Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores some of the challenges of interpreting Indian philosophy by examining three exemplary puzzles: the manner in which philosophical authors employed the idea of the Cārvāka system, a school of thought said to be at once skeptical, hedonistic, and materialist; the meaning of "freedom" in classical India; and the limits of reason as suggested in the work of the notable Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara. The essay seeks to demonstrate that even in areas such as these, which are assumed to be relatively well known, matters may be not quite so clear as people are wont to believe. The field remains open to, and in need of, revised and improved interpretation of the familiar no less than of topics that seem more obscure.

Keywords: faith, freedom, hedonism, hermeneutics, materialism, reason, skeptic, understanding, value, Vedānta

Introduction

Interpretation is not translation, though no fixed boundary between these two arts can be defined. Interpretation invites us to occupy, so far as knowledge and imagination allow, the perspective within which a cultural object was born and nurtured, to understand it in its own world and then to articulate the understanding we have gained in the terms available to us in our world. But because we cannot in fact occupy other worlds, interpretation thus understood remains in some sense impossible. We can only aspire to construct, from the materials available to us, an imaginative simulacrum of the domain that gave meaning to the object of our concern. This is one form of the famous hermeneutic circle that preoccupied Dilthey and others, and which holds all understanding to be at the same time constrained and enabled by the partialities of preunderstanding.

There is, alas, no methodological quick fix that would permit us to break free from the circle and to ensure that we will arrive at the "right understanding" of our object; the very idea of such a "right understanding" is itself, indeed, an illusion. Cultural objects offer us rich matrices overflowing with meaning; no uniquely determined and fully adequate understanding of them can be expected. But if a limitless horizon of possible understandings begins to open before us, we balk nevertheless at the thought that any understanding is just as good as any other. Even if guided by a Kabbalistic conception of the plenitude revealed in each letter of scripture, we retreat before the prospect that all interpretive possibilities must be treated as equal. However, we find ourselves at a loss to specify sure principles that would permit us to delineate between an unlimited range of acceptable or fruitful understandings and an unending field of fantasies that we wish to rule out of court. In view of the absence of clear and explicit criteria separating good interpretations from bad, some may urge that we cast off all restraint and embrace the full spectrum of interpretive possibilities, however disconcerting this is.

To this conundrum there is, I think, an appropriate response: every game has its rules. And every interesting game is constructed so as to permit, within its rules, a great many possible moves, while at the same time excluding an indefinitely large class of illicit maneuvers. Interpretation theory, or hermeneutics, at least when not restricted to a
particular domain (e.g., legal hermeneutics), offers no rule-book for the practice of interpretation; like a general theory of games, it can only aspire to clarify principles of the broadest extension and hence resists direct transposition to particular matters of practice. But just as every game has its rules, and is not directly guided by a generalized game theory, so every domain or discipline in which interpretation is at issue has its own procedural canon, whether this is made fully explicit or not, and whether it is presumed to be fixed or to evolve over time. What I am calling the procedural canon does not guarantee outcomes; it merely clarifies, within the disciplinary field in question, which moves may be countenanced and which not. And this is grounded in nothing other than the mutual assent of those “playing the game.” It is to be understood, too, that “game-changers” may emerge from time to time, but this point need not detain us just now.

The study of Indian philosophy exemplifies one such game. The field has emerged as a modern academic discipline only gradually over the past two centuries and draws at once from several disciplinary streams, whose practices inform its procedural canons. One of these is of course Indology, the philological discipline concerned with India’s past as evidenced primarily in the written languages of India—Sanskrit above all—and their literatures, taking account too of knowledge derived from such special fields as epigraphy, archaeology, and art history. Indology, in this sense, is essential for its role in establishing the textual sources of Indian philosophy and for teaching us to read them in a linguistically and contextually responsible and nuanced way, that is, a way that conforms with best current practice.

But once we have before us a cultural object that we identify as an expression of Indian philosophy—ignoring for the moment the fact that such identifications may be contested and subject to change over time—and have acquired the philological tools required to read it with a measure of sensitivity to its contents, we will likely find ourselves nevertheless struggling to come to terms with the conceptual universe we find there, its conventions and logical order. Traditional Indian hermeneutics, whether embodied in written commentaries or in the living expertise of traditionally educated scholars, supplies an indispensable compass, orienting our attempts to forge pathways through a conceptual topography that, initially at least, may appear forbidding and in some cases ill-formed. Compass in hand, however, we may remain at a loss to convey our discoveries intelligibly to the contemporary philosophical world, whether in its anglophone or continental iterations. Hence, philosophy itself, as it is practiced in one or another of its major contemporary forms, must also be part of the organon of the would-be interpreter of Indian philosophy. But as my mention of anglophone or continental traditions suggests—and it is of course possible (and desirable) to be much more fine-tuned than this—our prior philosophical commitments will inevitably color our understandings of the Indian sources we consider. If, for example, T. R. V. Murti’s brilliant attempt to unpack the thought of Nāgārjuna is no longer in the foreground of anglophone work on Madhyamaka philosophy, it is perhaps not so much a sign of a deficiency on Murti’s part, as it is a reflection of the fact that the mainstream of anglophone work on Indian philosophy is no longer formed in the Hegelianism that shaped Murti’s outlook, but instead has mostly joined forces with the analytic tradition. Our philosophical commitments do not guarantee that we will get it right; they do provide us, however, with our essential means of philosophical expression.

