

TOPICS IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

The Self in Indian Philosophy

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1 Introduction

The Brahminical or orthodox (*astika*) schools of Indian philosophy, especially the Vedantins and the Nyaya-Vaisesika argue that the self or *Atman* is a substantial but non-material entity. The *Katha* and *Chandogya* Upanishads for example define the Brahminical conception of the self as follows:

The light of the *Atman*, the spirit is invisible, concealed in all beings. It is seen by the seers of the subtle, when their vision is keen and clear. [...] The *Atman* is beyond sound and form, without touch and taste and perfume. It is eternal, unchangeable, and without beginning or end: indeed above reasoning.¹

An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. THOU ART THAT.²

The Brahminical view on the nature of the self as portrayed in the Upanishads can be summarised as four major theses:

1. The self *exists*;
2. The self is *immortal* and without beginning or end;
3. The self is essentially *non-material* and;
4. The self is *identical with Brahman*, the highest reality.

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¹Juan Mascoró, *The Upanishads* (Penguin Books, 1965), p. 61.

²Ibid., p. 118.

The heterodox (*nastika*) schools in Indian philosophy, such as the Carvaka materialists and the Buddhists, question the Brahminical arguments for a substantial, persistent and non-material self on metaphysical, moral and political grounds. The Buddhists and the Carvaka oppose the Hindu caste system and believe that the Vedas are full of falsehoods, self-contradictions and tautologies. The Carvaka accuse the Brahmins of being impostors who abuse the words of the Vedas and interpret them to suit their own egoistic needs. The Vedas are in their opinion nothing but a means of livelihood for the Brahmins who are lazy, lacking in intellect, energy, self respect and sense.³ The views on the self by the Carvaka and the Buddhists are illustrated by the following quotes:

The soul is but the body characterised by the attributes signified in the expressions, 'I am stout', 'I am youthful', 'I am grown up', 'I am old', etc. It is not something other than that.⁴

A sentient being does exist, you think, O Mara? You are misled by a false conception. This bundle of elements is void of Self, in it there is no sentient being. Just as a set of wooden parts receives the name of carriage, so do we give to elements the name of fancied being.⁵

2 Existence of the Self

Advaita (non-duality) is the Vedanta school associated with the philosopher Sankara (c. 788–820 AD) who is acknowledged as the leader of the Hindu revival after the Buddhist period in India. Sankara's metaphysics are based on the criterion that the real is that whose negation is impossible.⁶ From this criterion it follows that the self is real, because no one will say 'I am not'. Sankara writes that: 'Just because it is the Self, it is impossible for us to entertain the idea even of its being capable of refutation.'⁷

The Nyaya-Vaisesika subscribe to the conception of the self put forward in the Vedas as a substantial, persistent and non-material entity. They agree with the Vedantins that the self can not be perceived, but only inferred. The later Nyaya school however rejected the idea that the self can only be known by inference

³Monima Chadha, *Topics in Indian philosophy* (Churchill: Monash Philosophy, 1998), p. 145.

⁴Sankara on the Carvaka in: *Sarva-siddhanta-samgraha*, quoted in Ibid.

⁵*Cila Mara*, quoted in Derek Parfit, *Reasons and persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

⁶Jitendra N. Mohanty, 'Indian philosophy', in: *Macropædia*, volume 21, 15th edition (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1997).

⁷Sankara, *Commentary on the Vedanta sutras*, quoted in Chadha (1998), p. 173.

and asserted that the existence of the self can be directly perceived. The idea that the self can be directly perceived is put forward by Udayana in a polemical work against the Buddhists.

The Nyaya argument for the existence of the self through the notion of agency: ‘From the actions of the mind towards the contact of the sense-organ apprehending desirable objects, we infer the existence of the self’.⁸ An analogy offered by the Nyaya is that from the action of regular breathing we infer the existence of the agent who would act like a blower of the wind-pipe. The Nyaya are clearly referring to intelligent actions and not merely mechanical actions like that of a robot for example.

The Carvaka argue that the self is nothing but the body as characterised by consciousness. The Carvaka denial of a substantial self is based on the epistemological position that perception is the only valid source of knowledge. The Carvaka deny the validity of inference and other sources of knowledge (*darsanas*) usually accepted in classical Indian philosophy. From this position and the Brahminical assertion that the self can not be perceived they infer that the self can not exist because only that which can be perceived exists.

