

Indian Philosophy—Reading group 6

The focus of this chapter is the philosophy of mind. As Perrett writes, “The classical Indian philosophers developed highly articulated theories of the self, often claiming a correct understanding of the nature of the self to be a necessary, or sometimes even a sufficient, condition for liberation” (p. 168).

Indian theories of the self divide into two main classes:

- Those which “explain our diachronic and synchronic identity by reference to an enduring substantial self” (p. 168). [Orthodox Hindu philosophers and Jainas.]
 - Dualistic theories of Nyaya-Vaisesika and Samkhya-Yoga.
 - Non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta.
- Those who “deny the existence of such a self” (p. 168). [Most Indian Buddhist philosophers.]
 - Buddhist ‘no-self’ theory.

The problem of the self

Perrett first points out that, “[m]inimally characterised ... the existence of the self seems indubitable” (p. 169); Indian philosophers adduced Cartesian-style arguments to this end. E.g., here is the Advaitin philosopher Samkara:

Moreover the existence of Brahman is known on the ground of its being the self of every one. For every one is conscious of (his) Self, and never thinks ‘I am not’. If the existence of the Self were not known, every one would think ‘I am not’. And this Self (of whose existence we are all conscious) is Brahman. (Samkara, Brahmasutrabhasya I.1.1)

That being said, Samkara goes on to note that “it remains an open question what the nature of this indubitable self actually is” (p. 169). Here, we get a flourishing of options, including the dualistic/non-dualistic views mentioned above.

Nyaya-Vaisesika dualism

Here's one of the central arguments for Nyaya-Vaisesika dualism:

... the existence of the continuously existing self can be inferred from the fact that mental states like desire, hatred and so on are directed towards objects that have been experienced to be pleasant or painful in the past. And this in turn is taken to imply that the subject of those present mental states is a single enduring entity that is the very same self as the subject of those past experiences. (Perrett p. 171)

Members of the Nyaya-Vaisesika school then proceed to argue (by elimination) that “mental events must inhere in a simple, non-physical substance: an eternal self (*atman*)” (p. 172).

Since Nyaya-Vaisesika conceives of the self “as a permanent, immaterial substance that possesses perceptible qualia like cognition and desire” (p. 172), there are natural parallels to be drawn with Cartesian substance dualism. That said, there are differences; here are two:

1. Nyaya dualism holds that “the immaterial self has location, though not extension” (p. 172). (Perrett on this: “if the immaterial-location claim is to be intelligible, Nyaya dualism surely also owes us a developed ontology of immaterial points that are distinct from material points, even though the spatial properties of the two kinds of points are indistinguishable” (p. 173).)
2. “[W]hereas Descartes held thinking to be the essence of the soul, Naiyayikas hold thought to be an adventitious attribute of the self—as evidenced in dreamless sleep, where the self endures but is not characterised by any type of consciousness (a claim Descartes denied)” (p. 173).

Samkhya-Yoga dualism

Samkhya-Yoga dualism has fewer similarities with Western versions of dualism. In order to understand where Samkhya-Yoga dualists stand with respect to the mind-body problem, we should first, following Perrett, both disambiguate this problem and classify possible answers to it.

According to what Perrett calls the 'mental states characterisation' of the mind body problem, the question to be addressed is: *Are there mental states distinct from physical states?*; there are (at least) three possible answers to this question (p. 175):

Dualism: There are mental states and they are not physical states.

Reductionism: There are mental states but they are physical states.¹

Eliminativism: There are no mental states, only physical states.

According to what Perrett calls the 'person characterisation' of the mind-body problem, the question to be addressed is: *Do persons have mental states distinct from physical states?*; again, there are (at least) three possible answers to this question (p. 175):

Dualism: Persons have mental states and these are not physical states.

Reductionism: Persons have mental states, but these are physical states.²

Eliminativism: Persons do not have mental states, only physical states.

Views in these two formulations of the mind-body problem do not necessarily coincide: for example, one might maintain that there are mental states which are distinct from physical states, but deny that people have them. In that case, one would be a dualist with respect to the first question, but an eliminativist with respect to the second.

Samkhya-Yoga also distinguishes between two different kinds of mental state:

Intentional: Mental states which are object-directed.

Non-intentional: Mental states which are not object-directed.

With this in mind, we are now in a position to state that, with respect to the mental states characterisation of the mind-body problem, Samkhya-Yoga maintains the following two theses:

¹JR: Better to say 'can be reduced to' here?

²JR: Better to say 'can be reduced to' here?

T₁: There are non-intentional mental states and they are not physical states.

T₂: There are intentional mental states and they are physical states.

In other words ... Samkhya-Yoga is dualist with respect to non-intentional mental states, but reductionist with respect to intentional mental states. (Perrett p. 176)

With respect to the person characterisation of the mind-body problem, Samkhya-Yoga maintains the following two theses:

T₃: Persons (purusas) have non-intentional mental states and these are not physical states.

T₄: Persons (purusas) do not have intentional mental states and these are physical states.