An additional disciplinary field that comes into play here is the study of religion. Although the study of Indian religions, and of the ancient and medieval traditions in particular, is in some sense a branch of Indology, at the same time research in this area is necessarily informed by the theories and methods of religious studies more broadly. The pertinence of these to the interpretation of Indian philosophy is too varied to be summarized in the present context. Suffice it to underscore here that a major source of difficulty for reflection on Indian philosophy stems from conflicting intuitions in regard to the place of the study of religion within it.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was widely accepted that Indian thought was properly characterized as “mystical” or “spiritual,” over and against the scientific and positive ethos that was believed to reign in the West. This was not, however, the standpoint only of India’s detractors; for a counterargument, widely embraced by Indian intellectuals of that period, insisted precisely upon India’s “spiritual” legacy as an emnobilizing dimension of its civilization, a perspective that found some support in the idealism of much of late-nineteenth-century European philosophy as well. Nevertheless, the trope of the “spiritual” played a strong role in inhibiting serious philosophical engagement with Indian intellectual traditions, so that, not surprisingly, scholars committed to the latter began to push back, insisting on detaching the rigorous, logical, analytic dimensions of Indian thought from the penumbra of religion. (This was a “game-changer.”) The present volume, like much current work on Indian philosophy, still reflects the sustained inertial force of that push-back.

A problem that emerges is that the cure—detaching Indian philosophy from religion—though it was no doubt a provisional necessity, is not yet free from the malady that occasioned its application; for while it is now clear that Indian philosophy is
not properly conflated with religion, the relations holding among the philosophical and religious traditions of India continue to be in many respects obscure. To cite just one concrete example that touches the concerns of students of both Indian religions and philosophies: It is well-known that the thinkers of the Nyāya tradition played a particularly strong role in the development of rational theology in India, an area that belongs to philosophy. It is also known that they were mostly adherents of Śaivism, a topic for historians of religion; and it may be supposed that their commitment to the latter motivated, or at least played a role in, their quest to establish philosophical grounds for their theism. But current scholarship remains quite unclear about this; the precise relations between Nyāya philosophy and the sectarian identities with which it was associated remain but poorly explored. It is difficult to conceive how historians of Indian philosophies might sort out this and many similar issues (for most Indian philosophical traditions were somehow imbricated with one religious system or another), without recourse to insights gained from the study of religion. And let us not focus solely on the religious affiliations of the philosophers; what is more important is that many of the topics they debated—including rebirth, liberation, omniscience, the soul, scriptural authority, and much more—cannot be adequately interpreted without reference to their properly religious background.

Because it is not possible to treat all of this in brief, and because no purely methodological account of interpretive practice can be given, it may be best to proceed by considering some characteristic examples. In the three that follow, I shall not tarry much over the initial interpretive choice we must make, to identify a given cultural object as part of philosophy (though this will be part of what is at stake in my third parable). Like the decision to class a particular act as criminal, this must be determined in the first instance by reference to the principles, practices, and prejudices of those doing the classifying. Classification is, of course, an essential first step in any interpretive enterprise, but given the limits imposed on a brief article, such as this, I shall leave that issue in brackets and attempt instead to illustrate some aspects of the problem of interpretation as it concerns us here. The three questions I have chosen all engage philological, religious, and philosophical dimensions of the field to varying degrees, but nonetheless do so in rather different ways.

Three Parables

Who Were the Cārvākas?

One of the standard gestures in doxographic treatments of Indian philosophy is to speak of “three heterodox systems”: Buddhism, Jainism, and Cārvāka (or Lokāyata). In general, if we are entitled to speak of a “system,” we may imagine that there must have been some community of thinkers affiliated with or at least affirming such a system. In the case of Buddhism, for instance, we know that there were Buddhist monasteries in India, some of whose inmates studied, debated, and wrote on topics that we take to represent Buddhist philosophy; and analogously for Jainism. But who were the Cārvākas, what institutions did they belong to, and what texts did they produce? With the possible exception of one work of epistemological skepticism, the Lion Assailing the Verities (Tattvopaplavasimha) of Jayarāśi Bhāṭṭa (c. late 8th cent.), we can point only to fragments, few of which can be taken as reliable witnesses, in response to these questions. And without sure representatives, institutions, or works, what remains of a “philosophical system”?9