This last premise is however not a fair representation of the Brahminical position because the Mimamsa and the later Naiyayikas insist that the self as the subject is directly cognised in every experience. In the available texts there is however no detailed discussion whether the Carvaka had any arguments to deal with the Mimamsaka and the later Naiyayikas.

The Buddhist reply to the Brahminical view of the self would be that there is no such entity. This view is illustrated by the debate between king Milinda and the Buddhist monk Nagasena.⁹ King Milinda is not convinced of the theory of the not-self for, ‘if there were no person, there could be no merit and no demerit . . .’.¹⁰ Nagasena clarifies the theory of the not-self to the king by comparing a human being with a chariot. None of the individual parts of the chariot (the pole, the axle, the wheels etc.), are the chariot. Nor the combination of the parts is the chariot. Nagasena continues that he can not discover a chariot at all, only the word that denotes the idea of the chariot. The denomination chariot — or self — takes place

⁸*Padartha-dharma-samgraha*, quoted in: Chadha (1998), p. 200.

⁹Edward Conze, *Buddhist scriptures* (London: Penguin Books, 1959), pp. 147–149.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 147.

in dependence of the individual parts. In ultimate reality, the person can not be apprehended. Sankara takes issue with this theory, on the grounds that it provides nothing to hold together the various ingredients either at any one time or through progression in time.¹¹

3 Properties of the Self

The debate on the existence of the self can not be separated from a description of the nature of the self. The Scriptures mention three properties of the self. The self is eternal, non-material and is identical with *Brahman*: the ultimate reality. In this essay I will concentrate on the first two properties since there is not much argument on the last property in classical Indian philosophy.

The eternality of the self follows according to Sankara from the essential irrefutability of its nature.¹² Sankara is claiming here that since the self is not an effect, it has no beginning or end and is therefore eternal. The Buddhist would dispute this argument because they believe that anything that is uncaused, does not exist.

Sankara argues for the immateriality of the self by stating that the existence of an eternal, immaterial self, distinct from the body is a necessary presupposition for the achievement of liberation. The Scriptures would otherwise make no sense, which is a unacceptable conclusion for the Vedantins. This argument is of course not acceptable to the heterodox schools because they do not accept the Scriptures as a source of valid knowledge.

The Naiyayika uses an argument from language to ascertain that the self is distinct from the body. The Nyaya argument from language encompasses that since the word *I* is used in the Vedas and ordinary talk and since everything in the Vedas is true, the word *I* must refer to an existing entity. They hold that the word *I* must refer to a non-physical entity because: 'If the notion *I* referred to the body, then just as another man's body being as perceptible as our own body ... the other man's body would also be capable of being spoken of as *I*'.¹³ No perceptible property and thus no physical property of an individual can be used to identify a person uniquely

¹¹Brian Carr, 'Sankaracarya', in: Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam, editors, *Companion encyclopedia of Asian philosophy* (Routledge, 1997), p. 206-207.

¹²*The Vedanta-Sutras with commentary of Sankaracarya*, quoted in: Chadha (1998), p. 173.

¹³The Padārtha-dharma-samgraha, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 201.

and the referent *I* must therefore be something non-physical.

The persistence of the self is induced by the Naiyayika through the argument from memory. We have desires for objects that have been experienced in the past as being pleasant. One cannot desire a thing one does not remember and one can not remember someone else's experiences. They argue that there must therefore be a continuously existing self who had the experience in the past and who is desiring it in the present.

The materialists only accept the four elements air, water, fire and earth as the basic building blocks of reality and ultimate facts of the universe. The body is to the Carvaka a unique combination of these elements and the self emerges from these elements. They thus account for the higher principle of mind by the lower one of matter.¹⁴ The views of the Carvaka have been fervently opposed by the other schools of thought (*darsana*) in classical Indian philosophy. It is clear from the materials at our disposal that Carvaka philosophy was viewed with far greater disrespect than any other *darsana*. Phil Hari Singh argues that there appears to be an underlying hostility towards the Carvaka that is not fully borne out by the analysis of their doctrines.¹⁵

To the Buddhists a person is not a single substance existing continuously through time, but a series of physical and mental states also called 'person states'. The Buddhist term for an individual, a term which is intended to suggest the difference between the Buddhist view and other theories, is *santana*, which means stream.¹⁶ Each person state consists of various psychological and physiological factors, the *skandhas*. These *skandhas* are not persistent in time but last only for one infinitesimal short period.¹⁷ The person states fleet away and give rise to new person states in an endless cycle of cause and effect. Because every single person state only exist for an infinitesimal short period of time, there can not be a persistent self. The instantaneous succession of *skandhas* gives the impression of continuity, like the succession of twenty four still images per second gives the illusion of a moving image.

