

Indian Philosophy

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Indian philosophy is frequently misunderstood in the West, when it is not dismissed altogether. It is commonly thought to be so different from western philosophy as to be of little interest. In fact, a serious study of the subject tends to lead to the opposite conclusion. There is a remarkable amount of Indian philosophy that seems surprisingly familiar to those who have a knowledge of, say, Berkeley or Kant. While the cultural context and adjuncts of Indian philosophy may often seem alien, the content frequently reveals the fact that similar problems have exercised the thinkers of both East and West. On the other hand, because Indian philosophy has tended to stay in a close relationship with religion, it sometimes bears more of a resemblance to the medieval philosophy of the West rather than what preceded or succeeded it. But one of the problems with Indian philosophy is that there is so much of it, and it has such a long history, that no generalisation about it can convey more than a partial truth.

Much of that history is either vague or simply unknown. Dates and names are often highly conjectural. Broad periods may be roughly marked out, but details are frequently missing. In deference to this fact, in what follows I will mention as few dates and names as possible. That still leaves more than enough material for the limited space available.

It is largely a matter of taste and opinion as to when the history of Indian philosophy can be said to have begun. The earliest writings are the Vedas, collections of religious texts. Their age is a matter of considerable dispute, but most of the texts were in existence by the end of the second millennium BC. The principal exceptions are the Upanishads. Traditionally part of the Vedas but often distinguished from them, the oldest ones date to the first millennium BC. Whereas the Vedas roam over the whole of religion, the Upanishads are more specifically spiritual in nature. As they come at the end of the Vedas, the philosophy that developed around the Upanishads is known as Vedanta, and this has proved to be one of the most influential and durable of all Indian philosophies. I will return to Vedanta in due course.

It is standard practice to distinguish between orthodox and heterodox systems of Indian philosophy. The orthodox regard the Vedas (including the Upanishads) as authoritative, while the heterodox do not. The nature of the Vedas' authority is similar to that of the Bible in Christian theology: they have the status of revelation. However, as with the Bible, there is so much material contained within them (indeed, far more than the Bible contains) that plenty of room exists for variety of emphasis and interpretation.

Traditionally, there are six orthodox systems, which are usually regarded as falling into three pairs. The first pair is comprised of Nyaya and Vaisesika. The main interests of Nyaya are logic and epistemology, whereas Vaisesika is primarily concerned with metaphysics. They share a pluralistic view of the world, an Indian version of atomism. Vaisesika is as much descriptive as argumentative, and as much (disputable) physics as metaphysics. The aim is to give an account of the world, and this involves dealing with such standard philosophical notions as the categories. Nyaya addresses the question of how knowledge of this world is possible. The most important sources of knowledge are perception and inference, and in its exploration of the latter, Nyaya developed a form of syllogism. Although little known in the West, there are many similarities between Nyaya-Vaisesika and analytical philosophy. Although the style may be different, the content often appears familiar.

The second pair of orthodox systems is formed by Samkhya and Yoga. The idea that Yoga is a philosophy rather than just an attempt to force your body into impossible positions may come as a surprise. However, the popular image of yoga is not entirely misleading: in its pairing with Samkhya, Yoga is very much the more practical partner. If yoga is thought of as a technique, then Yoga expounds the point of the technique. What binds Yoga and Samkhya together is a form of metaphysical dualism. In the universe of Samkhya-Yoga there are two kinds of thing, spirit and matter. However, while matter is essentially unitary (because all material things evolve out of a single primal matter), spirit is pluralistic

(because there are many separate spirits). Where Samkhya engages in metaphysical speculation on the nature of spirit and matter, Yoga is concerned with how spirit may be disengaged from matter in order to regain its natural freedom and blissful state. Seen in this light, there are obvious similarities to gnosticism and Neoplatonism, with matter regarded as the source of ignorance and suffering.

Finally there are the Purva (earlier) Mimamsa and the Uttara (later) Mimamsa, although the latter is more commonly referred to as Vedanta. Purva Mimamsa is often, though not universally, regarded as the least important of the six orthodox systems, although perhaps the case is rather that it is the least philosophical. Its interests are largely directed at matters of ritual, and it identifies itself more closely with those parts of the Vedas relating to such concerns than do the other five.

Vedanta, on the other hand, is probably the most significant of the six. Those in the West with some knowledge of Indian philosophy will often have encountered it in the form of Vedanta. Its most celebrated exponent was Sankara, one of the best known of all Indian philosophers. After the pluralism of Nyaya-Vaisesika and the dualism of Samkhya-Yoga, it would be highly desirable for the sake of neatness if Vedanta were monistic. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. The Vedanta of Sankara is indeed monistic, but there are other versions of Vedanta that take a different line. In the Vedanta of Sankara, ultimately all things are within Brahman (God), all things are Brahman, and within Brahman there are no distinctions. Sankara's Vedanta is normally known as Advaita ('non-dual') Vedanta. Another form of Vedanta, usually associated with the name of Ramanuja, is known as 'qualified non-dualism'. In this case, while ultimately all things are within Brahman, and all things are Brahman, within Brahman there are distinctions. Finally there is a variant of Vedanta, usually associated with the name of Madhva, that is known as 'dualism', and here a distinction between Brahman and the world is retained.

