

Indian Philosophy—Reading group 1

Perrett's book is a topic-by-topic introduction to Indian philosophy—especially useful for us, as (a) it's written in the analytic tradition with which we're familiar, and (b) it explicitly draws links with (perhaps) more familiar schools of thought from Western philosophy. I'm excited to learn more about this rich tradition, and I hope you are too!

Today, we'll cover the introduction (charting some of the history of Indian philosophy), and the first chapter (on values).

Introduction

In his introduction, Perrett takes us on a lightening tour of the history of Indian philosophy. Coarsely, this can be divided into four periods:

1. The Ancient Period (900 BCE – 200 CE)
2. The Classical Period (200 CE – 1300 CE)
3. The Medieval Period (1300 CE – 1800 CE)
4. The Modern Period (1800 CE – present)

The ancient period

In the ancient period were composed, among other things:

- The four *Vedas* (*Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*).
- The *Upanishads*: explicitly philosophical works.
- The two epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

The *Vedas* “include hymns to the gods and manuals of sacrificial ritual” (p. 8). The *Upanishads* “represent a shift in world-view away from the earlier Vedic literature's emphasis on ritual

action towards a focus on self-realisation and the attainment of suffering and rebirth" (p. 8). This tension gave rise to the two central notions of *dharma* (social duty) and *moksa* (liberation), and also to the tension in Hindu thought between *pravrtti* (activism) and *nivrtti* (quietism). The latter is a central theme of the *Bhagavadgita*, itself a hymn in the *Mahabharata*.

Also to emerge during the ancient period (6th Century BCE) were the heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism. The former "accepted Upanisadic doctrines of rebirth, karma and liberation" but rejected "the Upanisadic doctrine of *atman*, or the Self". Like Buddhists, Jainists were also committed to *moksa*, but for the latter the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-injury) is particularly important.

The classical period

In this period there arose philosophical systems (*darsanas*). There are six orthodox schools, which accept the authority of the *Vedas*; often, these are classed into three pairs:

- Samkhya-Yoga (the former "teaches a dualistic metaphysics that is usually taken to underpin the practical psychology of Yoga")
- Nyaya-Vaisesika (the former the school of logic and argument; the latter the atomistic tradition)
- Mimamsa-Vedanta (the former the school of scriptural exegesis, focussing on the early *Vedas*; the latter focusing on the *Upanishads*¹)

There are also heterodox schools. Beginning with Buddhism, there are four major schools of Buddhist thought (p. 11):

- Sarvastivada (metaphysically: reductionist realism; epistemologically: direct realism)
- Sautrantika (metaphysically: reductionist realism; epistemologically: representationalism)
- Madhyamaka (founder: Nagarjuna; "seeks to maintain a dialectical middle way between the extremes of eternalism and nihilism")

¹The *Upanishads* appeared at the end of the Vedic period, and 'Vedanta' literally means 'end of the *Vedas*'.

- Yogacara (“a variety of metaphysical idealism”)

The other major heterodox school is Jainism, “advocating a distinctive metaphilosophy of non-absolutism (*anekantavada*), according to which no metaphysical view is unconditionally true, and an ethic of non-injury (*ahimsa*).” **Question:** To what extent is this akin to a neo-pragmatist view, such as that of Rorty?²

The medieval period

In this period there arose the great commentaries on the *darsanas*. According to Perrett (p. 14), while this period lacked some of the creativity of the classical period, it made up for this in “analytical subtlety and logical rigour” (nice).

Interestingly, “[b]y the end of the late medieval period, the ancient texts are no longer thought of as authorities to which one must defer, but are regarded as the source of insight in the company of which one pursues the quest for truth” (p. 14).

The modern period

This period is characterised by contact with the West—these resulted (sometimes inadvertently) in fruitful interactions in both directions.

Perrett’s book focuses principally on the classical and medieval periods.

Western conceptions of Indian philosophy

Perrett classifies typical Western attitudes to Indian philosophy as follows:

- *Magisterial approaches* “emphasize the inferiority of the country’s native traditions and strongly relate to the exercise of imperial power of guardianship” (p. 16).

²It’s at least a bit different, because Rorty says that we can embrace metaphysical frameworks ironically, but there’s no comparable implication of irony here.

- *Exoticist approaches* “concentrate on the wondrous aspects of India, emphasizing the positive value of India’s supposed differences from the West” (p. 17).
- *Curatorial approaches* include “a host of various attempts to note, classify and exhibit diverse aspects of Indian culture” (p. 17).

Perrett does not consider any of these approaches adequate. Instead, he favours an *interlocutory approach* (p. 19), according to which Indian philosophy should be considered an interlocutor with Western philosophy in a mutual search for truth.

Chapter 1: Value

Perrett begins this chapter as follows:

While classical Indian philosophy is incredibly rich in rigorous discussions of topics in epistemology, logic and metaphysics, comparable discussions in the areas of ethics, politics and aesthetics were not as extensive as might have been expected. (Perrett p. 21)

But he goes on:

However, although classical Indian ethics is thus underdeveloped relative to other branches of Indian philosophy, the Indian philosophers did have a good deal to say about the theory of value insofar as they vigorously discussed topics like the ends of life and the relation of virtuous action to those ends. (Perrett p. 21)

We’ll look into these matters in this chapter.

The structure of value: the *purusharthas*

The *purusharthas* are the ends of human life. According to a traditional classification, there are four classes of values (p. 22):

- *Dharma*: obligations and prohibitions enshrined in legal and religious texts.