In other words ... Samkhya-Yoga is dualist with respect to non-intentional mental states, but eliminativist with respect to intentional mental states. (Perrett p. 176)

Clearly, this is an intricate dualist view, not readily identifiable with one from the Western canon.

Advaita Vedanta non-dualism

According to Advaita Vedanta, there is only *one* conscious self. Advaitins are non-dualists in the sense that this single Self (*atman*) is identified with the Absolute (*Brahman*). The two main reasons given in favour of this position by Samkara (effectively the founder of the school) are: “(i) that Advaita gives us the best account of various scriptural passages, and (ii) that nothing in the theory is contradicted by our experience” (p. 178).

On the second of these:

Replying to the obvious objection that we are not directly aware of the Self he describes, he [Samkara] invokes an anti-reflexivity principle accepted by most Indian philosophers (both Hindu and Buddhist): the self as subject cannot be an object for itself, much as a knife cannot cut itself. (Perrett p. 179)

Question: Why find this anti-reflexivity principle plausible?

On Advaita metaphysics, Perrett continues:

But what of the appearance in our experience of a multiplicity of individual selves? According to Advaita, such individual selves are unreal; or more precisely, the individual human person (the jiva) is a combination of reality and appearance. It is real insofar as atman is its ground, but it is unreal insofar as it is identified as finite, conditioned and relative. (Perrett p. 179)

There are also various potential problems for the Advaita metaphysical picture. Here is one:

Now Samkara is emphatic that only atman/Brahman is real, that the appearance of multiple individual selves is a product of ignorance (avidya), and that liberation involves realising these truths. But ignorance has to be the ignorance of someone about something: it must have a conscious locus (asraya) in which it exists and an object (visaya) which it conceals. So, in terms of the Advaitin metaphysics of the self, whose is the ignorance here? Presumably not Brahman's, for surely atman/Brahman is free of any ignorance. But presumably not the individual selves' (jiva) either, for they are a product of ignorance and cannot be the locus of what is logically and causally prior to them.

Faced with this dilemma, Advaitins of the Vivarana school effectively accept the first horn and argue that Brahman is the locus of ignorance, while those of the Bhamati school effectively accept the second horn and argue that the jiva is the locus of ignorance. (Both schools, of course, have no difficulty in agreeing that Brahman is the object of ignorance.) (Perrett p. 180)

Buddhist 'no-self' theory

On the Buddhist 'no-self' view, which we've encountered in previous weeks, Perrett writes this:

... the Buddha denied that there is any element that is part of a person, such that (1) it is permanent, (2) the person has control over that element, and (3) it does not lead to suffering (duhkha)—all three features being characteristic, of course, of the Upanisadic atman.

Instead the Buddha offers an analysis of the person as a bundle of five types of psycho-physical states. These are the five aggregates (skandhas): material form, feelings, perceptions, intentions/volitions, and consciousness. And none of these five aggregates can plausibly be a candidate for the role of the atman since none of them is permanent, obeys the person of whom they are aggregates, and is free from suffering. (Perrett p. 184)

Why believe this *anatman* doctrine? According to Buddhist epistemologists, there are only two valid sources of knowledge: perception and inference. Vasubandhu argues that we don't perceive the self since everything we perceive is impermanent; nor is there "any reasonable inference to the existence of the self" (p. 185).

Question: What to make of these arguments?

One particular objection to *anatman* worthy of consideration is the charge that it is incompatible with other Buddhist doctrines, namely those of karma and rebirth (p. 187). (JR: recall Catherine's concerns in this regard from a few sessions ago.) In particular, "how can rebirth occur if it is not one and the same being who dies and is reborn?" (p. 187) Vasubandhu replies that "a person is just a collection of momentary *dharma*s and a reborn person is linked to the being that died by a causal process" (p. 187). (JR: I think that this is pretty much what we guessed... but there are still open questions, e.g.: just what *is* this causal process?)

The normative implications of theories of the self

In the Western canon, personal identity is considered to be an important concept, due to its connection with the 'four features': "survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation" (p. 188). (JR: Are these 'four features' really independent of one another?) Indeed, this is true both for reductionists and non-reductionists about personal identity.

A lot of philosophers—both Indian and Western, and both reductionist and non-reductionist—share a common assumption (NB: Perrett also presents an 'Indian grounding assumption', but I'll skip over this): (p. 199)

Grounding assumption: The justification of our normative practices with respect to the four features requires that they be grounded in facts about our identity, or in those facts to which identity is reducible.

The Prasangika Madhyamaka position on these matters is more akin to what Perrett calls *minimalism*, according to which “metaphysical pictures of the justificatory undergirdings of our practices do not represent the real conditions of justification of those practices ... [T]he presence or absence of ‘deep facts’ about personal identity is largely irrelevant to justifying our ordinary normative practices because these are not founded on a metaphysics of persons, but on our circumstances and needs” (p. 192).

Basic question: Is Parfit a minimalist about personal identity, in this sense? (I think so, right?)