There will not be space here to review the construction of the Cārvāka/Lokāyata “system” as this unfolds in works spanning the long period from the Treatise on Worldly Gain (Arthasāstra, c. 2nd cent. ce) down to Jayarāśi’s day. One of the fullest discussions occurs in the work of the latter’s predecessors, the Buddhists Sāntaraksita and Kamalaśīla (mid 8th cent.), who are among those who furnish relatively detailed evidence of a foundational text, the Aphorisms of Bṛhaspati (Bṛhaspatisūtra), on the basis of which some have sought to reconstruct that lost work in part.10 But here a caution is required; for we know of other cases in which collections of founding aphorisms (sūtra) have been invented owing to the felt need for such a work on the part of late authors.11 There is no good reason not to assume that something similar might have occurred here, in which case the fragments we have of the Aphorisms of Bṛhaspati represent no foundational work at all, but rather an imaginative idea of what such a work might have looked like had it ever existed. And given the skepticism that seems widely attributed to the Cārvāka/Lokāyata “school,” we must wonder too why they would have ever created a “system” to be condensed into a collection of sūtras, that most authoritative, indeed anti-skeptical, of forms.

Plunge further and the pond grows murkier. The Compendium of All Viewpoints (Sarva-darśana-samgraha), written in the mid-fourteenth century and one of the most-frequently-cited works in this context, seems to characterize the Cārvākas at once as skeptics, materialists, and hedonists, and this is quite typical of the manner in which they are described elsewhere.12 But about this we must be somewhat skeptical ourselves, for the three doctrines in question, though they...
need not be formulated so as to be altogether incompatible, are nevertheless quite distinct and by no means entail one another. Genuine skeptics have no more reason to affirm materialism than its opposite; materialists need not adopt an ethic of pleasure; and hedonists do not doubt that pleasure is the supreme value. We may ask then: is there really a system to this “system,” or is it merely a grab-bag category, into which were poured a miscellany of views that orthodoxy found repugnant? And we may note in passing that, on this account, the Buddhists and Jains—who like their Brahmanical counterparts generally rejected the three doctrines in question—appear far closer to that orthodoxy than their oft-repeated categorization as “heterodox” might suggest.

It would be rash to assert, however, that the Cārvākas, or Lokāyatas, were mere fictions, invented as a foil to dominant views. The evidence of literary and philosophical sources, works as diverse as the Treatise on Worldly Gain (Arthaśāstra) and the Career of King Harṣa (Harsacarita, 7th century), seems overwhelmingly to confirm that there actually were teachers who were so characterized. But this is also part of the problem. For when we turn, once more, to the testimony of the Compendium of All Viewpoints, we find it corresponds in large part to the satirical characterization of the Cārvākas in an eleventh-century play, the Rise of Wisdom Moon (Prabodhacandrika), in its depiction of them.13 Though there were no doubt real proponents of ways of thought that came to be known as Cārvāka during the formative age of Indian philosophy, and though it is possible that the sophisticated skepticism of Jayarāśi Bhaṭṭa represented, or was at least inspired by, such traditions, it seems equally sure that the Cārvāka system of the Compendium is principally a literary construct. To what end?

Before attempting to answer this, let us note that our interpretive problem has now shifted. Whereas we wanted to know, at the outset, who were the Cārvākas, and though this remains a valid problem, our chief concern is now with the use made of the idea of the Cārvākas in a particular text that we can situate in time and place, the Compendium of All Viewpoints, composed early in the history of the Vijayanagar kingdom in circles close to the ruling establishment. The Compendium of All Viewpoints, moreover, while covering the broad range of Indian philosophical traditions, is concerned in the end to vindicate just one, the Nondual Vedānta (Advaita Vedānta) of Śaṅkara, the philosophy officially embraced by the Vijayanagar court. It is now known, too, that the probable author of the Compendium was a logician, Cannihatta, who characteristically proceeds throughout the work by mixing elements of doctrinal summaries of the schools he treats with more trenchant consideration of logical problems generated by them.14

In connection with the Cārvākas, Cannihatta is at pains to insist, contrary to the satirical tone derived from his literary sources, that the Cārvākas are difficult to refute.15 Their skepticism requires us to address the foundations of knowledge, their hedonism our fundamental values, and their materialism the entire ethical and soteriological edifice predicated on the notion that our spirits endure. The principal task for the Compendium, therefore, will be to rebuild what the Cārvākas have torn down, and this Cannihatta begins in his second chapter, on Buddhism, where he turns to the tradition of Dharmakīrti to get the theory of knowledge back in its feet, at least provisionally.16 It is only at the conclusion of his work, however, in vindicating the thought of Śaṅkara in chapter sixteen, that he has succeeded to his satisfaction in putting Humpty-Dumpty together again.17

The three problems Cannihatta raises through his treatment of the Cārvākas, concerning knowledge, value, and ontology (together with the implications of this for ethics and soteriology), strikingly resemble the three famous questions of Kant: “What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?” (Critique of Pure Reason A805/B833). With this in view, the problems of whether or not there really was a Cārvāka school, what it may have taught, and how the discussion in the Compendium relates to this, recede into the background. Cannihatta made use of the Cārvākas because he found them “good to think.” They, or their literary image—it hardly matters any longer—shook our complacent assumptions, and encourage us to reason things through.