Even this briefest of overviews of the orthodox systems should be sufficient to indicate that allegiance to the Vedas has not produced a stale uniformity but, on the contrary, a wide variety of interpretations. However, the official view (which may appear difficult to sustain in the light of what has been said) is that the different systems are not contradictory but complementary. It is certainly true

that many of the differences between, say, Nyaya and Yoga are rooted in their addressing different issues rather than in their taking different positions on the same issue. On the other hand, to argue that non-dualism and dualism are reconcilable within Vedanta appears rather less plausible.

In one sense at least, however, the six systems can be construed as sharing a common cause. They agree on what the point of philosophy is, and the point of philosophy is salvation. Because of this, even the most abstruse debates between the different forms of Vedanta are understood as having practical implications. Exactly what salvation consists in, however, is another matter. There are clearly different interpretations of it, for example experiential (liberation from suffering), metaphysical (liberation from the world of matter) and epistemological (liberation from ignorance). On the other hand, it is possible that these are different aspects of the same thing. Even if complete complementarity turns out to be wishful thinking, there may yet be more scope for harmonisation than at first appears.

The idea that the point of philosophy is salvation is also shared by the major heterodox philosophical systems, namely Jainism and Buddhism. Before turning to them, however, brief mention may be made of another heterodox philosophy, that known as Carvaka. Little is known about its history, but from the fragmentary evidence that survives of its doctrine, it appears to have been remarkably eccentric by Indian standards. It was a thoroughgoing materialism that admitted perception as the only source of knowledge, and advocated a hedonistic way of life. It found no place at all for religion, which it regarded as a fraudulent enterprise. Its main influence appears to have taken the form of uniting all the advocates of the other systems against it! Some have seen Carvaka as an Indian equivalent of Epicureanism, although the correspondence is less than exact.

If the orthodox systems are philosophies connected with religion, the heterodox philosophies of Jainism and Buddhism are often regarded as religions in their own right. But if they are, they can nevertheless be thought of as philosophies as well. As heterodox systems, they reject the revelatory status of the Vedas and, indeed, can be understood as reactions against the Vedic religion. They both appear to have arisen in northern India during the sixth century BC,

although both have traditions of being in existence long before this.

The historical founder of Jainism is usually known as Mahavira. Metaphysically, Jainism bears a resemblance to Samkhya, with a radical distinction between spirit and matter, but with a plurality, indeed an infinite plurality, of each. Furthermore, spirit and matter are interdependent rather than separable. Epistemologically, it has affinities with scepticism in that it emphasises the limits of human knowledge. As a religion it is somewhat distinctive in vehemently denying the existence of God.

Perhaps the most celebrated feature of Jainism is its approach to everyday life. It preaches an austere asceticism, with a special emphasis on not causing harm. This stems from its understanding of *karma*, a key term running through much of Indian thought. In one sense, *karma* is simply the principle of cause and effect, but it also tends to have a moral dimension amounting to, 'Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap' (as St Paul cautioned the Galatians). Consequently, doing harm ultimately harms oneself. Jains can still be seen in parts of India wearing gauze masks to ensure that they do not swallow insects by accident and sweeping the paths in front of them in order to avoid treading on anything living. The aim of life for Jains, it might be said, is to leave as light a karmic footprint as possible.

There are very few Jains today, whereas Buddhists can be counted in their millions (although not in India). Unfortunately, Buddhist sects can also be reckoned in at least their dozens, and there are differing views as to what constituted the Buddha's original teaching. Different schools have taken up and developed different aspects of it, and in recent centuries much of this has happened outside the Indian context.

When seen within that context, much of what appears strange to western eyes about Buddhism becomes commonplace. Neither *karma* nor the doctrine of reincarnation are of Buddhist origin, but were part of the cultural background to its emergence. Metaphysically, perhaps its most significant innovation was its radical doctrine of impermanence. Neither the things of this world nor even our own selves have fixed natures. Rather, as with Heraclitus, everything is in flux. An understanding of this fact, not only intellectually but also experientially, is essential for meeting the

challenge of suffering, which is Buddhism's practical starting point. The promise of Buddhism is that suffering can be overcome by our own efforts, and the evidence for this is not some revealed text but the fact that the Buddha himself achieved it. In its central insight that we are the authors of our own suffering, Buddhism clearly has much in common with Stoicism.