- *Kama*: sensual pleasure and aesthetic experience.
- *Artha*: wealth and political power.
- *Moksa*: liberation from the bondage of the cycle of rebirth.

Often, the first three are arranged hierarchically, with *Artha* lowest and *Dharma* highest. But different authors have had different views on the relations between *dharma* and *moksa* (see next section).

Focussing on *dharma* more specifically, there are two distinct sets of duties (p. 23):

1. Universal duties (*sadharana-dharma*), which are “incumbent on all, regardless of age or occupation”. E.g. *ahimsa*, truthfulness, etc.
2. Personal responsibilities (*svadharma*), which are “the demands of social duty”—dependent on age, caste, etc.

In a conflict between these two, it is the latter which is typically taken to prevail.

On stages of life, there are four such:

1. Student life (*brahmacarya*). [Studies *dharma*.]
2. Householder (*garhastya*). [Pursues *artha* and *kama*.]
3. Anchorite (*vanaprastha*). [Pursues *moksa* but upholds *dharma*.]
4. Renunciant (*samnyasa*). [Devoted to *moksa*.]

Dharma and moksa

Dharma (JR: I think) one can understand as a kind of relativised deontological notion.³ By contrast, *moksa* “appears to be a non-moral value considered higher than morality” (p. 25). But as we’ve already said, the relationship between these two isn’t always clear:

³Nicholas Clanchy pointed out that there being ‘rules of thumb’ doesn’t necessarily imply a deontological framework, though. So perhaps a consequentialist understanding here is also possible.

- According to the oldest tradition (p. 25), *dharma* leads to *moksa*.
- The great philosopher Samkara, on the other hand, took *dharma* to oppose *moksa*, because the latter precludes action, whereas the former supposes it (recall the tension between *pravrtti* (activism) and *nivrtti* (quietism) mentioned above).
- Another philosopher, Ramanuja, holds a position according to which *dharma* is opposed to *moksa*, but not (*pace* Samkara) fundamentally so.
- The position expressed in the *Bhagavadgita*, according to which “*moksa* does not involve renunciation of action and hence *dharma*, but abandonment of attachment to the fruits of action, while still continuing to perform actions” (p. 28; cf. pp. 32-34).⁴

Hindu value pluralism

The above suffices to show that Hindu philosophers are value pluralists; they also think that these values can be ordered. But they can be divided according to whether they embrace one of the following two views, or the other (p. 29):

- *Ordered weak pluralism*: There is an irreducible plurality of values that admits of a single weak ordering, but these values do not conflict.
- *Ordered strong pluralism*: There is an irreducible plurality of values that admits of a single weak ordering, and these values can conflict.

Virtues

There’s nothing obvious in what we’ve said so far which suggests that Hindu ethics can be understood along the lines of ‘virtue ethics’, as it’s understood in the Western tradition. However, Hindu ethics still has a virtue *theory*; one traditional classification of virtues runs as follows (p. 34):

⁴Parin Ravichanthiran pointed out that it’s at least somewhat odd for Perrett to present the ‘*Gita* reading’ alongside Samkara’s reading, Ramanuja’s reading, etc. This is because (a) the former is, of course, substantially older than the latter, and (b) both Samkara and Ramanuja belonged to philosophical schools—one of the conditions for forming such a school was to engage with, and refute, all previous readers of classic philosophical texts, including the *Gita*.

1. The virtues of the body (e.g. *dana* or charity).
2. The virtues of speech (e.g. *satya* or truthfulness).
3. The virtues of the mind (e.g. *daya* or benevolence).

Among virtues, *ahimsa* (non-violence) is particularly highly praised.

Buddhist ethics

In brief:

- *Moksa* is still pre-eminent in the heterodox systems of Buddhism and Jainism.
- Buddhist ethics also contains a clear virtue theory (albeit not necessarily a virtue ethics—see above).
- Some authors (p. 39) argue that Buddhist ethics is best classified as a form of consequentialism.

Let's look into this last point in more detail. On the one hand, Buddhist ethics can't be a pure form of consequentialism, because it also takes intentions into account (p. 39). On the other hand, consequences are still clearly important—for Buddhists, "good is the elimination of suffering (*dunkha*)" (p. 41).

There are interesting connections between this Buddhist (seemingly) consequentialist view and the distinctive Buddhist metaphysics of 'no-self'. The point is made clearly in Santideva's *Bodhicaryavatara*:

I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering ... When happiness is equally dear to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I strive after happiness for myself alone? When fear and suffering are equally abhorrent to others and myself, then what is so special about me that I protect myself but not others? (Wallace and Wallace 1997)

Question 1: How is coherent to talk about myself or others in the above passage, on the 'no-self' view?

Question 2: How does the above relate to the views of Parfit on personal identity (cf. Nagel's nice discussion of Parfit in *The View From Nowhere*).⁵

Question 3: How is the metaphysics of 'no self' compatible with doctrines of reincarnation?

Jaina ethics

As Perrett writes, "[t]he Jainas are also opposed to ethical egoism, but they do not defend their ethical position by appeal to a reductionist theory of the self (on the contrary, they are fervent non-reductionists about the self)" (p. 44). On Jainism, "[t]he individual's ethical task is to undertake a rigorous process of self-purification and self-cultivation so as to eliminate the karma that entangles us in suffering and thereby achieve liberation" (p. 45).

Ahimsa is paramount in Jainism.

⁵There is, of course, a long tradition in the West of authors denying the existence of a substantial ego. Cf. also Judith Butler on gender (thanks to Nicholas Clanchy for this).