The Meaning of Mokṣa

The author of the Compendium of All Viewpoints, as we have just seen, strategically deployed the Cārvākas in order to set up three principle areas of philosophical inquiry. In the short space available here, I will limit my remarks to just one, the question of value, and in particular the value of “freedom,” mokṣa, which the Cārvākas are thought to have denied. That mokṣa is at the pinnacle of the classical Indian system of values is so widely assumed that it is taken to be almost a truism. It is this, above all, that sustained the stereotyping of Indian philosophy as “spiritual.” Nevertheless, mokṣa in its relation to Indian philosophy seems poorly understood.

Early Indian traditions supported a threefold scheme of values (trivarga) in which mokṣa did not figure at all. The
acquisition of wealth (artha), the achievement of pleasure (kāma), and the fulfillment of one’s duties (dharma) were the three values generally affirmed. It is sometimes held that “freedom” was first posited as the fourth and final value in the ascetic (śramaṇa) movements of the mid-first millennium BCE, chiefly Buddhism and Jainism, but it is not quite clear that they formulated an explicit four-value theory in early times. Thus, for instance, the great Buddhist poet Aśvaghoṣa (c. 2nd cent. CE) still invokes the established three values in speaking of worldly excellences. Mokṣa is counterposed to the entire trio; it is not added to it to form a four-value scheme.10

However this may be, half a millennium after Aśvaghoṣa, the Buddhist philosopher Kamalaśīla does not hesitate to declare that mokṣa is affirmed by all who are “educated about human values” (vyutpanna-purusārtha).11 Something clearly has changed. Whereas mokṣa seems to have formerly served to mark a rejection of the dominant system of values, it is now positioned as the most universal of values. That some such transition did in fact take place seems confirmed in a delightful essay by the late Daya Krishna, who demonstrates that in classical Indian learned discourse, mokṣa comes to be found almost everwhere, in writings not only on Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, and other systems of philosophy, but in works on grammar, polity, music theory, medicine, and sex.20 Given this evidence, one begins to suspect, as does Daya Krishna—perhaps adopting the role of the Cārvāka gadfly Bṛhaspati—that the affirmation of mokṣa is essentially a conventional cultural gesture (as when Americans greet one another by asking, “How are you?”), telling us really nothing of the substantive concerns of the philosophers and other scholars who affirmed it. As he puts it: “[M]okṣa was accepted as the highest value and the ultimate goal of life by the whole of Indian culture and, thus, anything, to be respectable and draw attention to itself, had to be related to mokṣa in some way or other…. [E]ach study or discipline claimed to be the highest and the noblest, and the only one that led to the final and supreme knowledge.”21

I am not entirely convinced by this explanation, but Daya Krishna’s work succeeds, as no other has, in problematizing for us the place and meaning of mokṣa in Indian learning generally and philosophy in particular. The puzzle with which he presents us requires a rethinking of our understanding of “freedom” in the Indian context. Repeated invocations of the cosmology of the painful round of rebirth (saṃsāra) and the desirability of release from it, despite the great importance of these principles in the development of Indian religions, seem too thin to be up to the present task.

We may begin by asking ourselves just what “freedom” means for us. It should be immediately apparent that the difficulty shown by Daya Krishna—that “freedom” is affirmed ubiquitously and so may be empty—is if anything even more true of our contemporary culture: freedom is promised to us in bombadments of advertising for automobiles, electronic goods, soft drinks, and fashion. Freedom is profferred by a consumer culture that, many would say, in fact enslaves us. In this sense, the “freedom” offered to us in a Pepsi bottle is certainly a legitimate object of philosophical concern. Freedom proves to be a more slippery concept than we may at first have imagined. No doubt we should be prepared for shifts of meaning in India as well.

When anglophone philosophers speak of “freedom,” however, they do so mostly in political and legal contexts, leaving the representation of freedom in the commercial arena to media critics and sociologists. Philosophers remain primarily interested in such freedoms as property ownership, political participation, expression of opinion, and so on. As we unpack the philosophical history of these notions of freedom, we find that they were founded, in their modern forms, in a series of myths composed during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, most famously in the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. These speak of what was supposed to have been the case for human beings in the “state of nature” and the restriction of that state by the institution of the “social contract.” In brief, it was posited that our natural condition is one of freedom to exercise our powers however we are moved to do so, but that a state in which everyone enjoys such freedom is one without security, without protection, above and beyond one’s capacity to fight or to flee, from the freedom others have to infringe on one’s self. Hence, we have tacitly agreed to some sacrifice of our original freedom in order to secure a measure of cooperation with our fellows. The challenge that thereby confronts society is how best to accord necessary security to its members, while satisfying to the highest degree practicable their demand for the freedom that flows from their proper nature.