¹⁴M. Hiriyanna, *The essentials of Indian philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000), p. 59.

¹⁵Phil Hari Singh, 'A history of the Carvakas' (April 2002), (URL: <http://www.philo.demon.co.uk/Carvaka.htm>).

¹⁶Parfit (1965), p. 503.

¹⁷In quantum physics, the shortest measurable period of time that has any meaning is the so called Planck-time and is equal to 10^{-43} seconds.

Sankara's criticism against the Buddhist theory of momentary person states is that in the absence of a permanent self throughout the successive *skandhas*, what sense can we make of memory and recognition? Sankara writes that: 'Remembrance means recalling to mind something after its perception, and that can happen only when the agent of perception and memory is the same ...'.¹⁸

4 Contemporary Discourse on the Self

The contemporary discourse on the self is predominantly physicalist in character. Physicalism in philosophy of mind is the view that consciousness and the self can be described and explained by the laws of physics. In this section I will evaluate the above described Indian views on the self in light of the physicalist philosophy of mind.

In a recent paper, C. Ram-Prasad offered some suggestions on how classical Indian philosophical material may contribute to current discussions in consciousness studies.¹⁹ This contribution is problematic because the transcendental ultimate goal of *moksa* in Indian philosophy is incompatible with the goals of physicalist consciousness studies. Ram-Prasad proposes to bracket out the transcendental elements of the philosophy through 'interpretative compromise'. The role he sees for Brahminical philosophy in contemporary consciousness studies is a deep critique of the dominant aims. The main critique that the Brahminical philosophy offers to the physicalist consciousness studies is the circularity of the physicalist studies: only when we know what it is that is to be studied we can study in it, but the purpose of the study is precisely to know what it is.

The self of the Carvaka can be viewed an epiphenomenon, an incidental product of physical processes that has no effect of its own. The Carvaka theory of the self seems elegant but does not offer a satisfactory explanation of the self. The study of the Carvaka philosophy is however particularly difficult. We are left with only a few fragmentary survivals of the Carvaka, but all these are preserved in the writings of those who wanted only to refute and ridicule it. Carvaka philosophy thus remains to be reconstructed from the essentially hostile references to it.²⁰ The

¹⁸Carr (1997), p. 207.

¹⁹C. Ram-Prasad, 'Saving the self? Classical Hindu theories of consciousness and contemporary physicalism', *Philosophy East & West* 51 (July 2001).

²⁰Singh (2002), p. xv.

hermeneutical difficulties in Carvaka philosophy prevent it from playing a role in contemporary discussions on the self.

Derek Parfit identifies two contemporary theories of the self.²¹ On the *Ego Theory*, a person's continued existence can not be explained except as the continued existence of a particular ego or subject of experiences. The ego theory explains the self like the Brahminical theories as a spiritual enduring substance. The rival view is the *Bundle Theory* according to which we can not explain the unity of consciousness at any time by referring to a person. Instead we must claim that there are long series of different mental states and events. In Bundle Theory the self is only a fact of our grammar. Parfit calls Buddha the first Bundle Theorist and he states that given the advances in psychology and neurophysiology, the Bundle Theory and thus the Buddhist theory of the self may now seem to be obviously true.²²

5 Ethics and the Self

The metaphysical beliefs that we hold depend in some way on our ethical convictions and vice versa, ethical convictions provide the motivation for upholding certain metaphysical beliefs.²³

Personhood is one of the basic assumptions in moral philosophy. In bio-ethics, struggles over abortion, animal rights and brain death have brought personhood to the forefront.²⁴ This is illustrated by the ongoing debate on embryonic stem cell research. The basic principle in this debate is that no human being can be sacrificed for the wellbeing of another human being. The arguments against and in favour of research on embryonic stem cells centre on the question at which point in the development of a human embryo one can speak of a person. If the lump of cells that forms the embryo is not considered a person, then there are no moral objections against using these cells in favour of advancement in medical science. If these cells do constitute a person, then the basic principle prohibits the use of

²¹Derek Parfit, 'Divided minds and the nature of persons', in: Colin Blackmore and Susan Greenfield, editors, *Mindwaves. Thoughts on intelligence, identity and consciousness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

²²Ibid.