Because of the belief that the doctrine of impermanence could be understood experientially, if the doctrine was a metaphysical one, it was nevertheless not a speculative one. Matters that were purely speculative were met with a shrug. In due course, in one of the most significant developments in the history of Buddhist thought, this agnosticism became transformed into a dynamic dialectical philosophy. The Madhyamika school of Buddhism, associated above all with the philosopher Nagarjuna, was a radical scepticism that emphasised the difficulties of entertaining either one metaphysical viewpoint (for example, that the world is real) or its opposite (that it is unreal). Broadened out into a systematic demolition of the conceptual, and of its correspondence to reality, Madhyamika bears more than a passing resemblance to the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara. Certain similarities to Kant, in terms of the antinomies of pure reason, are also apparent. Madhyamika is incisive and aggressive philosophising at its best, and more than adequate to overturn single-handedly western prejudices concerning the inferior nature or non-existence of Indian philosophy.

There is much more that could be said, but instead I want to turn to a different topic, that of the place of ethics within Indian philosophy. I raise this issue as it is sometimes suggested that Indian philosophy shows relatively little interest in the subject. Enough has already been shown, for example with regard to Jainism, that this is at best an over-simplification. However, it may be useful to shed some further light on the matter.

One reason for turning to the topic is that it provides an appropriate context within which to mention one of the most famous of all literary works to emerge from India, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Part of the massive epic the *Mahabharata*, it has had an influence vastly disproportionate to its modest length. Its teaching is that there is more than one route to salvation, and the way it indicates is that of religious devotion. This reflects a general principle of Indian philosophy, that philosophy itself is only one option amongst many

that lead to a common goal. No one is superior to any others, but they suit different temperaments, different aptitudes. Philosophy itself is not indispensable.

This leads to a second point. Because the goal of life is salvation, however understood (except for the Carvaka school), Indian ethics is not moralistic. The principle of *karma* gives ethics a sound underpinning of self-interest, and moral behaviour is understood as part of a means to a desired end. Morality is pragmatic.

There is also a third point. For the orthodox systems, the Vedas are always there in the background, and they contain much in the way of advice concerning everyday life. The caste system that has regulated Indian society for centuries takes its authority, and at least some of its content, from the Vedas. The principal significance of the Purva Mimamsa is that it consolidates many of the moral teachings of the Vedas. So one of the reasons why the orthodox systems in general may seem not to be unduly interested in ethics is because the subject was thought to be looked after elsewhere. If the Vedas and the orthodox systems are considered as a whole, then a different picture emerges from the one that appears when only a part is examined.

Finally, I want to look at some of the more modern developments within Indian philosophy. Of the names mentioned so far, with the possible exception of the Buddha, I imagine none is as familiar to most readers as that of Mahatma Gandhi. Less well-known, but of equal or greater importance philosophically, are such as Aurobindo Ghose and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. A brief consideration of the three may convey something of the flavour of Indian philosophy in the twentieth century.

Gandhi was more of an activist than a philosopher, but his writings reveal a persistent (although not always *consistent*) attempt to articulate a framework of ideas within which his activities could be understood and by which they could be justified. While drawing substantially on western inspirations such as Thoreau and Tolstoy, Gandhi sought to develop a philosophical basis for civil disobedience and non-violence in Indian terms.

Aurobindo was Cambridge educated and, like Gandhi, active in the Indian independence movement. Unlike Gandhi, he strove to be a systematic thinker, and sought to weave many

strands of Indian and western thought together in a creative way. The utopian community of Auroville in south-east India was founded to advance and practise his philosophy.

Radhakrishnan was at various times a professor at Oxford and president of India. A more orthodox thinker than either Gandhi or Aurobindo, he was both a notable expounder of Advaita Vedanta and an influential presenter of Indian philosophy to a western audience. His books are models of magisterial clarity.

Gandhi, Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan represent, in different ways, the engagement of Indian philosophy with its western counterpart. The engagement has not been entirely one way. Schopenhauer, for example, was an admirer of both the *Bhagavad Gita* and Buddhism. However, he was the exception rather than the rule. Rather more typical is the attitude taken by a professor of philosophy at a British university in the 1970s. When asked why his department taught no eastern philosophy, he replied, 'Because there isn't any.' This article has barely scratched the surface of the vast edifice that is Indian philosophy. However, I hope it has at least provided sufficient evidence that that professor was very, very wrong.

Anyone inspired to find out more about the subject could profitably begin with one of a number of excellent introductions to Indian philosophy such as P.T. Raju's *The Philosophical Traditions of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992), M. Hiriyanna's *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995) and Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy* (2 volumes, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). On the internet, the best place to start is at my Indian philosophy website, http://philtar.ucsm.ac.uk/indian_philosophy/.

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