This is of course compressed almost to the point of caricature, but it should be sufficient to permit us to raise the question that we must in order to begin to address Daya Krishna’s conundrum: does the classical Indian conception of mokṣa significantly resemble the modern Western philosophical idea of freedom? I believe that we can readily locate some important differences, such as may help us to make sense of the ubiquity of mokṣa in Indian learned discourse.

Although we do find Indian myths concerning the creation of monarchal government that resemble in certain features the modern Western myth of the social contract, the Indian myths are not predicated on the conception of freedom in a
primordial state of nature accompanied by threatening insecurity. Rather, they posit an original semi-divine condition characterized not by freedom, but by happiness, ease, and an absence of notions of property or possession. With the degeneration over time of these primordial, godly beings, they fall into a state requiring that they work to nourish themselves and so begin to compete with others for resources. Hence, conceptions of property arise and thus the need for a legislator, the first king. Freedom is not underscored here as a political or legal value at all and, so far as I am aware, the term mokṣa and its synonyms are never used in this context. The closest contact between the semantic fields with which we are concerned, those covered respectively by mokṣa and by the Western legal and political uses of “freedom,” would be in connection with manumission, release from captivity, or the annulment of a debt—a freed slave, for instance, is said to have been granted mokṣa—but the term is not employed to describe the condition of the first happy beings, or, for that matter, the subsequent exercise by beings in society of their entitlements (adhirākara), such as a right to petition the king. Freedom is not conceived here as one’s natural condition; it is, rather, a state that obtains when prior restraint is removed.

One manifestation of this, that has been much discussed in sociological work, following Louis Dumont, is the idea that the autonomous individual in traditional India is the renouncer, who has left behind the social restrictions that thoroughly define the Indian person-in-society. It was nevertheless well understood in early Indian ascetic orders that one who had achieved only an outer renunciation was still bound by the samsāra carried within. True freedom was freedom from that constraint and could be accomplished only through arduous efforts sustained over long years, perhaps lifetimes. What must be stressed is that, by this account, freedom is an accomplishment and is not posited as our original condition at all.

This tentative conclusion may now offer us one way to rethink the ubiquitous invocations of mokṣa that Daya Krishna found so absurd. For within any domain of activity, the individual who is unskilled is constrained. And to master a given discipline is to achieve a kind of autonomy within it. The bad singer is bound, the virtuoso free from that bondage; and similarly the bad poet, the muddled logician, or the inadequate lover, in contrast with their successful counterparts. Given the strong role of analogical reasoning in classical Indian thought, it becomes plausible now to see “freedom to” as an extension of the “freedom from” with which we generally associate the idea of mokṣa. The privileging of the latter value, which was generalized throughout the first millennium, impelled the dignification of its analogues as well. If my hypothesis is plausible (and I stress that it is only a hypothesis), then a resolution to the puzzle posed by Daya Krishna, one which does not have recourse to dismissing the affirmation of mokṣa as little more than an empty social gesture, begins to come into view.

Was Śaṅkara a Philosopher?

In a paper published early in his career, the great Sanskritist Daniel H. H. Ingram took up the riddle posed in his title, “Śaṅkara on the Question: Whose Is Avidyā?” For if we assume that avidyā, “unknowing, ignorance, illusion” is what explains the diversity of the world as it appears to us, but that the world is really one in the nature of Brahman, which is free from illusion, and that our very self, ātman, is none other than this Brahman, then it would seem that there is no place for avidyā at all. But if it is ownerless, without locus, then why am I subject to it? A deep paradox seems to inhere in the heart of nondual Vedānta. It is a paradox that, as Ingalls shows, Śaṅkara embraces, for he writes in his Commentary on the Aphorisms Concerning Brahman (Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya IV.1.3):

Whose then is this unenlightenment, it may be asked. To which we reply: Yours, since you ask about it. But [says the opponent], according to scripture I am God. Answer: If you are so enlightened as to know this, then you must know that unenlightenment is no one’s.

Many readers have no doubt found this passage to be more reminiscent of the deliberately enigmatic discourse strategies sometimes attributed to Zen masters than representative of what we usually take to be philosophy. Still, certain of the arguments presented by Śaṅkara in reinforcing the fundamental inscrutability of avidyā are characteristically philosophical—for instance, a version of the third-man argument concerning in this case the impossibility of ascertaining one’s knowledge of avidyā without recourse to a further knower capable of judging the relation holding between avidyā and one’s knowledge of it, and so on to infinity. Despite this, Ingalls convincingly shows that Śaṅkara systematically refuses any solution to the problem that would dispel the basic paradox itself. Instead, “[h]e concentrates on what he considers the heart of the matter, the teaching that is necessary for the attainment of mokṣa.” In short, for Śaṅkara, soteriology trumps philosophy.

