even if you have to wait until you get them alone. Maybe you'll find it convincing, maybe not—and if not there's no need to go on and on about it—but either way you've taken both your teacher, and your own commitment to the truth, seriously. This is the best-case scenario. Maybe the atmosphere in your dojo is more formal than this, or your sensei is a bit touchier about being challenged. In that case you might need to approach a senior student or try to work it out for yourself. Again, you might be able to, or you might decide that he was really just wrong about this. But either way, no genuine requirement of deference to your sensei can require that you believe something false or unjustified, just as no genuine requirement of deference to your sensei could require that you do something morally wrong if they asked you to.

### Deferring to History

Just as there is a tendency to defer to seniority in the martial arts, so there is a tendency to defer to history. When a budoka says "Kentsu Yabu said you should practice your kata thirty times a day," there is a good chance that they aren't just relating an interesting historical fact; they are actually *telling you* to practice your kata thirty times a day.

Such an inference—Famous Historical Master said such and such, therefore you should believe such and such—doesn't pass muster in other areas. Try telling a long-distance runner that Pheidippides (the original marathoner) said that athletes should not spend time thinking about their equipment, but should focus their minds on the gods. They might say something like "Oh yes, that's interesting"; but they *wouldn't* infer that they should stop replacing

their running shoes every four hundred miles. Runners think that the contemporary staff of *Runner's World* know more about running than all the ancient Greeks put together.

It's not just other physical activities where history is kept in its place; the same is true in any well-developed area of study. It's not considered disrespectful for a physicist to say that Isaac Newton's theories are false. Newton is a giant among physicists, but since physics is a serious endeavor, epistemic deference to historical figures is not required, and the fact that Newton, or Einstein, or Aristotle, believed that such and such is not regarded as a reason to believe that such and such. (It's probably worth noting that amongst crank physicists the authority of certain dashing figures—especially Einstein, Bohr, Feynman, and Hawking—is given more weight, and they may write as if the "Hawking thinks such and such, therefore such and such" inference is likely to go through, just as I occasionally meet people at parties who think "Chuck Norris thinks such and such, therefore such and such" is a persuasive argument in the martial arts.)



Our! But Chuck Norris said it would work!

But forget Chuck Norris, and consider Miyamoto Musashi and Takuan Soho, Gichin Funakoshi and Kenwa Mabuni, Jigoro Kano and Kyuzo Mifune, Morihei Ueshiba and Takeda Sokaku, Yim Wing Chun and Sun Tzu. In the martial arts—even in the *gendai budo*, which aren't all that old—founders, ancient writers, traditions and historical masters are treated with such epistemic deference that their sayings often go unquestioned even when they conflict with each other, with common sense, with contemporary science, and with other important sources of information—such as one's eyes.

I am not suggesting that the founders and practitioners who went before you do not deserve respect. But again, respect never requires inappropriate moral or *epistemic* deference. I'm enormously fond of the writings of Gichin Funakoshi; in a discipline where many practitioners are neither gentle nor modest, *Karate-do: My Way of Life* is an extraordinarily gentle and modest autobiography. But despite Funakoshi's stature in Karate, and my admiration for him, it would be daft for me to believe everything he says, because he says some things that are daft. For example, he writes that Karate can cure any illness except for physical injuries, and:

If a man who runs a temperature practices karate until the sweat begins to pour from his body, he will soon find that his temperature has dropped to normal, and that his illness has been cured.

Fever is a symptom of diverse medical conditions, including influenza, smallpox, HIV, lupus, and the common cold. Not all of these fevers can be cured by doing karate. This is why, when your six-year-old wakes up with a temperature of 104°F, you call the doctor instead of handing her the kongoken. Funakoshi's error is entirely excusable if his access to this kind of medical knowledge was restricted—but I could not be similarly excused if I believed him, and acted on that belief now.

### Poverty and Vice

How did we get to be so vicious in the martial arts? Why aren't people sanctifying the shot-put and turning their wasted, marathoning backs on Amby Burfoot when his advice is contradicted by the Ancient Greeks? Another part of the puzzle is that we martial artists struggle with a kind of poverty—data-poverty—which makes our beliefs hard to test.

Learning about some subjects, such as human anatomy, is straightforward: get hold of a copy of the latest edition of Netter's *Anatomy*, and start reading. If you want to know more, or you become skeptical of the information presented, you can visit a lab and observe or take part in the dissection of cadavers. Like those who have gone before you, you can get out a scalpel and check for yourself.