²³Chadha (1998), p. 147.

²⁴James J. Hughes and Damian Keown, 'Buddhism and medical ethics: A bibliographic introduction', *Journal of Buddhist ethics* 2 (1995), (URL: <http://www.changesurfer.com/BudEth.html>).

this person for medical research. This example illustrates that a theory on the self is required to be able to determine an outcome in this moral dilemma.

The Brahmanical theory of the self as a substantial and non-material entity would hold that any living organism with the potentiality to become a human has a soul and is therefore a person. The Brahmanical theory of the self and the subsequent ethical views would therefore render embryonic stem cell research immoral.

The classical Hindu materialist philosophy of the Carvaka do not totally deny the existence of the self for it is an emergent property of the physical body. The Carvaka answer to the moral dilemma of embryonic stem cell research would be that the young embryo is not a person because the material configuration of the embryo is not complex enough to produce a self.

The Buddhist totally denies any self and would therefore agree without reservations with embryonic stem cell research. In an earlier paper I have argued that the Buddhist conception of the self can not be upheld because denial of the self would lead to ethical nihilism.²⁵ The problem for Buddhist ethics has always been why should people act ethically if there is no actor.²⁶ If there is no self or other, how can there be karmic consequences, responsibility, loyalty or even compassion? Parfit rejects the existence of continuous selves and consequently, working for the future welfare of all beings is the same as working for one's future welfare, since there will be no 'I' to benefit in the future.²⁷ This interpretation of *anatta* would favour embryonic stem cell research. Most Buddhist commentators have however adopted classical Hindu teachings that the transmigration of consciousness occurs at conception, and therefore that all abortio incurs the karmic burden of killing.²⁸ We need Parfit's mild intepretation of the theory of the no-self to be able to offer a Buddhist solution to moral issues such as embryonic stem cell research.

6 Conclusion

The brief for this essay is to indicate who is right in the classical Indian debate on the existence and nature of the self. Truth I define for the purpose of this essay as correspondence with empiraical reality and agreeance with physicalist theories of the self. Any theory of the self also has to be able to support a sound, non

²⁵Peter Prevos, 'A persistent self?' (March 2002).

²⁶Hughes and Keown (1995).

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

self-refuting moral theory.

The views of the self in classical Indian philosophy span a wide spectrum of ideas. For the Brahmins, the self is a non-physical soul, a Rylean 'ghost in the machine'. For the Buddhists, the soul is a mere figment of the imagination. The Carvaka on the other hand, see the self as an epiphenomenon.

The Brahminical theories of the self can be considered not true because the spiritual conception of the self does not correspond with empirical reality—if one concedes that religious experiences are not part of reality. The theory is however capable of giving a clear answer on moral issues in bio-ethics as shown above.

The Carvaka theory could be true, but as is known to us it can not provide any explanation, only a description of the self.

The Buddhist theory of the self explains our natural beliefs about a self without any of the metaphysical complications of the Brahmanical theories. The theory of the no-self needs however to be interpreted mildly to be able to reply to the moral dilemmas in bio-ethics as parfit has suggested.

We are still a long way away from a satisfactory physicalist theory of the self. Roger Penrose even argues that we need an extension of our present day scientific understanding to be able to explain the phenomena of the mind in physicalist terms.²⁹ The Buddhist denial of the self as a substantial entity is a counter intuitive step and will require a Copernican Revolution in common sense thinking to be fully accepted. This evolution in human thinking was envisaged in 1885 by Friedrich Nietzsche, who was through Arthur Schopenhauer inspired by Indian Philosophy:

'Body am I and soul'—thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like the children? But the enlightened one, the knowing one says: Body am I totally and fully, and nothing else; and soul is but a word for something to the body.³⁰

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²⁹Roger Penrose, *Shadows of the mind. A search for the missing science of consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³⁰Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Also sprach Zarathustra (Thus spoke Zarathustra)', in: *Friedrich Nietzsche. Das Hauptwerk*, volume III (Nymphenburger, 1990), p. 34. Translation by the author.

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