This is most clear, I think, in the text that most directly presents Śaṅkara’s conception of the means whereby mokṣa may
be attained, his *Thousand Teachings* (*Upadeśasāhasrī*). One can be fairly certain that, were the author not routinely named as one of India's major philosophers, we might be reserved about whether to class it as a philosophical work at all; it is primarily an exposé of Upaniṣadic doctrine whose occasional introduction of brief objections and responses imparts to the *Thousand Teachings* something of a catechetical quality. Of course, many philosophers have written in genres besides philosophy—David Hume's contributions on history and Michael Dummett's on tarot cards come to mind—and in fact any number of works, among the many that are attributed to Śaṅkara, are not works of philosophy at all; consider the numerous devotional hymns ascribed to him. So may not the problem be with our classification of the *Thousand Teachings*, rather than with our classification of Śaṅkara?

This approach to the difficulty, however, will not work in the present case. The *Thousand Teachings* is absolutely central to Śaṅkara's project; for here he explicitly sets forth his approach to the attainment of mokṣa, the "heart of the matter" as we have seen. And unlike much that is attributed to Śaṅkara, there is good reason to consider this to be among his genuine writings, "the only non-commentarial work whose authenticity has been conclusively demonstrated," as the editor and translator of the *Thousand Teachings*, Sengaku Mayeda, puts it. It therefore seems to me to be essential that we take account of its testimony, its implications for our understanding of Śaṅkara-the-philosopher.

I shall refer here just to one key chapter: "On Instructing the Pupil" (*śiṣyānuśāsana*), or, in Mayeda's translation (which takes some liberty but gets to the point), "How to Enlighten the Pupil." Here, Śaṅkara explains at the outset that "[t]he means to final release is knowledge. It should be repeatedly related to the pupil until it is firmly grasped, if he is dispassionate toward all things non-eternal ...; if he has abandoned the desire for sons, wealth and the worlds ..." and so on, through a list of the qualities of the qualified aspirant, who must be a Brahmin (here referring to caste). It is clear from the outset that we are concerned here with a type of initiation, in which each step must be repeated until it is mastered, until its significance is disclosed, preparing the candidate for what lies ahead.

The entire progression is set forth by Śaṅkara through the careful deployment of the *mahāvīyakṣas*, literally the "great sayings," the passages derived from the Upaniṣads, such as the famous "Thou art That" (*tat tvam asī*), that are taken as embodying the true content of their revelation, the real pith. The stages of this path are traversed not without questions. The pupil may express his puzzlement, for instance, "When the body is burned or cut, I (=Ātman) evidently perceive pain ... But in all the [scriptures] the highest Ātman is said to be 'free from evil, ageless, deathless, sorrowless, hungerless, thirstless'." In the ensuing dialogue, the teacher establishes that a distinction must be made between the body as the perceived locus of the pain, and the perceiver who attributes that pain to himself. When this is understood, it follows that you (=Ātman) have no relation with the impressions of form-and-color and the like; so you (=Ātman) are not different in essence from the highest Ātman." A series of *mahāvīyakṣas* follows in confirmation of this truth, culminating in the inevitable "Thou art That."

In concluding this chapter of the *Thousand Teachings*, Śaṅkara returns to the question of nescience, *avidyā*. The discourse is now entirely in the words of the teacher:

A man possessed of nescience, being differentiated by the body, etc., thinks that his Ātman is connected with things desirable and undesirable ... The scripture gradually removes his ignorance concerning this matter ....

When nescience has been uprooted by means of the [scriptures], and reasoning, the only knowledge of one who sees the highest truth is established right in this [Ātman] that is described as follows:

"Without an inside and without an outside";

"Without and within, unborn" ....

[S]ince all the rituals and their requisites such as the sacred thread are the effects of nescience, they should be abandoned by him who is established in the view of the highest truth.

There is a peculiar parallel that I find here between Śaṅkara's thought and that of Martin Luther. I am not thinking so much of Luther's early condemnation of scholastic philosophy, but rather of his continued use of scholastic methods and arguments when they served his purpose (much as Śaṅkara grants a concession to "reasoning"), despite the clarity with which he came to maintain scriptural authority to be the sole warrant for religious belief. Śaṅkara and Luther, perhaps together with certain of the Buddhist Mādhyamika thinkers and even Catholic "sceptical fideists" as well, join forces in
their reservations in regard to the limitations of natural reason, or perhaps more particularly what we might call “procedural reason.” And in this they are joined too by a great humility: it is hubristic for us to presume that we can penetrate what is vouchsafed to the prophets and sages by the unguided force of reason alone. At the same time, within these varied ways of thought, there is nevertheless a determination to push reason to its limits, so that Advaita scholasticism, like Lutheran scholasticism or Mādhyamika scholasticism, came to embark upon its own project of rational reconstruction, a project that would foreground the recognizably philosophical dimensions of what is, I believe, a tradition that is radically determined to break free from the constraints of recognizable philosophical thought.35

Philosophical argument in these systems, if well wielded, contributes to readying us for a discovery that, as it were, catches hold of us by surprise, perhaps in spite of ourselves.36

Conclusions

As holds also in the history of philosophy in other spheres, it is not desirable to adopt here too restrictive a conception of philosophical research. We must engage with a broad range of sources and topics that promise to disclose unanticipated facets of the philosophical writings and ideas we consider. Matilal’s explorations of the Mahābhārata in connection with the study of ethics exemplifies this point very well.37 The three parables offered above all suggest that, in reading Indian philosophy, we become better readers by not closing down our vision of what counts as “philosophy,” but by learning to read around the edges of our sources, as it were. I must stress, too, that my particular proposals in respect to the questions I have presented are not primarily offered as resolutions of the issues raised—readers will come to their own conclusions about that; my purpose, rather, has been just to suggest that matters we may think we know well in respect to Indian philosophy are often still questionable.

