

## Indian Philosophy—Reading group 7

The final chapter of Perrett's book concerns Indian philosophy of religion. Perrett begins with the simple observation that, contrary to what one sometimes reads, Indian philosophy is separable from Indian religion: in this sense, it's akin to e.g. Early Modern Western philosophy, in which religious concerns are certainly *motivations*, but the subject is ultimately different.

By way of background, one important point to make is that theism isn't central to all Indian religions. Buddhism and Jainism, for example, are non-theistic religions. In Hinduism, orthodoxy was determined by acknowledgement of the authority of the Vedas, not a belief in God; within the orthodox schools, Samkhya and Mimamsa are both atheistic, Advaita Vedanta is "ultimately non-theistic" (p. 197), and Yoga and Nyaya-Vaisesika "are minimally theistic in the sense that they allow only significantly attenuated powers to God" (p. 197).

In the Indian tradition, there are a variety of different conceptions of a maximally great being; among the most important are *Isvara*, *Brahman*, Buddha and *Jina*. The first two are associated with Hinduism; the latter two with Buddhism and Jainism, respectively.

### *Isvara* and Yoga

As Perrett writes, "*Isvara* in both Yoga and Nyaya-Vaisesika is a being with distinctly attenuated powers when compared with the usual Western conceptions of God" (p. 200). He continues:

*Isvara possesses various great-making properties (including omniscience and being unlimited by time) ... Isvara is not, however, creator of the world ...; nor is he claimed to be omnipotent or omnibenevolent, though he can and does assist yogins who take him as the object of their concentration. Nor, as a permanently unembodied, detached purusa, can Isvara be a personal God in any meaningful sense. (Perrett p. 200)*

Two arguments adduced by Vyasa for *Isvara* are (a) a version of the ontological argument, and (b) an argument that grades of knowledge "imply an upper limit" (p. 201).

***Isvara* in Nyaya-Vaisesika**

Compared with Yoga, Nyaya-Vaisesika has a less attenuated conception of God:

*The Isvara of the Naiyayikas has far more great-making properties than the Isvara of Yoga, being not only omniscient and the benevolent author of the Vedas, but responsible too for the operations of karmic justice. Another of his roles is to be the fixer of the linguistic conventions that connect words and their meanings. Isvara is also said to be the creator of the world in the sense that he is the agent responsible for setting the world in motion at the beginning of each repeated cosmic cycle of creation and dissolution by bringing about the first combination of atoms. He is not the creator, however, of many of the world's basic constituents—including atoms, ether, space, time, universals and individual selves—and hence, although very powerful, he is not omnipotent. Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, he is not a liberated self because he has karma (albeit all of the meritorious kind) and desires (necessary for agency, according to Nyaya)—all properties incompatible with the Nyaya description of the liberated state. (Perrett pp. 202-3)*

Nyaya natural theology has been criticised on various fronts. For example, Kumarila argues that (a) “creation is not possible without a desire to create, but such a desire implies an imperfection in the alleged creator” (p. 207), and (b) the doctrine of karma renders God irrelevant. On these two arguments, Perrett writes:

*So why should Nyaya not just reply by conceding that Isvara is not omnipotent or omnibenevolent or free from karma? Because what Kumarila effectively seems to be arguing here is that these very restrictions render Isvara unworthy of being an appropriate object of ultimate concern. (Perrett p. 208)*

Recall that Kumarila was a scholar of the Mimamsa school: “an ultra-orthodox Hindu philosophical school of scriptural exegetes committed to deconstructing theistic arguments in order to shore up the independent authority of the Vedas” (p. 208). This explains why Kumarila is so critical of the Nyaya claim that *Isvara* is the omniscient author of the Vedas: “according to Mimamsa, the Vedas are authorless and their authority derives from precisely this property, for if they did have an author they would be fallible” (p. 208).

### ***Brahman and the varieties of Vedanta***

For all Vedantins, the object of ultimate concern is the maximally great *Brahman*. Ramanuja conceives of *Brahman* as the supreme person, and as a personal God. However, other Vedantins have different conceptions of *Brahman*. The three most important schools of Vedanta (and their effective founders) are:

- Advaita (Samkara).
- Visistadvaita (Ramanuja).
- Dvaita (Madhva).

These schools diverge significantly on the question of the relation of the Self to *Brahman*:

*Advaita ('non-dualism') holds that the Self and Brahman are identical; Dvaita ('dualism') holds that they are non-identical, though similar; and Visistadvaita ('qualified non-dualism') holds that the Self is a part of Brahman, and hence non-identical with it. (Perrett p. 211)*

### ***Jina***

In contrast with *Isvara* and *Brahman*, *Jina* and Buddha “are supposed to be human beings, albeit very highly developed ones” (p. 220). The notion of *Jina* is particular to Jainism:

*A Jina, then, is one who, having following [sic] a path of ascetic purification over many lives, is now free of all karma and all attachments that defile the soul, and hence will no longer be reborn. In the meantime such a highly developed human being now possesses various important great-making properties, including omniscience. (Perrett p. 220)*

Jainas maintain that *Jinas* are unrestrictedly omniscient. This was needed in order to render the authors of Jaina scripture infallible, thereby allowing them to justify the superiority of these scriptures.

## **Buddha**

Buddhists don't maintain that Buddha is unrestrictedly omniscient:

*Total omniscience, then, is not a great-making property that a maximally great being like the Buddha needs to possess. Restricted omniscience with respect to all matters relevant to the nature of salvation and the means of attaining it, however, is a great-making property that a maximally great Buddha does need to possess. (Perrett p. 225)*

Buddhists maintain that this restricted omniscience is sufficient to underwrite the authority of their scriptures (p. 226).