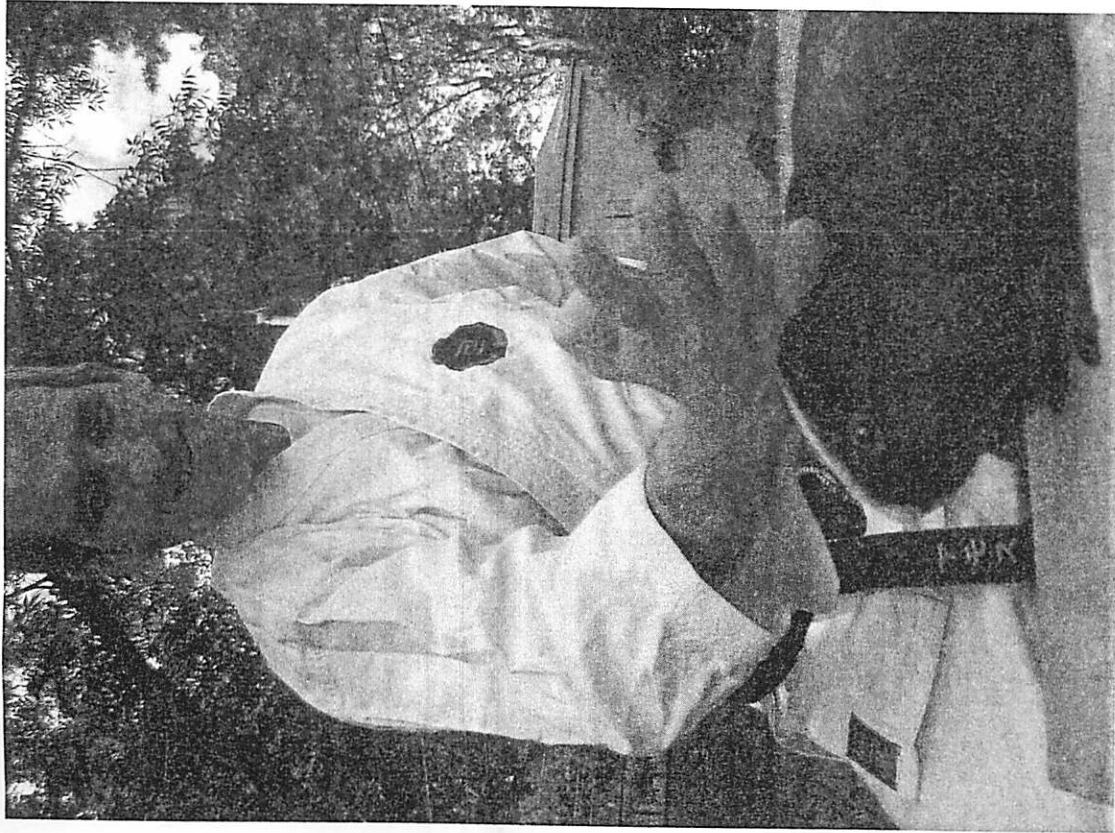
But you can't learn Karate or White Crane Boxing from a book, and there are a lot of martial beliefs that we don't get to *test* in such a direct way. You can't *check* to see how much force, and exactly which angle a neck-break requires, or learn from experience about the psychological effects and stopping power of an eye-gouge—at least, you can't unless you're unfortunate enough to be fighting a hand-to-hand war.

In an epistemically ideal—though morally horrible—situation, we'd be able to test the effectiveness of techniques by doing them in realistic set-ups over and over again. How many times out of one hundred does your no-holds barred *nukite* to the throat result in death within five minutes? Ten, twenty, eighty, one hundred? What's the most likely alternative outcome? Bruising? Scratching? Coughing? Unconsciousness? Internal bleeding? Partially crushed trachea? Escalation? Can subjects partially armor against it or roll with it? These questions have answers, but for good ethical reasons, we can't get at them by direct testing; and though martial techniques do get used “for real”, this rarely happens as part of a controlled experiment.

Our inability to test the answers to these questions has the knock-on effect that it is hard to test methods for improving techniques. Should you practice your nukite in the air, or will that just encourage you to overextend? Is it helpful to practice one thousand a day, or would it be more effective to practice three sets of ten against a pad? Our inability to test our fighting methods restricts our ability to test our training methods.

To be fair, I'm overstating my point a little here. Judoka regularly attempt to throw all sizes of other judoka who are resisting being thrown (though only resisting in certain acceptable ways—you can't poke your opponent in the eye, or pull a knife on them). Sometimes they succeed, and sometimes they don't; but either way, both *uke* (person receiving) and *tori* (person throwing) learn something.