We have seen that, in reading the Compendium of All Viewpoints as a straightforward account of the doctrines and arguments of philosophical schools—if indeed it makes sense to imagine a “straightforward account” of philosophy—we may fail to appreciate the manner in which the author is using his materials to advance arguments of his own, even while appearing to be reporting the opinions of others. The materials that help us to clarify this are in part other philosophical works, but they include also literary texts, which would have likely been familiar to our author.38 Reflecting on these, we learn that the Cārvākas of the Compendium are largely a literary construction and that the possible relationships between this construction and a putative philosophical “school” remain unsure. We confront a range of possibilities, no clear and simple solutions, and we see that the author whose work we are struggling to understand was himself working with a field of possible understandings of his materials and making choices among them. What becomes clear, in all events, is that Indian philosophers kept the Cārvākas alive, even when there was no such “school” of thought still active on the Indian philosophical scene, not only because they served as a strawman, but because the viewpoints attributed to them, satirically or not, disclosed hidden problems upon which much of the Indian philosophical edifice reposéd.

Our second parable, concerning the place of mokṣa in Indian philosophical discourse, led us to inquire about the category of mokṣa in Indian thought more broadly and to suggest that modern conceptions of freedom, originating in European political philosophy from Hobbes on, impinge on our ability to understand mokṣa in its premodern Indian contexts. Indicated here is the problem of eisegetical interpretation—the interpretation of the other through the projection upon it of one’s own prior conceptions and judgments—but unlike some who have written on the interpretation of Indian philosophy, I do not believe that eisegesis is inevitable, even if it can never be altogether eliminated; as the hermeneutic circle suggests, we do indeed always bring our own baggage with us, but the circle enlarges as our dialogue with our sources advances. Perhaps, then, we will never be able to understand “freedom” in classical Indian usage perfectly well, but we can, I believe, begin to determine the contours of a conceptual landscape quite distinct from that with which we are accustomed. There is, once more, no rule-book to teach us to do this, only the slow process of advancing hypotheses based on the best knowledge we have and then criticizing them ruthlessly.

The final example, hinging on Sāṅkara’s use of the “great sayings” of the Upaniṣads, accentuates the problem of the limits of reason, which emerges here as a primordial question for both philosophy and religion. For the counter-claims of reason and revelation, the effort to reconcile them against the determined refusal to do so, urge us not so much to find a solution as to choose. Sāṅkara’s choice, in my view, is clear, and it interestingly problematizes our vision of him as a philosopher, without denying, however, the stupendous contribution he made to Indian philosophy.40

In sum, the interpretation of Indian philosophy depends on the constant interrogation of our ideas of thinkers and “schools,” of authorial strategies and ends, of concepts employed, and of the arguments, explicit or understood, through

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**Interpreting Indian Philosophy**

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which those concepts are critiqued, defended, or refined. Like perfection itself, the aim of understanding Indian philosophy can only be approached asymptotically, without clear closure in sight.

**Bibliography**


**Notes:**


(5) As the late Bimal Krishna Matilal put it in the preface to his *Epistemology, Logic and Grammar in Indian Philosophical Analysis* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1971), p. 11: “Indian philosophy consists of a number of rigorous systems which are more concerned with logic and epistemology, with the analysis and classification of human knowledge, than they are with transcendent states of euphoria.”

(6) George Chemparathy, *An Indian Rational Theology: Introduction to Udayana’s Nyāyakusumāñjali* (Vienna: De Nobili Research Library, 1972), 180, may be credited with attempting to push further than most the question of the actual religious commitment entailed by Nyāya theism, at least in the case of the author he considers.

(7) The repetitions of this stereotype throughout the literature on Indian thought are too many to be detailed here. A recent example is Deepak Sarma, *Classical Indian Philosophy: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), where, in Part I, “Nāstika (Heterodox) Schools,” we read, “The Cārvāka school of Indian philosophy (also known as the Lokāyata [materialist] school) held a sceptical position asserting that matter is the only real and knowable entity” (p. 3). My misgivings about this description will be made clear below.
Interpreting Indian Philosophy


(9) Franco, “Lokāyata,” presents what is probably the best case possible, given the sources available, for thinking in terms of such a system and concludes that “between the 6th and 9th centuries, the Cārvāka/Lokāyata was a fascinating, vibrant, and innovative philosophical tradition, which engaged critically with the major philosophies of its time” (p. 642).


(11) The best example is perhaps the *Sāmkhyasūtra*, on which see Andrew Nicholson’s contribution to the present volume. Franco’s dating of the *Brhaspatisūtra* to about the sixth century conforms, in my view, with the probability that it is just such an artifice.


(14) Anantalal Thakur, “ Cannibihaṭṭa and the authorship of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*,” *Bulletin of the Adyar Library* 25 (1961): 524–538, an article that has been generally overlooked by scholars of Indian philosophy, makes a compelling case for rejecting the traditional attribution of the work to “Mādhava” (who might be either the celebrated Mādhavacārya-Vidyāraṇya, rāj guru of the Vijayanagar kingdom, or his nephew, the son of the great Vedic scholar Sāyaṇa, and also named Mādhava) in favor of Cannibihaṭṭa, a logician who seems to have been a protégé of Mādhavacārya.

(15) *durucchedam hi cārvākasya ceṣṭitam* (SDS, p. 2).

(16) SDS, p. 16.

(17) This chapter is translated in Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Sarvadarśanasamgraha ascribed to Mādhavacārya, Chapter 16: Śaṅkaradarśanam* (Chennai: The Adyar Library, 1999). As the vindication of Śaṅkara’s thinking is effected largely through critique of the rival systems, rather than sustained positive system-building, the metaphor of repairing what was broken is at best only hinted at by the closing words: *sakalam samaṛjjasam*, “everything is all right.”


(22) The myth as I am summarizing it here is the Buddhist account of the *mahāsammata*, the monarch who was acclaimed by the many. The canonical sources are referenced in Balkrishna G. Gokhale, “Early Buddhist Kingship,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1966): 15–22. Note, however, that when Gokhale writes of the first men that “[e]ach respected the rights of others and fulfilled his own obligations conscientiously” (p. 16), he is importing conceptions of “rights” and
“obligations” into the narrative that do not recognizably occur there. Refer to the major source-text in the Pali Canon: Dīghanikāya, Aggaññasutta, for a detailed study of which, see Steven Collins, “The Discourse on What Is Primary,” Journal of Indian Philosophy 21 (1993): 301-393. Collins discusses the parallels between the myth we find there with Western social contract theories in appendix 2, 387-389.


(24) Cf. Kapstein, Reason’s Traces, chap. 2, “Indra’s Search for the Self and the Beginnings of Philosophical Perplexity in India.”


(26) Ingalls, “Śaṅkara on the Question,” 72.


(30) On Śaṅkara’s use of the mahāvākyas, and their interpretation in later Advaita, see in particular K. Satchidananda Murty, Reason and Revelation in Advaita Vedānta (Waltair, AP: Andhra University Press, 1959), Part One, chap. 6.

(31) Mayeda, Thousand Teachings, 221. The passage quoted is from Chāndogypaṇiṣad VIII.1.5.


(34) Richard H. Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) treats at length the question of the “sceptical fideism” that followed the sixteenth-century European rediscovery of Pyrrhonism. An important difference between skeptical doubts and Luther’s (or Śaṅkara’s) privileging of scripture above reason is that for Luther the Christian achieved complete certainty. As Popkin (p. 56) shows, this latter attitude differs in the extreme from that of the skeptical revival, which left ambiguous whether the argument “because all is in doubt, therefore one ought to accept Christianity on faith alone” really urged a leap of faith, or was rather to be taken as the final, scathing reductio of fideism.

(35) A caveat may be required here in respect to Mādhyamika thought, which, though often interpreted as disclosing a reality that surpasses the scope of reason, seems seldom to explicitly embrace the authority of revelation. Nevertheless, the soteriological orientation of Madhyamaka, and the propeductive role of reason in respect to this, does, I think, broadly align it with the other religious traditions mentioned here. On Mādhyamika criticism of procedural reason, as represented in systematic epistemology (pramāṇa), refer to Dan Arnold, Buddhists, Brahmans, and Belief: Epistemology in South Asian Philosophy of Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

(36) A recent article that complements the present section in problematizing the characterization of Śaṅkara as a philosopher, though along somewhat different lines than those suggested here, is Jonathan Edelmann, “Hindu Theology as Churning the Latent,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 81, no. 2 (2013): 427–466.


(38) Given the great diffusion of the Prabodhacandrodaya and its popularity in Advaita Vedānta circles in particular, it is
quite unimaginable that the author of the *Sarvadarśanasamgraha* was not familiar with it.

(39) On isegetical interpretation in relation to Indian philosophy, refer to Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy*, whose argument, however, seems to me to exaggerate the role of isegesis. (On this, refer to my review in *Journal of Religion* 72 (1992), no. 3: 474-475.)

(40) Chakravarti Ram-Prasad, *Advaita Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Outline of Indian Non-Realism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002) may be recommended as a particularly trenchant contemporary philosophical reading of major aspects of Śaṅkara’s thinking and their legacy among his commentators.

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