Nevertheless, the fact that so few Karate claims can be straightforwardly tested, with the results published in peer-reviewed jour-



*Say No to animal testing*

nals, makes it harder to challenge the beliefs that are held solely out of deference to history or tradition, solely out of a tendency to exaggerate the worth of the things we hold sacred, or solely because we have invested so heavily in them that it hurts to give them up. Just imagine if the situation was as bad in anatomy. That is, imagine a world in which doctors insist that the blood circulates,

but forensic anthropologists scoff at the very idea; undertakers swear the heart is in the chest, but physiotherapists insist it is in the *bara*, and sports scientists claim it is an amorphous system spread throughout the core.

No one thinks you can learn true anatomy from a book, and instead you have to train with one of these groups, all of whom will insist that you listen to them lecture whilst running intervals and being whacked with a *shinai* by their research assistants. Medical imaging techniques were never developed and it's illegal to cut open a cadaver. Only then would the data poverty in anatomy be as bad as it is in the martial arts.

But the real problem isn't just that we live in data poverty—I think that's true for some perfectly respectable disciplines, including theoretical physics—the problem is that we live in poverty but continue to act as though we live in luxury, as though we can safely afford to believe whatever we're told, as though we don't need to make serious efforts to keep ourselves honest in the face of our own investment and longing for enchantment.

So is my main message that you should scoff at the word of your sensei or senpai? Of course not. That isn't being an epistemically responsible agent either; that's being an asshole. All the old constraints on your behavior still apply. It's important to be *cautious* in what you believe. In the words of the Buddha, copied from their place of honor on the wall of Harry Cook's dojo:

Do not believe on the strength of traditions even if they have been held in honor for many generations and in many places; do not believe anything because many people speak of it; do not believe on the strength of sages of old times; do not believe that which you have yourselves imagined, thinking that a god has inspired you. Believe nothing which depends only on the authority of your masters or priests. After investigation, believe that which you have yourselves tested and found reasonable, and which is for your good and that of others.

### Why It Matters

Why does it matter that the martial arts are rife with epistemic vice? Epistemic vice is not moral vice and a person might combine his gullibility or closed-mindedness with a gentleness or integrity which is morally impressive. Moreover, epistemic vice is *common* and can even be charming. Most of us know intelligent people who



have blind spots on certain topics, such as the parent who persists in believing in their child's troubled genius. One recent study even found that men and women who are married often overestimate the degree to which their spouse will be considered attractive by a random panel of judges, and that epistemic error is sort of endearing.

But it would be stupid to believe that epistemic vice is acceptable *in the martial arts*, because this is an area where it is morally important to have true beliefs, and not just cute ones. The question of whether you can stop a train with your *ki*, or whether a stretch will be detrimental to your students' health, or whether a technique could stop or kill someone—these are not questions on which it is acceptable to be endearingly mistaken.

# 13 Seeing Your Own Shadow

JOHN HAFFNER and JASON VOGEL

**S**omewhere in a nondescript building near Tel Aviv, a young military officer is taking a Krav Maga class in counter-terrorism. Today he is training for an airplane scenario—he has to learn how to try to subdue a man who is threatening hundreds of civilian passengers with a live hand grenade.

Meanwhile, just outside Shanghai, an elderly woman has commenced her morning Tai Chi routine in a local park before she makes her way to the nearby market, where she makes a living as a vegetable vendor. While the young officer rehearses fast movements to avert terror, the elderly woman is unrushed in her movement, and her mind is at peace.

As the contrast between Tai Chi and Krav Maga illustrates, there can be major differences from one martial art to the next. Beneath the surface, however, there can also be interesting similarities across martial arts. Indeed, in our view, there is at least one theme that is common to all martial arts: whatever else they may be, they can all be seen as an organized form of mental and physical discipline applicable to combat.

Admittedly, in the contrast we just considered, the Israeli officer's training is much more obviously a form of combat than the daily movements of the Chinese vegetable vendor. But Tai Chi can also claim combative roots, and its movements still have practical combative elements. When the elderly woman in Shanghai commences her sword routine, she may not be thinking about ways to defend herself in a dark alley, but the martial heritage to her movement is unmistakable.

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# Martial Arts and Philosophy

## Beating and Nothingness

Edited by

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and

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OPEN COURT

Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois

*Volume 53 in the series, Popular Culture and Philosophy*,  
edited by George A. Reisch

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First printing 2010

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Open Court Publishing Company, a division of Carus Publishing  
Company, 70 East Lake Street, Suite 300, Chicago, Illinois, 60601.  
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Marital arts and philosophy : beating and nothingness / edited by  
Graham Priest and Damon Young.

p. cm. — (Popular culture and philosophy ; v. 53)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8126-9684-4 (trade paper : alk. paper)

1. Marital arts. 2. Marital arts—Philosophy. I. Priest, Graham. II.

Young, Damon.

GV1101.M1278 2010

796.815—dc22

2010027665